# PREPARING EFFECTIVE COMPETITIVE GRANT APPLICATIONS

## WHAT IS A "COMPETITIVE GRANT APPLICATION"?

**A competitive grant application is a proposal with supporting information that has been prepared in response to an Application Guidance, RFP (Request for Proposals), Guide for Applicants, or RFA (Request for Applications).** Whatever the term used, there is a written request, most often from a public agency, for proposed projects that fit the purpose and objectives and involve "eligible activities" described in the guidance. Proposals – often referred to applications, perhaps because they must include information such as certifications and supportive documentation that are not necessarily a part of private-sector proposals – are sought from eligible applicants and then evaluated on a competitive basis to determine who will receive funding. Thus the funding agency defines, usually in considerable detail, the kinds of work it wants to support.

**A federal agency typically announces the availability of funding on its website and in the *Federal Register*,** a federal government publication used for a variety of purposes, including publishing draft and final regulations governing federal programs and announcing funding competitions. For contracts B for which for-profit entities are frequently eligible – the announcement may be in the federal government's *Commerce Business Daily*. The public announcement of a funding opportunity is typically a summary version of the RFP and is often called a Program Announcement or Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA). Interested individuals are referred to another website location or to the agency for the full "application kit" including required forms.

**RFPs are used for many types of funding.** Sometimes only one grant, cooperative agreement, or contract will be awarded, as when an agency wants to have a program evaluated, or needs a single national technical assistance contractor to assist local grantees involved in a particular category of program such as HIV prevention or HIV/AIDS services. In other cases, multiple awards are given, such as regional and national grants to minority-controlled organizations under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Capacity-Building Initiative (CBI) or multiple grants to minority community-based providers under various programs funded through the Congressional Black Caucus-initiated Minority AIDS Initiative. In such situations, several or many organizations in various parts of the country may receive grants or cooperative agreements from a federal agency to carry out related projects with particular target populations. Or State or local agencies may award multiple grants or contracts to several or many organizations, as occurs when state and local health departments subcontract funds for HIV education and prevention, Housing Opportunities for People with AIDS (HOPWA), or Ryan White CARE Act Title I or Title II funds for HIV/AIDS services. Grants may be made on a regional or neighborhood basis or without regard to location.

**Application guidances and RFPs vary in their level of detail and flexibility.** When there is to be a single award in a particular funding category, the RFP is usually very detailed and defines a very specific work scope. When multiple awards are expected, more flexible guidelines are provided, allowing any of a variety of types of activities so long as they contribute to a specific set of goals, focus on one or more specified target populations, and are within program guidelines. Thus an RFP for minority-focused AIDS prevention programs may allow proposals for a wide range of activities and interventions so long as they target specified minority populations at high risk for AIDS and are designed to reduce or eliminate the spread of HIV infection. An RFP for a youth-oriented employment and training program may propose any of a number of approved activities targeting the specified in-school or out-of-school youth population. Limitations on allowable activities or target groups, as well as required program components, are typically specified in the RFP.

**Some RFPs are extremely long and complex, while others are relatively short and easy to understand.** Under new legislation, the government is working to simplify the federal funding process and paperwork. As part of the Minority AIDS Initiative, the Office of HIV/AIDS Policy is training federal personnel and working with agencies to simplify their RFPs and use “plain language” in developing them. An increasing number of HIV/AIDS-related Application Guidances are now prepared in formats designed to meet “plain language standards. However, some Application Guidances remain very long, detailed, and sometimes confusing. Even with efforts to simplify them, some FY 2001 federal HIV/AIDS-focused guidances have been 40-70 pages long, including attachments and sample tables.

## WHO USES THE COMPETITIVE APPLICATION PROCESS?

**Federal, state, and local government agencies typically use an Application Guidance or RFP process to ensure open competition for public funding.** Because funding is made available under specific legislative guidelines, and because the government has a responsibility to make the opportunity to apply for funding widely available, an RFP provides an opportunity to obtain applications that meet legislative requirements and are submitted in a similar format that facilitates review of large numbers of applications.

Federal agencies can make non-competitive grants, though they represent a small proportion of total federal funding and often require extensive internal justification. Nonprofit organizations can sometimes obtain public funding through unsolicited proposals based on discussions with potential funding sources. However, the tendency is towards increased use of competitive proposals, and this is particularly true of federal funding for human services programs. If your organization is asked to submit an unsolicited proposal, take advantage of the excellent opportunity, but remember that funding is by no means assured; a complicated process is required to justify "sole source" awards – that is, grants or contracts awarded without a funding competition.

**An RFP approach is sometimes used by private funding sources including foundations and corporations, and by "intermediary" organizations**--groups that obtain funding from one or several sources and then reallocate it to other organizations to carry out specific programs. For example, in the AIDS field, the various local AIDS Partnerships (e.g., Washington AIDS Partnership) are examples of intermediary organizations that use the RFP process. Similarly, the National Council of La Raza, Center for Community Change, and several other large national nonprofit organizations have served as intermediary organizations for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's seed grant program for developing organizations.

**City and State agencies typically use RFPs not only for funds raised through their own tax revenues, but also for pass-through and block-granted federal programs,** such as Ryan White CARE Act (HIV/AIDS services), the Community Development Block Grant Program, and various demonstration projects. Many States use RFPs to determine what organizations will receive HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and elderly services funding.

**Use of RFPs by foundations and corporations is becoming increasingly common.** Large national foundations such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Kellogg Foundation have used competitive RFP processes in awarding HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and children's health grants. The Pfizer Foundation has used an RFP process for its Community Health Ventures Program, as has Johnson and Johnson for its health outreach and access grants. More often, however, private sources wait for potential applicants to find them, and make available –increasingly, on their websites as well as in written documents – their funding guidelines and application procedures. They indicate funding priorities, specify the kinds of information that must be included in a funding proposal, and indicate deadlines for submission of proposals to be considered at a particular Board of Trustees meeting.

## WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO COMPETE FOR FUNDING THROUGH RFPs?

**The range of "eligible applicants" varies.** Some competitions are open to profit-making and nonprofit entities; public agencies may also be eligible. For example, an FY 2000 Guide for Applicants for a "Targeted Capacity Expansion Program for Substance Abuse Treatment and HIV/AIDS Services" was open to public entities such as "units of State or local government" and "domestic private non-profit and for-profit entities." Some competitions are limited to public or nonprofit organizations; to minority or disadvantaged businesses; small businesses; or in some cases minority-controlled nonprofit organizations, universities, or consortia. For example, the FY 2000 HIV/AIDS Bureau Application Guidance for the Ryan White CARE Act Title III HIV Planning Grant Program's Communities of Color Initiative was open only to "indigenous private non-profit or public organizations serving communities of color." The FY 2001 CDC Program Announcement for "HIV Prevention Projects for Community-Based Organizations Targeting Young Men of Color who have Sex with Men" had a whole checklist of eligibility requirements including "have proof of current tax-exempt status" (which means applicants had to be nonprofit tax-exempt organizations), "be located in one of the eligible metropolitan areas," and "be able to show that 75 percent of the persons your program served in the past two years are of racial/ethnic minority populations." For-profit management consulting firms often bid RFPs such as technical assistance or evaluation projects for which they are eligible. Although community-based organizations may have greater capacity and commitment to carry out programs targeting minorities and low-income people, consulting firms typically have excellent proposal-writing skills, with specific ability to respond to RFPs.

## WHAT IS A LETTER OR INTENT OR PRE-APPLICATION?

**Sometimes funders add a step in the application process.** Instead of proposals, they first require or request that applicants complete a letter or intent or pre-application.

**A pre-application usually involves a letter** with a brief description of the applicant's proposed project and sufficient information to demonstrate eligibility and capability to carry out the kind of program called for in the Application Guidance. Initial screening of the pre-application may be done to ensure that the applicant is indeed eligible. Sometimes, technical review of the program concept and applicant experience and capability is used to screen out some groups, so that the number of entities submitting full proposals will be reduced. Only if the pre-application is approved may the organization prepare a full proposal in response to the guidance.

**A letter of intent is sometimes voluntary.** The federal agency uses letters to get a sense of how many applications and what mix of applications to expect. This helps in setting up review panels and processes.

## HOW ARE COMPETITIVE APPLICATIONS REVIEWED?

**Understanding the review process helps you prepare a competitive application in response to an Application Guidance.** Most guidances are prepared and disseminated in order to encourage a number of eligible organizations to compete for funding. Then through a clearly defined, standardized review procedure (usually involving an external review panel of individuals who do not work for the funding agency), the funding entity selects the organization or organizations it believes will best meet the program's purposes. An Application Guidance usually includes specific information on how proposals will be evaluated, often with a particular number of points allowed for each major component of the proposal. Selection typically includes consideration of the following:

- **Technical quality of the proposal –** whether the applicant has documented the need for the project in the proposed service area and among the proposed target population; whether the proposed objectives are appropriate, significant, and feasible; whether the work plan is practical and workable; the quality and feasibility of the evaluation plan; for "demonstration"-focused efforts, whether the project is innovative and potentially replicable. The demonstration of need may also be an important evaluation factor. Often, there are several different "review criteria" addressing technical quality; for example, problem and need, goals and objectives, methodology and work plan, and evaluation may be listed as separate review criteria.

- **Skills and related experience of staff and organization –** whether the organization and the proposed personnel have the capability to carry out the project, based on resumes, job descriptions, past experience, and sometimes relationships and agreements with other organizations in the service area.

- **Cost, including appropriateness of budget –** including whether total cost is within guidelines and whether projected costs seem reasonable, given the work to be carried out.

**The quality of the proposal and the experience of staff are very important in the competitive process.** However, the "best" technical proposal and most capable staff and organization do not necessarily mean success, if projected costs are very high or the budget is poorly prepared. Less highly rated proposals may “win” if their proposed costs are lower. This situation is described by the statement in many guidances that an award will be made based on "cost and other factors."

**Proposals may be evaluated by staff of the funding agency, by outside reviewers, or by a combination of the two.** The trend is towards use of panels of outside panels as the primary reviewers, with staff doing second level review of applications that are “approved” as scored above a certain level by reviewers. Review panels can include from 3-12 or more individuals who do not work for the funding agency and have appropriate credentials and experience related to the program for which funds are being allocated.

**A major problem with outside review panels has been the under-representation of minorities and community people, and an over-dependence on researchers and academicians.** In addition, reviewers from the West and East Coasts have tended to be over-represented, and reviewers from the Midwest and South and from rural areas underrepresented. As a result, review panels may contain few individuals knowledgeable about the special problems and needs of African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Pacific Islanders, or American Indians. However, some agencies are making a serious effort to include minority group members, consumers, and community-based organization staff on their review panels. MOSAICA has worked for several years with the Office of Minority Health (OMH) and the Office of HIV/AIDS Policy (OHAP) to identify and train minority reviewers and “market” the resulting database to federal agencies that fund HIV/AIDS-related activities. The database of experienced minority reviewers is now available at OMH for use by federal agencies and State and local health departments putting together review panels.

**Staff of minority organizations should offer to serve on review panels and recommend others.** You might be a reviewer in a program competition for which your agency did not submit a proposal, or be asked to read proposals in one funding category or region if you submitted a proposal in another category or region. Even when your agency is submitting a proposal, a single reviewer typically reviews only a small subset of the proposals, so there need not be a conflict of interest. Serving on a review panel can help you understand reviewer and agency expectations and help you strengthen your agency’s grant applications.

## HOW CAN YOU ENSURE A COMPETITIVE APPLICATION?

**Responding to an Application Guidance is very different from developing an unsolicited proposal.** In the case of an unsolicited proposal, your organization defines a program need, then develops a project plan to meet the need and a proposal to raise funds for the project. In the case of a guidance, someone else has defined the need and also outlined the type of response required; you must show your organization is able to provide the kind of project the funding source wants. On the other hand, guidances – particularly those for programs involving multiple awards--do allow for a good deal of creativity. Your task is to design a project that meets the needs of your community and fits the priorities and capability of your organization, and at the same time is fully responsive to the requirements of the guidance.

Following are some steps and hints which can help you improve the "competitiveness" of your proposal in response to an RFP or Application Guidance:

**1. Read the guidance very, very carefully**. Find the “Program Purpose” and the “Program Description,” “Program Expectations,” “Allowable Activities,” “Why are these Funds being Offered?” or similar sections, the parts that give the background, define the purposes and objectives of the program, and specify what activities the funding agency wants to fund. Read first for general content. Check to see that the guidance calls for projects that are consistent with your organizational mission and capabilities. (If it is not, stop reading and start looking for a more appropriate funding opportunity!) Review the section on “Eligibility,” “Eligible Applicants,” or “Who Can Apply Checklist” to be sure your organization is eligible to apply for funding, and to find out how broad your competition will be--just other nonprofit organizations, or public and/or for-profit ones as well. See if a "grantee share" of funding – a cash or in-kind "match" – is required or whether the funding agency will provide full project funding.

After the initial review, read the guidance again and ***mark*** key information. Put asterisks in the margin so you can easily find hints about priorities, objectives, preferred methods, activities that are NOT fundable, etc. *If you don't read the guidance carefully, you may forget to include some information or some component that is required, and your proposal may be judged "non-responsive" and not even considered.* Some applications provide a very useful Application Checklist; be sure you understand exactly what is required.

**2. Review the section that tells you how to prepare and organize your proposal**. Usually it will be called “Instructions for Preparing the Narrative Proposal,” “Application Procedures,” or (in plain language guidances) “What Do I Include in my Application and How Should It Look?” This usually tells you the proposal outline or format to be followed, and what information is supposed to be included in each section. Read it carefully, then reread and underline key information.

Be especially careful to identify the proposal outline that is to be followed, and to note whether page limitations are specified. For example:

- One Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Cooperative Agreement RFP required an abstract of not more than one page, a Description of the Target Population and Needs Assessment of not more than three pages, a Program Plan of not more than five pages, and an Applicant Capability and Coordination of Efforts statement of not more than four pages, excluding letters of support, plus Personnel and Budget information. Another CDC Application Guidance included two different page limits: 35 pages for applicants under Category A, and 45 pages for applications under Category B.

- A Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMSHA) substance abuse and AIDS program guidance called for an abstract not to exceed 35 lines, a program narrative of 25 single-spaced pages, and unlimited attachments except that biographical sketches could not exceed two pages and job descriptions for key personnel one page.

The trend in public agencies is towards limiting the length of applications, including appendices, and it is *extremely* important to follow such instructions. Failure to do so will mean that your application will usually be returned without being reviewed.

**3. Carefully study the "Evaluation Criteria" or similar section, which usually tells you the basis on which applications will be evaluated and often numerically scored.** In traditionally formatted Application Guidances, the scoring usually but not always corresponds to a section of the proposal narrative The new plain language Application Guidances often have a section called something like “How Will My Application be Scored?” which refers you back to the “What Do I Include in My Application” section. It provides a desired proposal outline and indicates the maximum number of points for each section of the proposal. Whatever the format, the guidance will typically indicate the maximum number of points your proposal may be awarded for each proposal component or the percent of total points you can receive for that component. For example, one HIV/AIDS Bureau guidance for services to children, youth, women, and families under Title IV of the Ryan White CARE Act called for applications to be rated using the following scores:

- Justification of Need for the Program - 10 points;
- Organizational Capabilities and Expertise - 15 points;
- Adequacy of the Proposed Program Plan for Coordinated, Comprehensive Systems of Care - 50 points;
- Program Evaluation - 10 points;
- Appropriateness and Justification of the Budget - 10 points; and
- Adherence to the Program Guidance - 5 points.

***Study the point scales carefully;*** they usually include a description of the factors to be rated and tell you where to focus your time and effort in preparing the application. For example, the criteria above make it clear that major focus in this application must be on demonstrating that the project will provide for coordinated, comprehensive care, and that organizational capacity is also quite important.

Sometimes there will be no numerical scores, but the guidance will tell you that the proposal will be judged on a specified set of factors. Usually, they are provided in priority order, with the most important factors listed first (Check the guidance to see whether it says that the order is in fact significant).

***It is extremely important that you thoroughly understand the funding agency's evaluation criteria, and that you understand the required format and its relation to these criteria.*** Sometimes, reviewers will look for specific information in a particular section and if they fail to find it, will assume that it was excluded and give you no points, even if you put the information in another section.

**4. Once you have thoroughly read and marked up the guidance, prepare an outline of your application.** Be absolutely sure that the format is the one required or suggested in the guidance, and that the subsections contain all the information needed to meet the specified scoring criteria. When you do the outline, write in the required components for each section and subsection. Be careful to use the *same terminology* as the Application Guidance. If it says “Needs Assessment,” use that as your section title, not “Problem Statement.” If it asks for a “Statement of Work,” don't call that section “Methods.” Get in the habit of looking for the funding agency's preferred terminology and using it throughout your narrative. It implies a familiarity with the funder and its priorities and will help improve your application's score. It is also important to demonstrate your familiarity with the preferred terminology of the discipline or program area involved.

**5. Now take a careful look at cost information**. With most programs for which multiple awards are projected, you may be funded at a level lower than the amount you request in the original proposal, so the budget amount is not as critical as the proposal. The important thing is to have a reasonable budget that is within the maximum permitted and allows you to carry out all the activities specified in the work plan. Some guidances will indicate an *average* or *maximum* grant amount. It is usually wise not to be far above the average unless there is a compelling reason for higher costs. For example, one SAMSHA guidance indicated that $16.0 million would be available to support "approximately 30-40 awards" that were "expected to range from $100,000 to $500,000." Sometimes there is a clear maximum request. A CDC Program Announcement required that applicants request "no more than $350,000, including indirect costs," if applying under Category A or no more than $500,000 under Category B.

Where a single or small number of awards are expected, cost may be a major factor in who gets the grant or cooperative agreement. Some RFPs may require two separate proposals, a "Technical Proposal" including your proposal narrative but excluding any cost data, and a "Business Proposal" which provides your budget and budget narrative. In such cases, it is much to your benefit if you can come up with a cost below that of other bidders, since cost will be a major factor in determining who wins the contract. Often no maximum cost will be given in such RFPs; usually there will be at least an estimate (sometimes in the RFP cover letter, sometimes elsewhere in the RFP) of the number of "professional person-years of effort" the funding agency believes will be required to carry out the project. That means the number of full-time equivalent professional staff and consultants. Figure about 230 days to a "person year," to allow for vacation, holidays, and sick days. Through contacts, attempt to determine the cost per person year allowed by the funding agency involved.

**6. If you have unanswered questions once you have completed the review process, e-mail or call the identified contact within the funding agency and ask for information**. Most guidances identify one or several contact persons within the funding agency who may be approached with questions. Be sure that you contact *only* those persons identified (no one else in the agency is supposed to talk to applicants during the application process). Also, be sure to list all your questions before calling the contact person so that you can get all the information through a single telephone call or e-mail. Remember that dozens or even hundreds of other potential applicants are also asking questions.

Agencies often identify two possible contacts for assistance: someone from Grants Management to provide grants management or costs-related questions and someone from the appropriate program branch to provide program-related information. These contacts are sometimes referred to as sources of "business management technical assistance" and "program technical assistance."

Telephone calls or e-mails to the contact person can enable you to avoid costly misinterpretations of the Application Guidance. For example, if the guidance is not clear about whether required charts are included in page length limitations, call and ask. If you incorrectly assume figures are included, you will have fewer pages of narrative compared to other bidders, which will put you at a competitive disadvantage. If you incorrectly assume they are excluded, your proposal will exceed the allowable length and may be rejected without consideration.

**7. Develop a work plan for preparing the application.** This enables you to identify all the tasks and activities required to prepare the application narrative and collect and organize the information needed for the application. This often includes work not directly related to the writing of the program narrative, such as letters of commitment from partner organizations, letters from prospective staff or consultants committing themselves to working with you, and/or epidemiologic or demographic data. Develop a work plan with tasks, activities, responsibilities, and time deadlines, and go over it with the team of staff who will be involved in preparing the application package. Be sure there is agreement on the division of labor and the deadlines. This is especially important if you are preparing the application in collaboration with other organizations, whose capability and cost information will need to be collected and integrated with those of the applicant agency. Letters of collaboration will also need to be drafted and signed.

Make a list of all information needed, from resumes to a map of the service area. Be *sure* to collect statistics, resumes, letters of commitment, and other data as early as possible, since without them, you will be in real trouble as the submission deadline nears. Most applications require the use of federal forms, such as the Face Sheet (Standard Form 424) for an Application for Federal Assistance, and the Budget Information Form (SF 424A). You can usually download them from a website or obtain them from the agency, but allow time to get them.

Sometimes you must identify by name and provide resumes for all "key personnel," which includes, at a minimum, the Project Director. This may mean talking to individuals not on your staff and getting their permission for you to use their resumes, with the understanding that if you win the grant or contract, you will offer them the position. Be sure the resumes show the skills required by the application. You can lose many points if the resumes are poorly written or the staff do not have the required experience or training. Sometimes you can simply provide job descriptions, but your proposal is always stronger if the Project Director and other key agency staff are identified by name, with resumes provided. An excellent proposal with weak staffing often will not be competitive – depending upon the review criteria.

**8. Make writing assignments**. If possible, have one person do the narrative, another the capability and back-up materials. If you have to divide responsibility for the narrative, have one person do the needs statement, the other the methodology and work plan (which is often in chart form). The fewer writers, the better. On the other hand, involve as many knowledgeable people as possible in meetings to discuss the proposal, agree on objectives, and come up with a detailed content outline. *Be very strict about deadlines for drafts*. If you use an outside consultant to help do the writing and complete an application at the last minute, the chances of omitting something or having a weak section that will make your application noncompetitive are very great. Leave time to review and revise drafts and--if there were several writers--make all the sections fit together in a tight proposal.

**9. Have someone responsible for editing and reviewing, and for seeing that all supporting material is prepared**. Meet quickly every few days on progress. Have back-up personnel who can help if bottlenecks develop. Be sure your agency capability information is revised to fit *this* guidance. If you plan ahead, you may have time to send the draft proposal to someone outside the organization for review.

**10. Once the objectives have been developed and the work plan has been outlined, prepare the budget**. First be sure you have in mind a target figure. Then do a rough budget, including everything you feel is needed to carry out the project as outlined, then review. If you are not experienced in budget preparation, be sure to bring in your Finance Director or someone else skilled in budgeting. Generally, the best approach is to first prepare a budget using your agency's standard budget format, to be sure that no cost categories are forgotten. Then revise the format to fit the funding agency's requirements.

If the budget as initially drafted is above the maximum allowable for the application or above what you feel is reasonable, and you feel cutting it will mean you can't carry out the project as designed, then modify the work plan and scale back the objectives until the budget is at a reasonable level. If the cost will be a major factor in the award, cut as much as you can without jeopardizing your project. Remember that consultants can be cheaper than staff if you have a high fringe benefit or indirect cost rate; but also remember that "in-house" capability is needed for high scores on personnel. So balance the proposal's need to get a high score on personnel and capability with the need to keep the cost reasonable. Don't propose a personnel plan or a work plan you cannot implement successfully.

**11. Prepare the application at least one or two days before the deadline, so you don't get caught on the last day by a broken copier or support staff who are out ill**. Remember to go over the completed application package, from letter of transmittal to attachments, very carefully, and be sure all guidance requirements are met. If the guidance says to label each page in a certain way or to include an original (that means an originally signed copy of the forms) or separately package the technical and business proposals, be sure to meet these requirements. If you do not, the application may be judged nonresponsive and returned without review. Some guidances require that your letter of transmittal includes a statement that your bid is "firm for a period of X days" and that your proposal is "predicated upon acceptance of all terms and conditions contained in the RFP and resulting therefrom." Be sure to meet all these requirements.

**12. Make certain that you meet the deadline on the guidance, or the application will be refused or returned unopened.** That may mean mailing it by a specified date and time or delivering it to the funding agency by a particular time and date. Remember: if you mail the application, get a readable postmark with the date and time mailed, and mail it certified, return receipt requested, so you will know it got there – and so if it gets lost, you will have the proof needed to send another package. Be sure to save the certified mail receipt until you receive the return receipt card from the funding agency.

**13. Once the application has been submitted, get a good night's sleep and then have the team debrief and try to learn from your experience**. Staff should talk about problems encountered and how to minimize them in the future.

**14. If you do *not* get the funding, request in writing a debriefing or the evaluation and comments on your application.** The federal government – like State and local agencies allocating federal funds – is required to provide such information either in a meeting or by mail. It will help you do better the next time you want to submit a competitive application.

## CONCLUSION

Responding to an application guidance can be extremely time-consuming, because of the required forms, assurances, attachments, format and length requirements and limitations. Developing the skills to prepare successful competitive applications requires organization, planning, attention to detail – and practice. Because more and more public- and private-sector funding is being awarded through this process, developing the staff capacity to respond effectively and efficiently can be an excellent long-term investment for a community-based organization.

## THIRTEEN COMMON MISTAKES IN GRANT APPLICATIONS – AND THEIR PROBABLE RESULTS

The following common mistakes in grant applications are unrelated to the basic content or methodology of a project, but may make the application far less competitive.

1. **Failure to follow application instructions:** The application does not follow RFP (Request for Proposals) or Application Guidance requirements regarding margins, type size, or page limitations – and it is declared non-responsive and returned unread.

2. **Missing component:** A required component – e.g., budget justification, specific attachments, chart, required letters of commitment from collaborating organizations, or narrative section – is missing. The funding agency may give the applicant a chance to provide the information or may declare the application non-responsive and not review it.

3. **Narrative not in specified order or sections misnamed:** The project narrative outline does not follow the order of presentation indicated in the application guidance, or uses section titles different from those stated – so reviewers find it difficult to locate required information.

4. **Misplaced or missing content:** Required material is put in the wrong section of the narrative, where it seems to the proposal writer to "make more sense," or is omitted altogether, usually where the project narrative includes many "bullet points" specifying information to be included within a section. Reviewers do not find required information – so the proposal loses points.

5. **Failure to use preferred terminology:** The application uses terminology different from that used in the application guidance – *cooperation* instead of *collaboration*, *letters of support* instead of *letters of commitment.* As a result, the application does not read as if it was written specifically for this funding agency and this application guidance – and it loses points.

6. **Missing references:** Data are used without citations or references to indicate their source. Research studies are referenced in vague rather than specific terms. The data appear questionable to some reviewers – so the application loses points.

7. **Focus inconsistent with review criteria:** The application guidance specifies a page limitation. The proposal does not exceed the maximum number of pages, but the allocation of pages to sections is not consistent with the stated review criteria. The application expends too many pages on sections that are worth relatively few points and too few pages to fully address key sections – so the proposal loses points in those sections.

8. **Unclear narrative or poor editing:** The application is poorly written and not well edited; sentences are often unclear – so reviewers often miss the point or are not sure what is being proposed. The application may also contains typos, incorrect sentence structures, or other evidence of limited editing or lack of quality control – giving an impression that the agency is not careful. Some reviewers assume that lack of care in

writing the proposal may mean lack of care in working with clients or doing research – so the applicant agency loses credibility with reviewers.

9. **Weak or non-measurable objectives:** The application does not include measurable project objectives, or the objectives address outputs such as number of clients to be served but not outcomes such as expected changes in client health status, access to services, etc. The application is likely to lose points for the narrative, work plan, and evaluation plan, since the work plan and evaluation plan are largely based on the objectives.

10. **Weak evaluation plan:** The evaluation plan does not provide a specific, practical plan for determining whether the project completed its tasks and outputs and/or whether it accomplished results (outcomes) for clients or community. Generally, the plan is vague, without specific outcome indicators or steps to be followed. It is not clear whether the applicant has the capacity to plan and conduct an evaluation – and the application loses points and credibility.

11. **Inconsistencies in the application:** The application has a narrative, a separate work plan chart, and a budget. Perhaps different people prepared these major sections, and there was no time to review them properly, so they do not agree. Some aspects of the methodology are not reflected in the work plan, and some staff mentioned in the narrative are not listed in the budget. The application seems inconsistent, and loses points.

12. **Budget problems:** The budget does not add up, puts costs in the wrong sections of the SF 424A form, or does not include a detailed budget narrative. Even if the proposal narrative is clear and effective, the budget gives the impression of having been done too quickly and with too little care, losing credibility for the application as a whole.

13. **Application arrives late:** The application is not postmarked by the post office on the deadline date or does not arrive by the specified time deadline. It is returned, unopened, to the applicant.