Navigating the Harm Reduction Funding Landscape

A Guide for State, Federal, and Private Funding

PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE: Syringe Services Programs (SSPs) are a proven and cost-effective HIV and viral hepatitis prevention mechanism, providing people who use drugs with sterile injection equipment, naloxone and overdose education, and other services that work to improve their quality of health and life. There are hundreds of harm reduction programs across the country, but many of them are faced with limited resources and infrastructures. This guidance document was designed to assist a variety of harm reduction programs — ranging from small-scale grassroots organizations to larger harm reduction programs — with navigating the funding landscape and fulfilling the requirements laid out in grant proposals and their application process. To be clear, not all grant applications require the same information or data. However, this resource is intended to provide current or newly implemented programs with an overview of useful tools that can assist programs in leveraging funding, diversifying streams of funding, and drafting a grant proposal.

1. Decide whether this is the right proposal for you:

It's important to determine whether or not a proposal fits your organization's mission, values, and the eligibility requirements of the request for proposal (RFP) and/or the funder. To ensure that the proposal in question is right for your organization, it's important to ask the following questions:

a. Does the funding opportunity match your organization's mission and values?

b. Does the funding opportunity allow us to reach our organization's goals?

c. Are there any organizational needs that this funding opportunity addresses?

d. Does the organization have the capacity to use the funds in the way that aligns with the RFP/funder requirements?

e. What information is needed to write the proposal, and do you have access to that information?

f. Will this funding opportunity expand on a current program or create a new one?

g. How much detail is required to describe the program that the funding opportunity would support?

h. Will staff need to be hired or the services/programs that this funding opportunity would support?

i. Does the organization have the capacity to handle the funding?

Note: Thoroughly reading an RFP goes a long way to ensuring a cohesive and responsive proposal is developed. It is important that an organization decide first if the RFP aligns with their goals, values, and needs. It is extremely clear to funders when a proposal is submitted just for the sake of getting money. Additionally, it is totally acceptable to do this part and determine that it isn't a good fit for the organization, or it isn't a good fit yet.

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j. Does the organization have the bandwidth to fulfill the funders' reporting requirements?

k. What will happen when the funding ends?

l. If you determine that this funding opportunity is not a good fit for your organization that is OK! Trying to stretch the resources of your organization in an attempt to secure funding could lead to burnout amongst staff and could also damage your organization's relationship with funders.

2. Outline the Purpose of the Proposal:

The purpose of the proposal outline is to describe all the information that will be helpful in developing a specific response to a funder's application requirements. Bear in mind, there may be more than you need for any one application, but the process of gathering and responding to this outline will prepare your organization to respond to almost any application. The proposal will allow you to state your case to funders as to why they should support the services/scope of work you are seeking to do. In this section it is important for you to express the following:

a. Need for services in the state and/or local area and the underlying factors driving the need for these services/solutions (depending on the scope/focus of your work).

b. What was the landscape of service provision/practices before your organization was implemented as a harm reduction program.

c. How you plan on addressing the needs impacting your community.

d. Express the value of the proposed solutions and the services that your organization is seeking to offer.

e. Your organization's unique ability to provide services and address the needs of the community.

3. Gather Background Data:

While you may be well-versed in the issues impacting your community, it's important to use a range of credible sources to better illustrate the stakes of the issues identified and how they impact your community/target population. Listed below are a few resources that will you find data on a variety of things that impact people who use drugs including: overdose deaths, service availability, SSP/Good Samaritan laws, HIV/HCV rates, and more:

a. HepVu: HepVu is a resource to assist in finding national/state data on HCV, opioid/drug use and overdose, and systemic issues such as poverty and income inequality.

b. AIDSVu: AIDSVu can provide you with national/regional/state data on HIV/AIDS transmission, its impact on people who use drugs (PWUD), and systemic issues such poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and income inequality.

c. Opioid and Health Indicators Database: amfAR can provide you with state-level information on rates/number of overdose deaths, state SSP/Good Samaritan laws, the number of people impacted by HIV/HCV, systemic issues, and the federal funding that is being provided to the state that could be used to support drug user health.

d. State/Local Health Department: State and local health departments are resources for gathering data that you can use to write a grant or educate community stakeholders. You can access your state's health department by using this link.

e. CDC: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can help provide you with data on overdose deaths, prescribing rates, efficacy of SSPs/MAT, and more.

f. NASEN: The North American Syringe Exchange Network can also be used to locate and describe SSPs in your region.

4. Draft and Submit a Letter of Intent (LOI):

The purpose of the letter of intent (LOI) is to inform the funder, typically private funders, of the purpose of the project that you are proposing. If the funder accepts your LOI you will then be contacted to submit your proposal. Also, the LOI should address why your organization is best suited to address the outcomes that are laid out in the RFP. Things to think about/include in your LOI:

a. Details of the project that you are proposing

b. Rationale for the project (i.e., why does your organization feel that this work is needed)

c. Letter should be 1-2 pages or the length stated by the funder

d. WORD COUNT MATTERS: Going over your word count could eliminate you from a pool of applicants. Be sure to adhere to the word count in every section of your application.

e. Consider the funder's perspective: Keep in mind that funders have the task of reviewing numerous proposals. Because of the time and energy that is expended during the review process, it is important that your proposal is clear, cohesive, and direct. No more and no less than what the RFP has required.

Example of LOI

5. Cover Letter:

The cover letter allows your organization to express how your work matches up with the mission and mandate of the funders. If your organization is asked to submit a cover letter it should include the following:

a. Should be brief (usually 1 page)

b. Describe the project you are proposing

c. How that project aligns with the funders mission

d. Include the contact information (name, email/office number)

e. Amount you are requesting

Example of Cover Letter

6. Title/Cover Page & Abstract:

The title page is usually a document/form provided by the funder. The title page usually includes information such as the name of the applicant, contact information, and a brief summary of the project also known as the abstract. A surprising number of applicants skip over basic information. It is critical to include all contact information. Funders will reach out by email/phone with notices of funding or follow-up questions. You do not want to make it difficult for them to find you. Things to think about/include in your organization's title/cover page and abstract:

a. Title/cover page (Funder may or may not require all the following details)

   i. Agency name
   ii. Date
   iii. Project ID (if provided/relevant to the grant application)
   iv. Project name
   v. Fiscal agency
   vi. Address
   vii. Phone number/email – It's important to include ALL contact information. You never want to make the mistake of making it more difficult for a funder to find you when responding to your submitted proposal.
   viii. Organization to whom you are submitting the application
   ix. Anticipated term/length of the project
   x. Amount you are requesting

b. Abstract

   i. Since the abstract summarizes the details of your project it is usually written after the entire proposal has been drafted.
   ii. Unless funder specifies the length, abstracts are usually no longer than a page
   iii. Describe your target population
   iv. Summarize data that highlights the magnitude or extent of the problem facing your community
   v. Provide a synopsis of the project objectives including scope of work
   vi. Briefly discuss the evaluation plan, the expected outcomes, and results of the project
   vii. Provide the amount requested

   Example of Title/cover page and abstract

Note: A good way to examine outcomes/results is to identify what a successful project will look like. You may ask yourself the following. Is success measured by:

a. *The number of syringes distributed?*

b. *The number of HIV/HCV test given?*

c. *The number of participants that are connected to regular health services?*

Once you have identified what success means, think about what you will measure along the way to demonstrate your success (evaluation metrics).

7. Statement of Need:

The need statement is seen by some as the heart of your proposal. This portion of the application should describe the community that you are looking to serve and the issues facing that community. Be sure to adhere to the word count that the funder has set.

Example of statement of need

8. Project Description:

This section describes the project that you are proposing to funders. It should also include the objectives and activities, not just the needs you seek to address and goals. Funders will usually provide you with the information that they are looking for in this section. Also, the funders may provide a form for this section sometimes known as "Scope of Work."

Note: Things to be included will vary per RFP/application guidelines and generally things to be included here are:

a. *What issues will your project seek to address?*

b. *What are the desired outcomes/goals of the project?*

    i. *What objectives and activities will your funding support to achieve the goals of this project?*

c. *What exactly will you be doing with the funding that will support completion of the stated goals?*

d. *How will your project address the needs of your target population?*

Example of project description

9. Evaluation Plan:

This section of the proposal is used to describe how a program will measure the success of the project. If the funder has not given you specific things to include in the evaluation plan, the following list is general information that should be included:

a. State the evaluation goals

b. Describe how you plan on evaluating your project/ program

c. Identify what you will measure

d. Describe the data collection plan

    i. The type of data that is being collected
    ii. Source of the data
    iii. Data collection procedures
    iv. Timetable of evaluation plan
    v. Protection of participants and data and cultural relevancy (i.e., how will you protect the data that you are providing to participants)
    vi. Description of staffing and management plans for the evaluation (i.e., describe the role of staff/ management in the evaluation process)
    vii. Description of reporting procedures
    viii. Proposed budget

More on how to write an evaluation plan

10. Project Timeline:

Usually funders will request to see a timeline that lays out the estimated times that certain phases of the project will be completed. Timelines can be created on Microsoft Word or Excel. Be sure to check with your grant officer to be sure that you are presenting your timeline in a format that is approved by the funders. Listed below are examples of different styles of timelines that can be used:

Gantt Chart template

Other timeline examples/templates

11. Scope of Work (SOW):

Many funders/agencies may require your organization to submit what is known as a Scope of Work document. This document allows funders to gain an idea of the goals, activities, timeline, and the personnel that will be responsible for completing work that is a part of a contract or sub-contract. Additionally, federal and state funding applications may require a work plan which in some ways is different than the scope of work. The example listed below is used by a Health Resource and Services Administration for Community Health Centers. While this resource likely includes more detail than what is usually required it can provide you with an idea/template for drafting a more detailed work plan.

Template for SOW

Template for Workplan

12. Budget Request & Budget Justification:

The purpose of this section is to include a detailed estimate of the cost of the project and the justification for funding the various components of the project. This can be the most challenging part for many organizations. Your project budget should match exactly your project description. Funders may provide a document for budget request/justification or they may state a specific way in which they want applicants to submit this information (i.e., in an Excel spreadsheet, Word doc, etc.). Be sure to make sure that the expenses that you have laid out in the budget justification section can be funded by the RFP. Including expenses that cannot be covered could lead funders to believe that you haven't take the time to thoroughly read the RFP.

a. Things to consider when drafting a project budget
   i. What are the activities?
   ii. How will they be funded? Is it staff time? Supplies? Transportation? Meeting materials?
      - Your budget should tell the same story as your narrative description
      - Will the award amount cover entire costs of proposed project?
      - If not, where will the necessary funds come from?
      - Are these secured? If not, how will the project be modified if you don't receive all necessary funds?
b. Budget Templates

   Examples/templates of line-item budget

13. Diversity in Funding:

Federal restrictions on funding syringe services programs coupled with the level of support that your organization may or may not receive from local and/or state stakeholders can make it difficult to secure funding. A creative way to create sustainable funding for your program is to utilize an array of funding sources that can help benefit your organization. Diversity in funding can also assure the funders that your organization has strong sustainability. Since the priorities of funders can shift, it's important to not rely on one source of funding. An example of a harm reduction organization that has utilized diversity in funding for sustainability is listed below:

a. The Homeless Youth Alliance (HYA) – serving as the only grassroots harm reduction coalition designed by and for underserved youth experiencing homelessness in San Francisco – HYA used diverse and innovative funding streams including foundations, donations, local government, and grants for violence prevention, food insecurity and creative arts to sustain their program.

14. Applicant Capability:

This section of the proposal should accomplish two important goals. First, a capability statement should describe your organization's characteristics and track record. Second, this statement should help your funder understand why the characteristics that are unique to your organization make it particularly qualified to receive funding for a specific project/services. This section will usually include information on the following:

a. History of organization
b. Description of successful projects/services of the organization
c. Organizational resources
d. Community recognition and support
e. Interagency collaboration and linkages
f. Agency strengths
g. Agency staffing
h. Board of Directors
i. Awards that the agency has received
j. Organization chart

Note: This section is where you'll want to provide specifics about your staffing plan – the number of staff you'll bring to the project, full, part-time, voluntary staff, where you expect they will be located. If they are individuals who are already in mind, on your team, describe in brief bios their experience, working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. If you are planning to bring staff on board, provide very brief job descriptions for candidate qualifications you will seek, and your expectation to bring them on board quickly.

15. Letters of Support:

It is important to determine early in the process if you are required to submit letters of support. Often, funders will request letters of support to gain an idea of whether or not other organizations support the work/program that your organization is seeking to offer. To ensure that you are not scrambling for letters of support at the last minute, it is important that you reach out to organizations for letters of support EARLY. Providing supporters with an adequate amount of time can help your organization secure strong letters of support. These letters are to be included in the proposal package that will be submitted to funders. Unless told otherwise by funders, letters of support may come from any of the following:

a. Program recipients
b. Community leaders
c. Other community organizations that work with similar populations
d. Health departments (state and local)
e. Agencies
f. Schools
g. Religious organizations

16. Memorandum of Understanding (MOU):

If your proposal involves agreements between two or more agencies, funders may ask you to submit a memorandum of understanding from each organization involved in the agreement. The purpose of this document is to outline for the funders what each organization will be doing and how they will contribute to the work of the project.

Example of memorandum of understanding

17. Appendix Materials:

Listed below are a few examples of documents that may be requested by funders to be submitted with your application:

a. Financial statement

b. Insurance documentation

c. Agency IRS determination letter

d. Job descriptions

e. To find out more on documents that need to be included in your proposal contact your grant officer

Federal or State Grants versus Private or Foundation Grants

The grant application process for both federal and private funding can be similar in a lot of ways. Both require funding applicants to be persuasive about the identified need and the applicant organization's qualifications for addressing the need. This isn't always necessarily true and might be less often the case with state and federal funding. Traditionally, with private grants, applicants can develop relationships with foundation staff and corporate staff during the grant cycle. Additionally, private grants may have fewer regulations than state or federal grants which can allow for programs to have flexibility around cost allowability and programmatic reporting of results. Another key benefit to private or foundation grants is, depending on its size, there may be fewer applicants in the proposal pool which can result in fewer proposals to fund. With this in mind, it is critical that your organization ensure that you follow the guidelines that the foundation implements to ensure that you have an exemplary application.

State and federal funding also has several advantages and disadvantages that you should consider before creating a proposal. For the federal applications you must be precise in responding to the application requirements, every component, and follow the formatting requirements to the letter. The application process is to score the maximum number of points in the review panel process. Typically, they will have a scoring sheet and will look closely at the point described in their review criteria. Keep in mind that you do not know who is reading your application and be mindful of what makes a successful application. The chances of success in a competitive application process are better when you submit a thorough, well-defined plan that is clearly articulated in the project's scale and scope of work.

Summary

Syringe services programs (SSPs) and community-based harm reduction programs remain underfunded in most jurisdictions across the nation, and arguably there is no jurisdiction in which PWID would not benefit from additional investment in SSPs. The funding landscape for harm reduction programs is complex. Many harm reduction programs rely solely on private donations, fundraising or crowdsourcing efforts, or even volunteer-based operations to ensure their program is sustainable. This guidance document serves as a tool that hopefully will assist a variety of programs in navigating the complex nature of harm reduction funding as well as understanding the grant proposal and application process. We recognize that several resources on funding and sustainability for harm reduction programs currently exist and hope that this guide will build on that foundation to support SSPs and community-based harm reduction programs.

Please contact DrugUserHealthTA@NASTAD.org with any questions about this document or suggestions.