

# CITY OF PALM DESERT STAFF REPORT

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MEETING DATE: September 26, 2024

PREPARED BY: Mariela Salazar, Management Analyst  
Eric Ceja, Director of Economic Development

SUBJECT: UNITE PALM DESERT AUTISM CERTIFICATION REIMBURSEMENT  
PROGRAM FOR PALM DESERT BUSINESSES

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## **RECOMMENDATION:**

1. Approve the Unite Palm Desert Autism Certification Reimbursement Program (ACRP).
2. Authorize Director of Finance to transfer \$30,000 from the Business Enhancement Program funds to Account No. 4254430-4393000 for the Autism Certification Reimbursement Program (ACRP).
3. Authorize City Manager to execute all documents required to effectuate the program.

## **BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:**

In January 2024, the City of Palm Desert became the first city in California—and the second city in the nation—to achieve certification as an Autism Certified City through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). In response to public comments made at the May 9, 2024, City Council meeting, the City Council directed staff to develop and implement an Autism Certification Reimbursement Program to assist Palm Desert businesses in becoming Certified Autism Centers (CAC).

Implementing this program aligns with the City's vision of fostering an inclusive and welcoming community. By encouraging businesses to achieve CAC certification, the City enhances the quality of life for individuals with autism and establishes itself as a leader in inclusive tourism. Furthermore, if approved, Palm Desert would be the first city in the nation to introduce an incentive program providing financial assistance to businesses seeking this certification.

Currently, The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens, the JW Marriott Resort and Spa, and the Joslyn Center are among the organizations in Palm Desert certified through IBCCES. Implementing the ACRP would bring numerous economic and community benefits, including:

1. **Inclusive Tourism** – Attracting families with autistic members, which boosts tourism and revenues, while positioning Palm Desert as a leader in inclusive tourism.
2. **Economic Growth** – Encouraging more businesses to become certified, leading to increased patronage and spending within certified establishments.
3. **Enhanced Reputation** – Promoting Palm Desert as a forward-thinking, inclusive city, setting an example for other municipalities.
4. **Improved Customer Experience** – Creating a supportive and accommodating environment for individuals with autism by raising staff awareness and sensitivity.
5. **Long-term Community Benefits** – Inspiring other businesses to participate, fostering a culture of inclusivity throughout the community.

**Implementation:**

In response to the City Council’s request, staff recommends establishing an ACRP to assist businesses to obtaining CAC certification. This program will prioritize support for the following business sectors:

- Priority I: Hospitality
- Priority II: Retail and Restaurants
- Priority III: Small Enterprises

Under the program, businesses will be eligible for a one-time reimbursement of \$2,500 towards the CAC certification fee. Reimbursement will be provided once the City receives confirmation of the business’s successful completion of certification.

This reimbursement program aims to reduce the financial burden of certification, making it more accessible for businesses to pursue CAC certification and employee training through IBCCES. IBCCES has offered a discounted rate for Palm Desert businesses, lowering the original CAC fee from \$5,000 to \$2,500. The training fees apply per staff member, with higher management required to undergo a 4-hour training session.

To qualify for certification, 80% of a business’s employees must complete the required training, with certification being renewed every two years. Staff recommends that the City provide this one-time assistance based on the availability of limited funds. Below is a breakdown of certification costs for businesses based on the number of employees.

Certified Autism Center - For Travel & Recreation					
Partner pricing	30 min	4 Hr.	CAC	Audit*	Total (Estimated)
less than 5 staff	\$25	\$89	\$2,500		\$2,689
6 to 15	\$25	\$89	\$2,500		\$3,003
16 to 25	\$25	\$89	\$2,500		\$3,317
25 to 50	\$25	\$84	\$2,500	\$5,000	\$9,070
50 to 100	\$25	\$79	\$2,500	\$5,000	\$10,640
100+	custom	custom	\$2,500	\$5,000	custom

\*Audits are mandatory for larger organizations of over 25 staff members. The exception to this is hotels, unless the hotel is a resort style hotel with additional amenities apart from the standard gym, pool and café.

If approved, staff will initiate the promotion of the reimbursement program to businesses within the prioritized sectors. The initial focus will be on Hospitality, with an implementation period of one year. During this time, staff will assess the effectiveness of the program and gather feedback from participating businesses. A report on the program’s progress, including any recommendations for adjustments, will be presented to the City Council before proceeding with Priorities II and III, which will target Retail, Restaurants, and Small Enterprises.

**Legal Review:**

This report has been reviewed by the City Attorney's Office.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

Staff recommends an initial budget of \$30,000 to be allocated towards the ARCP. This funding will support 12 Hospitality and Tourist Attractions under Priority I of the program, with each business eligible to receive a one-time reimbursement of \$2,500 towards their CAC certification fee. Reimbursement will be issued upon confirmation of the business's certification. Funding for this program is available in the Business Enhancement Program funds and may be transferred to Account No. 4254430-4393000.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. IBCCES Travel Survey
2. Become a Certified Autism Center
3. ACRP Guidelines
4. ACRP Application