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Michelle Corson, the CEO and founder of On The Road Garage, received a \$3 million investment to renovate a building to host a year-long apprenticeship program to teach auto repair skills to what Corson describes as vulnerable groups, such as domestic violence victims and the formerly incarcerated. Photo by John B. Sutton, Jr.

“A life-changing wage”: A \$3 million COVID grant will help launch apprenticeships for smart car techs to earn up to \$140,000

Those chosen for the one-year apprentice program will have benefits and earn \$15 an hour.

By NATALIE WALTERS, Money Reporter, natalie.walters@dallasnews.com

Dallas vehicle-financing nonprofit On The Road Lending will receive \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Commerce to renovate a West Dallas building where it will train people to become smart car technicians.

The grant is among \$4.8 million in pandemic recovery assistance for worker training programs in Texas. On The Road Lending worked with the North Central Texas Council of Governments on its application.



MICHELLE CORSON

Apprentices chosen for the one-year program will receive benefits and earn \$15 an hour. At their first job, they should earn about \$70,000 with the chance to double that with more experience, said On The Road Lending founder and CEO Michelle Corson.

“This is not just a living wage,” she said. “This is a life-changing wage.”

The grant will create about 275 jobs, with about half dedicated to the renovation of the facility and the other half belonging to the apprentices selected. Construction of the facility is expected to finish by the end of the year at which time it can start accept-

ing trainees in the program.

The facility will train people to calibrate smart cars. Advanced Driver Assistance Systems used in smart cars have sensors and cameras that work with a car’s computer system to help drivers with tasks like parking, emergency braking or switching lanes. If the sensors or cameras aren’t calibrated correctly, the system may not work and could lead to an accident.

Smart cars need calibration, or to be realigned, after a collision, as well as after more common events like windshield or bumper replacements.

This will be the nonprofit’s second facility. Last July, it opened its first facility in Irving, On The Road Garage, a for-profit business with 20 employees who make collision repairs.

On the Road Lending was founded in 2013 to help people get better jobs by taking away the barrier of not being able to afford a reliable car. It helps people improve their credit and purchase quality cars, financing them through its sister private-equity loan fund with a low-cost loan. The 14-employee nonprofit has done over 800 loans.

The surge in used car prices during the pandemic — due to trends like factories closing to keep workers safe from COVID-19 and a chip shortage — has had

a big impact on the nonprofit. Used car prices **are up 25% in the past year**. Corson said she hopes part of the grant can be used to help offset some of that cost for people.

The nonprofit says it grants loans based on peoples’ character rather than their credit score. The average increase in credit score of those working with On The Road Lending is 157, according to the organization’s **latest annual report** from 2019. The average age of the nonprofit’s clients is 41 with an average salary of \$32,061. Nearly 80% of clients are women and about 90% are people of color.

In early 2020, On The Road Lending received a **loan of up to \$10 million** from Goldman Sachs’ urban investment group to expand its program into underserved communities outside of Texas. It was already in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. The loan will be used to expand into Arizona, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee starting in July, Corson said.

*Those interested can check for open positions at the Irving garage or the future West Dallas garage by visiting the **On the Road Garage website**. You can also email training@ontheroadgarage.com.*

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