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Gov. Evers, WEDC announce \$3.5 million in grants to four Wisconsin organizations assisting startups

Ignite Wisconsin program aims to foster collaboration, encourage startup growth

MADISON, WI. FEB. 18, 2026 – Gov. Tony Evers, in collaboration with the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) announced in his State of the State address that four consortiums aimed at supporting and strengthening some of Wisconsin's fastest-growing startup sectors have received \$3.5 million in the first round of Ignite Wisconsin funding from WEDC.

The Ignite Wisconsin program aims to make strategic investments that will advance startup companies in targeted sectors with high growth potential, such as fusion energy and emerging technologies. By concentrating on specific sectors, the program is expected to help participating startups increase collaboration, catalyze innovation, and create an environment that will attract talent, capital, and opportunity statewide.

"Wisconsin has always been known for discovering innovations and ideas that transform the world," said Gov. Evers. "I'm excited we're continuing that tradition to support small businesses across our state. Our newly created Ignite Wisconsin program is going to make strategic investments to advance startups in our state in targeted sectors to boost our homegrown innovation."

"Startups play a vital role in driving Wisconsin's economy forward," said John W. Miller, secretary and CEO of WEDC, the state's leading economic development organization. "But they need help. With the assistance of WEDC's Ignite Wisconsin program, we hope to provide the fuel needed to encourage partner organizations to work together to deliver the solutions and support needed to grow our startup community."

Initiatives funded through the grants will last between one and two years.

The four consortiums that received funding include:

Cheese Wedge Consortium - \$1 million

Cheese Wedge Consortium, led by New North, Inc., is a coordinated, regionally based approach that builds on existing partners and infrastructure. The consortium will draw on the New North, Inc.'s longstanding role in Northeast Wisconsin and the Phoenix Innovation Park's integration with UW-Green Bay to connect universities, corporations, investors, and service providers into a single, cohesive platform for entrepreneurship. The consortium will deliver accelerator programming, pre-seed bootcamps, and corporate engagement. Core

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components include equity investments, legal and housing stipends for relocating founders, co-working space, and community outreach to raise Wisconsin's entrepreneurial brand.

The consortium expects to support 21 startups and 42 participants in one year, provide direct funding to 18 businesses, create 46 new jobs, and generate \$3.4 million in revenue.

"This collaboration is not just about connecting organizations; it is about creating a thriving region where ideas flourish, and solutions to the world's challenges are born," said Patti Habeck, president and CEO of New North, Inc. "Together, we are driving innovation and ingenuity."

Wisconsin Frontier Technology Consortium - \$950,000

The Wisconsin Frontier Technology Consortium, led by the Wisconsin Technology Council, aims to accelerate commercialization of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced materials, and quantum computing. The initiative will establish the Wisconsin Frontier Technology Lab to connect researchers and industry for collaborative technology development, launch the Wisconsin Frontier Technology Accelerator to support early-stage high-growth startups with mentorship and investor access, and convene the Wisconsin Frontier Technology Roundtable to strengthen partnerships and address challenges.

The consortium expects to support 24 early-stage startups in two years, host four Frontier Technology Labs and four statewide roundtables, engage researchers, industry leaders, and investors, provide grants for technology development, generate early-stage investments, create more than 50 jobs, and raise Wisconsin's profile as a technology leader.

"Our consortium is thrilled to partner with WEDC to raise the profile of Wisconsin's frontier technology ecosystem," said Maggie Brickerman, president of the Wisconsin Technology Council. "This end-to-end platform will support founders from innovation to impact and ensure that breakthroughs in deep technology benefit Wisconsin's core industries and workers."

Wisconsin Fusion Energy Coalition - \$778,000

The Wisconsin Fusion Energy Coalition, led by the 5 Lakes Institute, Inc., will establish Wisconsin as a national hub for fusion energy commercialization. The coalition, which is anchored by UW-Madison's fusion research strength and commercialization capacity, will accelerate startup formation, supply chain development, and community outreach in a sector projected to exceed \$350 billion globally by 2050. The initiative's core components include business creation, business creation support, business attraction, outreach, and brand strategy.

The consortium expects to provide financial support to five startup teams and technical assistance to over 80 companies in 18 months, resulting in 24 new jobs, three new product lines, and two company relocations or retentions.

"WEDC's support will help us build out a vibrant ecosystem around decades of world-leading fusion energy research at UW-Madison and Wisconsin's strong manufacturing base that is well-positioned to be an important part of this new industry's supply chain," said Kathleen Gallagher, executive director of the 5 Lakes Institute.

The Foundry Factory - \$772,000

The Center for Technology Commercialization's Foundry Factory is a founder-centric pipeline designed to increase the number and quality of high-growth startups in Southeastern Wisconsin. The initiative addresses gaps in the region's startup community through a

structured, milestone-driven model. Components include an innovation bootcamp, accelerators, pitch events, matchmaking, networking, and more.

The consortium expects to provide funding for 15 businesses over two years, provide technical assistance to 60 businesses, and provide pre-accelerator programming for 15 teams advancing toward investment readiness.

"WEDC's investment in our Founder Factory initiative is an investment in the future of Southeast Wisconsin's innovation ecosystem," said Margaret Ramey, director of the Center for Commercialization. "We're building a clear pipeline of innovation support and a hub of entrepreneurial activity that, despite being a two-year initiative, is designed to spark a lasting cultural shift toward a more connective, innovative region."

For more information about Ignite Wisconsin, visit wecd.org/programs/ignite-wisconsin/

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The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) leads economic development efforts for the state by advancing and maximizing opportunities in Wisconsin for businesses, communities and people to thrive in a globally competitive environment. Working with more than 600 regional and local partners, WEDC develops and delivers solutions representative of a highly responsive and coordinated economic development network. Visit wecd.org or follow WEDC on Twitter [@WEDCNews](https://twitter.com/WEDCNews) to learn more.