



Shore Hatchery Business Competition Guidelines

2026 - 2027 Guidelines



Introduction

The Shore Hatchery Competition is a bi-annual Mid-Atlantic business competition that distributes \$200,000 each year as non-dilutive cash grants to startups in Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and West Virginia. The competition helps startups overcome specific obstacles to growth in order to create new jobs within three years. Businesses are required to report back on their progress via an annual survey.

Businesses complete an online application and submit a full business plan and financials to enter the competition. All submissions are reviewed by the Entrepreneurship Team and the top 10-15 applicants are selected to compete in an in-person event in Salisbury, Maryland. Competitors participate in an exhibit-style tradeshow in the morning and a pitch competition in the afternoon. Final awards are made by a panel of business and community leaders.

Eligibility Requirements

- All competitors must be Mid-Atlantic businesses, within 5 years of launching. Eligible Mid-Atlantic states include Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and West Virginia.
- Submission of a full and complete application, business plan and financials.
- An Ask not to exceed \$50,000 to overcome a specific obstacle to the firm's growth.
- Must attend competition event in person.
- Winners & Non-winners are not eligible to compete again. Applicants not selected to compete may reapply in the future but are encouraged to improve their submission by working with the SBDC or Rommel Center for Entrepreneurship.
- Previous Ratcliffe Program Awardees:
Participants who have previously received funding from any Ratcliffe Foundation-supported program are subject to a cumulative award cap of \$20,000. This total includes all funding awarded across any and all Ratcliffe programs (e.g., Shore Hatchery, Ratcliffe Foundation Entrepreneurship Fellows, etc.). When submitting your funding request ("Ask"), please ensure that your total cumulative award amount—including the current request—does not exceed the \$20,000 cap.

Awards

A total of \$100,000 will be awarded each semester amongst the winners (\$50K maximum award per winner). Award announcements will be made in person at the event, following deliberations. Cash payments will be paid out as checks. Winners must complete the required paperwork in order to receive their award.

Deadlines

See our [program website](#) for deadlines and event dates.

Applicants can submit or update their materials at any point during this period. The system will be closed at 11:59 PM on the final deadline date. Applicants are encouraged to submit well before the final deadline to avoid internet connectivity or system problems.

Submission Requirements

- **Online Application:** Applicants will complete an online application that includes a background profile, contact information, and a full business plan with financials.
- **Exhibit Tradeshow:** Competitors will participate in an exhibit style tradeshow, featuring their products or service. Recommended materials are: tablecloth, poster or signage, marketing materials, samples or a prototype. A tabletop poster template is available on our website for companies without pre-existing exhibition materials.

- **Presentation:** Competitors will create a 1-minute pitch and engage in a 6-minute Q & A session with the judges. The "pitch" should include (at a minimum): The Product or Service, The Market, How the Product or Service Will Make Money, Your Leadership Team, Your Competition and Competitive Advantage & Planned Use of the Ratcliffe Funds. NO Pitch decks or Presentation material allowed during your pitch. Competitors are welcome to wear marketing items such as logo wear, shirts, hats and pins.
- **Electronic:** All submissions must be made via the provided web-based information system. Submissions sent by email, mail, or other methods will not be reviewed.
- **Meetings:** Competitors will participate in 3 virtual meetings to prepare for the event. See our [website](#) for meeting dates/times.

Rubric

| Question | Category | Areas to Consider | Point Value |
|----------|---------------|---|-------------|
| 1 | Communication | The competitor uses effective verbal and non-verbal communication and prepares a professional quality exhibit. Competitor is able to use both qualitative (story) and quantitative information effectively. Competitor is able to answer reviewer questions confidently and articulately with specific and targeted responses. | 10 pts max |
| 2 | Problem | Pitch clearly identifies a relevant problem and defines who specifically has the problem (market segmentation). Competitor can articulate the severity of pain points, root causes, and impacts using appropriate supporting evidence. Problem is significant and compelling enough to drive user adoption at the given price point. | 10 pts max |
| 3 | Solution | The solution is feasible, innovative or novel, scalable, and clearly described. Solutions should be viable from business, market, and technology perspectives. Solutions should solve root causes and address key pain points mentioned in the problem definition. Competitor has an existing version of their product or service available in the marketplace OR a proof-of-concept or prototype of the solution for technology startups. | 15 pts max |
| 4 | Market | The competitor knows relevant industry trends and the competitor landscape as well as how their solution is differentiated or effectively competes in the marketplace. Competitor articulates quantitative measures of market size, growth or other measures of market potential. Company has deployed successful marketing tactics as evidenced by growth and tracked using key performance metrics relevant to their business model. For pre-revenue tech startups, evidence of customer discovery or other forms of initial market testing are provided. | 15 pts max |
| 5 | Money | Competitor presents a clear "Ask" and describes how the awarded funds will be used to overcome a specific obstacle to growth. Additional sources of capital needed to fill remaining funding gaps are available or addressable. Funding available through Shore Hatchery will provide a meaningful contribution to the company's development. The competitor's financial performance data, budgets, forecasts, and metrics are detailed and realistic. | 15 pts max |
| 6 | People | The founder team (2-3 preferred) has the requisite technical skillsets to develop and deliver the initial solution. Evidence that the team has a history of working together, friendship, or other connections beyond this specific venture. Team members can demonstrate a personal commitment to starting their proposed company. | 15 pts max |
| 7 | Extra | There may be intangibles or other factors at play outside of the 6 primary variables. Judges have 20 points they can assign to account for these factors in their scoring. | 20 pts max |

AI-Assisted Application Review

We may utilize AI-assisted review tools during application review and screening. The use of AI will be limited to the business information submitted in the application for fields, including the business profile, problem/solution statement, market opportunity, financial overview, and team composition. Personal contact information and all supporting materials, such as business plans, financial statements, pitch decks, and other attachments, are not included in any AI-assisted review process.

AI-generated assessments are used as a supplemental input to the review process and do not determine competition outcomes. All applications remain subject to review by our evaluation team, judges, and competition administrators. Applications have the option to “opt out” of the use of AI in the application form.

Scoring

Applications and pitches will be evaluated by a panel of industry experts. A scoring rubric will be used to rank submissions. The top-ranking submissions will be reviewed by the judging panel on competition day, and then winners will be selected. All decisions made by the panel is final and scored rubrics will not be shared with competitors.

Other Competition Rules

- Generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, may be used as part of an applicant’s creative process. However, submitted text and narrative should largely be the applicant’s own self-generated content. Applications and business plans that appear to be overly-reliant on AI-generated content may receive lower evaluation scores.

FAQ’s:

- **Can someone review my business plan?**
Yes. You can contact Scott Hines (SXHINES@salisbury.edu) or Sumathy Chandrashekar ([SXCHANDRASHEKAR@salisbury.edu](mailto: SXCHANDRASHEKAR@salisbury.edu)) of the SBDC Small Business Development Center, Michael Jensen, Executive Director of Entrepreneurship (mdjensen@salisbury.edu) or reach out to Heather Brooks, Event Coordinator (hmbrooks@salisbury.edu) to request an appointment for business plan assistance.
- **When will I know if my application has been accepted into the competition?**
Our team will complete a 2-week internal review of each applicant, then we will personally invite each competitor via phone and email.
- **What happens if it turns out that I'm not prepared to compete this round?**
 - If we determine you are unable to compete, **before submitting the application**: you are welcome to re-apply for a future round.
 - If we determine you are unable to compete, **after submitting the application**: you will be able to re-apply for a future round. Please email hmbrooks@salisbury.edu to communicate any changes.
 - **If you were invited to compete but are unable to**: Please notify the Event Coordinator, Heather Brooks at: hmbrooks@salisbury.edu. You will be eligible to apply to a future competition.
- **I didn't submit all my information before the deadline. Can I still submit my application after the cut-off date?**
Unfortunately, once the application process for a semester's competition cycle closes, no new applications will be accepted until the next cycle. We would, however, love to have you re-apply for the next Shore Hatchery competition! Since competitions are held twice a year, you would only need to wait approximately 6 months for the next cycle. More information on the next information cycle can be found on the [Shore Hatchery website](#) closer to the next cycle’s start date.

- **Am I allowed to bring product samples or my prototype into the pitch portion of the event?**
No. These materials are not allowed to be part of your presentation. Judges can see and experience your samples or prototypes during the exhibition period in the morning.
- **Who can I bring to the event with me?**
Feel free to invite your founder team and up to 1 supporter such as a spouse or business mentor to the event. Please do not bring your children under the age of 18 to the event as childcare facilities and spaces are not available.

Competitor Readiness Training

Prepare for success with our Competitor Readiness Training! This online training helps early-stage entrepreneurs determine whether Shore Hatchery is the right fit and develop a compelling application. Participants will learn how to clearly articulate their venture, funding ask, and growth goals while gaining insight into what it's like to compete through perspectives from past winners and judges. The training is designed to help teams submit a strong, thoughtful application and feel confident entering the competition. Access the training here: [Join the Online Entrepreneurship Competition Workshop](#)