Reading the RFP: What to Look For

Discretionary federal grant programs offer significant opportunities for funding, but the application process is competitive and time consuming. Before you invest the time and effort, scan the Request for Proposal (RFP) for the following to help determine whether this is the opportunity for you.

- **Eligibility criteria.** Is my organization eligible to apply?

- **Match requirements.** Is there a match requirement and if so, can my organization meet the requirement? Be sure to check if the match must be cash or if it can be in-kind.

- **Total award amount.** Consider both the maximum request and the anticipated award levels. Is the award sufficient to make it worth the effort? If you are a smaller organization, does the award amount dwarf your organizational budget? If so, your capacity to manage an award of the anticipated size may be a red flag for the funding agency. Be realistic.

- **Number of anticipated awards.** How competitive is the grant program? Assume that geographic distribution will play into final award decisions. Is your program really solid enough to be one of four national awards? Spend your time responding to requests for proposals where you can truly be competitive.

- **Priorities.** Federal grant programs often have absolute (must) or competitive (preferred) priorities. Consider whether or how you can meet stated priorities to secure the extra points that will give you an edge. And if you don’t meet them, how competitive will you be?

- **Past grantees.** For grant programs that have made awards in the past, take a look at former grant recipients and successful past proposals to get a sense of the kinds of organizations that were funded (size, type of organization, area of emphasis) and the scope of work.

- **Time.** A federal grant is not a minor undertaking—especially if you want it to be successful! If you have decided to go for it, do you and your staff have sufficient time to see the proposal through to the end? Make sure there are no conflicting deadlines, vacations or other issues that will deter completion of the proposal. Aim to submit the grant a day or two in advance to cover any unforeseen complications in submission.
If you’ve reviewed the above and feel that all systems are “go,” then re-read the RFP for the following additional considerations to assess the competitiveness of your organization’s proposal. Particularly in today’s economic climate, you want to be sure that you are selective in terms of which proposals you submit and where you will have a strong edge over other applicants.

- **Best practice programming.** Funding agencies want to be assured that they are investing taxpayer dollars wisely. The strongest applications outline work that is grounded in research-based best practices. Make sure that your program aligns with practices that are yielding results.

- **Innovation.** Federal departments tend to fund projects that are innovative in some way and contribute to advancing best practices within their respective fields. In fact, most federal grant programs explicitly state that funds may not be used to support existing services, which is viewed as supplanting funding. Ask yourself: Will your organization’s proposal advance the field of knowledge in a particular area or with a particular target population that will appeal to the funding agency?

- **Partnerships.** Federal agencies are increasingly looking for collaborations and partnerships; they may even be required as a component of the proposed program. Make sure that your relationships are secure and that your partners are prepared to commit not just to applying but to the work that comes when you get the grant.

- **Mission match.** Federal grants provide significant resources, but are also a significant undertaking for any organization. Make sure that you’re pursuing an opportunity that advances your work; don’t be tempted to chase dollars if it means pulling your organization off track.

If you’ve reviewed for the above and still feel that your organization is a good fit, congratulations! You’ve identified a funding opportunity that makes sense for your organization and those it serves. Now the real work begins!