A Guide to the Federal Grants Process

PREPARING FEDERAL PROPOSALS: AN INTRODUCTION

GOVERNMENT GRANTS INFORMATION SYSTEM DOCUMENT 5002

Prepared for the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee by
Arlen Sue Fox, City Connect Federal Grantsmanship Network
Spring 1997

City Connect Federal Grantsmanship Network is a project of the Tides Center, supported by the following funders:

Bankers Trust Company Foundation
Booth Ferris Foundation
The Chase Manhattan Bank
Citicorp Foundation
Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS
Aaron Diamond Foundation
Foundation for Child Development
William Randolph Hearst Foundations
Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation
J.P. Morgan & Company
The New York Community Trust
Pfizer Inc
The Pinkerton Foundation
The Scherman Foundation

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of the content of this guide is based on materials created by or with the assistance of members of the City Connect Federal Grantsmanship Network,* funding guidelines and announcements from many federal agencies, and materials from other governmental, nonprofit, and commercial organizations, and individuals, including:

Brooklyn in Touch Information Center*
The Bureau for At-Risk Youth
California Budget Project
Community Resource Exchange*
Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies*

Handsnet
Housing Assistance Council
Ellen Karsh, Director, City of New York Mayor's Office of Grants Administration
City of New York Washington Office
Public Advocate for the City of New York
Dr. Anthony Sainz, Hunter Graduate School of Social Work
United Neighborhood Houses*
United States Government Printing Office

SOME NOTES ON THE USE OF THIS GUIDE

Obtaining Companion Documents through Fax-on-Demand

The *Guide to the Federal Grants Process* includes three companion documents, *The Federal Funding Process: An Overview; Accessing the Federal Register Online*; and the present document, called *Preparing Federal Proposals: An Introduction.* Taken together, they give an overview of the process by which the Administration and Congress prepare a federal budget, the way in which federal agencies manage and award discretionary funding, the ways in which federal grant information can be accessed, and an introduction to the preparation of federal proposals.

Is Your Organization Ready for Federal Funding?

Before you consider going through the demanding process of preparing a proposal for federal discretionary funds, you should be aware that the exercise is likely to be a waste of your time unless your organization:

- Is incorporated as a nonprofit organization and has tax-exempt status.
- Has a solid track record in running programs in areas related to that for which you are applying. This track record is enhanced if you can show that you have successfully managed and appropriately reported on other government-funded programs, including those at state and local levels.
- Employs a bookkeeper and/or an accountant and operates under well-established fiscal procedures (preferably using a computerized financial system).
- Has staff who are prepared to undertake the reporting and audits required for most federal grants.

PREPARING A FEDERAL PROPOSAL

Introduction

Preparing a federal proposal, especially the first one, is a time-consuming and detailed process. In one survey, Ellen Arrick, the evaluator of the City Connect Federal Grantsmanship Network, found that the average staff time committed to developing an organization's proposal was more than 70 hours—and for proposals that won grants, the average staff time was more than twice that. Considering that there may be no more than a month to six weeks to respond to a funding announcement, this means that all of this work often is condensed into a very short time. Therefore any organization interested in seeking federal funding must begin to work on a proposal immediately after a funding announcement appears in the *Federal Register*, and in fact can and should begin to prepare materials that will be used in a proposal even before the funding announcement is published.

After the first federal proposal, the process may be a bit easier and less time consuming when an agency gets ready to submit a second one. This is because some components of the narrative for any federal proposal may be used again, sometimes with only a little modification to tailor them for other grants. The usual narrative sections required in federal proposals include a program narrative or executive summary, a statement of need, measurable objectives, a program description and plan of operation, a description of the proposer's organizational capacity and or staff expertise, an evaluation plan, and a budget and budget narrative. Some of these sections may have different titles (e.g., a need section may be called "statement of the problem") or may be organized as responses to a series of questions in the application guidelines, but the information required generally falls into categories like these. The proposal package also will include standard forms such as a budget summary and other documents normally required by all federal agencies.

This section gives an overview of requirements for most federal applications. An organization that is serious about seeking federal funds will begin right now to assemble the necessary documents and narratives, so that they are on hand when a funding opportunity appears.

Applicant Materials

Any organization that intends to apply for federal funds should begin by assembling a file of materials about the organization, its financial status, and its staff. Some of the information listed below must be submitted with the application; others must be available by the time a grant is awarded; still others may not be part of the application itself but will be important in preparing a narrative. It is useful to have the most up-to-date version of these documents on hand even before a funding opportunity becomes available. Among the documents that may be required or useful for an application are the following:

- Certificate of incorporation as a not-for-profit organization
- Most recent 501(c)(3) letter or other proof of tax-exempt status

- Employer Identification Number (EIN)
- List of board members' names and addresses (for some funding opportunities it is also necessary to indicate race/ethnicity and gender)
- Organization chart
- Job descriptions for all positions
- Current resumes of managers and key staff
- Most recent overall organization budget
- Auditor's report for the most recent fiscal year
- List of all current funding sources, and potential sources of matching funds
- Floor plan showing access for people with disabilities, or description of plans to accommodate people with disabilities if facility is not readily accessible
- Personnel policies and procedures demonstrating compliance with Equal Employment Opportunity requirements, Americans with Disabilities Act, Drug Free Workplace, etc.
- List of existing formal linkages with organizations in the community, area, or city, and letters of agreement specifying how each organization participates or will participate in collaborative work with the others
- Any recent program evaluations

Standard Forms

Each federal application package comes with a set of standard forms to be filled out and submitted as part of each proposal (see document #5004 or go to website: http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/EOP/OMB/Grants/). Federal agencies may use slightly different versions of the same required forms, and these forms may have slightly different names, numbers, or visual formats, but the information in all of the standard forms is essentially the same, and much of it is required by federal law.

The forms always include a cover page and budget summary (which together are labeled Standard Form 424A or SF 424A by most agencies) and a number of self-explanatory forms that the applicant must sign to agree that the organization will abide by certain federal laws (these are called "certifications" and "assurances") and a form disclosing lobbying activities, if any. SF 424A is described more fully in the next section. Note that the person preparing a proposal usually is not the person who must sign the official forms. Too many applicants pay no attention to these forms until the day a proposal must be mailed, only to find that the individual who must sign them is not available.

The application package may include a checklist to be completed and returned with the application. This may include a reminder for the applicant to inform a state or local government agency about the proposal, or must obtain the agency's agreement to include the proposal in an overall state or local plan. The checklist should be examined early in the proposal development process to ensure that all required materials and reviews are on hand by the time the proposal is ready to be sent. The application package also provides detailed instructions for filling out all the necessary forms and should indicate the placement of the forms within the proposal package (some agencies prefer slightly different proposal arrangements). As in every section of a federal proposal, the instructions must be followed carefully.

Appendix A, (Document 5004) is a sample package of forms and instructions from a funding announcement issued by an office of the Department of Health and Human Services. The forms are also available on the web at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/EOP/OMB/Grants/

Standard Form 424A and Budget Narrative

Standard Form SF 424A consists of a cover page with details about the applicant, the proposed project, and the budget, followed by budget information in spreadsheet form. Instructions for filling out these forms are provided (usually on the back of each page of the form). To follow the discussion in this section, review the forms and instructions shown in Appendix A. **The information in this section is intended as an overview. Each applicant must read all instructions on the forms carefully and call the federal agency's contact person if there is any need for clarification**.

Some federal agencies may provide additional instructions and/or information for these forms. For example, the application package may give the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) number to be filled in on the cover page (item 10), or may instruct the preparer which type of application description to check (item 8). Other agencies do not routinely include details of this sort; if anything is unclear, call the agency contact listed in the application package to determine what is required.

The budget spreadsheet, called "Budget Information, Non-Construction Programs," includes six parts. Section A is a summary, and each line represents the first-year costs for a single program. Most nonprofits will be applying only for one grant and so will fill in only line (1). Most will be applying for new funding, and so will skip columns (c) and (d), but will fill in columns (a), program name, (b), CFDA number, (e), total new federal funds requested, (f), total nonfederal funds, and (g), total requested.

Section B breaks down the types of expense (personnel, fringe, travel, etc.) for each line in Section A. Again, because most nonprofits will apply for only one grant, they will fill out only columns (1), for their program, and (5), the total amount requested. The total for column (1) should be the same as the total for line (1) in Section A.

Section C ("Non-Federal Resources") shows any funds that may be available from local, state, or private funding sources, and any funds that may be donated by the applicant itself. Some grants require matching funds, often because Congress has written this requirement into the authorizing legislation. Generally it is only funds actually committed for this project that will be entered here; in some cases the federal agency will permit the applicant to show funds applied for, with a reasonable expectation of award. A description of funding that is committed and/or anticipated should appear in the budget narrative (see below).

For some grants matching funds are not required, but the review process gives extra credit to proposals that show nonfederal resources for the project. In some cases the contribution may be "in kind," that is, not cash but some other resource like staff time, space, equipment, or other assets for which a value can be calculated.

In most cases when matching funds are mandated, these funds cannot be in kind (although in a few cases in-kind matches are allowed). Normally they must involve cash grants, contributions, or contracts. Usually they can come from any nonfederal source (and very rarely from another federal agency), but occasionally the actual source is specified (for example, a community development grant might require a certain proportion of the total project cost to be covered by local businesses). If any aspect of the matching requirement is unclear, the federal program officer should be consulted.

Some applications call for a plan to continue the proposed project after the end of the federal grant period. However, the amounts to be raised for this purpose will not be shown in the budget summary form.

Because the section on nonfederal funds may involve so many different requirements, it is vital to read the application package with great care, and to call the agency contact if there is any uncertainty.

Section D, "Forecasted Cash Needs," is fairly self-explanatory. In most cases the program plan will call for equal amounts of spending in each quarter. However, if there are likely to be heavy start-up expenses, or if some key component of the program is planned to come on line during a later time period than the starting date of the grant, these costs should be estimated and shown for appropriate quarters. (It is this kind of detail that can demonstrate how carefully the applicant has planned the proposed project.)

Section E forecasts project costs for the life of the expected federal funding. If the application indicates that grants are for three years, estimates should be developed for each of these years. The amounts may be the same each year, but, as in Section D, some program plans may have heavier first- or -second-year costs. Some applicants build in a cost-of-living increase for later years.

This section has one peculiarity. Because the previous sections involve details of the first year's budget, in most cases column (b), labeled "First" year, will show funding required in the first continuation year, which is actually the second year of the proposed project. Again, there may be federal agencies that treat this information differently, so it is important to check with the contact person.

Indirect costs are the subject of negotiation between each federal agency and its grantees (Section F). This rate normally is established only after a grant has been made. Organizations that have had federal grants in the past and have a "negotiated rate" will present this information here; new applicants should check with the agency contact person to determine how this cost should be estimated.

A **budget narrative** follows the budget summary forms, explaining and giving details of the analysis behind the summary amounts. This narrative should flow from the proposed program (even though the program description itself comes later in the application) and reflect realistic estimates of what is required to implement the program. It should be comprehensive and detailed enough to demonstrate that the applicant fully understands and can justify all likely costs. Applicants should be sure that every item that appears in the budget/budget narrative is accounted for in the text of the proposal.

For example, an organization might plan a program to tutor 100 sixth graders after school during the course of a year. The project might require 50 tutors (each working two days a week with each of two students) or 25 tutors (each working one day a week with each of four students). The tutors might serve as volunteers but be provided with transportation costs, or might be paid by the hour, or might be given a flat stipend for the year. Whichever strategy is selected for the program (and justified in the program description), the costs of each strategy will differ, and the costs must be explained in some detail in the budget narrative.

Explanations should be given for all elements of the budget that are summarized in Section B. If out-of-town travel is planned, the narrative should show the number of trips and the purpose (which also may be discussed in the narrative in more or less detail); actual or estimated train or air fare or the cost per mile for a car; actual or estimated daily cost of hotel and meals; any conference or training costs; etc. If equipment is required, the narrative should indicate how many, what type, and the per-unit cost (the purpose of the equipment also should be explained here and/or in the program narrative).

Many proposals receive high scores on the basis of a thoughtful, detailed, and reasonable budget that realistically reflects the needs of the proposed program; all proposal evaluators want to see a careful and rational analysis of costs.

Proposal Abstract

Although it is not always required, it is useful to prepare a brief (no more than one page) abstract, or executive summary, of the proposal. Applicants often leave this element until the rest of the application package is complete, but it is wise to set aside at least a few hours, and preferably a full day, late in the process but well before the proposal deadline to create a strong, dynamic summary of the proposal that "sells" it at the outset.

The abstract should include brief summaries of the background or need for the project, program description or plan of operation, and expected outcomes.

Needs Assessment

All federal proposals include a detailed description of the population to be served and strong justification of the need for the proposed project (the funding agency may call this a needs assessment, a description of the problem, or something similar). Unlike private funders in New York City, who normally are fully aware of conditions in the city and its communities, the people who read and score federal applications may be from anywhere in the country. Although they are experts in their own fields, they are likely to be completely unfamiliar with New York's physical and political geography and social conditions. They know nothing about the applicant's experience and qualifications in the field (although a later section of the proposal will document this). Thus it is important to include:

- Proof that the population in the community is, in fact, eligible to receive services under the terms of the federal guidelines for the grant.
- Data that demonstrate the existence and extent of the problem in the community, including specific gaps in service that the proposal will address;
- Full understanding of the theories and practices that have been put forward to solve the problem in New York and elsewhere;
- Knowledge of relevant solutions that have worked in New York and elsewhere, especially when some elements of these efforts are incorporated into the proposed program plan. The proposal also should indicate why there is still a need for a new program if successful solutions already exist.

The funding announcement often includes a description of the funding agency's own concept of the need. **Applicants should read this section of the announcement carefully and focus the proposal on describing and documenting those issues that are of concern to the funder**.

Because the subjects of federal applications are so varied, it is not possible to provide information sources for all topic areas or programs. In many cases the staff members who are designing the proposed program will have much of this information on hand, but it may be necessary to carry out some library research on theoretical background, program evaluations, etc. Sometimes the federal program officer (or the agency's web site) will be able to suggest reference materials. For example, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention publishes reports on research in the field, including results of past CSAP grants.
The following sections offer some suggestions for finding the most commonly needed data from sources in New York City.

Demographic Data

Most federal grants are targeted to communities with predominantly low-income populations. Many are targeted to specific members of a low-income community, like children, teenagers, unemployed or underemployed individuals, a particular immigrant group, etc. The best sources of documentation of these demographic characteristics are:

- o **New York City Department of City Planning**, 22 Reade Street, NY, NY 10007; (212) 720-3448. City Planning compiles population and housing data by community district and/or by Census tract and block. Its staff are extremely knowledgeable. The City Planning Bookstore, also at 22 Reade Street, has a list of City Planning books and population summaries that are for sale at relatively low prices.

- o **U.S. Department of Commerce**, which manages the Census, maintains a Census Library at 26 Federal Plaza (Broadway between Duane Street and Worth Street), Room 37-130; (212) 264-4730. Staff are knowledgeable and very helpful. Most data are from the last Census, with updates available for some topics.

- • **New York City Housing Authority** maintains data on the housing developments it manages and characteristics of the tenants who live there (number of units in the development; number of children, average family income, percentage of public assistance recipients, etc.) in specific developments. Request NYCHA data from William Steinmann, Acting Director for Research and Policy Development, by mail at 250 Broadway, Room 711, New York, NY 10007, or by fax at (212) 306-7905.

- O **City of New York Human Resources Administration** , **Office of Management Planning**, 250 Church Street, compiles data on numbers of public assistance recipients in a District Resource Statement for each community district. The contact person is Jenny Siff at (212) 274-3358.

Other Data

The public library and the libraries of colleges or universities can assist in identifying appropriate literature and research to support the stated need or provide information on current theory and practice in a particular field.

Analysis of the applicant's own case files or surveys of its own clients or program participants can document the types and extent of issues with which the agency is currently dealing or which are of concern to the community.

There are many other possible sources of data, often identified by calling the local community district office or a City agency that deals with the issue of concern.

A publication called *The Green Book* is a useful reference to identify the appropriate agency; it lists the names, addresses, and phone numbers of key personnel, the agency's primary purpose, and the major divisions of every New York City agency and of many state and federal agencies as well. *The Green Book* is published annually and is available at the Citybooks Store in the lobby of the

Municipal Building, One Centre Street, New York, NY 10007. The phone number is (212) 669-8866. One example of a listing to be found in *The Green Book* is

- The **New York City Police Department**, which compiles statistics on crime data citywide, by borough or major sections of each borough (e.g., Manhattan North or South), by precinct, and by approximately 10- to 12-block sectors of each precinct. Write to NYPD, FOIL Unit, Room 110C, 1 Police Plaza, New York, NY 10038.

  Do not wait until a federal funding announcement appears to begin collecting crime data. The FOIL unit has a very small staff and cannot guarantee anything less than a four-month turnaround time in response to requests. There is a charge of 25 cents per page for these data (all crime statistics for the city as a whole appear on one page per year; each borough is on two pages per year; each precinct or sector is on one page per year). Do not send money with the initial request. For orders up to $1.75 the Police Department expects you to send a check after you have received the materials requested; NYPD will send an invoice for amounts of $2.00 and up.

Other organizations that may be good sources of information include, for example, the Department for the Aging, the Department of Health, the New York City Board of Education, and other relevant state and local agencies.

Goals and Objectives

The federal agency that issues a request for applications usually has a stated or unstated set of goals and objectives that it expects the funding to address. Applicants should read the announcement carefully. If the announcement spells out the goals and objectives for the federal grant program, or if the goals and objectives are stated or implied in the background or legislative history of the program, the proposal should incorporate those goals and objectives into the applicant's own plan.

In every case the goals and objectives should emerge clearly as a logical response to the proposal's statement of need.

Goals normally refer to broad, long-term intentions that normally cannot be met within the time period of a proposed project, and probably will not be met through that project alone, if at all. For example, eliminating youth violence is a goal that, realistically, may never be achieved because it is affected by factors that are numerous, complex, and to a large extent outside the reach of most possible interventions. A proposed program, say, a youth mediation program, may be only one of many possible steps toward the ultimate goal.

Objectives may be thought of as outcomes that can be expected from the project itself. Whereas the accomplishment of goals may or may not be subject to measurement; objectives must be concrete and specific, measurable, realistic and attainable, and time-bound. Creation of such clear, measurable objectives is necessary to the development of an appropriate evaluation plan

For example, objectives for a mediation program for at-risk youth might include a positive change among program participants, by the end of the first six months, on a standardized measure of attitudes toward nonviolent conflict resolution; a reduction of 75 percent in violent incidents among the participants by the end of the project; a 60 percent increase in school attendance in that population during the same period.

Program Description

The program description, or program plan, should show that the applicant has designed a thoughtful, workable solution to the problem that has been described in the need statement. A clear and detailed description of the proposed program must be strongly supported in several ways.

- The description not only should explain what the applicant intends to do (spelling out goals, measurable objectives, and activities to be performed), but also should clearly address the federal program's funding priorities. Most federal programs have very clear mandates, which are discussed in detail in the application guidelines. To a large extent, every proposal will be rated on how closely the program meets those mandates. Whenever possible, the applicant even should use language from the guidelines to describe the program, to make it clear to readers that the proposal focuses on the intent of the announcement.

  Note that this is not a matter of changing the way a program should operate in order to meet the federal guidelines; it is a matter of describing an appropriate program in a way that lets the reviewer see that the funder's concerns are met.

- In addition to addressing federal program priorities, the description must show exactly and realistically how the program will address the problem in the community and target population that has been described in the need statement. Consistency across all components of the proposal is extremely important.

- Sufficient details must be included to demonstrate that planned activities, number and type of staff proposed (applications may include a section with job descriptions and/or resumes), number and type of persons who are to receive services, and time frames for accomplishing objectives are realistic, and that the program has a good chance of succeeding in achieving those objectives.

- When a collaboration is proposed, each partner's activities, roles, and responsibilities should be addressed with similar attention, and their interactions must be presented fully and in detail. For example, a welfare-to-work consortium might include an organization that provides job training and placement and another that offers child care to trainees and new workers; other partners might provide social services, or GED preparation, or college courses.

The details of each partner's contribution will be described, along with the ways in which each partner will identify, refer, and provide support to participants and interact with the other partners in the consortium.

Evaluation

Many federal grants, especially those funding demonstration projects, require systematic evaluation of the funded project. In many cases the funding agency expects, or even requires, that the grantee hire an external evaluator, so that costs for the evaluation are built into the program.

It is useful for organizations considering applying for federal funding to establish relationships with an academic program that has experience with the federal funding agency or experience evaluating the type of program proposed. The evaluation expert can be expected to help the applicant develop an evaluation plan based on the program's objectives, and to write the evaluation section of the proposal.

The earlier an evaluator becomes involved, the more useful the evaluation plan will be and the stronger the proposal is likely to be. Ideally, the evaluator will help the applicant formulate goals, objectives, and expected outcomes.

Evaluations generally are of two types:

- **Process**, or formative, evaluations assess the implementation of the project and provide feedback to allow for program corrections. Process evaluations consider such questions as whether activities are occurring when and where they should; who is receiving the services, how well they are being implemented, and whether they could be done more efficiently; and whether clients are satisfied.

  Process evaluations generally make use of qualitative methods, which might include focus groups, personal reports, observation notes, case files, some types of survey, some types of interview, etc.
- **Outcome**, or summative evaluations measure outcomes, program effectiveness, and program impact on the problem that the program is designed to address. The questions that outcome evaluations raise include whether program objectives have been achieved; whether the target population has changed as a result; whether unanticipated results have occurred, and whether they are desirable; what factors may have contributed to the changes that have occurred; how cost-effective the program is compared to others with the same goals; what impacts the program has made on the problem; and what new knowledge has been generated.

  Outcome evaluations generally are very formal in approach and designed according to professional research procedures. They use primarily quantitative methods but may draw on qualitative data to help explain the research findings. Such evaluations probably would involve "before and after" measures of attitudes and/or behavior of members of an experimental group (the group that experiences the program) and at least one control or comparison group (which does not receive services, at least until a later time). Impact on a broad population or community might involve multiple measures over time.

The specific data collection methods that are used depend on the nature of the evaluation and the questions to be answered. They may include standard attitudinal or behavioral measures that have been tested on similar populations or they may be developed and tested for the specific target population. Questionnaires, observations, systematic collection of data from various sources, and similar techniques may be used.

Some basic principles that underlie the evaluation section of a proposal follow:

- The linkage between the activities (program components) proposed and the expected outcomes of the program must be clear and explicit in the evaluation design. This linkage is spelled out in the program objectives.
- "Dosage," the actual amount or level of services provided, can influence outcomes. For example, children who participate for two hours several times a week in a tutoring program may show better results than children who participate for an hour once a week--or may not, which has implications for program planning.
- As suggested by the last example, negative findings can be just as important as positive results because they help in understanding why a program did not work and how it might be modified to be effective.
- Qualitative data can be as useful in determining the effectiveness of an intervention as quantitative data.

Organizational Capacity

The organization's history, successes in implementing projects similar to the proposed program, standing in the community to be served and or relationships with partners in past and proposed collaborations, management and staff experience and qualifications, and other information that documents the **applicant's ability to operate the proposed program and manage the federal grant** may be described in a variety of places throughout the proposal or may be consolidated in a separate section called organizational capacity, organizational experience, or something similar. Some funding agencies ask for letters of collaboration or support in this section; some ask that they be presented in an appendix.

As noted on page 1, a good deal of time can be saved if this material is assembled in advance, maintained in a file, and tailored to a specific proposal.

The key is to demonstrate that the organization, its staff, its partners, and sometimes its board are experienced and accomplished enough to ensure that the program will operate as planned, that the grant money will be spent appropriately and with appropriate documentation, and that the project has a good chance of meeting its stated goals.

IMPROVING THE CHANCES TO OBTAIN FEDERAL FUNDING

The Proposal Review Process

In most agencies a proposal may be completely eliminated from competition if it fails in any way to be responsive to the RFA (for example, if it is late, or omits a section, has sections out of the specified order, exceeds a specified page limit, or in some cases even if the typeface or margins are smaller than directed in the application package). Some (but very few) agencies may request "technical corrections," instead of rejecting a proposal, if it is responsive overall but lacks some technical requirement (for example, an indication that the applicant has undertaken a required procedure with a state or city agency).

Although the review process varies somewhat by agency, the normal procedure is to have every proposal read by at least two and sometimes more separate reviewers (also called readers), who are nongovernmental experts in the field. If a proposal is not rejected for lack of responsiveness, the reviewers read and independently assign scores to the sections of the proposal, based on evaluation criteria published in the funding announcement or application package. Evaluation criteria normally include a designated number of points for aspects of the proposal, such as the statement of need, statement of objectives, program description, agency and staff experience and qualifications, and other elements like the use and strength of community partnerships, recommendations from community organizations and individuals, appropriateness of the budget, etc.

For some programs the individual reviewers' scores are reported directly to agency staff and compiled to obtain a final score; for others a review committee (generally comprised of the two or more reviewers in a group, sometimes including other groups of reviewers for the same federal program, and occasionally including federal agency staff) will discuss the proposals further and report joint recommendations.

Proposals scoring lower than a predefined cutoff are rejected for funding, proposals scoring higher than this cutoff are recommended for funding, however, recommendations for funding do not mean that funding will be granted. The grants actually awarded are determined by the number of proposals that qualify, the amount of funding available, and each proposal's ranking among those that are recommended. Sometimes only the highest-scoring two or three proposals can be funded. Other considerations may enter the decision process. In some agencies, program staff review recommended proposals under additional agency priorities indicated in the funding announcement. For example, some announcements indicate that a specified amount or proportion of the total funds available will be awarded within each state or region, so that the highest-scoring proposals in a given state or region will be funded in rank order until that amount is expended.

The proposal's score or ranking and the reviewers' comments normally are available to the submitting organization. In a few federal agencies these documents are sent routinely to proposers; from most agencies they must be requested, often in writing. Reviewers' comments sometimes may be routine and occasionally unhelpful (at least in part because the reviewers have to read so many proposals that they can get tired and lose concentration), but **every organization should be sure to obtain these comments and should make use of them in revising the proposal for future submissions**.

The Proposal

Agency staff and reviewers say it is astonishing how often proposal writers do not adhere to the requirements set out in the funding announcement/application package. Applicants fail to meet the submission deadline, exceed the specified budget or page limits, present materials in the order they think is appropriate rather than the order requested in the application package, ignore some section of the application or questions they are asked to address, ignore instructions about format, and make other errors that either lead to outright rejection of the proposal as nonresponsive or significantly lower the score.

Thus it cannot be said too often that the most important thing a proposal writer can do is to **follow instructions. Read and reread the application package, and respond completely and precisely to its requirements**.

Although repetition should be kept to a minimum, a certain amount of repetition is inevitable in response to the application's questions and requirements for each section. A writer cannot assume that the reader will remember that an important point has been made earlier.

It is vital that each section of the proposal is consistent with every other section. If a statement of need shows a gap in services in the community, the objectives and program description should show how that gap will be filled. If a program activity calls for a certain type/number of staff persons, this should be explained in the program description, accounted for realistically in the budget and budget narrative, and described in the agency capability or staff expertise section (depending on the specific requirements of the application); job descriptions and/or resumes should be included as requested.

Many proposal writers provide excellent need statements or program descriptions but offer budgets that appear inflated at one extreme or inadequate to carry out the necessary program activities at the other. Reviewers often work in the field of the proposals they are reading. They recognize unrealistic (underestimated or overestimated) budgets--and see and respond negatively to "padding." Some evaluation criteria include points for the appropriateness of the budget. Thus it is important to develop a realistic budget and explain and justify all proposed costs.Most organizations underestimate the amount of time it takes to prepare a federal proposal and the extent of the materials they have to assemble for it. A recent survey indicated that in a small sample of nonprofit organizations the average time it took to prepare a federal proposal was nearly 80 person hours--but for those proposals that received awards, the average preparation time was more than 150 hours, almost twice the overall average.

To cut down on last-minute 20-hour days preparing a federal proposal, it is useful to have "generic" sections drafted and on file; for example, a needs statement and an organization description can be prepared before any funding announcement is issued, and modified to fit the needs of the specific announcement. These sections can be based on a previous year's funding announcements of interest to the organization. In any case, it is vital to begin preparing the proposal as soon as the application is available. This provides time to collect data to fill in gaps, for example. It also should provide time for review and suggestions by staff and outsiders not involved in proposal preparation.

Federal Technical Assistance

There is extensive agreement (and pride) among federal program officers that the scoring process is as objective as it is possible to make it, and that they themselves have no way to intervene (and would not if they could) to support some proposals over others. Most program officers, who probably do have the greatest influence if there ever is any leeway in decision making, are careful to avoid even the appearance of favoritism or assistance to one group over another, and they are sensitive to anything that looks like an effort to influence the process.

Nevertheless, federal staff can assist grant seekers in a few general ways. Before a proposal deadline, agency staff usually are extremely helpful and generous with information about the requirements for a submission, but must refuse to answer questions that they think may give an edge to one prospective grantee over another. Many agencies hold preapplication conferences. It is wise to attend these conferences, where participants can ask any questions they wish. It is wise to read the application carefully ahead of time if it is available, in order to make the fullest possible use of the opportunity.

After the proposal deadline and until awards are announced, staff avoid any discussion of the process, the program, or the proposer. Some even refuse to speculate about when decisions may be made. Some agencies use external consultants to whom questions are referred, to distance the proposer from the program officer (sometimes these consultants also organize preapplication meetings and/or answer technical questions about a submission before deadline).

Unless an agency creates a barrier by using a consulting group to provide technical assistance, organizations often can bring themselves directly to the attention of program officers and create positive impressions--but only if they make calls and requests for information appropriately and at appropriate times. The long-term objective is to become known in a positive way to the program officer; and this could take several years.

An organization may request information from a program officer about a funding opportunity described in the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*. The group then has the opportunity to describe an existing or planned program to see how closely it fits the agency's funding priorities; the program officer also may be able to suggest other funding possibilities.

In a broader approach, an organization or--better still--a group of organizations with a track record in a particular field might meet with appropriate program officers to discuss the unmet needs and potential new funding directions. This is a long-term approach that can be helpful to program officers interested in new solutions in their areas of expertise.

For a current request for applications, groups might call the program officer to ask if this is an appropriate funding opportunity for them. This allows them to describe their project and their organizations. They also should feel free to call for technical assistance during the preparation of a proposal (e.g., to ask for clarification if application instructions seem contradictory), but never should put the program officer in an awkward position by pushing for information if the officer indicates that she or he can't answer a particular question. They should avoid any approach to the program officer after the proposal deadline and until awards have been announced.

If funding is not granted, the group could call or meet with the program officer to ask for general information or technical assistance to help prepare a better proposal next time, or to discuss the agency's philosophy or funding priorities.

Winning proposals may be reviewed, but agencies differ in how they are made available. Some agencies charge for photocopying; some require that anyone wanting to see the winning proposals must read them at the agency itself; some require that requests be made formally under the Freedom of Information Act.

Most program officers are in Washington and environs, but some funding recommendations or advice can come from a regional office in New York City. It pays to get to know staff here, again by calling for advice or information at the proper times, and by attending meetings or briefings. If a regional staff person is likely to be a good contact, his or her name will appear as a program officer in a funding announcement, and he or she usually will be present at meetings or bidders' conferences held in New York City or in the New York area.

Partnerships/ Collaborations

Increasingly, federal agencies (as well as state, local, and many private funders) are calling for collaborations among community-based organizations, or between CBOs and businesses within a community, or between CBOs and larger institutions like a university, a city agency, a hospital, a board of education, or a national or regional nonprofit. Ignoring this requirement is fatal to a proposal.

Before a request for applications ever appears, every CBO should be reaching out to other organizations in their field of interest and/or in their community, even if these organizations have been competitors in the past, and discussing ways in which they might work together productively to address issues of mutual concern. It may be necessary for organizations whose programs overlap to rethink which of them will provide which services. All of this takes time, usually much more time than is available between the time a funding announcement appears and the deadline for proposal submission.

Although the lead agency in most federal applications must be incorporated as a not-for-profit organization with tax-exempt status, smaller organizations that are not incorporated may be partners in a project and may strengthen a proposal by demonstrating a true community partnership orientation.

If they do not presently exist, relationships should be initiated with every sector of the community, from churches to merchants, from tenants' associations to civic associations, from schools and school districts to hospitals and health centers. City agencies with sites in the community should be approached. Elected and appointed officials at every level also should be included in discussions. The broader and more diverse the representation is within a community, and the more convincing the coordination and integration among partners, the stronger the proposal and the better the chances for funding. Note that some applications require documentation of the development of a collaborative program. Notices of meetings, lists of those invited, attendance lists, agendas, and other such documents may prove useful.

Letters of commitment and joint participation (spelling out the ways groups will work together, refer clients, etc.--not just "support" letters commending the program)--should be included in a proposal package. Reviewers generally can tell if a collaborative effort has been thrown together for a particular grant; again, outreach and discussions about possible joint efforts should begin now.

Congressional Staff Involvement

Although a letter from a Member of Congress is not enough to get a proposal funded (because reviewers know that most Congressional offices provide a letter for any group that asks for one), the lack of such a letter may raise a question in the reviewers' minds about why it's not there. And Congressional staff usually will not follow up on behalf of a proposal unless they have sent such a letter. At least a week before the proposal is due (longer if possible), the Congressional office should receive an executive summary of the proposal and some indication of the comments that would be most useful (some staff like to see a draft or a sample letter). The office may write directly to the federal agency receiving the proposal, or may send the letter to the organization for inclusion in the proposal package.

Note that the strength and sincerity of a letter--and the overall level of support--depends on the Member's and/or staff's familiarity with a group. Thus every organization that thinks it may look for federal funding should cultivate a relationship with its local Congressional staff. Groups should invite Members to events, invite staff to visit their programs, send materials--even more than they would do with a foundation or corporate grantmaker. They should feel free to call for information and help. They should be aware that Congressional staff often are swamped with work and may not return calls--and keep calling.

There are several more active ways in which a Congressional office can help, but most will do so only for the groups they know best and/or those they believe are the most capable; some will do this for only one or two organizations each year, if they do it at all. A few feel free to follow up aggressively on a very limited number of proposals they feel strongly about, but most offices use very low-key approaches to avoid anything that appears to put undue pressure on a federal agency. If an organization has established a good relationship with Congressional staff, various options can be discussed.

For a current submission, a Congressional office can (but not all offices do) follow up a letter with a phone inquiry to the appropriate staff person (usually an agency professional designated as the Congressional liaison) about the status of a proposal or an expression of the Member's interest in it.

The best time for such an inquiry is after the review committee has finished its job and before final decisions are made. At that point, if the proposal has scored high enough to be recommended for funding, the inquiry may gain it just a little more agency attention at a critical time. Obviously the strongest message is sent if the Member makes the call, but even a staff call can help.

After a funding decision has been made, Congressional intervention may provide longer-term help for a group that is well known, has a strong score but has not received funding, and is not satisfied with an agency's responses to its own follow-up questions. Congressional staff may pose a series of questions to the Congressional liaison about the reasons for funding decisions, which, if not answered satisfactorily, could prompt a request for a formal response from the assistant secretary responsible for the program, a meeting with the program officer to discuss the decisions, or a briefing to help a group understand the ways in which it failed to respond properly to the application requirements.
These approaches should be used sparingly, and very carefully. They should not be confrontational, nor should they be an effort to change current funding decisions.

If a meeting is seen as anything other than a request for information and technical assistance, it can generate a negative perception of the applicant. In a very rare circumstance, such a discussion might show that the review committee has overlooked an important element of the proposal, or made other errors in scoring, but the chief value of this kind of intervention is to help a group learn what it needs to do for future submissions and to bring the group to the program officer's attention in a positive way.