Demystifying AmeriCorps Grant Writing

AmeriCorps Montana Grantmaking - How it Happens & Key Terms

AmeriCorps Montana Funding Streams

- Formula – a grant making process where applications are submitted to Office of Community Service (OCS), awards are recommended by the Grant Review Work Group, and approved by the Commission on Community Service for submission to AmeriCorps for final funding determination
- Competitive – a grant making process where Single State Applicants apply through OCS for review, ranking, and recommendation for funding prior to being submitted to AmeriCorps for nationwide competition and award determination

Notices of Funding

- NOFO: Notice of Funding Opportunity, amount of funding may be unknown/not appropriated
- NOFA: Notice of Funding Available, amount of funding is known and may be limited

Types of Applicants

- Single State Applicants must apply through the AmeriCorps Montana Notices administered by the Prime Grantee, the Governor's Office of Community Service (OCS)
- Multi State Applicants (National Directs), apply directly to AmeriCorps and consult with OCS
- Tribes may apply to OCS or AmeriCorps directly

Application Types

- New - organizations proposing a new project
  - ***Note: organizations who have had prior AmeriCorps funding and are starting a new application will likely have to request OCS initiate an application with AmeriCorps prior to entering data into eGrants (45 CFR 2522.340). This also applies to organizations applying for an operating program after having received a planning grant.***
- Continuation - organizations who are applying for years 2 or 3 of a 3-year grant cycle
- Renew/Recompete - organizations whose 3-year grant cycle is expiring and are applying for a new 3-year grant cycle

Creating an Application

Applications are created within eGrants using the "Creating an Application" section in the lower left corner of the home screen.

Previously awarded applications can be renewed or continued from the Awarded Applications menu on the right side of the eGrants homescreen.

Creating an Application

New ▶
Continuation/Renewal ▶
Amendment ▶

VIEW MY GRANTS/APPLICATIONS

▶ View All
▶ 26 Awarded
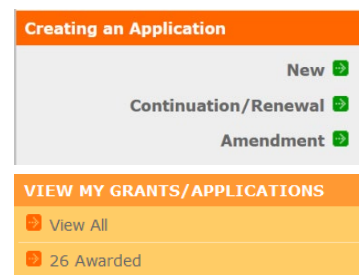
App. Type	Creation Date	Status	
New	08/05/2021	Awarded	view | amend | continue
			Select a Report ⌄ GO

Grant Narratives: Think Through Before Writing

Complete applications contain these elements:

Narratives (Think through "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How?")

- Executive Summary
    - Follow the template (pretty please). That is all you have to do.
- Program Design
    - Why, What, Where, How: Theory of Change and community needs in words and numbers
    - How: Intervention, Evidence Base & Tier/quality, Notice Priority, Member Experience
- Organizational Capability
    - Who & How: Org Background, Staffing, Accountability, Member supervision
- Cost Effectiveness & Budget Adequacy
    - "See budget" (seriously, only those words)
    - Review the budget narrative as printed from eGrants. All calculation narratives must equal the Total (CNCS + Grantee shares). Watch for rounding errors.
- Evaluation Report & Plan (if applicable)
    - What & How: what year is my program and what is required for a Evaluation Plan/Report?
    - Use the Evaluation Plan Template.

Logic Model

- Theory of Change in a table format, program design in a table

Standard Form 424 Budget & Budget Narrative

- Calculations and alignment with performance & org policy

Performance Measures

- Outcomes, results for people and places

Authorization, Assurances, & Certification

- Authorized representative, fine print is real

AmeriCorps Grant Writing

General Tips

1. Read, Rest and Think, then Read again! Look for Changes. *Note that new requirements may be put into the Notice, as the Notice is incorporated into your contract by reference.*
    - The Notice (Hint, changes from prior years are typically highlighted in another color.)
    - Application Instructions
    - Mandatory Supplemental Information
    - Performance Measure Instructions
2. Start writing and budgeting as early as possible in a creative way that works for you.
    - Draw pictures, write poems, make program and budget notes throughout the year
3. Program and financial staff should meet regularly. During the application process it is essential that they meet several times.
    - Performance based budgeting leads to mission capability and accurate coding
    - Application narratives should flow and align with the budget
4. Use the Technical Assistance Period to ask questions and point out errors.
5. Tell a story, explain the problem, how AC service is the solution, and how service benefits contributors.

- Speak the truth and stick to the facts
- How your organization is already working in the issue area
- Weave together performance measures, data collection and evaluation
- It's not all technical writing, be creative!

Tips from the Notice

1. Use assessment criteria in the Notice to gauge length of each narrative. Give more narrative length for sections with higher point value, than those with less or no associated value.
2. Make it easy for reviewers to find responses to sections and review criteria.
   - Narrative field headers are automatically generated by eGrants, so do not waste space on them (e.g. Executive Summary, Program Design, etc.), but do include sub-category titles.
   - Don't start with a blank page. Create an outline using the Subcategories and Review Criteria.
   - eGrants limits formatting (no bullets, indents, italics, bolds, underlines, etc.). Implement any formatting you can, such as:
     - Capitalizing Review Criteria sub-categories (e.g. THEORY OF CHANGE, NOTICE PRIORITY, MEMBER EXPERIENCE, etc.)
     - Indent paragraphs by using spacing generated by the spacebar (cannot use Tab in eGrants).
   - Start sentences with the Review Criteria key terms and/or bullets listed in the Notice.
     - "The program will recruit AmeriCorps members from the geographic or demographic communities in which the programs operate by…"
3. Use in line citations in the format of your choice (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.) to support the evidence. Don't waste space on a bibliography. Don't waste space giving hyperlinks, they will not be reviewed.
   - Use as current reports as possible (preferably in the last 6 years)
   - When selecting evidence, read the Evidence Base and Quality review criteria and Mandatory Supplemental Information carefully
   - Use evidence to support need, intervention, and anticipated outcomes. How are proposed grant activities known to make a change in people, places, or needs of the State Service Plan
4. Strive to understand evidence and evaluation reports. Use the AmeriCorps Evidence Exchange and Meta-Data Glossary, Mandatory Supplemental Information (MSI), and other authoritative resources.
5. The Notice sets the standard for page limits, as determined by eGrants.
   - Draft your grant narrative in a word processing program and then copy and paste into eGrants. Note that pages from word processing likely do not reflect pages in eGrants.
   - Each narrative field has an unknown character limit. Be concise as the narrative may be cut off.
   - The Notice sets the page limits for certain elements (e.g. Application and Logic Model) as printed out from review tab "Print Application for Federal Assistance." Any pages beyond the page limits will not be reviewed.
   - Review the Application print out for paragraphs that end in a one- or two-word line; make those paragraphs more concise to eliminate a line of narrative.
6. Follow NOFO guidance on the instructed way to title, name, and submit required additional docs.
7. Think like a reviewer - engage an outside person to read and score with tools (e.g. Scoring Matrix)
8. Strive to hit submit at least one day early.
9. Communicate with OCS so we can serve you! Our success is interdependent.
10. Review the Print Application for Federal Assistance and clean up as needed.

- Search (ctrl + f for windows, command + f for MAC users) for "¿." This tends to result from a formatting error for apostrophes " ' ." This can also be completed in the narrative pop-up boxes.

Understanding your Audience

OCS Review Process

OCS convenes Grant Review Workgroups to review all types of Single State Applications.

- Workgroup typically consists of 1 to 2 OCS Staff, 3+ Commissioners, and 1 Community Volunteer
- OCS staff compile grant review binders with all applications
- Each reviewer completes individual scoring of all application materials and additional docs.
- At the Workgroup Meeting, reviewers come to a consensus scoring. All applicants are present.
- Workgroup produces a ranking and funding recommendation based on consensus scores. The recommendation is presented to Commission for approval
- After approval, the score sheet, feedback, and application are returned for clarification
- Applicant strengthens application based on feedback, and resubmits to OCS
- OCS submits grants in a package to AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps Review Process

1. Technical writing for strangers in faraway places… In FY2023, AmeriCorps moved to a fully external review work group of experts and individuals with AmeriCorps grant experience.
   - May include: university professors, focus area field experts, and former AmeriCorps or Commission Staff from around the nation
2. Using third party citations lends credibility to your application, evidence, and more.
3. Frame things in concepts, metaphors, or visualizations that make sense to people from around the nation, not just Montana. Past examples include:
   - Hydrologic cradle
   - compelling tapestry of needs
   - treated the equivalent to 600 football fields of public land
4. The application may or may not be read in whole.

Grantmaking Next Steps

1. OCS submits applications to AmeriCorps (Typically competitive in January and formula in June)
2. AmeriCorps reviews and makes funding determinations.
3. OCS receives Notice of Grant Award (NGA) and notifies organizations if funded or not.
   - NGA includes dollars, MSY/Slots, and education awards
4. Programs must have staff available to respond to Clarification/Resolution. Timing of this is not always clear at time of application. Clarification usually pertains to budget calculations.
5. AmeriCorps issues application feedback, which may or may not be useful or not.
6. Awarded applicants will receive Evaluation Plan feedback. Expect to work with OCS and AmeriCorps to revise and resubmit the evaluation plan at least once.
7. OCS issues subaward contract based on program start date.
8. Program implementation, get working on recruiting sites and members!

Congratulations on making it this far! We hope this has been a useful tool as your organization embarks on AmeriCorps Grant Writing!