Citizens NYC Community Leaders Grant Submission

https://www.citizensnyc.org/clg/

Essay Questions:

In no more than 200 words, tell us your group's story! Please describe your group's mission, major accomplishments, and any quotes from community members on the impact of your group's work.

"Technology is the most powerful tool for creating equity ever available to the human race - bar none."

- Me

I'm Ken Granderson, and since 1995, I've built and used technology to educate, inspire, and empower historically disadvantaged communities like my childhood "Do Or Die" Bed-Stuy.

We're at an inflection point like the 1996 arrival of the internet to the general public – but rather than being a tech hobbyist or professional to REALLY use it, with AI, a smartphone and mouth connects you to the combined knowledge of the human race.

Last year, during a weekend of flash flooding and government shutdown - I hosted "AI for the Community" where I showed how AI could help someone in a flooded basement apartment, or how a food insecurity organization could communicate more effectively.

A volunteer described writing a book about her recent trip to Ghana to the AI, and 5 seconds later had an opener that she held back tears to read.

This session confirmed the need to do these workshops on an ongoing basis, so the Bed-Stuy.AI Club was conceived as a vehicle to support ongoing workshop delivery, and a model for others to launch new AI Learning Clubs.

Detailed Project Description

Bed-Stuy.AI is a community-based **AI learning club** that will host a series of free, in-person workshops in Bedford-Stuyvesant between **June 2026 and May 2027**. While the workshops are rooted in Bed-Stuy and focused on serving the local community, **club membership is open to anyone** who wants to learn, participate, and contribute. The purpose of the Club is to create accessible, welcoming spaces where people can experience how AI tools can be used for everyday empowerment.

The Bed-Stuy.AI Club builds on an initial community workshop and is intentionally designed to move beyond one-off events into a consistent, ongoing program of sessions focusing on real, practical use cases rather than theory. Workshops are intentionally jargon-free and hands-on, showing how AI tools already available on smartphones and laptops can help with writing, learning, organizing ideas, communicating more effectively, and exploring creative or personal projects. Participants are encouraged to ask questions, experiment, and support one another during the session.

An explicit part of the club's mission is empowerment through participation. In addition to learning about AI, community members are invited to take part in delivering the workshops themselves - helping with demonstrations, sharing use cases, or presenting alongside others. This creates opportunities for people to build confidence and develop presentation skills in a supportive, low-pressure environment, particularly for those who may not have had many chances to speak in front of a group.

Another core principle of Bed-Stuy.AI is "paying it forward." There is no cost to attend. Instead, participants are encouraged to share what they learn and help others, both inside and outside the club. This reinforces a culture of mutual support rather than passive consumption.

Grant support from CitizensNYC will contribute to **one year of club operations**, allowing Bed-Stuy.AI to purchase shared presentation equipment and support reliable, ongoing workshop delivery during the June 2026-May 2027 period. As the club evolves, the project will intentionally

document and share what works, with the goal of **open-sourcing a simple, replicable model** that other communities can adapt to launch and sustain their own AI learning clubs focused on personal and collective empowerment.

Leadership & Background

The Bed-Stuy.AI Club is driven by the leadership and lived experience of **Ken Granderson**, a Bed-Stuy native, MIT alumnus, Bed-Stuy repatriate and technology pioneer whose work has focused on bringing advanced, emerging technologies to underserved communities for the past 30 years. In 1996, Ken led a volunteer project that put Boston's Roxbury community online, and in 2014, architected, built and maintains the official website of the Government of Saint Lucia.

For the past three years, Ken has been a daily user of AI tools in his professional work and has increasingly integrated them into his personal life as well. Through that experience, he believes that **never before in history has the average person had access to the ability to learn, think, and strategize using the equivalent of trillions of hours of human expertise**. AI represents a moment of unprecedented opportunity - not reserved for specialists or technologists, but available to everyday people.

That belief is what drives the Bed-Stuy.AI Club: creating community-centered spaces where neighbors can experience these tools directly, demystify how they work, support one another in learning, and use technology as a practical means of moving themselves - and their communities - forward.

Additional Funding & Non-Monetary Resources (≥150 words)

In addition to the requested CitizensNYC support, the Bed-Stuy.AI Club draws on a combination of non-monetary resources, volunteer contributions, and community partnerships to ensure a successful year of operation. We are targeting a $0 venue cost by identifying local venues that can be secured at no cost for free, public-facing educational programming, and have identified several churches, community centers and business-owned meeting spaces that will offer in-kind contributions of their space to help keep our costs down and make the club accessible to all participants.

The project also benefits from sponsorship and in-kind support from the **BlackFacts Educational Foundation**, a 501(c)(3) organization led by the project's founder. The Foundation serves as a vehicle for community-focused technology initiatives and helps support Bed-Stuy.AI through shared resources such as access to paid AI tools, limited operational expenses, and website hosting. This support allows the club to operate without relying solely on grant funding.

Volunteer involvement remains central to the project's success. Club members assist with outreach, setup, facilitation, and documentation, and participants are encouraged to take on small roles over time, reinforcing a peer-led, shared-ownership model. The project leads contribute substantial pro bono time in planning, facilitation, and follow-up, drawing on our decades of experience working with technology in community settings and planning, delivering and training others to facilitate presentations to a variety of audience demographics.

Strategically crucial, the Bed-Stuy.AI Club is designed to scale to available resources. Even if funding is partial, the project can move forward effectively by adjusting the number of sessions or relying more heavily on in-kind support, ensuring sustainability throughout the grant period.

Why Is the Project Needed? What Does Success Look Like? (Revised, ≥150 words)

Since the arrival of the personal computer, technology has been hoped by many to be a "small d" democratizing force that would help millions from backgrounds that have been historically ignored to explicitly excluded from earlier industrial and economic revolutions and access to opportunity, to FINALLY get a fair shot at benefiting from new realities and opportunities in our societies.

30 years ago, when I established websites for Boston's low-income communities of color, I had hoped that free public Internet access through the library system would help facilitate my neighbors to experience what I had been living for several years - communicating with people across the USA and around the world in real time, and experiencing being at the leading edge of innovation at the exact same time and using the exact same venues and tools as the kings of industry.

However for a variety of reasons, including the non-trivial level of technical expertise and comfort necessary at the time, things did not play out that way - and today, while technology has been woven into every aspect of our society, most people use it for purely social or entertainment purposes, rather than as a tool to improve the quality of their personal or family lives, on a purely self-directed basis – not requiring permission from anyone, nor having externally imposed limits on where they can go.

So the sea change opportunity that the Bed-Stuy.AI Club is ultimately up to, is helping regular people – non-techies from all walks of life - not 'learn' but EXPERIENCE how the smartphones that most already have, and the ability to speak that most also already have -are ALL that they need to use AI tools to help them work through a wide variety of real-world challenges, informed by most of the combined knowledge of the human race.

Success for the Bed-Stuy.AI Club does not require everyone to attend regularly or become highly skilled. Successful outcomes include a neighbor attending a single session, starting to use AI on their phone, using AI to better handle challenges in their life, and then encouraging friends or family to attend a future workshop. Success also looks like participants helping one another during sessions, sharing knowledge informally, and building confidence over time, and a community that does not fear new technology, but understands many of its benefits and risks, its opportunities and imperfections, not because they are relying on hearsay, but because they are USING it themselves.

We will define specific KPIs and create tools to capture them to ensure that we are tracking success and improving based on actual DATA, not just our 'feelings.'

And at a higher level, as we publicly share the decisions and tools we use to deliver and improve the workshops, success means that other informal or formal community groups with replicate and / or even exceed what we do with the Bed-Stuy.AI Club, and help share the awareness that the ability to use technology to improve one's possibilities in life no longer requires technical expertise, expensive tools or access to experts, but that using AI can offer opportunities to learn and operate on a playing field more level than ever before in human history.

How will your project strengthen relationships among community members and project participants? (≥150 words)

Building bridges across generations, professions and cultures by using AI technologies that EVERYONE is paying attention to - to help solve meaningful problems for people from all walks of life is the very DNA of Bed-Stuy.AI.

In the past, access to technology often required being an expert or hobbyist yourself, having a niece or nephew who was up on tech, calling the Geek Squad.

While we're not trying to compete with any particular group that helps non-techies benefit from technology, thanks to the brave new world created by real-time multilingual speech recognition, near ubiquitous smartphone use, and generative artificial intelligence, we have a never before possible opportunity for those who will never view themselves as techies to directly benefit from the latest advances in this industry that is reshaping our entire planet.

Club members will initially participate where they feel most comfortable, and will be encouraged to expend into responsibilities to learn about everything from event planning and logistics to public speaking, in an informal, neighborhood-based, low-pressure environment rooted in a philosophy that the benefits of technology are for EVERYONE to enjoy, and that EVERYONE has

something they can bring to the table to make our communities better places for ALL of us to share living in.

Building on the idea that everyone has something valuable to contribute - the philosophy of "paying it forward" - to not be content with learning, experiencing and benefiting for yourself, but making the intentional and affirmative choice to "Be The Change You Want To See In The World" by sharing the knowledge of what is possible via AI today with others -whether inside or outside of the Club - is intended to help neighbors see not only the commonality of many of our challenges, but that regardless of someone's station in life, they have the ability to make things better for others WITHOUT having money, connections, influence or power.

The best outcome for the Bed-Stuy.AI Club is that it becomes a catalyst for new personal and professional connections, better awareness and understanding of people who represent the ever-diversifying demographics of Bed-Stuy and many other neighborhoods, and that it ultimately helps people view technology not as something external to them, but as something that can be in service to humanity - no matter who you are.