

**Standardizing Foundation Grant Applications:
Foundations in many regions of the country are developing common
grant application formats. Will more uniformity in grantmaker
requests lead to better proposals?**

By Patty Wolfe

For hundreds of nonprofit agencies in Massachusetts, the process of applying for grants from local foundations has recently become a lot less burdensome. Thanks to something called the "common proposal format," Massachusetts grantseekers are now able to compose a single proposal and know that it will meet the general requirements of more than one of the foundations that they have identified as key prospects.

Formally introduced in January, 1995, the common proposal format of the Associated Grantmakers of Massachusetts (AGM) has proven to be especially popular with smaller, community-based nonprofits. According to Sally Peabody, president of the group, use of the common form has leveled the playing field between grass-roots organizations and larger, more sophisticated agencies that may have more experience in grantseeking. When all applicants are required to respond to the same set of questions, Peabody said, there is "more opportunity to present the essential components of sound program planning." A clear, sensible format produces more logical - and more fundable - proposals, Peabody said.

Smaller foundations have also responded favorably to the common format. Funders with few or no staff have found that the format gives them "a better analytical take" on proposals, Peabody said.

The Massachusetts innovation is part of a growing movement among funders. The Council on Foundations has identified 24 regional associations of grantmakers (RAGs) around the country. Of this number, half have already established a standardized application format like the one adopted by AGM, and more are in the works.

For grantseekers with limited resources, a primary benefit of the common application format is that it can save time and cut paperwork. Most common grant applications include a cover form which can be easily revised on a word processor each time an application is prepared. When several foundations are

approached for the same purpose, a single general form can be adapted for all submissions.

Of course, not all funders in a given geographical area accept the common form, and common forms do vary from RAG to RAG. Therefore, most RAG representatives advise, grantseekers should continue researching individual funders to determine whether a proposed program fits the funder's priorities. They should still obtain application guidelines from those funders that provide them, and they should avoid "shotgunning" a proposal simply because a group of funders has indicated a willingness to accept a common format. In the end, it's the content of the proposal, not just the form in which it is submitted, that determines its appropriateness.

Also, when members of a particular RAG do agree to accept a common form, they retain the option to require additional information from applicants. Significant variations include the type of demographic information requested about the community, target population, board and staff.

In addition to the regional associations that have developed common formats, national affinity groups of funders have started to explore the idea. The National Network of Grantmakers (NNG), an organization of funders committed to social justice and philanthropic reform, has taken the lead in this regard. NNG has already devised a common grant application form which is now accepted by 27 foundations.

One fringe benefit of the trend seems to be increased communication between nonprofits and the foundations that support them. In developing their common formats, several RAGs have formed committees consisting of both grantmakers and grantseekers who decide what sorts of information should be included in the application. The New York Regional Association of Grantmakers (NYRAG) used this "consensus" approach to create a format which, following a one-year trial run, has been adopted by 50 of its 185 members. Recently, the Council of New Jersey Grantmakers adopted this same format for use by its member funders.

Valyrie Laedlein, of the Community Resource Exchange in New York City, praised the NYRAG form for bringing greater focus to the proposal-writing process. Laedlein, whose organization provides technical assistance to nonprofits in program planning and proposal development, noted that while it may be challenging at first for inexperienced grantseekers, the NYRAG format "forces them to get to the heart of what they are really going to do."

Once they have grown accustomed to thinking within the framework that the format provides, Laedlein said, organizations become more adept at developing sound rationales for their proposed programs.

When a common format promotes this sort of logical planning process, it can help nonprofits of all sizes and levels of sophistication produce better proposals. To see how well the common formats accomplish that end, a review of the eleven forms currently used by RAGs around the country, plus the one used by the National Network of Grantmakers, was conducted for this article.

Summary

The proposal summary lets a funder get a quick snapshot of the application: a bit about the applicant, the problem to be addressed, the work to be done, and what it will cost. It sums up the proposal in a paragraph or two. The majority of common grant applications use a fill-in-the-blank format to elicit this information. In most cases, that format does yield essential data, such as the applicant's IRS tax status, address, type of grant requested (operating, project, etc.), and the amount of funding sought. But too many of the common forms appear to be heavily weighted towards financial information in the summary, with less (or no) attention paid to the need for the funding, or the work that will be accomplished with it. Since a request for funding is inseparable from the program plan, those RAGs that include space on their cover forms for a little narrative are bound to get a better bird's-eye view of the request than those that look exclusively for financial data and legal documentation. They get a more balanced presentation of financial and programmatic information.

For example, The Rochester Grantmakers Forum has a summary form which requests detailed information about the applicant's revenue (e.g., percentages of revenue from federal, state, county, and city governments; memberships/individual contributions; United Way; fundraising; corporate and/or foundation grants; and fees). But the only questions related to the proposal itself are the type of request (capital, endowment, program, and general support), the number of people who will be served, and the geographic area to be served.

A better window into the proposal, which is what the summary is supposed to offer, would include at least a few sentences about the nature of the proposed program.

The format developed by the Baltimore Area Grantmakers requests a cover letter that includes the proposal summary tailored to the specific interests and priorities of the funding source. That's a good idea. Not only does it afford the applicant an opportunity to indicate the nature of the request; it also puts the brakes on an applicant who might be tempted to "shotgun" the proposal to all funders who accept the common format.

Another example of a strong summary format, which correlates financial and programmatic information, is the one used by the Associated Grantmakers of Massachusetts. The cover summary is a form, requesting basic data about the applicant (IRS status, type of request, etc.). But there is also space for a succinct description of the applicant's mission and a narrative summary of the proposal. Again, to prevent wholesale "shotgunning" of the application to all Massachusetts grantmakers, that form also asks the applicant to explain the strategic link between the proposal and the funder.

Introduction

An introduction is the opportunity for applicants to state their qualifications and build their credibility in the eyes of a funder. For established organizations, the introductory section of a proposal gives them a chance to share their accomplishments and successes. Younger nonprofits can discuss the impetus for their development, community support for their efforts, the vision of their founders, and the experience or expertise of board members and key staff. Although it is labeled in various ways (Agency Information, Profile of Organization, Background, etc.), all of the common application formats request this sort of information.

The Connecticut Coordinating Council for Foundations and the National Network of Grantmakers both ask the applicant organization to describe how the people it serves have been involved in the program planning process. That's a good way to ensure that clients have meaningful input into planning and implementation of services. It suggests how a well-designed proposal format can guide applicants toward effective program development and implementation.

In assessing the introductory component of the common formats, we looked for ways in which applicants were encouraged to include such key information as organizational history, accomplishments, board involvement, role in the community, principal staff, constituency, volunteers, etc.

The National Network of Grantmakers requests this information in two separate places: first in the narrative portion of the format (specific questions relate to the problems, needs, or issues that the organization generally addresses, its history and major accomplishments, and current programs and activities), then in a section on "Organizational Structure/ Administration" included among the attachments. Here applicants are asked to provide additional information as required by individual member funders. Sample questions include:

- "Briefly describe how your organization works: What are the responsibilities of the board, staff, volunteers, and if a membership organization, the members?"
- "How representative are these groups (board, staff, etc.) of the communities with which you work? Please outline general demographics of the organization."
- "Who will be involved in carrying out the plans outlined in this request? Include a brief paragraph summarizing the qualifications of key individuals involved."
- "Provide a list of your board of directors with related community and employment affiliations"

These sorts of questions may be quite relevant, but breaking them out into a separate checklist could have the effect of disrupting the logical flow of the proposal planning process.

Problem Statement/Needs Assessment

Good program planning depends on a clear understanding of the problem to be solved or need to be met. Unfortunately, decisions about program development are too often based on gut feelings rather than sound research, and communities end up with well-intentioned services that fail to address real problems or needs. In assessing the common formats, we paid particular

attention to the ways in which applicants were asked to document a problem or need. Most of the common grant application formats do succeed in guiding applicants toward an explanation of the problem or need they propose to address, and a few take the process one step further. For example, the Pacific Northwest Grantmakers Forum not only asks applicants to identify the needs to be addressed, but to acknowledge similar existing projects, if any, and explain how the proposed program will be different. It also asks applicants to identify agencies engaged in comparable activities and to state what efforts will be made to work cooperatively with those agencies.

The Rochester Grantmakers Forum takes a similar approach. It asks applicants to document the needs to be addressed, and to note any similar projects currently operating in the community. The format asks how this program would be different and why it is also needed.

The National Network of Grantmakers gets at the problem statement/ needs assessment elliptically, by asking why the applicant is proposing the project. That could have the unfortunate effect of leading an applicant to confuse problems or needs with methods of solving problems or meeting needs. ("We are proposing to supply pre-schoolers with free milk because too many of them are nutritionally deprived...") A more direct question might prevent the applicant from falling into this common trap of confusing problems with a method for solving them.

Another difficulty arises when the order of a proposal format reverses the logic of the planning process. The format developed by Associated Grantmakers of Massachusetts asks for a description of the specific request, including goals and objectives. Then, once the solution is offered, it asks the applicant to describe community or regional needs and/or challenges that the proposed program is intended to address. This may be relevant information for a funder to have, but the order in which it is requested leads one to believe that the problem is based on the solution, rather than the other way around.

The Donors Forum of Wisconsin fails to address the question of needs at all. Under the heading of Project/Program Description, applicants are asked to specify the outcomes that they plan to achieve with their proposed projects. Good program planners would undoubtedly include a statement of documented need here, but the funders do not specifically direct them to do so. This format moves too hastily into the area of program methods, allowing

the unwary applicant to make easy (and possibly spurious) assumptions about the need to be met or the problem to be solved.

Objectives

Once the problem or need is defined and documented, solid program objectives can be established. Ideally, these should be:

- time limited (determining when the impact on the problem will be accomplished);
- outcome-oriented (addressing an increase, decrease, or change in the problem or need);
- measurable (to what extent will there be change?);
- related to the problem (directly, and not by circular reasoning);
- realistic (do-able)

Unless these criteria are met, neither grantmaker nor grantee can ultimately determine whether a program has had any real value. In assessing common application formats, we looked to see whether program objectives were required at all, and if so, whether clear criteria were laid out for setting those objectives.

We found that a majority of common applications do require discussion of proposal goals and objectives under the broad narrative heading relating to "the request"; but only three forms ask applicants to supply measurable objectives. Some application formats ask applicants to talk about "strategies and outcomes," which could be loosely interpreted as objectives. Among these, the form used by Donors Forum of Wisconsin is especially problematic. It provides no foundation for establishing measurable change, since its form does not specifically ask for information on the needs to be addressed. (Later, the Wisconsin form also includes a specific heading for narrative discussion of evaluation plans. Without a set of objectives that relate to impacting the need or problem, however, applicants will probably have trouble finding a basis for their outcome evaluations.)

More RAGs should consider requesting measurable, time-limited, outcome-oriented objectives to promote both accountability and replicability of programs. After all, if you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there?

Methods

The planning process should include a thorough exploration of the methods that will be used to achieve the program's objectives. Planners must anticipate how the program or service will work. The methods proposed should clearly relate to the problem being addressed. In assessing the methods sections of common formats, we asked whether they lead applicants to "think through" their proposed activities, their use of personnel, and their relationships with other organizations. We also paid particular attention to the ways in which they direct the applicant to consider such matters as target population, timelines, and community involvement. The Donors Forum of Wisconsin is quite precise in asking applicants to explain how the proposed program will reach its target population and how it will engage the people it serves. This is especially useful in getting program planners to think through actual methods of service delivery. It also helps avoid a common pitfall among human services projects: producing programs that are inaccessible to intended clients.

Associated Grantmakers of Massachusetts requests information on how the program will draw on the "opportunities, strengths and assets" of the community or region. That may sound like a reasonable thing to ask, but it probably invites too many woolly responses. If the intent is for funders to ascertain how applicants will utilize existing resources in implementing their programs, applicants should not be tempted to respond with vague generalities.

Overall, most common application formats do a good job of dealing with the subject of methods. But keep in mind that if inadequate attention has previously been given to identifying the problem and its causes, even the best articulated methodology will be faulty.

Evaluation

In recent years, funders have made evaluation an increasingly critical component of the programs they support. Quality improvement and accountability are hot topics right now, and it shouldn't be surprising to find that most common application formats require a major narrative segment on evaluation. Generally, these ask applicants to describe how they would measure the success of their programs, who they intend to have conduct the

evaluation, and how results will be used or disseminated. The latter is an especially important consideration, since evaluation results can be used not only to improve the program itself, but to promote community awareness, influence public policy, and guide replication efforts.

Notably, the Associated Grantmakers of Massachusetts also asks applicants to discuss how the organization's constituency will be involved in the evaluation. This is an excellent way to encourage qualitative feedback.

Also notable is the fact that most common application formats which include budget forms have specific line items for evaluation expense. That is a sure sign that these funders take evaluation seriously, and are even willing to pay for it! (On those budget forms that don't have a separate line for evaluation expense, applicants would be well-advised to include this cost under personnel, contractual or other expense, as appropriate.)

Future and Other Funding

Effective planning takes into account not only what will be done and why, but how the program will be fully supported during the grant period and sustained beyond it. Grants are finite, and good programs should not be left to wither on the vine. Most funders want some assurance that they are making an investment in something that will last, or at least survive beyond the period of the grant. And by identifying other funding sources to help implement the program, an applicant organization can demonstrate that it is already committed to keep the program going. We looked for two factors in assessing common formats in the area of future and other funding: a request for description of other available support for the period of the grant, and a request for description of future funding strategies.

Most common application formats passed the test. Those that don't request information about future funding strategies - New York/New Jersey and the NNG - should consider doing so.

Budget

Some common applications provide forms for use by applicants, while others allow applicants to prepare their own formats. Either way, the important aspect of the budget for grantseekers is to be able to match requested

financial resources with the program plan. Two common applications - those of the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers and the Donors Forum of Wisconsin - provide a budget form which only summarizes projected expenses. That may be less than helpful to grantseekers, who must systematically evaluate the real costs of a proposed program. A good format compels them to do just that.

It is interesting that the Wisconsin form asks for significantly more detail about projected revenue than projected expense; in fact, a second page is provided for applicants to list all sources of contracts, grants, in-kind support, and other revenue along with amounts both pending and certain. While this sort of detailed revenue information can be important to the funder, detailed expense projections are no less important in helping grantseekers ensure consistency between the program plan and the budget - and, down the road, helping them manage their expenses.

Other Information

Most formats provide a list of required attachments, such as names and affiliations of board members, organizational charts, brief resumes of key staff, annual reports, and documentation of support/collaboration with related organizations. In most cases, applicants are also permitted to include other material relevant to their proposals.

A Closer Look

To compile the chart on pages 10-11, each component of the common application forms was assessed in terms of its value in promoting effective program planning. A numerical rating was applied for each component: Summary, Introduction, Problem Statement/Needs Assessment, Objectives, Methods, Evaluation, Future and Other Funding, and Budget. A total of 40 points is possible using this (admittedly unscientific) process. The top scoring form was that of the Delaware Valley Grantmakers (DVG), with 37 points. DVG, the first RAG to adopt a common form, introduced the concept in 1988. Its format has been perfected over time, and it has served as a model for the formats used by other RAGs around the country. Many of those have only been around for a year or two, and they are still in the pilot phase.

In general, common grant application forms appear to do best in eliciting introductory information about applicants. The lowest scoring component, overall, is the Objectives section. Too few ask applicants to identify measurable, outcome-oriented, realistic objectives that relate to the problem they claim to address.

A Word of Caution

The existence of a common grant application should not be viewed as an invitation to "broadcast" proposals to all the funders in a region that accept the format. The instructions that accompany these formats almost always remind applicants that:

- The common application form is not a substitute for researching the priorities and requirements of each separate funder. Simply because funders may be using a common application form does not mean that all types of requests are appropriate.
- Funders may require additional information. All applicants should thoroughly research the application requirements of each separate funder.
- Timetables for applications and preferred type of initial contact will vary among funders.

In addition, several of the common applications request that the applicant make a strategic link between the proposed program and the funder's interests in a cover letter.

What's Next?

With so many RAGs moving to common application forms, when will they all join together and create one common form that can be used nationally? Wendy Grishman, Director of Affinity Group and Regional Association Services at the Council on Foundations, said that the Council is currently making no effort to promote a national format. But as more and more RAGs communicate with one another about what works and what doesn't, perhaps they will take it upon themselves to come up with a more universally acceptable form, using the best from all that have been developed thus far.