

Guide to Successfully Preparing for Federal Grants

The Center for the Study of Social Policy's (CSSP) *Neighborhood Investment* work helps communities and local leaders understand, assess and secure public and private resources needed to achieve better long-term results for vulnerable children and families.

In the current economic climate, federal funding in particular is a significant source of support for local efforts and can be hugely beneficial in helping communities achieve, scale-up and sustain local work. However, for many communities, the stringent requirements and competitive nature of federal grants can seem daunting. The nature of community collaboration itself can also make applying for federal grants challenging as consensus has to be built with a variety of stakeholders and partners. Yet, many communities have learned how to creatively leverage federal resources to 1) advance more comprehensive community-based interventions that integrate services and address the interwoven needs of individuals and families; and 2) build the capacity needed at the local level to implement, evaluate and sustain the work over time.

Based on CSSP's experience, communities can be most successful in accessing federal grants by working together to create a process that contains the following elements:

- A focus on results
- Data to demonstrate need
- Solutions that work
- Learning and accountability
- Effective partnerships
- Long-term sustainability

This brief will explore why each of these elements is important to successfully receiving federal funding.

A Focus on Results

Your community must work together to ensure that any potential funding opportunities are adequately aligned with the results being pursued. To do so, first ensure there is clarity and consensus about these results. Results are the community's vision for the conditions you believe are needed for child and family well-being. Engaging in a results-driven process to clarify and refine your shared desired results will help to empower your community to envision what you want and focus on what solutions are needed to get there. The results your community chooses to pursue should be meaningful to a range of different people, commonly understood and measurable.

When a grant opportunity arises, a critical first step will be for you and your partners to do a very close reading of the grant and analyze whether the grant's criteria and requirements are aligned with your results. You should also think beyond the specific programs that the grant could support and consider what capacities would be needed to effectively implement and sustain your proposal. Consider the following questions:

- ✓ What is driving the need to apply for funding?
- ✓ How will getting the grant impact your community now and in the future?
- ✓ How would the grant impact different populations within the community?
- ✓ Would all community partners and leaders support a decision to apply?
- ✓ Who in the community has a commitment to and an established track record of serving the grant program's target population?
- ✓ Who has the organizational capacity (skills, experience, infrastructure, staff) to manage and meet both the required deliverables of the grant and its resulting impact?
- ✓ Who has the history, experience, skills and capacity to ensure that a broad cross-section of community residents have input and leadership roles in the planning, implementation and accountability for the proposed project?
- ✓ Does the grant provide an opportunity to deepen these capacities?

Using Data to Demonstrate Need

Your community partners should be prepared to make a strong case for your need for the grant and show how your proposed activities will address those needs. This typically involves a data analysis that gives a picture of the current conditions in your community and the factors you believe are impacting these conditions. The data would also examine any potential trends for how these conditions might change moving forward. In addition to using the data that is most relevant and necessary to tell a compelling story, you should also keep in mind any specific data required by the grant. You will have to work closely together to compile and synthesize various sources of data. Some questions to consider include:

- ✓ What are the challenges and the successes impacting the community and the target population you are focusing on?
- ✓ How do those who are doing well differ from those facing serious challenges?
- ✓ Do these experiences differ by population (e.g. by race, gender, age, etc) or sub-section of the geographic area you are targeting?
- ✓ What do community members say is the cause of the issue or problem you are addressing?
- ✓ What assets and strengths exist in the community?
- ✓ What are the trends? Are things getting better or worse? Why?
- ✓ How does your community compare to other communities? Are other communities that are nearby or with similar demographics facing the same challenges?

Proposing Solutions that Work

Your community will then have to make the case that the solutions you propose in the grant will address the stated need and get to the results you want to achieve. Starting with the end in mind, your community should develop a detailed action plan with proposed interventions that are based on the best available evidence about what works. While there may be no silver bullet solution, there are often several evidence-based strategies that you can draw upon. You should also feel comfortable using the best research available when making the case for why certain strategies and interventions could improve outcomes locally. Keep in mind the unique needs and existing resources in your particular community.

Consider the following questions when assessing strategies:

- ✓ What does research say will work? Have those practices been shown to work in communities with similar characteristics and demographics?
- ✓ What was the evidence base for successful interventions? What kinds of community infrastructure and capacity were in place?
- ✓ What kinds of community infrastructure and capacity will your community need to successfully implement the proposed solutions? Who in the community can provide this infrastructure and capacity?
- ✓ What do residents and other community stakeholders say they want and need? What does the community think will accomplish those changes?
- ✓ What's missing and what is already in place in your community? Can you identify opportunities to build on current and new programs to reach a higher level of effectiveness?
- ✓ What is likely to work in your community? What best fits community challenges, the results residents want and your potential resources and capacity?
- ✓ What systems and policies may need to change to ensure the success of your strategies?

In designing your approach, you also want to consider questions about the appropriate scale of the solutions you are proposing. You can do this by starting with questions about the magnitude of impact you hope to achieve and then thinking about the extent to which the resources you have can support strategies that will achieve that desired level of impact. Some questions to consider in determining scale are what is the size of impact that you can most *successfully* accomplish with available resources? What is your current capacity to achieve the results you are seeking? Do you have a plan for expanding this capacity? Have you accounted for the resources you will need to expand your community's capacity and successfully implement your proposed strategies?

Learning and Accountability

One critical capacity that you should be prepared to lift up in your grant proposal is the ability to measure and evaluate program outcomes. Federal grants increasingly expect communities to demonstrate their ability to collect and track data on how interventions are impacting those served. Grantees are also expected to have a system for using this data to evaluate programming over time to ensure their strategies are achieving results. Being able to demonstrate the ability to evaluate and document success will help your community to continue to attract more dollars in the future.

You should think of your data in terms of long-term evaluation as well as short-term performance measurement. In the short-term, you should be able to show how you will use data to learn and make adjustments to the work in real-time. This has several advantages, including enabling communities to:

- Immediately hold each other accountable for the work while it's being done
- Make mid-course corrections in the action plan if it's not having the desired impact
- Realign or reallocate resources to get better outcomes
- Keep people informed and engaged about the work

- Communicate to funders, local policymakers and residents how the work is progressing

To do this well, you will need to develop indicators that measure your progress in reaching results. Because there are dozens of possible indicators for any given result, you should work with community partners to choose indicators for which data will be available on a timely basis, are locally relevant to your community and that effectively communicate to your stakeholders the status of the results you are pursuing.

Building Effective Partnerships

The current administration has emphasized the need for breaking down silos between agencies and has encouraged more collaboration among community partners. This presents an opportunity for you to lift up your unique local experience of building partnerships between key stakeholders. We know that strong partnerships enable communities to more effectively respond to the interwoven challenges that individuals and families experience. Through partnerships, community stakeholders can share data, align programs in new ways, create more comprehensive strategies and share resources in ways that maximize funding and save money. In your grant, you should describe how your partnership is helping you to expand your capacity in those key areas.

In addition, you also want to demonstrate how your core partnership has worked to ensure that residents are also partners in both the planning and implementation of this work. We know that residents often understand best how families are faring and can help others in the community further their understanding of the resources available (or lacking) in the community, how families are experiencing existing systems and what solutions might best address community needs. Reaching out to residents is also a first step in building trust and helps to bring a level of legitimacy and credibility to your efforts. In recognition of how important the voice of residents and families is, federal agencies have increasingly required demonstration of those relationships in grant applications. You should lift up the role of residents in moving the community's results agenda forward.

When describing your partnerships, you should be clear about how you have structured your partnership to ensure that stakeholders are working together effectively and that residents are fully involved in the process. Many communities create formal and informal structures to carry out their work and to create opportunities for core partners to share progress in reaching results with the broader community. Your description should include the mechanisms you will use to ensure partners are accountable to each other and to the community. For example, many communities create an operating structure guided by a shared agreement that describes the specific roles and responsibilities of each partner and the resources that each partner is committing.

Long-Term Sustainability

Increasingly, federal agencies are seeking to ensure that federal grants are an investment in a long-term commitment to change. Your community will have to think about what kind of long-term sustainability strategy makes sense locally. Many communities have found their interventions and partnerships to be stronger when the focus from the onset is about achieving

results for children and families – whether or not they receive additional funding. As funding availability can ebb and flow, demonstrating a clear vision and strong commitment from local partners to do “whatever it takes” to get results can also help your community to leverage future funding from both public and private sources as they become available.

Another dimension of sustainability that positions communities as strong applicants for federal funding is the capacity to effectively utilize and maximize current funding. You should be able to assess your community’s use of existing resources and how these resources have been focused towards streamlined, results-driven services. To do so your community will have to be able to:

- 1) *Be clear about what you want to finance.* You should be able to accurately estimate fiscal needs, taking into consideration from the very beginning what is needed to achieve results at a greater scale and thinking about not just programmatic costs but also costs related to administration, infrastructure, data, capacity-building and ramp-up costs for program expansion.
- 2) *Map available resources.* What are your current sources of funding (both cash and in-kind contributions)? How flexible are these resources? Do you have a balance of public and private funding, short- and long-term funding, restricted and flexible dollars?
- 3) *Assess the gaps between resources needed and those in hand.* What particular results areas, strategies or activities are you lacking support for? What categories of spending (management, data, programs, professional development, etc.) are you lacking resources for? What are the time limits on funding sources?
- 4) *Build capacity to track future public and private funding sources to fill those gaps.* You will have to show how the grant you are pursuing is an investment that can help leverage new resources. This requires your community to show how it will both keep track of and analyze public and private funding sources to see how they can best be used to support the work.

To demonstrate your focus on sustainability, you should also demonstrate how you are tracking and analyzing existing and future *policy* opportunities that are relevant to your local community change efforts. These opportunities – at the local, state and federal level – are an important dimension of leveraging and generating new funding resources. Policymakers can help to ensure continued access to funding streams and help to align policies and procedures for grant applications, reporting and program evaluation.

Conclusion

Our experience has shown that addressing each of these components is necessary for the success of any collaborative community change effort. Through our *Neighborhood Investment* work, we have helped communities incorporate these elements into their community change and decision-making processes. With these strategies, we believe that communities can more successfully compete for federal funding.

*For more information on our work, please visit
<http://www.cssp.org/community/neighborhood-investment>*