

# ASK AN EXPERT SERIES

## WRITING YOUR FIRST FEDERAL GRANT

On December 10, 2020, three experts shared their insight and answered participant questions during an Ask an Expert session hosted by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center. While the federal grant application process may seem overwhelming, the experts divided the steps into manageable actions. During this hour-long session, discussion topics included finding funding solicitations, drafting a compelling application, avoiding common errors, and applying online. Following are the questions and abbreviated answers provided by the panel of experts during the [discussion](#).

### Questions and Answers

#### What is the process for applying for a federal grant?

Pre-application, application, and post-application are the three phases in the grant application process.

The **pre-application phase** is the time *before* a funding solicitation is published. During this time, an organization can—

- **Develop (or review and update) a business or program plan.** The plan describes individuals served, services provided, existing resources, and a budget for each activity you want to accomplish with the federal funding.
- **Formalize existing partnerships** with official [Memorandum of Understandings \(MOUs\)](#) or [sub agreements](#) and identify gaps in services where additional partnerships may be beneficial.
- **Determine how the organization will sustain the work** if a grant is secured. Consider if money will be spent to hire staff to carry out the mission or services or used to pay for the services.

The **application phase** is *during* the time when an organization identifies a funding opportunity, writes the application, and documents their program plan and vision of how to start, grow, and sustain

their anti-trafficking work in the grant application. Using a six-week timeframe as an example, a suggested breakdown for what happens during the application phase is listed below.

### Week One

- **Confirm the grant is the right fit.** Grant applications are time consuming to write and require an organizational commitment to execute, if funds are awarded. Make sure the grant is the right fit for your program and organization.
- **Develop a grant team.** Taking the grant from identification to submission takes a team. Subject matter experts and decisions makers must be a part of the process and clearly present the vision. The grant writer, whether internal or contracted, is only responsible for presenting the information within the solicitation rules.
- **Draft a clear vision for the funds.** Know what the organization wants to accomplish and determine if it can be afforded within the available funds.

### Weeks Two to Five

- **Write the grant proposal.**
- **Gather additional information.** Collect all required attachments and certifications.
- **Develop partnerships.** Formalize partnerships that will strengthen services, bolster the application, and ultimately enhance the program.
- **Host regular check-in meetings.** During this phase, meet regularly with the grant team to ensure tasks are being completed and deadlines are being met.

### Week Six

- **Read the final draft.** All decision-makers and subject matter experts should read the final draft to know the commitment being undertaken.
- **Upload.** There are often technical difficulties when uploading a grant submission. Start this process a couple of days before the submission deadline; do not wait until the last minute.
- **Wait for a response from the funder.** This wait time can be upwards of six months, be patient. Awards are announced on a rolling basis, usually July through September.

The **post-award phase** is *after* a federal grant is awarded. Successful applicants will receive notice their organization has been selected as an award recipient.

Once awarded, a grant recipient—

- **Receives a timeframe in which to accept the award**, including the acceptance of all award terms and conditions. For an OVC grant, this timeframe is 45 days from the date of the award. Adherence to the designated acceptance timeframe is important to receiving the funds.
- **Gets assigned a grant manager**. All new grantees are assigned a grant manager who serves as their primary OVC point of contact during the life of the grant. The grant manager provides guidance on grant management and project implementation and is responsible for the monitoring and oversight of the award.
- **Is given access to a wide range of resources** including training, technical assistance, and capacity building opportunities to support them in their work.

The process for applying for OVC's human trafficking program funding is competitive. It is common for first-time applicants not to receive a grant award. Organizations with unfunded applications are highly encouraged to submit again in the future. All unfunded applicants receive a letter notifying them of the funding decision and the peer review comments on their application. The peer review comments can be highly beneficial to inform the development of applications in future funding cycles.

#### **How do you determine if an organization/program is ready to apply for and manage a federal grant?**

Consider whether your organization has appropriate staff and a **financial system in place** to adequately manage, track, and report on the receipt and use of federal funding. The Office for Justice Programs (OJP) describes pre-award requirements for the [Standards for Financial Management Systems](#) and offers guidelines for identifying what an adequate accounting system entails.

Become familiar with **key post-award requirements**, including general award special conditions, federal/local matching fund requirements, and grant reporting. OJP's [Funding Resource Center](#) offers helpful guidance, information, and resources for potential OJP funding applicants, as well as access to post-award instructions and resources. Review this information before deciding to submit a grant application to gain a fuller understanding of the expectations of grant recipients. In addition, documents on meeting a federal match requirement are available on the Center's [website](#).

Having a **well-documented, healthy program** where you can articulate your vision, goals, and objectives is also a good indicator of your readiness to apply for federal funding.

You will need to **collect and use local data** to share program successes as you report on the work you are doing for a grant.

Make sure you have the **staff capacity to dedicate to the grant**. Be realistic about how much work it will take to manage the grant; writing reports, attending required training, and data collection all take time away from the work you are already doing.

Lastly, do you have **full support from your organization**? Make sure leadership is invested and the organization can handle the financial and programmatic requirements before committing to grant writing. Successful grant management requires a committed team.

If this sounds overwhelming, managing a grant may also feel overwhelming. Take time to address each of these pieces prior to committing to the federal grant process to help the submission and post management of funds be a success.

### **How did the Salvation Army of Delaware know they were ready to apply for a federal grant?**

For starters, we had a plan in place for receiving the funds. We had a history established of serving clients; proof we were doing the work. We did our research to show there was a need and explained how our organization was filling that need. Lastly, our leadership and administration were supportive of the application process and pursuing the federal funding opportunity.

### **What are some tips for submitting a competitive grant application?**

First, have the **right “language.”** The language in the solicitation can be a guide for how to talk about your work. Second, **review, edit, and re-review** again and again. And third, **be the best program** and communicate how your program is meeting a community need.

**Be interesting, be consistent, and follow directions.** A good grant tells a story starting with the scope of the unique problem to your program and your jurisdiction. Wow the grant-makers with a well thought out plan using everything you know from the previous work you have done. Offer a program that meets survivor needs and is realistic and reasonable. Next, ensure everything is cohesive and references each other throughout the application and the budget. Lastly, follow the

directions. Grant solicitations give detailed directions from font type and size to questions to answer in the narrative. Don't lose points trying to add extra words or sharing out of order.

**Find the right grant funding for your program.** There is a lot of federal funding available to support your anti-trafficking work. Determine which program solicitation is the best fit for your organization and present an application that is uniquely developed to that solicitation. Carefully review the application package in its entirety prior to submission to ensure that the application meets the basic minimum requirements, addresses all of the required elements of the solicitation, and includes all of the appropriate attachments.

#### **Are there any specific trainings offered for each federal grant?**

Yes. Many grant-making agencies offer pre-application webinars specific to the funding solicitation. Sign up to attend these webinars. You can hear from federal staff working on the program, learn the basics of the funding program, and review the criteria and requirements for the grant solicitation.

#### **How do you learn about the grant format?**

All eligibility requirements and submission instructions are in the funding solicitation along with contact information so you can ask questions.

#### **Where can you find training on grant writing?**

The Office of Justice Programs [Grants 101](#) offers resources on the application process. The [Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center](#) also offers free coaching on how to develop strategies to fund and sustain your anti-trafficking work. Contact the Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-682-0411.

#### **How do we know we have addressed all the grant requirements?**

This varies depending on the grant. Address the requirements listed in the solicitation, using the application checklist in the solicitation as a guide. Often within the solicitation, there is a review section to see the criteria and how each section is being weighted as part of application review process. This information can help you determine where to spend your time during the application development.

### **Where do you go to search for grant solicitations?**

There are many places to search. For [OVC human trafficking grants](#) or other [Department of Justice grants](#), go directly to their websites to see all open solicitations for that year. For a wider spectrum of grants, the best source is [Grants.gov](#). Subscribe to [News from OVC](#) to receive funding notifications.

### **When should we contract or partner with another entity or organization for a service?**

Anytime. Human trafficking requires a coordinated and integrated response and organizations working together can more efficiently deliver services and more holistically aid trafficking victims. Partnerships are a good business practice regardless of an organization's pursuit of federal funding.

During the grant writing process, use time during weeks two and five to formalize existing partnerships and identify new partnerships to address gaps in victim services and address the solicitation requirements. Partnership can be formalized in two ways: (1) creating a [subgrant or subaward agreement](#) and (2) drafting a [MOU](#) or letter of intent. In the grant narrative, share your partnership plan, subaward agreements, and MOUs to demonstrate how these relationships work for the program and address victim needs.

Formalized partnerships show the grant making agency how you are working with the community. Human trafficking is a complex issue and partnerships demonstrate how an organization is offering a comprehensive response. Demonstrating what your program can offer in-house and what partnerships can offer is really important in a grant application.

The Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center offers partnership planning documents such as—

- [Building Partnerships](#)
- [Building Capacity Through Partnership Planning](#), and
- [Developing a Local Network](#).

Contact the Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-682-0411 to request assistance on this topic.

### **Where can we find successful examples of awarded applications?**

Department of Justice—including OJP and OVC—federal grant applications are non-public documents and not available for review. A list of awards is available to the public and can be found on OVC's website. Visitors to the website may search for awards in a number of different ways and will be able to find more detail about those awards that were made. Potential applicants are also encouraged to visit the [OJP Funding Center](#) for assistance in preparing and submitting applications for OJP funding, including OVC funding.

### **Are there any new steps in the grant application process for FY2021?**

Yes. [JustGrants](#) launched in October 2020 as the new grants management and payment management system for the Department of Justice, including OVC grants and funding. Self-guided [training resources](#) provide detailed instructions on how to navigate through the new system.

### **When should you use outside support in writing a grant application?**

Using a grant writer or a consulting grant writer during the application process can be helpful. The important thing to remember is taking the grant from identification to submission takes a team. Subject matter experts and decisions makers must be a part of the process and clearly present the vision in the grant application. Finding a grant writer with experience or interest in human trafficking can make a big difference in their understanding of the language and the nuances of the subject matter, adding depth and interest to the application.

### **What is the rate to hire a grant writing consultant?**

It varies depending on where you live and the market value for the services in your area. Grant writers typically charge hourly rates ranging from \$20 per hour in smaller markets to more than \$100 an hour in larger markets for more experienced professionals. An online search of services in your area can start the process of determining the cost of hiring a grant consultant for your organization.

### **How are program results shared or reported in the grant application?**

Program results, also called performance measures, are connected to clear program goals. [Performance measures](#) share progress towards meeting program or the grant goals. All recipients of federal funding are required to collect and report performance data that demonstrate the results of

funded activities. OVC uses performance measures to capture the work grantees are doing to serve victims of human trafficking. In terms of grant writing, the solicitation provides links to the types of data that is needed to report on how the program will use the grant funding. You may need to include a staff position in the grant application who would be responsible for collecting and managing data.

**What is a reasonable percentage of time for a project director to spend on grant-funded activities?**

It depends. Consider how many staff work on the program, the types of service delivery work or training those individuals perform, and staffing necessary to implement the project as it is conceptualized by the organization in the grant application. In smaller organizations, the project director may be more involved in the work. Regardless of the organization's size, some grant programs require project director time and commitment engaging in the project. The solicitation will contain guidance on the level of commitment of project leadership.

**Is it a concern if many people within an organization are included in the grant budget?**

Not necessarily. The percentage of time people are spending on implementing activities to be done under the grant funding needs to be reasonable and realistic to their actual contributions to the project. Clearly documenting how the work will be accomplished using staff time and then documenting that staff time in the budget shows how staff costs are reasonable.

**When completing budget allocations, are there concerns or red flags when an agency includes all upper management (CEO/COO/CFO) within the budget?**

Not necessarily. The key is to ensure that the costs associated with these leadership positions are reasonable based on their estimated time on the project and linked to grant deliverables. Unless upper management is playing a key role on the implementation of the grant award, it is anticipated the percentage of their time allocated in the budget for oversight and supervision would be relatively small as compared to the staff and time allocations for project staff.

**What costs are allowable under a grant; i.e. do grants typically cover administrative costs?**

It depends. OVC's human trafficking grant programs generally allow administrative costs such as salary and fringe benefits of management and accounting staff. Other federal funding programs may have a specific limit on the percentage of grant funding that can be used for this purpose, while others offer



more general guidance. Review individual grant program solicitations to understand the unique requirements of that program. Other generally allowable expenses (beyond the provision of direct services) may include funding for training-associated travel, data collection, and/or costs associated with project collaboration. The key is to demonstrate within the application a clear link between individuals listed in the project narrative and the budget, illustrating how costs will be maximized, sufficient funding will be dedicated to the intended purpose of that program, and that all costs are necessary and reasonable.

### **What is a minimum, or average, staff-size for organizations submitting federal grants?**

There is no minimum for OVC funding; the size of an organization is not a determining factor in eligibility. OVC offers grant funding opportunities to victim service providers in organizations of all sizes. Selected grantees include both large and small organizations. Funded grantees also include organizations with limited experience serving victims of human trafficking as well as those with a demonstrated history providing a range of victim services.

### **Can the federal match requirement be waived for a brand-new non-profit?**

No. By law, all OVC human trafficking grants funded under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 require a 25 percent match. OVC has NO authority to issue a waiver. (Note: Match requirements may differ for other non-TVPA human trafficking federal grants.) More information on how to meet the OVC match requirement is available [here](#).

### **Are there any trainings about how to meet match requirements?**

The Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center hosted a [webinar on Meeting the Federal Match Requirement](#) and offers documents such as—

- [Understanding the Requirements of a Federal Grant Match](#),
- [Documenting an In-Kind Match](#), and
- [Perspectives from the Field on Meeting a Match Requirement](#).

Contact the Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-682-0411 to request assistance with meeting the federal match requirement.

**When providing support/research within the application, is five years too old to include?**

Findings from a study or research conducted five years ago may be relevant. Most importantly, use demographic and other data that best illustrates the problem of human trafficking in all its forms in the target area to be served. This includes the most-up-to date data highlighting existing efforts and areas of unmet need. Provide an explanation about the research data presented and how it contributes to addressing the need for the proposed project. Additionally, consider using regional or state data where local data does not exist.

**How many applicants apply to OVC per year? What's the total funding amount?**

The number of applicants vary depending on the number of programs available, the level of funding for each program, and the anticipated number of awards to be made under each program. In fiscal year 2020, the Office for Victims of Crime released nearly \$100 million in funding for human trafficking programs, including \$35 million in funding for housing assistance. Subscribe to [News from OVC](#) for updates on new funding opportunities and other OVC announcements.

**We are trying to build a comprehensive adult human trafficking program; what key federal funding streams should we be looking into?**

OVC offers several different grant programs each fiscal year to address human trafficking. OVC Services for Victims of Human Trafficking Program and OVC's Housing Assistance Grants for Human Trafficking may address your need. OVC's Services for Victims of Human Trafficking Program develops, expands, and strengthens victim service programs for victims of human trafficking. OVC's Housing Assistance Grants for Human Trafficking provides funding for housing and support services to victims of human trafficking, including funding for both transitional- and short-term housing. Although grant funding opportunities can change from year to year, it is anticipated that both of these programs will be released in FY 2021.

Here is a [list of OVC human trafficking grants and funding](#) from FY2020.

Subscribe to [News From OVC](#) for updates on these and other new funding opportunities.

### **Can you please explain sub grants/awards?**

A sub award is funding given from a federal grant recipient (also called a pass-through entity) to another organizations (also called a sub recipient), as a pass-through award. Pass-through awards are done for the purpose of completing or carrying out some aspect of work to be done as funded under the federal grant. For example, under the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) Victim Assistance Formula Grant Program, OVC makes a grant award to each VOCA State Administrating Agency (the pass-through entity) to support thousands of victim assistance programs nationwide. The State Administrating Agencies in-term provide sub awards to local community-based organizations and public agencies that provide services directly to victims through a process establish by that state agency.

A sub award is also the term and mechanism used for compensating a project partner for services provided under a federal grant. For example, if the YWCA partners with Legal Aid to apply for a grant and the YWCA submits and is awarded the grant, Legal Aid would be a sub recipient and receive funding through a sub award. Organizations are encouraged to review the [DOJ Financial Guide](#) for more detailed information on sub award definitions and requirements. Use a [sample sub award or sub agreement can](#) as a starting point for developing program-specific agreement.

### *Additional Information*

[OJP Applicant Resources](#)

[OJP Funding Center](#)

[Department of Justice Financial Guide](#)

[Federal Grant Match Requirements](#)

[Grant Funding Resources](#)

[JustGrants Trrughtaining Resources](#)

Contact the Human Trafficking Capacity Building Center at [contact@ovc-htcbc.org](mailto:contact@ovc-htcbc.org) or 1-844-682-0411 to request assistance with starting, growing, or sustaining your anti-trafficking work.