



Scoring and Review Processes: Best Practices

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Pre-Submission Guidelines

Establish goals and priorities for City funding

Goals, values and priorities are not the same as the statutory or compliance-related requirements of the RFP. Priorities should be specific as they will be used in developing scoring criteria and evaluating applications against the rubric.

Submissions of preliminary application or Letters of Intent (LOI) via Google form (or something similar) *(optional but highly encouraged)*

- Encourage potential applicants to send a letter indicating their intent to submit an application with a brief description of idea
 - Should include descriptive title, name of institutional affiliation; goal the application will address; brief description of project idea; and estimated project timeline
 - *The LOI should be designed as a way to support applicants to get feedback on their idea, and also to provide an initial opportunity for the City to screen applications that do not meet core criteria.*
 - *The initial screening process may establish 4-5 statutory criteria to be considered (The project is located in a HUD Qualified Census Tract; The project is for disproportionately impacted populations within Worcester; Applicant must be a 501(c)(3) with a Board of Directors or be able to provide accountant produced financials; Applicant must be current in all financial obligations with the City of Worcester. It is not recommended to include all of the compliance requirements in this initial screening of applicants. The LOI should not be used as a deadline that hinders or creates barriers to applications. The LOI should be framed as a means to let applicants know if their ideas generally match the intent of the funding*
- Once LOIs have been submitted, staff estimate number of applications across goal, identify potential applicants, and provide feedback to those who submitted LOI

Determine structure of review panel/committee/group and decision-making protocol

- Detail role of committees and how they differ (for example, is there a separate allocations committee apart from advisory groups? Who has the final decision-making authority?)
 - *Note: In order to truly honor people's time and expertise, it is strongly recommended that the committee have decision-making power and be compensated. At minimum, there should be a process in place that supports a final decision maker who comes back to the committee to describe why recommendations were or were not followed.*
- Clarify the number of grants that can be funded, whether funding is allocated towards specific projects, demographics or types of applications, and if committees can recommend funding partial requests.
 - **Note:** It is recommended that funding decisions are decided at the end of the process. The review committee/panel should be assessing the alignment and strength of applications, not determining how much to fund.

□ Develop scoring criteria, rubric, and weighting

- Draft scoring structure based off principles and guidance of project/those developed with committee
 - If using allocation committee structure, advisory committee can provide feedback on scoring rubric draft before finalizing. If not using allocation committee, advisory committee should decide on scoring rubric
 - Scale and scoring structure should be clearly defined on tool; can be numerical (1-5 score) or categorical (Fully Answered, Partially Answered, Not Answered), and should include space for qualitative feedback/comments
 - Questions should be weighted based on the level of priority. Not all questions and criteria to evaluate the application will be equally weighted.
- Criterion should be set and clearly defined on rubric, and should reflect the city's values and priorities in funding. Examples include: alignment with funding priorities; readiness; community engagement; centering marginalized communities; sustainability
- Scoring rubric should follow elements/flow of application components to facilitate ease of scoring process for reviewers.
 - ***Note: It should be made clear that the scoring rubric is one tool that will help make final funding decisions. Be clear on process for final funding decisions.***

□ Devise a Grants Formula

- Determine whether funds will be earmarked for different priorities of the city, or whether the type of proposals will dictate the allocation. Considerations might be made around designating a portion of funding for smaller organizations (i.e., organizations with operating budgets less than \$500,000), for specific priority areas (i.e., 20% of funding will be for organizations working with XXX population group or within YY geographical region), or for proposals that are deemed "more risky" (i.e., compelling applications but from an organization trying something new, or an application that focuses on a very specific and small subset of a priority population).
 - ***Note: The formula can shift throughout the review process, however having some designation upfront ensures a commitment to equitable grantmaking.***

Processing Applications

□ Submission of Applications

- Applications should be accessible by web and hardcopy at least 4-6 weeks prior to the application due date. To make the process more equitable, it is recommended that the application be available in multiple languages
 - Applications should not be overwhelmingly complicated; aim for 3-6 pages of narrative, followed by budget table, workplan, and relevant attachments/appendices
 - Alternative formats such as video, recorded PPT presentations, and oral presentations should also be considered as acceptable application formats
- Develop outreach strategy to disseminate application to priority groups, communities, and partners; available in multiple languages
 - Application instructions and submission procedures should be available on city's website and in printed format; emailed to community partners for expanded reach

□ Internal screening of applications

- Internal staff and/or partner groups should screen initial applications as due diligence; includes screening for compliance with application rules such as length, format, completion of full application
 - Internal review will take approximately 3-5 business days depending on number of submissions received
 - *Note: the internal review is not an evaluation of quality of proposals or project idea, rather, it's the identification of applications that are deemed eligible based on submission criteria. There should be some flexibility (e.g., if applications are submitted at 12:01 vs at the 12:00 am due date they shouldn't be disqualified), as this is not a formal procurement process.*
- Develop process for assigning applications to reviewers, including timeframe and tiers of review (for example, be clear if committee's aim is to narrow applications or have final say).
 - Clarify time commitments and compensation/honoraria/stipends for committee members (see Committee Structure Best Practices document)
- Consider grouping applications together into categories for review committees. For example, one review committee may only review small organizations under \$500,000. Another committee may focus on capital projects.

Bucketing organizations together may help mitigate bias towards well-resourced organizations with greater capacity (such as financial stability, greater evaluation capacity, grant-writers on staff)

Assigning Applications to Reviewers

Identifying potential conflicts of interest

- Prior to scoring, allocation group should be sent a summary list of applicants and asked to review and submit conflict of interest form; identify possible conflicts and assign reviewers according to the match between topic/area of expertise, or lived experience
 - Consideration should be given to the balance and quantity of applications across reviewers. For example, if there are 20 members on the advisory committee and 60 applications were submitted, divide into 5 small groups of 4 and ask them to review 12 applications each.

Host review committee pre-review webinar/guidance documents

- Develop guidance document and host orientation to review roles and responsibilities for reviewers; should also include summary of applications received, tips for reviewing, a review of the funding priorities and goals etc.
 - Assign at least two group leads per group who will be responsible for presenting proposals to larger committee before voting process
 - Additional agenda items to cover in pre-review webinar: Platform instructions; review scoring rubric; role of primary and secondary reviewers; day of review agenda
 - Address potential biases and raise awareness that may arise in the application review process and panel discussions. Sources of biases that are common during grant reviews: Affiliation (preference for top-ranking or well-known organizations), Conflict of Interest, Structural (who have received funding previously), Gender, and Race/Ethnicity (dominant culture of leadership)
 - Establish group agreements collaboratively to govern panel dialogues. Parameters can encourage honest and respectful conversation, while acknowledging power dynamics.
 - Acknowledge the shift from Equality to Equity: not all organizations are the same and it won't always be a clear comparison when assessing several concurrent applications
- Be clear on timeline for reviewing applications. For example, if reviewers are tasked with reviewing 20 applications, assume that each application will take a minimum of 1 hour to review
 - ***Note: Full proposal review will take approximately 3-8 weeks depending on quantity of applications submitted and should include opportunity for reviewers to ask clarifying questions to applicants.***

Facilitating Review Meetings

□ Prior to review meeting

- Prior to meeting, reviewers should have completed and submitted scoring documents and provided feedback; each idea is reviewed in depth and scored by two review committee members before convening as a group
 - How many ideas are we asking each member to review?
 - 10 ideas x 45-60 minutes/idea = 8-10 hours
 - Assume 12 members per Review Committee
 - 60 ideas received = each person reviews 5 as primary and 5 as secondary

□ Holding committee meeting (first-round of review)

- Before meeting, staff will compile individual scores/reviews in preparation for the meeting;
 - Staff understands spread of scores, number of recommended be advanced; and reviewer conflicts before in-person/virtual review meeting
- At meeting, primary reviewer (group lead) will provide an overview of idea and reason in favor of, against, or in the middle for proposal and as to whether idea should move forward; have time for discussion
 - Secondary reviewer (2nd group lead) should provide additional reasons and contribute feedback on the idea relative to the content
- Committee discusses comments, feedback, and concerns
- Committee recommends advancing or not advancing to second-level review with broad categories over screening cut-offs (e.g., Definitely, Maybe, Not Responsive vs using scores to eliminate)
 - Facilitate consensus and voting process that allows the applications to move between broad categories
 - Final voting should happen if no consensus can be achieved

□ Staff review (second-level review)

- City will review and consider recommendations of the review committees, available resources, and equitable distribution of those resources
- Develop plan to circle back with committee to describe why recommendations were or were not followed.