

Consultant corner: government grant requests

If you've looked through a request for proposals (RFP) or request for qualifications (RFQ) from a government funding source, you might have felt overwhelmed. These documents — sometimes hundreds of pages in length — can include complex or even confusing information. They may call for extensive written responses that detail not only your organization's qualifications, but also your specific work plan, budget, staffing model and more. Then there are typically multiple forms and other documents that you'll need to prepare and submit, too.

But while preparing a public grant request is usually a major undertaking, the rewards can be high: Many government funding sources provide grants in the seven-figure range, and support may span multiple years. (According to a recent [report](#) from the National Council of Nonprofits, nearly a third of all nonprofit revenue comes from government sources.)

At Thurlow/Associates, we have almost 30 years of experience helping our clients receive significant support from city, county, state and federal sources. Along the way, we've learned a thing or two about how to put together a competitive proposal. Based on our successful experience, we're pleased to offer a few tips, as follows:

1. *Review the request carefully.* This sounds self-evident, but when reading such long, dense documents, it's easy to overlook something. Don't skim the small print! Start by reviewing the summary of the grant's purpose, eligibility requirements, amount/s available, and timeframe for the project to be implemented. Note any mandatory meetings, bidder's conferences or other first steps in the submission process, as well as the submission deadline. If you still want to proceed once you're familiar with all of the above, read the rest of the RFP carefully and thoroughly. Make notes. Mark sections you have questions about — and contact the funding source for answers if permitted. (Carefully follow instructions regarding submitting questions.)
2. *Be honest with yourself about your capacity and qualifications.* You don't want to spend 100+ hours working on a proposal, only to be disqualified because applicants are required to have five years' experience in providing similar services, and you only have four. Or because you're required to submit five years of audited financials and you only have two. (Don't assume it won't matter!) Evaluate whether you are truly eligible. In addition, of course, carefully analyze whether you can fulfill all the requirements of the grant, with the amount of funding available. Not every opportunity will be right for every organization — and some grants can actually increase your funding gap, by requiring you to cover a percentage of the work from other sources.
3. *Outline strategically.* Create an initial outline that includes all the questions you need to answer (copied directly from the RFP), in the order they're asked. If there's a scoring rubric, add information from that rubric in the relevant places. This will help you remember what's most important to score maximum points — and it will provide a strong framework for your proposal narrative, helping to ensure you answer every part of every question in full and don't omit any required details. We also recommend using terminology drawn from the RFP itself, in your answers. This can help reviewers to readily identify that your responses meet the requirements and goals of the grant.

- 
4. *Plan in advance and don't use the back burner.* Creating a public grant request is undoubtedly a significant undertaking, so start planning as early as possible. Working with the appropriate members of your team, create a timeline for gathering the information you need and completing each section. If you aren't able to stick to the timeline, reengage the team promptly to evaluate whether to continue.
 5. *Don't fall victim to technicalities.* Are you required to use a specific font or use a specific amount of space between lines? Should the margins be a specific width and depth? Must the pages be numbered? It may sound trivial, but qualified applicants can be (and have been) rejected for something as simple as using the wrong font size. Don't let that be you.

In addition to providing strategic counsel to our clients, Thurlow/Associates helps with high-quality implementation — including the pursuit of government funding. To learn how our strategic approach to public funding can help you, contact us for a no-cost consultation. You can reach us at (310) 675-6497 or at hello@thurlowassociates.com.