Leveraging Federal Funding

Who can access funding?

Myth: Federal funding is only accessible to wealthy communities and governments.

Fact: Federal funding is available to nearly all Americans if you know where to find it.

Finding funding

Where to find: To search for federal funding, go to grants.gov. In the top right corner, there a search box where you can look for grants by keyword. Additionally, there are more detailed search tools under the "Search Grants" tab on the top of the page.

How to find: The search tool on grants.gov includes several filters you can apply to help you find a grant that fits your needs. If your keyword search brings up too many results, check the left hand column for the category section. Select whichever category best fits your funding need then click through the results to read descriptions of the grant.

Finding funding

Eligibility: You may also want to filter grants based on who is eligible to apply for them. Federal grants have strict eligibility requirements, meaning that only certain entities/organizations can apply for a designated grant. There are six main categories of eligible organizations:

1. Government organizations (including state, county, local, and tribal governments)
2. Education organizations (school districts and higher education)
3. Public housing organizations (public housing authorities)
4. Nonprofit organizations
5. For-Profit organizations (including small businesses)
6. Individuals

Who is applying for the grant will make a big difference in the strategy you should use to pursue the funding once you have identified it.

Different strategies for different applicants

Government funding: In theory, the government is a representation of the people and government officials must answer to their constituents. In reality, this does not happen without pressure. In the context of grants, communities can pressure elected officials to apply for funding. In the game of pressuring government officials for grants, there are two key components: *numbers and education.*

Numbers: Government officials generally value numbers, so being able to show community support for funding is important.

Education: In addition to generating numbers through community support, organizers should develop education strategies to help politicians and other government decision makers. Developing an educational strategy should also help with volunteer recruitment.

Different strategies for different applicants

Non-profits: Allying with non-profits for grant opportunities can look several different ways. The first step when you recognize that a non-profit is eligible to apply for the grant that fits your needs is finding a non-profit whose mission fits the grant description.

Non-profit leadership: Non-profits are generally driven by their board of directors and executive director. To pressure non-profits, apply pressure to these actors.

Numbers: Non-profits boards generally value possible outcome data. Phrased a different way: how is your project going to make an impact and what data can you use to track the impact?

Real World Examples - Oakland

Residents of Oakland City Council Districts 1 and 2 started a participatory budgeting process where residents came together to vote on different ideas to leverage federal money.

As a result, several proposals such as the creation of community gardens, youth after school, vocational, and mentorship programs, english classes for immigrants, and additional homelessness services.

Through this process, community members were able to leverage federal dollars to areas where to community deemed most in need.

Real World Examples - Oakland

However, this participatory budgeting process did not appear overnight - it appeared as a result of community pressure and education.

Organizers were a key part of this process - both by educating key leaders about the participatory budgeting process and by rallying community members to participate.

Through community efforts, Oakland was able to leverage federal development grant dollars to meet the needs of the community.

Real World Examples - Denver

Community Organizations Together Colorado, Colorado's People Alliance, and SEUI approached city council member Robin Kniech to create the "Left Behind Workers Fund", which provided unrestricted cash funding to community members regardless of immigration status.

Non-profits and unions were entrusted with reaching out to community members and directing them to apply for the program. By having community members and organizers on the ground to educate folks about the benefits after the program was created was a key to its success.

One million dollars of the funding for this program came from federal grant funding from the CARES act.

Real World Examples - Spokane

Community activists in Spokane pushed for zero-fare transit but were met by resistance from the city who noted that $12 million dollars of the annual transit budget came from the profits from fares.

In response, community organizers developed a plan to utilize and apply for federal grant dollars to mitigate the budget deficit that would be caused from implementing zero-fare transit.

While this proposal has not yet gone into place, it shows how community is actively trying to pressure and educate members of the city council on the benefits of zero-fare transit as well as the possibility that federal grant money provides.

Review - Organizing steps

1. Determine community needs, loop in community members.
2. Identify project idea and what research based metrics you can use to support your proposal.
3. Search grants.gov for grants that fit your proposal.
4. Once you've identified a grant, identify who the application must be submitting through and where their pressure points are.
5. Organize and educate community members to apply pressure.
6. Once you have secured federal funding, utilize organizing and the networks created while pressuring decision makers to make sure the community knows how to access whatever benefits may now be available as a result of the new federal funding.