

Aisha Benson  
Executive VP, TruFund Financial Services, Inc.  
OFN Board Member Candidate 2019

Dear OFN Member Colleagues,

It is with sincere gratitude and enthusiasm that I come before you as a candidate for the OFN Board of Directors. My interest in this role is sparked by my growing desire to take on a more active leadership role in advancing the strategic direction, public policy agenda, and collaborative work of this industry. I want to lend my expertise and leverage my networks to assist the talented OFN team in its goal to align capital with social, economic, and political justice.

I believe I have the requisite skills and experience to help the OFN Board in continuing to meet its mission and vision objectives. I am a formally credit trained professional with over 25 years of experience lending to micro entrepreneurs, small businesses, mid-size firms, non-profits, intermediaries, and real estate projects. The first 16 years of my career were with financial institutions, where I developed a strong foundation of technical skills, insight into how to balance profit and mission, and a hunger to create impact for the underbanked, unbanked, and underserved.

In 2010, I joined TruFund Financial Services out of my longing to be more strategic, innovative, and intentional about reaching the communities and populations I could not help through traditional banking, TruFund's work is wide-reaching. We provide loans, New Market Tax Credit investments, and business training and advisory services to for-profit and non-profit businesses in metro and rural communities of New York, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas. Since inception, TruFund has disbursed \$136 million in capital to more than 1,300 small businesses and nonprofit organizations, which has contributed to the creation and/or retention of nearly 9,200 jobs. Our Community Development entity has deployed \$235 million in tax credits to over 36 projects nationwide.

My responsibilities at TruFund are varied but I am primarily charged with oversight of the New Market Tax Credit (NMTC) program, as well as lending and technical assistance operations in each of our markets. I also work closely with our President and senior staff on creditor/investor relations, compliance, and resource development. In conjunction with my role at TruFund, I currently serve on the executive boards of the New York CDFI and New Market Tax Credit Coalitions, as well as the NMTC Advisory Boards of US Bank and Coastal Enterprises.

My Board and overall industry experience will allow me to provide strategic insight and functional value as an OFN Board Member. I understand the importance of recognizing new ideas relevant to the current industry climate, implementing programs that address our changing communities, using public policy as a tool to advance mission, generating opportunity through diversity and inclusion initiatives, and the importance of strengthening our industry as the trusted go-to partner for government, corporate, non-profit and community. AS a member of the executive board for the NY CDFI coalition, I helped steward the first allocation of revolving loan fund capital appropriated to a statewide CDFI fund.

Even prior to launching my career, I was being prepared to be a change agent in this space. I grew up in a severely distressed community in Harlem, NY but gentrification claimed my family as one of its early victims years ago. We were forced to move in with extended family due to rapidly escalating rents. On a positive note, I also experienced first-hand how entrepreneurship can be a pathway out of poverty as my mom and aunt made jewelry and formed a talent management company that placed my siblings and cousins on Sesame Street, commercials and videos. We never became wealthy, but the bills were paid on time and I didn't lack for anything. These personal experiences serve as context and motivation for the work I do every

day. They are also why I have volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and continue to coach young people on financial literacy. I am inspired daily to create positive change and make an impactful difference in an authentic way.

TruFund and I, as a professional, value our longstanding relationship with OFN. Members of our team have spoken on numerous conference panels, joined into webinars, participated in advocacy efforts, and voted in every Board election. I was blessed to participate in the inaugural Citi / OFN Leadership Program for Opportunity Finance in 2014 and I love being plugged into the CDFI Women's Network. It is because of my active participation that I can attest that OFN's role in the education and professional development of CDFI practitioners and industry partners elevates the field.

OFN Board members have the responsibility to steer OFN in the direction that leads to the betterment of member CDFIs and the entire community development sector. I am committed to fulfilling this role. I am not looking to change the direction of OFN by being on the Board. Instead, I'm looking to do more of what is working but perhaps more creatively and in a way that benefits a broader membership base.

If elected, I would help drive more capital and resources to member organizations. Further, I want to ensure that there is a fair and equitable distribution of access to opportunity for all CDFIs, regardless of size, time in business, focus sector, or region. We can stand to do more to ensure that smaller CDFIs, emerging CDFIs, native CDFIs, rural CDFIs, CDFI credit unions, and urban CDFIs have a level playing field. If we are successful here, not only will there be more impact on the ground, but I believe we will also see membership increase. Currently 250 (21%) of the 1200 CDFIs nationwide are members. With more opportunities abounding, there is potential for a significant increase in membership.

I would also work to increase learning and professional development opportunities. Access to information, knowledge, resources, and peer-to-peer training spark fresh content and innovative approaches to product and service delivery. The ultimate beneficiaries are our valued clients and communities.

I will make sure that the promotion of collaboration remains a pillar for OFN. I am a firm believer that rising tides raise all ships. Collaboration provides opportunities to advance our work. Working together, we can innovatively and efficiently address neighborhood challenges around gentrification, the struggles of businesses and families in rural communities, predatory lending abuses, and disparities in lending to people of color and women.

I have received formal training in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion. I will endeavor to keep OFN focused and accountable to these principles. We represent diverse communities and so diversity should be evident at all levels of leadership at OFN and across our membership base.

I count it an honor to be a practitioner and leader in this industry and look to extend my commitment even further by serving on this illustrious Board. Trufund is not just a job for me and serving on the board would not just be a role. I live and breathe this work. I have 25 years of committed service to back this up and I plan to give many more years to come. I sincerely appreciate your vote.

I invite you to contact me at 917-338-9227 or by email at [abenson@trufund.org](mailto:abenson@trufund.org) with your questions, concerns, and ideas.

Sincerely,  
Aisha Benson