



STEP PROGRAM GUIDELINES

Funded in part through a grant with the U.S. Small Business Administration

Pending the availability of SBA funds

STATE TRADE EXPANSION PROGRAM (STEP) FY 2025

****FOR QUALIFIED STEP ACTIVITIES OCCURRING 07/22/2026 - 09/29/2027****

Section I – Program Information

A. Program Purpose

The program goal of STEP FY 2025 is to increase the number of eligible small businesses (ESBCs) that export, increase the value of exports by ESBCs, and increase the number of ESBCs exploring significant new trade opportunities. Eligible activities include trade shows; trade missions; design of international marketing media; website translation/localization/SEO; U.S. Department of Commerce services; and export training.

STEP applications are due prior to participation in project or activity. STEP acts as a partial reimbursement. Reimbursements will be made towards eligible small businesses' registration/service fees and event participation expenses. The Department of Economic and Community Development's (DECD) application process vets applicants for eligibility and follows all U.S. SBA STEP procedures. **The STEP FY 2025 program year runs July 22, 2026 through September 29, 2027 and operates on a first-come, first-served basis.** STEP operates pending the availability of SBA funds.

B. Funding Levels

With export **General Assistance Funds (GAF FY 2025)**, STEP eligible small businesses may apply to receive assistance of **75% of eligible expenses up to a maximum of \$6,500 per activity, for a maximum total of \$10,000 per eligible company per program year.** This means that small businesses can engage in and apply for more than one STEP activity in a program year. DECD will accept applications for the **minimum qualified amount of \$500 or greater.**

All applications are due no later than July 1, 2027. Applications will be reviewed and funds will be distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis, **pending Connecticut STEP FY 2025 funding availability.** For STEP consideration, applications must be submitted prior to activity participation.

Section II – Qualifications

A. Company Qualifications

The STEP FY 2025 funds are available to Connecticut companies that:

1. Operate a registered business in Connecticut to manufacture, assemble and/or distribute a product, or provide an exportable service.
2. Meet the criteria established in Section 503 of the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015 that defines the term ‘eligible small business concern,’ as a business concern that:
 - a. Is organized or incorporated in the United States;
 - b. Is operating in the United States;
 - c. Meets:
 - i. The applicable industry-based small business size standard established under section 3 of the Small Business Act; or
 - ii. The alternate size standard applicable to the program under section 7(a) of the Small Business Act and the loan programs under title V of the Small Business Investment Act of 1958 (15 U.S.C. 695 et seq.);

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) size standards are found at 13 C.F.R. Part 121. Use the following sba.gov link for information on size standards for your business (<https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-guide/size-standards#section-header-0>);

 - d. Has been in business for not less than 1 year, as of the date on which assistance using a grant under this subsection commences; and
 - e. Has access to sufficient resources to bear the costs associated with trade, including the costs of packing, shipping, freight forwarding, and customs brokers
3. Must export product.
4. Must seek to export goods or services of U.S. origin or have at least 51% U.S. Content.
5. Must not be presently debarred, suspended, proposed for disbarment, declared ineligible, or voluntarily excluded from participation in this transaction by any Federal department or agency.
6. Must confirm good standing with State of Connecticut Departments of Labor and Revenue Service.
7. Submit a completed application form and complete all other required documents with handwritten signatures, where applicable, prior to their proposed export activity, and **no later than July 1, 2027**.
8. Execute their proposed STEP FY 2025 export activity **by September 29, 2027. Activities must be completed by September 29, 2027.**
9. Submit all reimbursement documentation to DECD within two (2) weeks of a completed activity. **Failure to do so may result in DECD revoking one’s STEP approval and allocated funds. Exception: if a company’s event ends on September 29, 2027, post-activity Reimbursement paperwork is due October 1, 2027.**
10. Agree to provide DECD with export sales resulting from the STEP-funded activity via post-activity reports/surveys and updates.
11. STEP funds are applied for and project specific. STEP funds are not a company allocation. Activity swaps are not permitted unless extenuating circumstances and per the review and approval of CT STEP team.
12. Different companies with same owner are not permitted to apply, per SBA.

B. Program Thresholds and Category Spending Caps:

1. DECD will accept applications for the minimum qualified amount of \$500 or greater.
2. Companies may apply for reimbursement towards multiple activities within program budgetary limits. However, each application should contain one quantifiable activity. Applicants requesting assistance at multiple trade shows or trade missions should submit materials separately.
3. STEP General Assistance Funds (GAF) shall not exceed **75% of eligible expenses up to a maximum of \$6,500 per activity, for a maximum total of \$10,000 per eligible company per program year**. All previous STEP FY 2025 requests for GAF assistance shall be considered in calculating eligible funding limits.
4. Participation in domestic trade show exhibits are allowed only if the applicant submits a demonstrated international strategy for exhibiting at a specific domestic trade show for approval
5. Companies who use STEP funds to participate in domestic trade shows must provide a list of completed matchmaking activities at the show, if any, and international leads contacted during the domestic trade show
6. To submit multiple applications, please see Section III, "Filing Procedures"

C. Qualifying Activities:

Qualifying activities include:

- Foreign Trade Mission Participation**
- Export Trade Show Exhibit Participation**
- US DOC Commercial Services
- Design of Marketing Media
- Payment of Website Fees
- Export Training Workshops

D. Eligible Expenses

Eligible expenses associated with the activities listed above are as follows:

- Trade Mission / Trade Show costs including but not limited to: registration fee, booth fee, furniture, interpreter fees, and shipping (no baggage shipping costs or printing, including costs associated with printing banners)
- USDOC Commercial Service Fees
- International Material/Collateral Translation
- Website Translation
- Export Training Registration Fees
- B2B Matchmaking Registration Fees

E. Ineligible Expenses

Expenses ineligible for reimbursement include, but are not limited to:

- Airfare, Ground Transportation, Lodging, etc.; NO travel costs
- Meals, Beverages, Gratuity

- Compensation, wage, or salary of any employee
- Capital Goods, Product Samples, Supplies
- Product giveaways/Promotional Items
- Phone or Internet Usage
- Website Development
- Design of video content for international marketing
- Alcoholic Beverages
- Passport or Visa fees
- Immunization
- Expenses related to entertainment of current or prospective clients or government officials
- New product development or alteration of existing products
- Printing costs, including costs associated with printing banners
- Conferences; conferences are ineligible
- Compliance testing
- Association or membership dues
- Sponsorships

Section III – Filing Procedures

Login to the STEP FY 2025 [Application Portal at stepgrant.smapply.io](https://stepgrant.smapply.io). Create an account and follow the directions to submit your application. All applications must be submitted **no later than July 1, 2027**.

You will be asked to complete the following tasks:

- Complete the Connecticut STEP FY 2025 Activity Application Form *(in Application Portal)*
- Review and Sign the SBA “Eligible Small Business Concern” [Self-Certification Form](#)
- Refer to your North American Industry Classification System [\(NAICS\) Code](#) to determine your SBA Size Standard
- Review and Sign the [Federal Debarment Form](#)
- Complete and Sign the [State of Connecticut Agency Vendor Form](#)
- Complete and Sign the [W-9 Form](#)
(Both forms should have a matching Social Security Number or Federal Employer Identification Number)
- Complete and Sign a [Strategic Export Plan](#) on company letterhead *(not required for Export Training Opportunities)*

****Note Regarding Multiple Applications:**

While major qualifying activities from Section II, Part C may entail multiple qualifying expenses from Section II, Part D, one quantifiable activity should be submitted with each application. Example:

- One application requesting assistance with Trade Show participation that includes a translator and a B2B event at the corresponding Trade Show **is acceptable**.
- One application requesting assistance with participation in multiple Trade Shows or Trade Missions **is unacceptable**.

Section IV – Program Reimbursement

- Reimbursements will be based on completion of approved activities **by September 29, 2027**, and the submission of all reimbursement request documentation to DECD within two (2) weeks of a completed activity. **Failure to do so may result in DECD revoking one's STEP approval and reimbursement allocation.** No partial reimbursement requests will be accepted. Exception: if a company's event ends on September 29, 2027, the post-activity Reimbursement paperwork is due October 1, 2027.
- Once you receive an email notification that your application has been approved, complete your export event/activity as planned in accordance with your project budget.
- When your event/activity has been completed, login to your STEP FY 2025 [Application Portal](#) account, where you will be asked to submit the following:
 - Post-Activity Report/Survey;
 - Receipts documenting payment of all registration and/or service fees and other costs associated with your approved STEP FY 2025 fund activity (i.e., bank statements, check stubs, or an invoice with a zero balance) and;
 - STEP Grant Activity Invoice to request payment of your reimbursement from DECD;
- Requests will be reviewed and processed as they are received on a first-come, first-serve basis. Processing time for the State of Connecticut payment system can take anywhere from 2-4 weeks. STEP FY 2025 participants should incorporate this lead-time into their internal budgeting processes, as DECD will be unable to expedite individual company payments.

Section V – Contact

For more information on the Connecticut STEP program, please contact:

Kerron Vernon at 860-500-2446 or kerron.vernon@ct.gov

Laura Jaworski at 860-500-2368 or laura.jaworski@ct.gov