

Grants.gov Update Moving Ahead, Slowly

When the federal government's new Grants.gov Web site was officially unveiled last December—promising "one-stop shopping for information on applying for all federal grants"—it was promoted by the Bush Administration as a major milestone in the President's E-Gov Initiative.

"For the first time, there will be a single government-wide source for information about grants programs across the federal government," declared Tommy Thompson, Secretary of HHS, the department in charge of developing the cross-agency site.

Now, several months into its operation, how well is Grants.gov measuring up to the hype?

The biggest problem for Grants.gov users has been the spotty, unpredictable list of grant announcements posted to the site. According to HHS's December 9 press release touting the launch of Grants.gov, the site "now has information about more than 800 available grant programs involving all 26 federal grant-making agencies."

Despite that claim—and a policy directive from the White House Office of Management and Budget that agencies must post their grant announcements to Grants.gov—not all agencies are doing so on a regular basis.

As a result, grantseekers cannot yet rely on Grants.gov for a timely, truly comprehensive inventory of grant announcements. Unless they continue to check the Federal Register every day, they are bound to miss important opportunities.

Grants.gov's outreach coordinator Katie Root acknowledges that some agencies have been slow to comply with OMB's mandate. "We have contacted each agency directly to find out the reasons why this is occurring," she said. "What we have noticed is that many agencies or sub-agencies choose to post their grant opportunities on Grants.gov after the full announcement has been published in the Federal Register. What I have also noticed is that the agencies have a lag time between when the agency officially announces the grant (typically posting it on their Web site) and when they publish it in the Federal Register."

On January 7, OMB sent a memo to all federal agencies reminding them to comply with the directive to use Grants.gov and implying that some agencies have been less than fully cooperative.

"I do not believe this is due to agencies dragging their feet," Root said. "But I do believe the agencies have not adjusted their current processes for Grants.gov and we have been squeezed in after the agency has done its typical grant announcement. It's kind of like, 'Oh yeah, we almost forgot to place the announcement in Grants.gov'."

So far, there appear to be no sanctions if an agency fails to post its announcements to Grants.gov. Nor is there any clear date by which grantseekers can be assured that all federal grant announcements will in fact be posted to the site.

Instead, there's much talk about the ongoing need to "educate" grantmaking agencies and "evaluate" the progress being made. And whatever pressure is applied on agencies to comply may have to come from grantseekers themselves, rather than from Grants.gov managers or OMB.

"As we have gone through this evaluation process to discover which agencies are not complying with the OMB notice, we have discovered that the agencies are posting their opportunities, but some are just not posting them at the same time as their full announcement is published in the Federal Register," Root said. "What would be helpful for Grants.gov is to have the grant community contact those specific grant programs that they believe are not posting on Grants.gov or who have a huge time gap between when it is published in the Federal Register and when it is posted on Grants.gov and ask them to either post the opportunity on Grants.gov or post the opportunity on a more timely basis. This will help reinforce the OMB policy and also push the agencies to provide this service to its recipients."

Gaps in the "Find Grant Opportunities" feature of Grants.gov are not the site's only snag. Users also face a serious limitation when they turn to the "Apply for Grants" feature.

According to the December 9 Grants.gov press release, "Apply for Grants" is a feature that "greatly simplifies the application process by allowing applicants to download, complete and submit applications for specific grant opportunities from any federal grantmaking agency."

"We are working with agencies to get more programs on board," Root said. "Many agencies are waiting until they have developed a system-to-system hook-up to Grants.gov. We have been able to accomplish this hook-up with USDA, HHS, and Education. Next in line are EPA, Energy and NSF. This will help us to increase the number of programs we will have available on the Web site."

Grants.gov has no firm deadline by which all federal agencies' online grant application packages must be accessible at the site, but it does have a couple of targets. "This year we have set our goal at having 50 grant application packages posted on Grants.gov and we hope to receive 15,000 grant applications through the Grants.gov portal," Root said. "What I expect you will see is a slow roll-up of more packages every year until we can get everyone on board."