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A Step-By-Step Primer On How To Obtain Large Government Grants For Nonprofits (Part 4)

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Obtaining Government Grants: Step 4—Writing The Application

There are many steps to applying for large government grants. Each step is equally important to securing the funding your organization needs for growth. Over the next several weeks, we are planning to outline, step-by-step, the general process inherent in obtaining these grants. Our hope is that other professionals advising or working within the NPO community will comment and offer their own suggestions or opinions. We believe that such productive dialog will be helpful toward bringing more efficiencies (and money!) to Delaware nonprofits. This is the fourth part of this series: The Application.

STEP 4. Writing The Application

This article focuses on how to prepare the grant application. In step one, you learned how to prove on paper that your organization had the capacity to partner with the Federal government and become a vendor. In step two, you learned how to research to generate support for your grant application. In step three, we discussed how the case for support should be written to align with the Federal agency's objectives for the community. In step four, we will focus on writing the application.

Deciding where to start on the application after your organization has decided to pursue Federal grants can be a daunting task, but is manageable. Much legwork and time should have already been spent on determining that your organization has met the capacity requirements, generating support, and working on a case statement. Next, after you have downloaded the grant application on Grants.gov, you are probably staring at approximately 100 pages of "Paper

Reduction Act" detailed instructions explaining how to apply for the funding your organization needs.

The first step to completing this task is to read, read, read! Reading the application (multiple times) will ensure that over the next few months, you will know the application so well that you will be able to quote the requirements and the location of the content in each section.

After reading the application comes the arduous task of digesting the process, which can be quite formidable. Fortunately, there are several methods that can be useful to break the process of completing the application into smaller, manageable steps. These steps are outlined below.

1) Review Pre-requisites to Application. What are the requirements listed in the application to apply? Does your organization meet those requirements? If so, what documentation do you have to demonstrate these facts? Make a list of the documents you need, or the assurances that confirm your organizations eligibility. Basic requirements may be having a DUNS number, 501-c-3 status, or being an EEO provider. More specific requirements may include having previous experience as a provider of the programs or services listed in the grant or certifications and training of specific types of staff. Before you exhaust your organizations resources in applying, confirm your eligibility in writing.

2) Contact the Agency. Questions about eligibility or other required commitments can be addressed with the specific program officer listed on the grant application. Applicants should take note that in addition to the outlined proposal, they may be required to perform other services or commitments, such as future involvement in specific institutions or client groups. This may necessitate the modification of the original concept in order for the project to be eligible for funding, or may require the applicant to make commitments they are not prepared to do.

It is important to note that many agencies will refuse to answer questions regarding the grant application once it is released, often stating, "It may give an individual organization an unfair advantage." Therefore, if you anticipate applying for a type of grant, it is to your advantage to read the previous year's application prior to applying, and ask your questions before the current year is released.

3) <u>Critically Review the Application</u>. After the application has been read through once or twice, it is important to take the time to read the application critically and begin making notes. As you review the application at this stage of the process, it may be helpful to use several different highlighters, assigning colors to specific anticipated tasks. For example, use yellow for required internal attachment, green for documents needed from external supporters of the project, blue for tasks assigned to internal staff outside of the development office, and purple for attachments noted in the text of the instructions but not listed in the application requirements. This information will be important as you develop the timeline.

3) <u>Create a Internal Working Timeline For When Different Parts of the Application Will Be Due</u>. Creating a timeline is essential because there are many parts to the application and all are necessary to complete. Particularly, Federal grants have a list of mandatory attachments, and so one aspect of the timeline should focus on gathering and completing the attachments. Bear in mind that the failure to include all required attachments, regardless of where they are listed in the application, is one of the most common reasons for rejections of Federal grants.

Some of the attachments may take weeks or months to obtain or develop. Many are letters of support or documents required from agencies or individuals outside of your organization. Some of the documents may be required in order to receive a secondary requirement, such as a commitment letter from all funding sources prior to receiving a commitment for State funding. Other information required must be created internally. The development officer should be responsible for gathering and tracking every document and making sure all materials required for the grant are received prior to application.

One very manageable method to facilitate tracking this information and help build the timeline is to use a simple spreadsheet. The spreadsheet should have at least three columns: one for the list of attachments, one for delegating responsibility for obtaining/creating the attachments, and the third should have a deadline for securing or finalizing them.

The first column of the spreadsheet should be the list of attachments. Because most Federal applications are posted on Grants.gov in both Microsoft Word and PDF formats, it is easy to cut and paste the attachment list from the word documents to your spreadsheet. Note that many applications will also list attachments in the requirements section, but then also include other, additional required attachments, which are only vaguely referenced in the general text of the instructions. Because you should have already highlighted these attachments in purple, it should be easy to spot and add them to your spreadsheet.

Next to the attachments column should be an assignment column where these documents can be assigned to an individual, who might be an internal or external source. For example, the program budget may be assigned to the organization's CFO, and a support letter may be needed from the Mayor, Governor of your State and your local authorities.

The third column should have listed the deadline date to obtain each document. Setting a deadline date should be based on the deadline for submission of the grant. On your timeline, a deadline for documents should be **at least** two weeks prior to the submission date. Because almost all Federal grants are required to be submitted online, allowing two weeks builds time into your schedule for technology glitches, incorrect application macros which reject your data, insufficient memory or data transmission capacity issues, etc.

4) Assign tasks. Once you have your timeline, begin assigning the tasks. Microsoft Outlook has an excellent task assign feature, which allows you to electronically assign a task to individuals within your organization, and provide detailed information on what is needed. You can outline steps to complete the task, such as when the initial meeting to discuss the budget will take place; when you would like to review the draft; and assign a deadline for the CFO to complete the final draft. Whenever possible, gather all documents at least one month prior to the deadline of submission.

For external requests; it is best to contact the official or agency in person via telephone and follow up with written correspondence. Writing a detailed request of what is needed, and then scanning and emailing the request is efficient and effective. To expedite your

request; it is often helpful to include a draft of a letter you need, with a note that says, "I have taken the liberty of drafting a sample letter." Most letters from government offices are staffed with interns who are assigned the task of drafting your letter. If you provide the letter; they simply cut and paste it on the required letterhead, and return the document.

5) <u>Begin writing the grant</u>. Most Federal grant proposals have the following components: (1) the executive summary, (2) organizational capacity, (3) the problem statement (or needs assessment), (4) project objectives; (5) project methods or design, (6) project evaluation, (7) sustainability, and (8) the project budget. Each of these sections must be covered in detail, and should comprise its own separate section of the proposal for easy review and reference by the grantor agency. It is helpful to create folders for each of these areas and file the research and data that needs to be incorporated into your grant in each file for later use.

Most of the information needed for the executive summary and organizational capacity can be pulled from your case statement and from the grant instructions narrative. Use the agency's language! For example, if an agency goal is to "Expand affordable housing to rural areas," then state, "Our organization is ideally suited to provide affordable housing in the following rural areas as defined by the agency guidelines because…." and substantiate your statement with facts. The same is true of the problem statement (or needs assessment). Restate the need outlined in the grant narrative to assure the reviewer that you understand the goals and objective of the program. This information, as well as project evaluation, will be the focus of our next article.

The program methods or design is one of the most important portions of your grant, and unlike private funders, more is better! In this section, describe in detail the activities that will be performed, and include the staff, resources, facilities, transportation, support services, partnerships that will be required to meet the need.

In addition, most Federal grants have an extensive narrative of questions that need to be answered by the applicant. Cut and paste those questions into a word document and make each question a new paragraph. Bold the questions, and begin writing the responses to

those questions as text for your grant. This information will flow naturally into your proposal. Make sure to answer each question thoroughly by supporting your statements with facts, statistics, data and references.

Throughout this process, make sure to highlight how your organization is unique, distinctive, or innovative and explain why it is the best applicant to meet the agency's need. These applications are extraordinarily competitive; with only one or two awards per region. Some regions include four to seven states, and all applicants are competing for the same funding.

Finally, make the review process as easy as possible for the reviewer. Create an index for your application, and make distinct sections. Use appendices to guide reviewers to detailed statements, supplementary data, references, and any information requiring in-depth analysis. This will make your grant easier to read and give the grant proposal reader easy access to the details of reports and data if clarification or back-up information is required. Depending on the type of program or project, the application may also include time tables, work plans, schedules, activities, methodologies, legal papers, personal vitae, letters of support and endorsements from partners and community leaders.

A few general closing tips.

- In addition to using excellent grammar and spelling; make sure to check for page, format and font requirements of the grant application. Many agencies will require a specific format for submission.
- Pay attention to regulation on size of documents to be uploaded, and how to name each document. Some online software programs will reject applications if attachments are incorrectly named.
- Make sure to spell out acronyms. Do not assume the reviewer is knowledgeable about the content of the grant.
- Assume the reader knows nothing about your organization, the project or the programs. Have a colleague review your grant for readability and errors. Ask them if your case is convincing!

- Have a co-worker cross check your sections with the index to make sure all of the information is inserted. After spending months on the project, it is easy to overlook errors.

- Number every page of the grant in sequential order. That way, if a document is lost by the reviewer, you can prove it was originally in the grant. If you can get access to Adobe Acrobat Pro; it does this for you on any PDF file. It also allows for insertion and deletion of pages, and reordering of a PDF file.

- Submit PDF files. Do not risk having your documents changed!

- Remember; many excellent proposals with perfect submissions are rejected because of insufficient funding. Neatness, attention to detail, organization, and efficiency are critical.

- Finally, be ready to submit early, but not too early! Federal agencies make many changes to the grant applications as errors are discovered, and you may be required to re-do the entire application if submitted too early.

Don't miss our next article: Step 5 – The Logic Model and Project Evaluation.

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