Guidance and Tips on Navigating the U.S. Department of Justice Grant Process

Advancing Community Safety and Justice Initiatives

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Contents

Introduction to the guide

Across the country, a wide range of stakeholders are working to improve community safety and justice. Ensuring that communities have sufficient resources to grow, develop, and sustain innovative solutions and initiatives is a constant challenge nationwide. Applying for federal grants can be a great opportunity to gain access to needed funds. However, the grant application and management process is complex and often requires more resources and a greater capacity than applicants expect.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) provides grant opportunities for nonprofits, government agencies, law enforcement, academic institutions, and for-profit companies. The DOJ's funding opportunities aim "to support law enforcement and public safety activities; ... to assist victims of crime; to provide training and technical assistance; to conduct research and collect national statistics; and to implement programs that improve the criminal, civil, and juvenile justice systems."[1]

Funding through the DOJ is available through three grantmaking offices: the Office of Justice Programs (OJP), the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS).[2] DOJ funding can be used to support a wide range of activities such as innovative research projects and program development, and it can provide funding to expand or sustain an existing initiative.

In an effort to streamline the applicant experience, the DOJ has changed its application process in the past few years.[3] While these updates should make it easier for applicants in the long run, recent changes may result in confusion for people who have applied for DOJ funding in the past.

The goal of this guide is to support increased opportunities for funding of innovative approaches by supporting applicants as they make their way through the federal grant application process. The guide highlights key steps in the application process and supports applicants through drafting and assembling a proposal for submission.

Glossary of terms

Below is a list of terms used throughout this guide.

- **Entity:** The organization, agency, or individual applying for a grant.
- **Entity administrators:** Each entity must have someone designated as the entity administrator. The administrator is responsible for managing entity users, roles, and assignments in JustGrants; ensuring entity profile accuracy; and maintaining entity documents in JustGrants.[4]
- **Forecast:** When a funding opportunity is planned but the funds are not yet available. Forecast opportunities are subject to change until they are published.
- **Funding opportunity announcement (FOA):** The DOJ's official solicitation, which announces grant opportunities and provides instructions on how to apply.
- **Grants.gov:** The web-based system where SF-424 and SF-LLL forms are located. This is also where users can explore and save open and forecast funding opportunities. To apply for any DOJ funding opportunities, there are two deadlines for submission of materials; the Grants.gov deadline is first and must be met in order to submit an application through JustGrants by the application deadline.
- **JustGrants:** The web-based system where the application should be submitted.
- **Performance metrics:** Output or outcome data of grantees' activities and services that demonstrate accomplishment of the goals and objectives.[5] Each solicitation will note specific performance measures that must be reported.
- **SAM.gov:** The system where entities must register before applying for any federal funding opportunities.
- **Unique entity ID (UEI):** A 12-character alphanumeric ID assigned to an entity by SAM.gov that is used to identify the organization. A UEI is needed to search entity registrations, exclusions, and contract award opportunities[6] and must be secured prior to submitting a grant application. For those familiar with the previous DOJ process, UEIs have replaced the DUNS numbers in the application process.[7] Once assigned, an entity's UEI will not change.
- **SF-424:** Application for federal assistance. This form, completed in Grants. gov, should be submitted early in the process to ensure that there is enough time to receive approval. It requires information such as applicant organization information, contact information of the primary point of contact for the grant application, the funding opportunity information, estimated total funding for the project, and the authorized representative among

other things.[8] When completing the SF-424, it is OK for information to be speculative. The SF-424 will be automatically uploaded to JustGrants in an editable format. The DOJ recommends that all SF-424 and SF-LLL forms be submitted at least 72 hours before the Grants.gov deadline to allow time to correct any errors that may arise.[9]

- **SF-LLL:** Disclosure of lobbying activities requires entity information and contact information for the entity's lobbyist, if applicable, among other things. Like the SF-424, the SF-LLL should be completed early in the process. This document will be automatically uploaded to JustGrants in PDF form. The DOJ recommends that all SF-424 and SF-LLL forms be submitted at least 72 hours before the Grants.gov deadline to allow time to correct any errors that may arise.[10]

Overview of DOJ grants

Each year, the DOJ offers billions of dollars to support the innovative work of criminal legal system stakeholders and community partners.[11] The DOJ makes awards through three funding entities: the OJP, OVW, and COPS.[12]
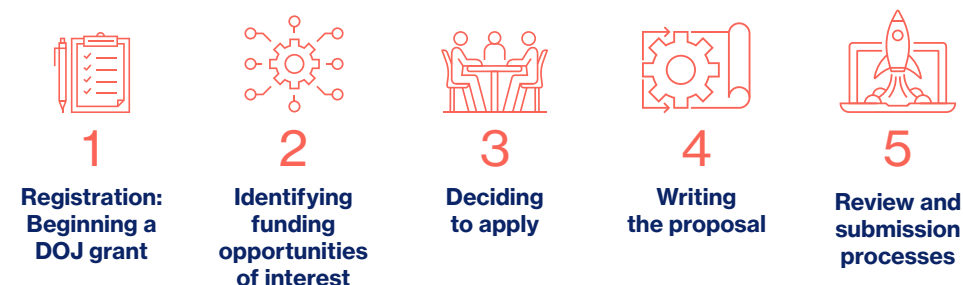
Offices funding DOJ grants

- **Office of Justice Programs:** The OJP is made up of six offices that offer "federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance and other resources."[13] Its mission is to "provide leadership, resources and solutions for creating safe, just and engaged communities."[14] The following offices are the OJP's program offices:[15]
  - Bureau of Justice Assistance
  - Bureau of Justice Statistics
  - National Institute of Justice
  - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
  - Office for Victims of Crime
  - Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking
  - OJP email sign up

- **Office on Violence Against Women:** The OVW's mission is to develop "the national capacity to reduce violence against women and administer justice for and strengthen services to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking."[16]
  - OVW email sign up

- **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services:** COPS advances "the practice of community policing."[17]
  - You can sign up to receive notifications from each of the three offices about new DOJ funding opportunities here:
  - COPS email sign up

Generally, there are three stages of the DOJ grantmaking process: the pre-award phase, where applicants prepare and submit proposals;[18] the award phase, where the relevant DOJ office reviews submissions and determines awards;[19] and the post-award phase, where grant recipients implement proposals and fulfill reporting requirements.[20] This guide focuses on the pre-award phase to help prepare applicants for the application process.

Explaining the pre-award process

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Registration: Beginning a DOJ grant	**Identifying funding opportunities of interest**	**Deciding to apply**	**Writing the proposal**	**Review and submission processes**

1 Registration: Beginning a DOJ grant

In order to apply for a federal funding opportunity, entities must first have an active SAM.gov registration, and the organization, agency, or individual completing the application must have a Grants.gov account. These registrations play different roles in the grant application process and have different requirements:

- **SAM.gov:** Registration is required to complete other parts of the application process and generally takes around 10 days to complete.[21] Register with SAM.gov as soon as possible to avoid delaying other application steps. SAM.gov registrations must be renewed every year or whenever entity information changes.[22]

- **Grants.gov:** Registration can take weeks for new users, so applicants should start the process of applying several weeks before the Grants.gov deadline that is indicated on the funding opportunity, also called a solicitation. Unlike SAM.gov registrations, Grants.gov registrations do not have to be renewed.[23]

Once a solicitation has been published, applicants should use Grants.gov to submit completed SF-424 and SF-LLL forms, which are needed to gain access to the complete application.[24] Once these two forms have been approved, new applicants will receive information on how to set up a JustGrants account. If the

applicant already has a JustGrants account, application information will automatically be sent to the associated account.[25] Each solicitation has a Grants.gov and a JustGrants deadline that will need to be met before an application can be submitted. JustGrants is where the bulk of the application will be completed and ultimately submitted.[26]

2 Identifying funding opportunities of interest

Early in each calendar year, the DOJ releases a program plan, which includes brief information about the anticipated funding opportunities that will be available in the upcoming year. Though not set in stone, the program plan can help entities begin planning for the application process even before official solicitations are open. The program plan includes a brief description of the funding opportunity, estimated award amount, number of awards that are planned to be made, and the approximate time frame when the solicitation is expected to open, among other information. Many grant opportunities are reissued year to year, so previous program plans can serve as a guide for what funding may be available even before the current year's program plan is released.

The 2024 program plan can be found here: https://www.justice.gov/dojgrantsprogramplan.

Past, anticipated, and open solicitations can also be viewed at Grants.gov.

ℹ️ *In addition to staying up to date on funding opportunities by signing up for email updates from each DOJ agency, you can also subscribe to receive updates on certain funding opportunities or save a search on Grants.gov to receive notification on funding opportunities of interest.*

3 Deciding to apply

Once you have identified funding opportunities of interest, the next step is to decide if you are going to apply. While being eligible for a funding opportunity means that you *can* apply, it does not mean that you *should*. Key considerations in deciding to submit a proposal include the following.

Can you submit a proposal?

1. **Eligibility:** Eligibility requirements can be found in the program plan, in Grants.gov, and in the full solicitation once released. No exceptions are made related to eligibility criteria, so it is important to check the requirements when reviewing forecast opportunities and confirm eligibility when the official

solicitation is released. Eligible entities include: states, local governments, higher education institutions, hospitals, nonprofits, for-profit organizations, and, in limited cases, individuals.[27] The DOJ often releases training and technical assistance grants alongside direct grants. Make sure to apply to the opportunity that is most appropriate for your entity.

> **ℹ** *In **Grants.gov**, you can search by eligibility to increase chances that you are seeing applications for which you are eligible.[28]*

2. **Matching:** A few solicitations will require entities to provide matching funds to support a portion of the request for federal funds.[29] Matching requirements can be fulfilled through nonfederal cash resources or in-kind to support such as volunteer services, supplies, equipment, or buildings.[30] State and local governments, program incomes, and private donations are common sources of matching funds.[31] It is important to ensure that your entity can meet any matching requirements included in the solicitation. Make sure you fully assess your ability to meet the matching funds requirements and clearly note in the budget how matching funds will be used.

3. **General feasibility:** Applying for federal funding opportunities is a long process and involves many steps and careful planning, so it is often difficult to assess how much time will be needed to complete an application. When searching for opportunities of interest, ensure that there is enough time to complete registrations if the applicant is new to SAM.gov and Grants.gov. Remember SAM.gov registrations can take as long as 10 days to be approved, and Grants.gov registration can take weeks for new applicants.

Should you submit a proposal?

1. **Alignment:** Grant proposals should reflect the mission and goals of an entity, so applicants should assess how well the goals of the solicitation match and the entity's mission and overall goals.

2. **Capacity:** An assessment of your organization's capacity should consider what skills are needed to meet the application's requirements such as preparing a budget, writing a proposal narrative that will create interest, and whether the entity will be able to keep track of the reporting requirements if funding is ultimately received.

3. **Probability for success:** Each solicitation will include the estimated number of awards for each funding opportunity. Entities should consider the expected number of awards and award amount in order to determine if the likelihood of being selected is worth the effort needed to complete the proposal and whether the funding that is available is enough for the entity to complete this project.

Questions to help assess capacity

- Do you have the necessary resources and partnerships to write a proposal that meets the goals and requirements of the solicitation, as well as adequate time to apply?
- If awarded, will your entity have the resources and partnerships necessary to fully implement the proposed project and comply with federal funding record-keeping and reporting requirements?
- Will the proposal compete with other projects on your team's or your partners' plate in the upcoming year, or add too much additional work for you or your partners?

4 Writing the proposal

Once you have found a solicitation that may be a good fit, it is time to begin writing the proposal. Even before a solicitation is officially open, applicants can, and should, begin to develop their proposal ideas, assemble a grant writing team, and create a plan for completing the application.

The following questions can help guide the development of a proposal:
1. What are the goals of the proposal? How do they connect to the goals of the funding opportunity?
2. Will the proposal be a new idea or be used to expand or sustain an existing program?
3. What are the application requirements and who will complete each part?
4. What partnerships will be necessary to develop and implement the proposal?
5. How much will the proposal cost to implement?
   a. What staff time is needed?
   b. How will the funding be used?
   c. If there are matching requirements, how will you obtain the matching funds or in-kind donations?
6. How do you plan to collect the performance metrics that are required by the proposal, or if an evaluation is required, what partner will you bring in to help with evaluating the success of the proposal?

Breakdown of proposal components

Though every solicitation will not have the same components, there are a few key sections that can be expected. These include the proposal narrative, budget detail worksheet, budget narrative, and forms and appendices.

1. Proposal narrative

The proposal narrative is the core of any application. It is the applicant's opportunity to persuade the DOJ that the proposal presents an idea, program, initiative, or approach that meets the requirements of the solicitation; that can be completed in the time frame provided and with the funding included in the award; and that the applicant is well qualified to receive the award. Most solicitations will include a breakdown of what must be included in the narrative. When writing the narrative, you should follow the order for each section of the narrative included in the solicitation and use headings and subheadings to clearly identify the parts of the narrative being addressed.

In addition to the general requirements provided by the solicitation, the proposal narrative should aim to do the following:

- **Describe the issue that the proposal seeks to address:** Applicants must describe the problem that the solicitation seeks to address and in doing so, demonstrate an understanding of the complexities around the issue such as gaps in or absence of services; lack of collaboration among stakeholders; or the need for testing new approaches to solve a problem or serve a community. Including specific statistics can be a helpful tool in illustrating the problem. There are many sources of publicly available data at the federal, state, and local levels, such as U.S. census data, FBI Uniform Crime Reporting, or state-level corrections data, that could be useful when writing a proposal. In some instances, you may need to make requests for nonpublic data such as information collected but not published by state agencies, law enforcement, or court systems to help make the case for the need for your proposal. It is important to identify needed data and make any requests early in order to ensure that you will receive the information in time to include in your proposal. Stories can also be a helpful tool in demonstrating the applicant's understanding of the problem and need to develop a proposal to address the problem. A concise story can help reviewers understand the extent of the need and demonstrate the potential impact that the award could provide.[32] You can bolster your narrative by connecting the identified need or proposal idea back to the stated goals of a solicitation.

- **Build credibility:** It is essential that grant proposals provide information that helps to establish that the entity has the knowledge, expertise, staffing, capacity, and financial practices and procedures in place to successfully complete the proposed project—especially if it is the entity's first time applying for a federal funding opportunity.[33] If selected for an award, the DOJ will be providing the entity hundreds of thousands, or millions, of dollars of taxpayer money. It needs to know that the entity is capable, reliable, and will be able to successfully implement the proposal and meet all requirements. You can build credibility for your entity by describing relevant experience for implementing similar programs and managing grant funding from another federal agency or any other source, as well as by highlighting the unique resources, expertise, and knowledge your entity will bring to the project that are necessary for successful implementation.

- **Present a realistic and impactful idea:** Though changes can be made with prior approval, it is expected that the entity implement the idea as presented in the proposal, including identifying partners, budgeting the award, and producing any project outputs, such as resources, trainings, materials, or assessments, within the time frame and with the funding provided in the solicitation. Make sure to be realistic and ensure that you have all the necessary resources to implement the proposal included in the application.[34]

- **Describe the performance measurement:** In order to ensure that grant recipients meet the goals and objectives of their project, each solicitation requires applicants to include in their proposal a description of how performance will be measured.[35] DOJ offices rely on different performance measurement tools, so it is important to take note of which tool each solicitation will rely on for evaluating project performance.[36] If the solicitation requires the collection of complex data, it is helpful to identify early on who will be responsible for the collection of data and that the data collection plan be described in detail in your proposal. Performance metric information is collected through a series of questions that require reporting in the form of narrative, check-all-that-apply, or numeric responses.[37] Each grant program is required to report on performance metrices on a quarterly, semiannual, or annual basis.[38] Some grant programs have required performance metrics that must be reported, while others allow the grantees to determine their own metrics. For example, as part of the performance metric reporting for the Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative, grantees are required to report on metrics including the types of community violence strategies employed, the number of people engaged, and the frequency of different forms of community engagement.[39]

In some cases, solicitations require the use of an external evaluator and the development of an evaluation plan to be included in the proposal. If this is the case, you should work collaboratively with an evaluation partner to develop an evaluation plan that meets both the needs of the program and requirements of the solicitation.[40] When searching for an evaluation partner, it is important to ensure that the evaluators have the necessary qualifications, skills, and resources to meet the grant requirements.[41] Local academic institutions can often serve as strong evaluation partners. Past grant recipients from your region may also be able to provide referrals for local evaluators.

2. Budget detail worksheet

In the JustGrants system, there is a required web-based form to streamline the process of creating the budget detail worksheet. The categories in a budget detail worksheet include: personnel, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, supplies, construction, consultants/contracts, other costs, and indirect costs.[42] To complete the budget detail worksheet, you will need a line-item budget that accounts for and categorizes all the funds that will be used to implement the proposal, including the DOJ grant funds, matching funds, and other sources of supplemental funding. It is also important that the budget calculations do not exceed the award amount. You should familiarize yourself with the budget detail worksheet early on so that you can ensure the development of the line-item budget can be easily formatted to meet the requirements:

- **Include only allowable costs:**[43] Each solicitation provides guidelines for the types of expenses that are allowable and unallowable. Ensure that your budget detail worksheet has included only allowable costs.

- **Note where matching funds will be used:** Some solicitations will require entities to match some of the federal funds, meaning some of the project cost will not be covered by the federal grant. Make sure to clearly note where matching funds will be used. In some cases, funding in addition to the federal grant may be required in order to implement the proposal, or sometimes an in-kind match can be used. An in-kind match is documented as the value of nonmonetary contributions to the project that are necessary for project implementation. For example, volunteer time contributed to the project can be used as an in-kind match by inputting the value of that volunteer time, a market hourly rate x number of volunteer hours, into the budget. Budgets should reflect all funding expected to be used by an applicant necessary to implement the proposal.

- **Confirm that calculations are correct:** Budget detail worksheets should be checked for accuracy before submitting the application. Reviewers will assess the accuracy of proposed budgets and if the included expenses are allowable according to federal regulation. Although there is a process to adjust a budget after an award has been made, it is limited to certain types of changes and can take a significant amount of time, so applicants will want to take care to ensure that all project costs are accurate and complete before submitting their application.

Further information about submitting a budget detail worksheet can be found on the OJP's website.[44]

> *The format and categories in the budget can vary based on the office: OJP, OVW, or COPS. Specific information about the requirements of each can be found here.*

3. Budget narrative

Every expense line item included in the budget detail worksheet should be reflected in the budget narrative. Agencies will often provide applicants with guidance on the how to prepare the budget narrative.[45] As DOJ guidance on the federal funding process notes, "The budget narrative should leave no questions for a reviewer about the purpose of the requested funds."[46] The budget narrative should:

- **Describe each budget item:** Clearly explain what every budget item is and how it will be used. You will also need to explain how you calculated the totals for each of the line items in the proposal. For example, if the budget requests funding for two laptops for the project lead and project coordinator under the "Equipment" line item, then the price of one laptop should be indicated twice in order to display the total cost (eg., $1,000 x 2 = $2,000).

- **Connect to solicitation goals and objective:** Draw direct connections between the allocated funding and the goals and objectives of the proposal to demonstrate that the funds are necessary for project implementation.

- **Be cost-efficient:** Demonstrate that the proposal represents a cost-efficient approach. If the proposal relies on resources or services that are more expensive than other options, clearly explain why the more expensive option has been chosen and is necessary for project implementation.

It may be easiest to complete the budget detail worksheet prior to writing the budget narrative. This will help to ensure that every number included in the worksheet will be reflected in the narrative.

4. Forms and appendices

Forms and appendices, also known as attachments, for a solicitation may be required or optional. Take note of what is required or what you would like to attach and include them as tasks to complete in the proposal development timeline. Common attachments include letters of support, project timelines, position descriptions of staff partially or completely funded by the grant, and more.[47] One common mistake is waiting until the last minute to collect necessary forms and attachments. Like other parts of the process, this step often takes longer than expected, so make sure to collect what is needed a few days prior to the JustGrants deadline to ensure that there is enough time to collect what you need and troubleshoot any issues. When working on appendices, make sure that you are not including in the appendices information that is required in the application itself.[48] However, you can refer to an attachment within the application.

Give proposal documents short and clear titles, reflected at the top of the first page of the document and in the file title. Reviewers will be looking at numerous applications. Clearly naming your documents ensures that the reviewer can find any necessary information. Additionally, you should include references to the forms and attachments throughout the proposal when applicable. Make sure that the references match the actual document titles.[49]

Assembling a grant writing team

Most proposals are not written by one person but rather a team. Though no two teams will look the same—and some people on the team may be able to fulfil more than one role—there are some key roles to keep in mind while assembling a team to complete the application:

- **Approver:** A person within your organization with the legal power to enter into a contract on behalf of the entity will be needed to submit the application and accept the award.

- **Grant facilitator:** This individual will be responsible for coordinating and overseeing the proposal development process and will ensure that application deadlines and requirements are met.

- **Writers:** This person or people will be responsible for writing the proposal; this could be the team that will implement the project or someone who is familiar with grant writing and can help shape the project idea and draft the proposal.

If there is no one within your entity with experience writing grants, an independent grant writer can be hired to assist in the process.[50]

- **Budget staff:** The budget detail worksheet should be created by someone with experience creating budgets. The budget creator should also assist with the budget narrative, working with the team that will implement the proposal to ensure all proposed activities and costs are described and reflected in the web-based budget form.

- **Reviewers/editors:** Before submission, grant applications should go through two types of review: a content review and a technical review. The content review should concentrate on the proposed project to ensure that all necessary information is included in a logical way, while the technical review will ensure that the the entire application is free from grammar or punctuation errors and meets all the technical requirements for submission. While members of the proposal writing team can and should review the application sections throughout the writing process, additional reviewers should also be used.

- **Approvers:** Organizations and agencies often have internal policies related to approvals that are need for the grant proposal. Make sure to identify early who internally must sign off on the application and make sure to allow enough time to obtain those approvals. The solicitation itself may also require documentation from internal staff necessary to complete the application. Make sure to take note of those requirements early in the process and consider the time needed to obtain the necessary approvals and requirements in planning.

- **Submitter:** This person is responsible for assembling all the application components, uploading them to JustGrants, and ultimately submitting the application. This individual will need to be assigned the role of submitter in JustGrants in order to complete this task. It is beneficial for the submitter to be well versed in operating Grants.gov and JustGrants prior to the submission of the application.

- **Partners:** Many proposals will require the guidance and support of partners in order to be viable. There are several ways that partners both inside and outside the entity can be engaged in the proposal development process.

Partners may provide insight into the problem to be addressed or the population intended to be served by the proposal, help develop the proposal idea, or assist with the implementation. Some proposals will require external evaluators, a memorandum of understanding between multiple organizations, or letters of support from partners. Make sure to identify the specific requirements of the grant proposal related to documenting partnerships. Applicants should also work early on to confirm existing partners' willingness to collaborate on the proposal and determine the funding they may need for any participation. If new relationships need to be developed for the proposal, reach out to potential partners as soon as possible to discuss. Applicants should also identify the documentation or information needed from each partner and communicate those requirements to them as soon as possible so that all parties involved in the application know what is expected of them.

The importance of partnerships

The implementation of many proposals requires the support of strategic partnerships. When working to develop partnerships, search for partners who will:

1. **Deepen the expertise of the project team:** Community, academic, culturally and linguistically specific, and other partners often possess insight into the communities intended to be affected by the project and their needs, or provide expertise necessary for the success of the project. Partners can serve as a key source of knowledge of the problem the proposal is designed to solve and of past efforts to address the issue or have connections to the community critical to project success. Proposals are strengthened when a deep understanding of the community intended to be affected is demonstrated.

   It is important, especially when bringing in a culturally or linguistically specific organization to the project, that the partnership be meaningful. In other words, partner organizations working with and in historically marginalized and underserved communities should be provided with a share of the project budget that accurately reflects their contributions and participation in meeting the project goals.

2. **Demonstrate community support for the proposal:** Reviewers may sometimes consider community support for proposed ideas when scoring applications in the merit review process.[51] Letters of support may be required or permissible to submit as attachments to the application .

3. **Supplement resources and funding of the proposal:** Through financial and other forms of support, partnerships can expand the capacity of the applicant to implement a proposed idea. Federal funding can sometimes be insufficient to implement a proposal in the manner that is envisioned. Partnerships can be beneficial in obtaining funding needed to add to DOJ funding for a proposal or to broaden its scale or impact. Partnerships may also help applicants secure nonmonetary or in-kind resources needed to implement the proposal, or to demonstrate a funding match.[52]

Creating a timeline

The DOJ predicts at which point in the year each solicitation will be open for applications in both the program plan and the Grants.gov listing. Using these dates, applicants can map out a timeline and begin planning for their proposal and application even before the solicitation is officially open. Grant facilitators, described on page 14, should keep track of deadlines, requirements, tasks, and staff contributing to an application to ensure that it stays on track.

Proposal timelines should include:

- **Grants.gov and JustGrants deadlines:** Remember that each solicitation has two submission deadlines:[53] one for Grants.gov, which is mostly required forms, and one for JustGrants, where the entire application will be submitted. There is typically a two-week period between the two deadlines, and both need to be met in order to submit an application in JustGrants.[54]

- **Necessary approvals:** Applicants are often subject to specific internal processes for approvals. Applicants should ensure that they are aware of the approval process for their specific entity so that they can allow for enough time to collect approvals.

- **Task deadlines:** All steps in the application process—from completing necessary registrations, to writing the proposal, to reviewing and submitting the application—should be included in the timeline and assigned to a specific team member.

- **Person responsible:** To ensure that all requirements of the solicitation are met, each task related to its completion should be clearly defined and assigned to a specific person or people.

Some solicitations will include a checklist.[55] If you created a timeline for the solicitation prior to reviewing it, consult the checklist to ensure that all of the items are reflected in your timeline. In addition to the provided checklist, it can be helpful to create a checklist for each part of the application parts to ensure that they are complete before being submitted.[56]

Writing tips for drafting a proposal

When writing a proposal, there are a few general tips to keep in mind:

- **Be as clear and concise as possible:** Avoid using acronyms, unless they have been adequately defined, and confusing language. Keep sentences short and clear and use active verbs to describe goals and activities, such as: "The proposed project seeks to enhance the collaborations between reentry and workforce development programs by ..."

- **Ensure all required information is included in the proposal and application:** Each solicitation includes scoring criteria that explain the information that needs to be included or the questions that need to be answered as well as the percentage of the total score for each section. This information can be used to help prioritize which parts of the application to dedicate the most time to compile.

- **Pay attention to requirements:** Solicitations provide clear guidelines for the content that must be included in the application and the format that should be used. Make note of these requirements after reviewing the solicitation and be sure to follow them throughout the proposal development and application completion process.

- **Make the application easy to navigate:** Make content as easy as possible to navigate by organizing it in a logical manner and answering any questions in the order they are asked. Applications are scored primarily by peer reviewers external to the DOJ who often have to score a significant number of applications under a tight timeline, so it is important to make it as easy as possible for reviewers to find the information required to be included in the application materials.

- **Ask for help if needed:** Each solicitation will include contact information that can be used if technical support is needed, such as issues uploading attachments, submitting the application, or any error messages an applicant may encounter. The DOJ will not be able to assist with the content of the application, but agency staff can answer questions related to issues such as eligibility for applying,

submission requirements, or any other concerns unrelated to the content of the proposal.[57] In addition, JustGrants offers a series of training videos and materials to help an applicant through the application process.[58] Entities new to using JustGrants should consult these resources prior to applying for a funding opportunity. Finally, partners can provide assistance in developing and drafting the proposal and in navigating any obstacles that may arise in the application process.

5 Review and submission processes

The strongest proposals will undergo review throughout the application development process rather than wait until just before the deadline for submission. A multistep review process helps to ensure that there is adequate time to address any comments or questions that may arise during review. If possible, the application should undergo both a content and a technical review prior to submission, with content reviews typically occurring first. Brainstorming potential reviewers should be included in the proposal planning stage.

Content review

Content-based reviews ensure that the proposal is clear and concise and that the application is complete. Reviewers should be provided with the full solicitation so that they are aware of all requirements and note if it is lacking any essential components.

- **Timing of review:** The results of this review could lead to significant content changes that will take time to implement. For this reason, the first of this type of review should come at an early stage to ensure that there is enough time to address any issues. Reviewers can even begin reviewing completed sections before the draft of the application is finished.[59]

- **Who should review:** Early content reviewers should be people familiar with the project and who can help shape the content that goes into each section. Third parties with less familiarity with the proposal are often good content reviewers toward the end of the process, since they may be able to identify content gaps that people familiar with the proposal may miss.

Technical review

In a technical review, editors should ensure that there are no grammar or punctuation errors and that the proposal meets any formatting guidelines that may be required by the solicitation. Reviewers should be given a copy of the full solicitation in order to verify that the proposal meets all formatting requirements, such as font size, margins, and spacing.

- **Timing of review:** Because content reviews may result in significant changes to the text of a proposal, technical reviews should take place after the content review, once the application sections are in their final draft stage. A final, technical review should occur at least one day before submission, when all the application parts are complete.

- **Who should review:** Technical reviews are best conducted by people not involved with the writing of the proposal, since writers may be too involved to recognize the errors. Having an outside person edit the proposal will make it less likely that mistakes will go unnoticed.

Approver review

Applicants are often subject to specific internal processes for approvals. The solicitation itself may also require documentation from internal staff necessary to complete the application. Applicants should ensure that they build in enough time for approvers to review the proposal and sign off prior to submission. Many approvers will want to see the proposal when it is as close to the final stage as possible.

Submitting the proposal

Once the entire application and attachments have been edited and approved, they can be uploaded to JustGrants to prepare the application for submission. Conduct a final check to ensure that all necessary components, including required forms and attachments, have been included. Remember, incomplete applications will not be considered. It is recommended that applications be submitted 48 hours before the deadline to avoid any technical issues that may prevent timely submission.[60]

6 Proposal evaluation by the DOJ

Once the proposal is submitted to the DOJ, it will undergo a process of merit review. All funding opportunity announcements are required to include information about how the application will be evaluated.[61] Some review processes include peer review, where subject matter experts outside the federal government review

applications based on solicitation criteria[62] and provide ratings and recommendations for the DOJ to consider in the award-making process.[63] Only applications that have met the minimum requirements of the solicitation will be reviewed.[64] The basic minimum requirements of solicitations can vary but generally include the following sections: statement of the problem/description of the issue; project design and implementation; capabilities and competencies; plan for collecting the data required for the solicitation's performance measures; and budget. Applications are scored on how well the application addresses each of these sections, so be sure to cover everything that is asked for within a section.

The OJP has highlighted the following as additional considerations during the award-making process: geographic diversity, strategic priorities, and available funding, as well as the extent to which the budget detail worksheet and budget narrative accurately explain project costs that are reasonable, necessary, and otherwise allowable.[65] Additionally, there may be priority considerations that are taken into account in a given year. For example, in 2024, the OJP will prioritize proposals that "meaningfully advance equity and remove barriers to accessing services and opportunities for communities that have been historically underserved, marginalized, adversely affected by inequality, and disproportionately impacted by crime, violence, and victimization" or "demonstrate that their capabilities and competencies for implementing their proposed project(s) are enhanced because they … are a population specific organization that serves communities that have been historically underserved, marginalized, adversely affected by inequality, and disproportionately impacted by crime, violence, and victimization."[66]

The office offering the funding opportunity will also evaluate the degree of risk posed by each applicant by considering factors such as:

1. Applicant's financial stability and controls
2. Applicant's ability to meet the requirements of managing a federal award
3. Applicant's history of performance under the OJP and/or other federal awards
4. Reports and findings from any audits of the applicant
5. Applicant's ability to comply with statutory and regulatory requirements and to implement award requirements[67]

Some applicants, due to previous performance under federal grant programs, may be deemed "high-risk." High-risk applicants are those who may have past unsatisfactory performance, financial instability, inadequate financial management system, or nonconformance to terms and conditions of previous awards.[68]

Applicants are required to disclose and explain their high-risk status in the application and may be given additional requirements or oversight if given an award.[69] High-risk applicants should be sure to include context on how they have worked to fix the factors that led to past unsatisfactory performance in relevant sections of the application to help reviewers more accurately assess current risk. New applicants should ensure that their application demonstrates their capacity and ability to manage federal funds and meet grant requirements.

The final decision on whether to grant an award is made by the OJP's assistant attorney general, the director of the OVW, or the director of COPS, depending on which component's solicitation the applicant applied.

Conclusion

Federal funding opportunities can provide a pathway for community-based organizations, government agencies, and other entities to implement proposals that promote safety and justice in communities across the United States. Though the application development process requires a significant investment of time and resources, proper planning and preparation can make the process less burdensome. It may take multiple attempts for an applicant to be selected for an award, so do not be discouraged if you don't receive an award on the first attempt; there will be other opportunities to receive funding. Additionally, if not selected, you will receive feedback on your proposal and application overall that can be used to help make future attempts successful.

Endnotes

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