

10 Tips for Creative Grants Development for Municipalities

Nancy F. Mckenzie, PhD, President of Transtext Consulting

Unfortunately, there are dwindling funds from national and state agencies, and community based and municipal programs must rely upon creative uses of categorical funding streams, foundation grants and corporate support for their programs and services. This makes grant writing a very competitive activity and one for which you need all of the tools that you can muster. Below, I have crafted the following Ten Tips for researching and crafting convincing and effective proposals.

10 Tips

1. If a grant RFP or RFA looks promising but is new to you, and you have ANY questions, utilize the contact person notification and call or write him/her an email. Contacts are usually helpful and this saves a great deal of trouble and time if the eligibility, program or budget information is ambiguous. Contacts are a great shortcut for deciding the grant is doable, or for determining that you are on the right track. Definitely call: you will find that you can gain a lot more information than you originally thought to ask about.
2. If a RFP or RFA (especially federal ones) include a scoring section that explains priorities for points, cut and paste this section and use it as a template. The RFP questions can then work as guides to the narrative you will write for funding. This is very important because it tells you exactly how much weight the funder puts on each section, and what specific things the reviewers will be looking for. If you highlight each question **in a color** and leave it this way while you finalize your funding draft among its many writers and/or editors, your writing partners will also have a guide as to the substantial questions that they must answer.
3. Never be shy about discussing how important your agency is in terms of awards, recognition, credentials and experience of staff. Many of my clients underplay the efforts and achievements of their agency. If you don't toot your own horn to the funding source, who will?
4. If your agency is connected to anyone who has applied for the RFP that you are considering, get a copy of the RFP and use it as a pseudo-template. This lets you see how discussion points are approached and sentences are begun for specific issues. This is not plagiarism but a kind of over-writing that can often be very helpful. Ask the person who wrote the grant for permission to use it as a guide. Or, ask that person to be a reader on your granting draft.
5. Foundation grants are your best bet for programs that serve the under-resourced. The Foundation Center is a very valuable resource and can be used in a variety of ways. If I am working on a specific project and need to know the most relevant ten foundations for funding, I register for a month's usage at a high level that allows me the tax records of the agency so that I can see who they actually fund and in what amounts,

as well as according to what priorities. Spend a few days marking out the most amenable funding sources and then cancel your subscription. The Foundation Center is very cooperative with this strategy. It only takes an email to cancel and they write back quickly to let you know that it is done. Another grant research company is Grant Station.

6. Use Google, Use Google and Use Google. I find that most of my searches end up using Google for my hard research issues. If you are trying to buttress your arguments with research, especially medical and educational articles, these are often proprietary and charge a high price for a copy of the article. If you put the full title of the article you need into Google there is usually someone who has sent it to, or over, the web and you can find it for free. In fact, I would say 75% of my journal searches are completed without pay through Google.

7. If you are writing grants for specific populations it is not always possible to find general funding sources for groups for housing, medical care, counseling, workforce development, childcare, disease prevention or health promotion. However, if you are creative and think about the multiple issues that confront most low-income clients, you can find a funding source that targets a condition and you can usually stretch it out to serve your population. This is especially true for new funding sources. The idea here is to look at what state, local and federal governments are worried about and putting political money to fund, and carving out an argument for the population you want to serve. For example, how to fund programs that serve the needs of low-income families. Since the nation now recognizes that we have overcrowded our prisons and jails, and this is leading to public health and recidivist crime issues, there is money for prisoner release transitions in housing, education, job development, families, parenting, mental health and crime prevention. Each federal and state division has some money for supporting ex-offenders and their families and this is a great opportunity to support low-income communities as they navigate unemployment and poverty in our culture.

8. If a funding source asks for an organizational chart, provide it. In addition, if the program that you are trying to fund is situated deep within a large organization, provide an accountability chart – one that outlines who will supervise and be accountable for how the funder's money is spent, how activities are carried out and how they are reported. I title this chart: "Program Leadership Chart".

9. Whether your agency plans to apply for federal or state funds in the near future, it is a very good idea to register for electronic granting activities. Registration takes a few weeks and involves administrative signers. This is not something that one wants to be concerned about once a funding source looks promising. Not already being registered stops most grant seekers in their tracks. Go ahead and get registered for the major funding agencies at the federal and state level. They will all be requiring electronic submissions in the near future, and you will no doubt have to do it anyway. If you wait, doing it while you are applying for a grant will be very inconvenient.

10. Besides your usual municipal data sources, acquaint yourself with the major social and health issue think tanks, and add their publications or research departments to your Internet Favorites. The following is a partial list of what I use. These are highly visible and credible sources for making a granting argument.

- Annie E. Casey Foundation (education) <http://www.aecf.org>
- Children's Defense Fund (children's poverty) <http://www.childrensdefense.org>
- CDC <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats> and http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/popup_nj.htm for New Jersey
- Institute of Medicine (especially the health disparity reports), <http://www.iom.edu>
- Joint Center for Housing Studies <http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/resources>
- Kaiser Family Foundation (Medicaid, Medicare, uninsured, HIV/AIDS, TB, women's issues, public health) <http://www.kff.org>
- National Governor's Association, <http://www.nga.org> (publications)
- Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) <http://www.samhsa.gov>
- Urban Institute (housing, crime, poverty, workforce) <http://www.urban.org>
- U.S. Department of Justice <http://www.usdoj.gov>
- Vera Institute (prison issues) <http://www.vera.org>

Nancy McKenzie is President of her own grants consulting agency: Transtext Consulting (www.transtextconsulting.com). She also teaches community health courses and philosophy courses in colleges within the City University of New York system. Nancy is a member of AAGP (American Association of Grant Professionals) and the NY/NJ Grant Writers network. She lives in Brooklyn. You may contact her at 468 Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11238, by phone (718) 360-0687 or by fax (718) 623-3582.