

Saving Time in the Pursuit of Money

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In business, it is often said that “time is money”; this statement is also true in the grants business. As grant professionals, the nature of our deadline-driven job coupled with the need to secure financial resources forces us to look seriously at both time and money. In the fourteen years that I have worked to coordinate grant activities in Somerset County, advances in technology, due largely to the widespread use of the internet, have enabled me to make better use of my time while searching for grant money.

Gone are the days of laborious searches through the indexes of the Foundation Directory. Now with my online subscription to the Foundation Directory Online my research time has been drastically reduced. Also gone the way of the dinosaur is the Federal Register, although I must confess I do miss it. Years ago I started reviewing the print versions in the library. At that time, when the World Wide Web was in its infancy, it was offered for a fee online. Now there aren't a lot of grant announcements to be found in it since the federal government's transition to www.grants.gov.

I'm not the biggest fan of grants.gov, but having successfully navigated the registration process with minimal teeth grinding, and having successfully submitted two applications, I do like having (*almost*) one place to look for federal funding announcements. The format is consistent and you can even sign up to receive grant announcements daily by email. (It will be even better when they start listing award information – a grant seeker's dream!)

Now all this leads me to the Garden State. Back in the day, we had to rely on printed funding announcements that either came through the mail and/or could be found in the New Jersey Register, and there are a number of problems that can arise with this type of information distribution.

The main issue is timeliness. I've received letters that were dated more than a week earlier than when I received them. Sometimes letters can sit for days in an elected official's mailbox. Sometimes the letter is routed to the wrong person. At times there may be about four weeks to pull together an application from its announcement date. When a letter takes a week to get to the right person, and then local governing body approval is required, it's not uncommon to be left with just a handful of days to pull an application together. Funding announcements printed in the New Jersey Register also require a lot of lead time. Some public notices for grants are printed in the Register just days before attendance at a mandatory bidders' conference is scheduled.

The best solution to this is posting grant information on the State's website. We not only save in printing and postage (as well as a few trees), but we also save time. Ideally we will find out about grant opportunities when they are announced, giving us more time to develop partnerships and prepare well thought-out proposals.

The State of New Jersey has a fairly good website, even allowing online automobile registration. However, my experience with state grant information has shown a lack of consistency among state departments. Some state departments provide up-to-date grant information on their web pages in an easy to use format. For example, with a quick online hit to www.nj.gov/dca you can click on “Grants” in the header. Instantly, users will see all of the open grant opportunities available in the Department of Community Affairs’s SAGE system (System for Administering Grants Electronically). SAGE not only lists the available grant opportunities, but also allows for electronic submission of applications and grant reporting. The Department of Education also has a lot of up-to-date grant information available online at www.nj.gov/education/grants, in addition to links to application packages. A few departments allow people to subscribe to press releases by email: another way of finding out about grant opportunities.

On the other hand, there are many more state departments and agencies that offer grants but the information is not easily found or as detailed as it is on the two previously mentioned department websites. For example, the Department of Law and Public Safety lists federal and state grants at www.state.nj.us/lps/grants_state.htm#sas, yet no information is available as to application deadlines (if any), available funds or application materials. Similarly, the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) makes a directory available in print and online at www.state.nj.us/health/grants/index.html, but again, limited information is provided as to current opportunities, deadlines, application forms and etcetera. Nearly half of the grants listed in the DHSS grants directory say “unknown” or “varies by grant” for application deadline.

A few states are out in the forefront of online grant information. The State of Texas has recently launched an electronic grant search portal (see it for yourself at www.texasonline.state.tx.us/tolapp/egrants/search.htm). It’s new, so perhaps there are still some things to be tweaked, but it is light years ahead of where New Jersey currently is. Similar to the federal government’s grants.gov system, Texas’ eGrants system is a portal for searching. Users enter the portal but link to the actual grant information on the webpage for the particular state department which administers the grant. Users are presented with information in a consistent and easy to review format – saving time while searching for money.

The State of Michigan has embarked on its own single-access point to grants information. EGrAMS (the Electronic Grants Administration & Management System) is similar in concept to grants.gov and Texas’s eGrants system, but Michigan’s system allows users to sign up for email notifications and also includes non-state funding opportunities. Try it for yourself at <http://egrans-mi.com/portal/User/home.aspx>. Again, the concept is saving time and while searching for money.

The National Grants Partnership was established in 2004 to bring together government and non-government individuals with an interest in improving the grants process in the United States – primarily at the federal level. You can read their white paper: *Accelerating Grants Streamlining* at www.thengp.org/publications.htm. With the

assistance of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, local governments and grant professionals in New Jersey can similarly partner and speak with one voice to improve the availability and access to grant information in our state. Let's encourage our state government to provide better information to the communities their grants are designed to assist.

Denise Katula is the Grants Coordinator for Somerset County. She is responsible for coordinating the grants process for all county divisions, in addition to providing technical assistance to the twenty-one municipalities in Somerset County. Denise is a member of AAGP (American Association of Grant Professionals) and serves as Treasurer of its New Jersey Chapter.