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Good, Better, Best: Choosing the Right Tool to Document Partnerships in Your Grant Applications

INSIDE: If Every Grantseeker Has AI, Then What Do You Have? • 287(g) and Public Safety Grant Eligibility • Surviving the CFI Innovation Fund's Review Funnel

In This Issue

Funding Help: Grants to Support College Student Mental Health 4

Program Snapshot: Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant..... 6

If Every Grantseeker Has AI, Then What Do You Have? 7

287(g): What is it and how is it changing grant eligibility for public safety organizations? 12

Good, Better, Best: Choosing the Right Tool to Document Partnerships in Your Grant Applications 15

Program Snapshot: Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Program 19

BUILD Grants for Transportation: What's Next After IIJA Expires 20

Three Committees, Three Questions: How to Survive the CFI Innovation Fund's Review Funnel 23

Program Snapshot: Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) Innovation Fund 27

Election Security Funding: A Critical Investment in Free and Fair Elections 28

Partners, Proof and Place: What Recent Competitions Tell Us About Winning Grants 31

The Criminal Justice Process: From Response to Reentry..... 34

Program Snapshot: Rural Law Enforcement Violent Crime Reduction Initiative (RVCI) 36

Thinking About SBIR? Confirm Your Business is Ready First 37

Program Snapshot: Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR)..... 42

Dear reader,



When the writing levels out, what's left to distinguish the best projects?

That question sits at the center of this issue of FUNDED, and it is one that Ashley Schultz addresses directly in one of the most candid pieces we have run in FUNDED in some time. For the better part of three decades, grantseeking ran on a quiet hierarchy, in which the organizations with dedicated writers, with time and practice and staff, tended to win. AI tools have begun to dismantle that hierarchy. But Ashley's argument is that AI has not leveled the playing field so much as it has changed the surface on which the game is played. What gets proposals funded now is what was always underneath the writing: institutional memory, community-specific data, and the discipline to say no to the wrong opportunities. Those things have always been there. AI just stopped letting polished prose stand in for them.

Sandy Trowbridge's cover story approaches a related problem from a different angle. Partnership documentation is one of the places in any grant application where the gap between form and substance is most visible and most costly. Whether a narrative description, a letter of intent, or a full MOU is the right tool depends on how far along the partnership actually is, and Sandy provides a clear framework for making that call.

Christina Fernandez follows with a data-driven look at the partners, proof, and place themes emerging from the last 24 months of federal education grantmaking, an interesting observation about rural communities outperforming in programs that were never designed to be rural-specific, and the growing expectation that state agencies are in the room before a competition even opens.

Shannon Day closes out her criminal justice series with this issue's installment on response and investigations. Her piece covers everything from the patrol car as office to the COPS grants that fund the human beings on both ends of a 911 call. In a separate article, Shannon also examines 287(g) and its expanding role in DOJ and DHS grant eligibility, with practical guidance for agencies navigating requirements they cannot or will not meet.

Further in this issue, Joseph Phelan takes a careful look at what comes next for transportation funding when the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law expires in December. Amanda Day documents the sharp decline in federal election security funding, from HAVA's $425 million peak to $45 million in 2026, and the compounding effect of CISA's workforce and budget losses. It's a story with real stakes for the 2028 cycle. Marc Smithers surveys the narrow but navigable landscape of federal mental health funding for colleges and universities. And Elizabeth Evans provides a detailed walkthrough of the Canada Foundation for Innovation's three-committee review funnel, including data patterns from the 2025 competition that correct some persistent assumptions about request size, language, and discipline.

As always, feedback, corrections, and ideas for future issues are welcome at mpaddock@grantsoffice.com.

I hope you enjoy this issue of FUNDED as much as we have enjoyed bringing it to you!

Sincerely,

Michael Paddock
Editor and Publisher,
FUNDED

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Grants Office

Funding Help: Grants to Support College Student Mental Health

Marc Smithers, Grants Development Consultant

A 2025 Healthy Minds Network survey found only a third of college students are thriving and colleges are trying to find ways to fund a widening mental health need. In that same study, thirty-seven percent of all respondents had sought therapy or counseling in the previous twelve months, which was up from thirty percent the previous year. Mental health staff at higher education institutions are seeing increasing demand for their services at a time when over half of respondents to the annual survey report by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors reported a decrease in their total budgets in their most recent fiscal year.

As mental health staff fight for additional resources during a time when colleges and universities face tighter budgets, grants professionals should consider programs that fund mental health initiatives on campus as a potential source of growing an institution's portfolio. These programs have one of two aims, the first being those programs that have a broader focus that can include mental health supports and the second being those programs which focus explicitly on mental health initiatives. Through exploring an example of each kind of program, grantseekers can begin to strategize which kind they should pursue to meet the growing demand.

PROGRAMS INCORPORATING MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The first type of program, those which incorporate but do not solely focus on mental health support, comprise funding opportunities that take a more holistic approach to student support. Programs in this category often have mental health as one aspect of student development, either as a required piece of a broader initiative that an institution is to undertake or simply as a way that institutions may use funding from their award.

Example Program: FIPSE: Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success

The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) is a collection of programs administered by the Department of Education that address a variety of priorities identified by the agency's leadership. Over the years, FIPSE initiatives have supported areas such as basic student support services and improving accessibility at institutions of higher education. While the specific focus can vary from one program



to another, the broader goal remains consistent: helping universities find innovative ways to strengthen enrollment, support student retention, and ultimately improve graduation outcomes. One of the FIPSE programs released in June 2026, the **Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success (CEVSS)**, sought to fund the development and expansion of support programs for veteran students. The aim was to fund holistic support models at institutions which addressed the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of veteran students.

The CEVSS program is a good example of ways that a college or university can utilize a portion of funding from a program for mental health provided that the overall project focuses on establishing this center of excellence as its main aim. Within the broad focus on establishing a center of excellence, the agency ensured that model programs would include a veteran student support team, including representatives from various offices such as financial aid, admissions, and mental health counseling. This could help an institution in multiple ways, such as through funding part of an additional mental health counseling position that is focused on supporting veteran students, offering additional programming targeting mental health support for veteran students, or through connecting veteran students with telehealth opportunities for colleges that may not have the capacity to offer expanded services on campus. Utilizing funding from programs not specifically designed for mental health initiatives often requires that institutions consider where these initiatives may fit within a broader comprehensive program. Academic leaders can also find ways to take a more piecemeal approach using these funding mechanisms. While funding from a program like CEVSS will not entirely meet the institutional need, programs which allow for the incorporation of mental health support can help expand an institution's capacity to serve all its students more effectively.

PROGRAMS DEDICATED TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The second type of program, those which are solely dedicated to mental health supports, are rarer than the first type but can be important avenues institutions should consider when developing their grants strategy. These funding opportunities are designed to help institutions better support students' mental health, either in one particular area of concern such as suicide prevention or through a generalized approach to campus mental health funding.

Example Program: Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant

While FIPSE is offered through the Department of Education, the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under the Department of Health and Human Services also offers a program focused on campus mental health: the Campus Suicide Prevention Grant Program. Unlike FIPSE, which incorporates some aspects of mental health funding into its program, this program is explicitly focused on improving campus mental health services. It does so by specifically funding projects which provide comprehensive, evidence-based initiatives at colleges and universities that improve access to behavioral health services. While the main focus of these efforts revolves around the prevention of suicide and substance use disorders, the program also funds initiatives that are more general in their approach to mental health supports, such as promoting help-seeking and reducing stigma around behavioral health and improving the identification and treatment of at-risk students.

The most recent cycle of the Campus Suicide Prevention Program held in July 2026 focused on capacity building efforts. Previous awards from this program have gone toward funding direct support and clinical staff, but the change in focus toward capacity building may affect how institutions plan to utilize funds in future cycles. Institutions planning to apply should keep this in mind if they are preparing to apply for the new cycle which has been forecast to open in mid-December 2026 with a smaller total funding amount than previous years. The 1:1 cost-match is also an important aspect to consider when planning to submit an application in the upcoming months, though this match requirement is waived for minority-serving institutions and community colleges. Despite cost-match requirements and a capacity building focus, however, the Campus Suicide Prevention Program is one of the few programs colleges and universities can pursue for direct funding of mental health supports and should be seriously considered by institutions that have critical needs in these areas of student development.

CONCLUSION: FINDING YOUR FIT

Institutions looking for additional ways to fund mental health supports on campus do not have ample funding opportunities to pursue. The GLS Campus Suicide Prevention program is one of the only federal programs which explicitly focuses on mental health for colleges and universities and should be one of the first that an institution considers for these purposes. Looking beyond these programs, though, is a key strategic step that grantseekers should take, broadening their approach to look at programs that focus on student well-being more broadly or on specific student populations and their needs, such as the CEVSS program. Grantseekers that know how to craft an application that both meets student needs and aligns well with the parameters set out from a program which allows for the incorporation of mental health support will be well positioned to find funding for this growing need.



Program Snapshot

Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant



SUMMARY

The Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Campus Suicide Prevention Grant provides funding to institutions of higher education to help them better support students by:

- Improving student access to behavioral health services, especially for those at risk for suicide, depression, serious mental illness, and substance abuse disorder;
- Promoting help-seeking behaviors and reducing stigma around help-seeking with the goal of preventing and reducing suicide and substance abuse disorders; and
- Improving the identification and treatment of at-risk students.

Funds can be used for a variety of purposes including: personnel; screening and outreach tools, training, crisis network development, and data collection infrastructure. The majority of funds are expected to be used for capacity building initiatives which enable the institution to better identify and support students who are at-risk.

ELIGIBILITY

Institutions of higher education are eligible to apply.

DEADLINE

The application is forecasted to open on December 15, 2026. An estimated $1,000,000 will be awarded in total across five projects. A 1:1 cost match is required but will be waived for minority-serving institutions and community colleges.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

https://www.samhsa.gov/grants/grant-announcements/sm-26-009

If Every Grantseeker Has AI, Then What Do You Have?

Ashley Schultz, Manager of Community Engagement

For the 26 years Grants Office has been in business, grantseeking has run on an unspoken hierarchy. The organizations that won money were the organizations that could write. These were the folks with a dedicated grantwriter on staff, or a development director who had been around long enough that they could rub two sticks of an idea together and create a blazing narrative. If you were a two-person nonprofit, or a department where grants were the fourth item in someone's job description, you knew you were going up against people who simply had more resources and more practice. But in the last two years, that hierarchy has disappeared from our grantseeking world.

Today, organizations without a grantwriter on staff start in the same place as those with one. With AI tools, putting pen to paper is no longer the hard part. Work that used to take a week of late nights at the office now takes one afternoon. And naturally, with these assistive-text generating tools widely available, more applications are being submitted at every level of grantseeking.

All this lands on a reviewer's desk as a taller stack of applications and a smaller number of awards to give out. A well-written narrative used to tell that reviewer something real. It meant an organization had the time, the staff, and the experience to produce a good draft – and while that was never a perfect measure of whether they could deliver a good project, it was a fast way to thin the stack. Now every narrative in the pile reads well, and reviewers have lost a signal they had been relying on for a long time.

For the two-person nonprofit reading, this is good news! The old hierarchy has broken in your favor, and you should absolutely take the win. But if you are one of those dedicated grantwriters who have long enjoyed whatever edge your quality writing provided – this is less a loss than a reset. Your craft still matters. It's just stopped being the only thing that sets you apart. If your days used to be spent drafting, the work ahead looks more like directing.

So all of us are standing in the same moment, taking stock and getting our bearings. Reviewers still have to thin the stack, and they will do it on something other than the writing. The question, then, is what that ***something*** is. I'd argue it is already in your building – in what your organization knows about itself, what it knows about its community, and what opportunities it is prioritizing. The rest of this article is about putting each one to work.





(1) WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION KNOWS ABOUT ITSELF

The people on your team carry a great number of facts in their beautiful human brains. They know which program you went after in 2019 and why you didn't win it. They know what your last project actually cost, not what the budget said it would. They know which activities move the needle with the people you serve, and which ones look good in a logic model but do very little. And they know how all these details have shifted over the years, because they were there for all of it.

For some organizations, this history is documented. There are physical and digital files that someone takes great pains to keep current. For many others, it lives within the brains of three or four long-tenured people, and nowhere else. Hold a proposal development meeting without one of them in the room, and the rest of the team is left guessing.

Writing institutional memory down in a form other people can use has always been good practice. It is also the thing that gets pushed to next quarter, and then to next quarter again, because it is never the most urgent item on anyone's desk. That calculation has changed. The depth of what you have written down now determines whether an AI tool helps you produce a proposal only your organization could have submitted – or a generic one that anyone could whipped up. Documenting what you know is no longer a matter of tidiness. It is a matter of whether what comes out the other end of an AI prompt is any good.

A reviewer can tell the difference. A proposal built on your own records sounds like an organization that knows where it has been, what it has tried, and what it cost. That used to be something they could infer from a well-turned sentence. Now they must find it in the substance.

What still stays human

Writing something down does not replace the person on your team who knows it.

Say your grant narrative includes a figure: 400 people attended your event. Every reviewer and AI tool will read it as fact, which it is. The context lives with the person who was there: it rained all morning and the event usually draws 900 people, so that figure needs explaining rather than celebrating. The number is accurate, but without its context, it is also misleading.

That is why writing things down only works when the people who know things stay involved. They know the gap between what a record says and what the record actually means. They know which numbers need a qualifying sentence beside them, and they are the ones who catch a figure that stopped being true over time.

Do this first

At this point, you may be hyping yourself up to block off a day and document all of it at once. Please don't try it. The job is too big for one sitting, and it is never truly finished since records start aging the moment you save them. You'd be signing yourself up for a lifetime of maintenance, not a one-time project.

Instead, start with something small and satisfying. Pick the single piece of institutional knowledge that would hurt most if the people holding onto it were all out of office on a two-week vacation. Write that one down this week. Capture the numbers and the context around it. Save it somewhere your colleagues can actually find it - and if it includes details about the people you serve, keep those out of public AI tools. Last, decide who keeps it current and how often. Without that final step, you risk handing an AI tool information that stopped being true two years ago.

(2) WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY

Those same human brains also hold a picture of your community that no outsider or AI tool could put together. In a stack where every proposal reads well, being able to say “our situation is unusual, and here is exactly why” is still the bedrock of a strong and fundable argument.

AI tools work best when they are given concrete details to work with. Without local statistics to substantiate a claim, these tools reach for regional and national ones. And why not? They’re easy to find, fancy to cite, and still sound perfectly authoritative. But that authority is borrowed. A reviewer reading a need statement built entirely on state or provincial data cannot tell whether you simply couldn’t find local numbers or didn’t bother to collect them in the first place. What they can tell is that you have described a problem that could belong to dozens of organizations like yours, rather than the specific problem in front of you.

A grant is money to solve a specific problem for specific people. If you cannot say who is affected, how many, since when, and whether it is getting better or worse, a reviewer has every reason to wonder whether you know what you would be spending their money on. Vagueness about the problem reads as vagueness about the solution.

And a need statement is only the start of this test. Accurate, detailed project timelines reflect a strong understanding of how long things take in your organization. Calibrated goals show you know your community and what success looks like for them. Exact budget figures and readable budget narratives point to a spending plan someone actually built line by line. Even your attachments carry it. A Letter of Support from a partner who clearly knows you reads very differently from one that AI drafted for them to sign.

What still stays human

Funders are not testing whether you can cite a statistic. They are testing whether you understand the problem.

Before there is hard data, the understanding a funder is looking for lives with your people. It’s with the caseworker who reported patterns while on home visits, or the government employee who heard positive feedback at a public hearing, or the teacher who saw a new practice make a genuine impact in their classroom.

Those same frontline staff are also the ones who know what is worth counting. What may start as a small anecdote in a grant proposal can turn into a set of honest statistics that are unique to your organization.



PRO TIP:

A Letter of Support is evidence that someone outside your organization knows your project well enough to speak to it. That evidence disappears when every letter in the packet sounds the same - whether the sameness came from your template, an AI tool, or a partner who was too busy to write their own.

Reviewers read letters in a stack, the same way they read applications. Four letters that share a voice tell them less than one letter that mentions a specific conversation, a shared client, or a problem the partner has watched your organization work on.

If you draft letters for your partners to save them time, give each partner a different starting point and ask them to add something only they would know.

Do this first

The fastest way to find out where the specifics are missing is to look at a proposal you have already written.

Pull up a recently submitted grant proposal. Next, name a peer organization: the school district down the road, the health center in the next town over, or the organization you always seem to be applying against. Could they have submitted this exact proposal with their name swapped in for yours?

Read it yourself first and mark every paragraph where the answer is yes. Don’t fix anything on this pass, just mark it. Then ask an AI tool the same question. It may find a few more places you read past. What you are left with is a list of places in the application where something generic is standing in for something specific: a national figure where a local one belongs, a timeline that could describe anyone, a budget line built from assumed costs. Now, take that list to your people. They are the ones who can tell you what belongs there instead.

(3) WHAT YOU SAY NO TO

So far, we've focused mainly on what your people know. This last one is about what they are willing to turn down.

Applying for a grant used to cost something. Someone had to read the guidelines, build out the project, write the narrative, and chase down the attachments. That cost worked as an effective filter for the number of grants submitted each year. When a reasonably responsive draft can be assembled with AI tools in an afternoon, the filter quietly dissolves. Leaders of every kind of organization are now asking their grantseeking teams – Why don't we toss our hat in the ring and just see what happens?

As someone who has been on the receiving end of that question, I can say it is much more expensive than it sounds. AI tools may make the drafting time faster, but nothing else in the grantseeking process gained the same boost. You still need the staff time to assemble the project components and imagine how it will be delivered. You still need to compile a budget. You still have to ask a partner for a letter (and then ask for a re-write when they use the wrong font size or fail to add their letterhead). And if you win something your organization cannot actually deliver, you have not won anything – you have signed up to administer an award that will go badly and potentially spoil a relationship with that funder for years.

Your people know which grants you are genuinely likely to win. They know what your organization can take on without breaking, and they know what is already sitting on everyone's desk between now and the application deadline. That knowledge has always been there. What has changed is that you must now use it deliberately, because the high cost of writing no longer makes the decision for you.

The good news is that screening got faster too, and this is where AI tools genuinely earn their keep. Research that used to cost a full afternoon for one program now costs thirty minutes, which means you can afford to look properly before you commit. While you're at it, be sure to –

- **Look at what the funder has actually funded.** Not what they say they prioritize – what they actually wrote checks for. Ask an AI tool to work through the funder's granting history: who received awards, in what amounts, and for what kinds of projects. Then hold those results against two things: the priorities in their own guidelines, and what your organization can realistically deliver.
- **Check whether the priorities have drifted.** Line up this year's guidelines against the last two or three and ask the AI tool to tell you what changed. Look for language that got added, categories that disappeared, and eligibility that narrowed. A funder can keep the same program name for a decade while steadily changing what it actually wants to support, and the only way to catch that is to read the versions side by side.
- **Map your project against the reviewer criteria** before you write anything. Find out which sections carry the most points, then check how much of the score your weakest areas are worth. Sometimes the answer is that your weak spot is worth four points and you should proceed. Sometimes it is worth thirty points, and you have just saved three weeks of toil.

PRO TIP:

Funder websites have varying levels of information about their awarded projects. If you don't find details directly on the program page, check for press releases and news articles.

Past awards are also available in public databases. Foundation funders in the US disclose every grant they make on their Form 990 filings to the IRS. In Canada, a registered charity's giving appears in its CRA filings. National government grants are posted in open data portals — in the US that is USASpending.gov; in Canada, open.canada.ca.

Hand what you find to an AI tool and ask for the pattern: who gets funded, at what size, for what kind of work.

What still stays human

An AI tool can lay all that evidence out in front of you in a single sitting. It cannot say no. That part still belongs to your people. But AI can make your "no" a lot easier to defend.

Reading a pattern to determine fit requires judgment, and judgment requires human brains. Your team knows what else is in their queue, which colleague is already stretched thin, whether your board has opinions about this funder, and how much goodwill you have left with the partner you would need a letter from.

And then there is the harder version of saying no – the one where the program came down from your executive director, or where someone above you has already told leadership you were going to apply. No amount of funder research makes that conversation easy. But AI tools can change what you walk in with. And if the answer is going to be yes regardless, the same AI screening tells you which version of yes to deliver – be it a tighter scope, an earlier partner ask, or a weakness flagged before a reviewer finds it.



Do this first

Chances are you're building a grants calendar for the upcoming year. Before it circulates to leadership, look at it critically and sort the list into two piles. On one side, the opportunities that genuinely fit – what you know you can win and deliver well. On the other, the longer stretches that really only make the list because AI tools make the costly writing part feasible.

The first pile is where your real resources go: the early project design, the staff time, the partner you are going to ask for a letter. The second pile is where you run the screening noted above. Some grants in that pile will survive the screen, and you will have a better reason for keeping them than you had before. The rest come off the calendar.

If your leadership is asking for more grants, this effort is how you answer without just saying no. "More grants" is almost always shorthand for more money, not more applications. The two piles let you show the difference: here is where our effort has a real chance of becoming an award, and here are the dead ends where we risk our effort going instead. That is a conversation about return, not about appetite. If you can, have these conversations while your grants calendar is still a draft. In November you are presenting a plan. By May, you risk taking on the harder task of seeking permission to abandon one.

CONCLUSION

Picture that grants reviewer again: a lone individual working through the tallest stack of their career, every proposal in it reading well. They still have to get to a shortlist. And with the writing no longer telling them much, they are left deciding whether they believe you.

That belief comes down to roughly three questions. Does the need look concrete and documented? Do the numbers hold up? And does this organization seem to understand what it is actually applying for? Reviewers have always asked some version of these — they just used to have a faster way of guessing at the answers.

Strong writing was always a proxy for the work underneath it. Writing well took time and staff and practice. The organizations that had those things tended to be the organizations that could deliver. It was a decent shortcut while it lasted. AI tools have since broken the shortcut — but they haven't touched what the shortcut was pointing to.

And what that shortcut was pointing to never relied on the size of your grantseeking team. Believability comes from knowing your own organization and its place within your community.

So if every grantseeker has AI, what do you have? You have the things no prompt can supply on its own. Why the 2019 application failed, and what it really cost. A caseworker who can tell you what is happening in the neighborhoods you serve. The judgment to look at a well-matched opportunity and still say no, because your people are already at their limit.

And if all of this sounds like advice you have heard before, that is because it is. Grants professionals have been saying for decades to document what you learn, write specifically, and apply strategically. AI did not add anything to your plate. It just stopped letting good writing stand in for the work behind it.

287(g): What is it and how is it changing grant eligibility for public safety organizations?

Shannon Day, Senior Grants Development Consultant

For most of its history, 287(g) was a little-used corner of federal immigration law. Today, with agreements numbering in the thousands, it has become a major factor in who can compete for federal public safety funding. Cooperation with federal immigration enforcement now appears in the terms of many DOJ and DHS grants, and some new programs require a 287(g) agreement outright. This article explains what 287(g) is, how it works, how it affects grant applications, and where agencies can look for funding if federal dollars are out of reach.

Key Takeaways

- **287(g) lets ICE deputize state, local, and tribal officers to carry out certain immigration enforcement functions. Agreements have grown from about 135 to more than 2,500 since early 2025.**
- **Many DOJ and DHS grants now want recipients to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement, and the new BIDEN/ANGEL Programs require a 287(g) agreement.**
- **Agencies that can't or won't meet these requirements still have options, including state-appropriated grants and private foundations.**

WHAT IS IT?

Section 287(g) of federal immigration law allows voluntary agreements between state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These agreements let trained officers employed by their state or local government carry out certain immigration enforcement functions of the federal government under ICE supervision.

While US federal immigration law dates back to the 1790s, section 287(g) was added as part of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) in 1996 following a broader push to address illegal immigration. Several factors prompted its addition, including a newly Republican-controlled Congress acting against the Clinton administration, numerous state lawsuits over the costs of illegal immigration, limited federal enforcement capacity, and security concerns following the 1993 World Trade Center and 1995 Oklahoma City bombings.



Despite this background, the provision remained quiet and largely unused in its first two decades. The state of Florida was the first to sign a 287(g) agreement in 2002, primarily driven by post-9/11 security concerns. As the decade continued, more state, local, and tribal agencies signed agreements, but the program remained relatively obscure, mostly outside the broader public safety discussion. By the end of the Obama administration, 287(g) agreements were limited to a few dozen.

The program surged under the first Trump administration, growing more than twelve-fold to 150 agreements with law enforcement agencies and jails across the country. In his second administration, Trump signed an executive order directing DHS to expand 287(g) agreements "to the maximum extent permitted by law." Within the year, these agreements exceeded 2,500 departments – spanning more than 15% of all state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies in the country.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The program operates through three models:

- Jail Enforcement Model (JEM): Officers screen people already booked into jail, lodge ICE detainers, and start removal processing. This is the original model, in use since the program began.
- Task Force Model (TFM): Officers can question people and make immigration arrests in the field during routine policing. This is the most controversial model. It was discontinued in 2012, revived by ICE in 2025, and has grown the fastest since.
- Warrant Service Officer (WSO): Created in 2019, this is the narrowest model. Officers serve ICE administrative warrants on people already in their custody.

Many law enforcement agencies have used 287(g) agreements for years without issue. Officers I have spoken with say collaboration with federal agencies has helped them. A detective in a rural Colorado agency described how a drug and human trafficking ring was investigated and disrupted with help from ICE agents.

But that same officer said that since 2025, ICE enforcement generates negative impacts. His community includes many long-established immigrant families, and it has seen a much larger ICE presence as a result. That presence has soured his and his community's view of the partnership.

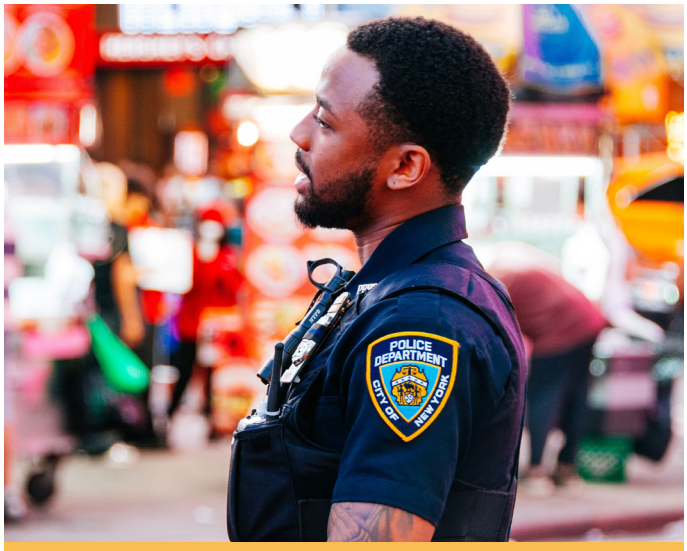
WHY DOES IT MATTER FOR GRANTSEEKING?

The short answer: cooperation with federal immigration enforcement now affects federal grant eligibility.

Since 2025, many Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Justice (DOJ) grants have added language requiring or requesting that recipients cooperate with federal immigration enforcement, whether through 287(g) agreements or within the terms of the grant itself.

There are even new grant programs funded through Public Law 119-21 (commonly known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act) that require applicants to have, or commit to entering, a 287(g) agreement. This includes the **Bridging Immigration-related Deficits Experienced Nationwide ("BIDEN") Program** and the **Assisting Neighborhoods and Governments with Enforcement of Laws (ANGEL) Grant**, both of which are explicitly for state, local, and tribal immigration enforcement.

These new provisions in longstanding grants have created substantial hurdles for public safety organizations competing for federal funding. While an organization can choose not to apply for programs like BIDEN, government leaders and municipal legal teams are now reconsidering large swaths of non-immigration-related DOJ and DHS funding because of these requirements. I worked with a police department in California that planned to apply to the **COPS School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP)** in 2025. They had successfully used federal grants for several initiatives over the years. The department did all the legwork preparing to apply, bringing partners, including the school district, on board. Then they saw language in the notice about cooperating with federal immigration enforcement. The department could not comply with this new requirement because the California Values Act (Chapter 17.25) bars local police from assisting with federal deportations, honoring ICE detainer requests, or sharing non-public release dates. As a result, this department and other California agencies cannot comply with the immigration-related rules attached to SVPP and similar grants.



What the Grant Language Says

"Out of program scope is any program or activity, at any tier that, directly or indirectly, violates (or promotes or facilitates the violation of) federal immigration law (including 8 U.S.C. § 1373) or impedes or hinders the enforcement of federal immigration law—including by failing to comply with 8 U.S.C. § 1373, give access to DHS agents, or honor DHS requests and provide requested notice to DHS agents."

Source: BJA FY2026 Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG) Program, Local Formula NOFO



WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

An agency may lack a 287(g) agreement for many reasons: it may be unwilling or unable to abide by the requirements, or limited by the local, tribal, or state government it answers to. Whatever the reason, the result is real limits on grantseeking for organizations large and small across the United States.

So what can these agencies do? State grants are one option but choose carefully: many state public safety grants are federal pass-through funds that carry the same federal conditions. Departments should look specifically for state-generated programs. Many state agencies that administer pass-through grants also administer state-funded programs, so your State Administering Agency (SAA) is a great place to start.

Private foundation funding is another avenue, and many agencies I work with have started considering it. While most private foundations focus their giving on 501(c)(3) organizations and community enrichment projects, many will work with municipal agencies. Start with small community foundations. They live and work in the community you serve, so give them a call! There are also numerous corporate foundations that are friendly to first responder needs. A few examples include **Firehouse Subs Public Safety Foundation**, **Norfolk Southern** and other rail companies, and **Pacific Power** and other energy companies.

It's frustrating, but I always advise patience. Most federal grant programs are authorized by Congress, so they tend to outlast any single administration, but their priorities and expectations change with each new one. History suggests they will shift again with the next administration. But until then, work with your legal counsel or read the DHS and DOJ grant terms and conditions yourself to determine whether federal funding and 287(g) agreements are on the table.

If your agency is weighing its options, reach out. We're glad to help you map the funding that fits.

COVER STORY

Good, Better, Best: Choosing the Right Tool to Document Partnerships in Your Grant Applications

Sandy Trowbridge, Grants Development Consultant



Strong partnerships are at the heart of many successful grant applications. Funders want to see that you are not working in isolation, that you have engaged the right organizations to get the job done, and that those partners are committed to the project's success. So, once you have identified your project partners, how do you best demonstrate that commitment within your application?

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)'s **STOP School Violence Program** (a federal grant program that funds K–12 school violence prevention efforts) offers a helpful illustration. For each named project partner (whether or not they will receive grant funds), the STOP Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) asks applicants to provide at least one of three things: a description in the project narrative confirming the partner's agreement to participate; a letter of intent (LOI); or a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Each option is acceptable, but each sends reviewers a progressively stronger signal that your partnership is real, defined, and ready for implementation if awarded. The following sections describe each option, explain when and how to use them, and outline key questions to ask your partners so that you can land on the right fit.

Key Takeaways

- **Start with the NOFO. Confirm how the funder wants partnerships documented and how they define each option, since funders sometimes use the same term for different documents.**
- **Each document signals a different level of commitment. A narrative description is your own account (good), a letter of intent is the partner's stated plan to participate (better), and a signed MOU is a formal agreement between partners (best).**
- **"Best" isn't always right. Match the document to how developed the partnership actually is and avoid over-promising.**
- **Plan ahead for MOUs. Sign-off from each partner's authorized representatives, plus any legal review, can take several weeks, so leave time for planning, drafting, reviewing, and signing.**

QUICK DEFINITIONS

Before choosing a tool, start where every application effort should: with a close review of the NOFO and any supplemental guidance, such as application guides and FAQs. This review will tell you how the funder prefers partnerships to be documented and what they mean by each term. The table below is representative and compares three standard options side by side. Funders may define these documents slightly differently, so always follow the guidance in the specific NOFO you are responding to.

A note on terminology. Adding to the confusion, definitions can vary across funders, even within the same federal department. The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), for example, allows what it calls "letters of support" in place of an MOU in limited circumstances, as long as they cover the same content an MOU would. OVW also uses the term "letter of commitment" for a document similar to what STOP calls a "letter of intent." Similarly, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP) asks for "letters of support" but in practice wants them to confirm how major partners or significant stakeholders plan to be involved in and support the project. In other words, they function more like "letters of intent." Some funders also use "letter of intent" or "LOI" to mean a pre-application notice of intent to apply, rather than a letter of intent to partner. Always look at what the NOFO asks each document to contain, not just what it calls it, and when in doubt, ask the program officer for clarification.

	Good: Project Narrative Only	**Better: Letter of Intent (LOI)**	**Best*: Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)**
Written by	The applicant	The partner	All partners, together
Signed by	Not applicable	The partner (sometimes the applicant as well)	Leaders authorized to commit each partner organization
Level of commitment	Applicant's self-reported plan to partner	Partner's stated plan to participate; specifics still in progress	Formalized written commitment of roles, resources, and responsibilities
Best used when	Partners play an informal or advisory role, or the relationship is new	Roles have been discussed but not finalized, or there isn't time to complete an MOU	Funds will flow to a partner, project responsibilities are shared, or the funder requires one
What it tells the reviewer	"We plan to work with this partner."	"We intend to work with the applicant and are still finalizing the details."	"We are committed and have agreed on exactly who will do what if awarded."

* **The use of "best" simply means that the document sends the strongest partnership signal. It does not mean that it is always the right choice for you. The goal is to match the tool to how developed the partnership actually is.**

What about letters of support?

You may notice that letters of support aren't included in the table above. They are often confused with these tools, but they serve a different purpose. A letter of support is a third-party endorsement that vouches for your organization and proposed project. It is signed by the third party and tells the reviewer "I endorse this organization and this project." As the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) Grant Application Resource Guide explains, it differs from an MOU in that the supporting organization is not committing staff, services, or supplies to the project. Instead, the letter speaks to the applicant's capacity to implement their proposed project for the benefit of the broader community. For more on this topic, see "Quick Tip: Leverage Letters of Support to Strengthen Your Grant Applications" from a previous FUNDED issue.

GOOD: DESCRIBING PARTNERSHIPS IN THE PROJECT NARRATIVE ONLY

What it is. The simplest way to document a partnership is to describe it in your project narrative (the main written section of your application, where you explain what you plan to do and how). This means explaining who your partners are, what roles they will play in the project, what they will contribute, and why they are well-suited for the work. In STOP, for example, the Project Design and Implementation section (the most heavily weighted part of the narrative) asks applicants to name any subrecipients (partners that will receive grant funds to carry out part of the project) and describe their roles in conducting project activities as well as describe coordination with local law enforcement and other key partners.

When to use it. A narrative description may be sufficient when partners serve in an advisory or informal role, when the relationship is still in its very early stages, or when the funder does not require (or permit) the inclusion of signed partner documentation. This approach gives you full control over how the partnership is framed, with no signatures to track down. However, because it is self-reported, it carries the least weight with reviewers. It also uses valuable space within page limits. The STOP proposal narrative, for example, has been capped at just 10 pages in recent cycles.

Could a signed letter from your partner say more than you have room for in your narrative? If so, pairing a brief narrative description with an attached LOI or MOU (if permitted by the funder) often lets you go into more detail without cutting into the page limit. Just confirm how your NOFO treats attachments, since some funders count them toward an overall application limit while others don't.

How to do it well. Be as specific as possible about who will do what and when. Consider asking partners to review how you are describing the partnership before submitting so that you are confident that they are on board with the plan even if you won't be submitting any formal documentation. Finally, make sure your narrative descriptions are consistent with your budget and any attachments.

BETTER: LETTERS OF INTENT (LOI)

What it is. A letter of intent is a written statement from a partner confirming that it plans to participate in the proposed project if funded. The STOP NOFO notes that "a letter of intent indicates the organizations' intention to partner, but the details of the commitment have not been fully worked out and officially agreed to." STOP also specifies that the letter should confirm the partner's agreement to "support the project through commitments of staff time, space, services, or other project needs." In other words, it is not enough for a partner to say they like your project (as in the case of a letter of support); the letter of intent should specifically name what they intend to contribute.

When to use it. Have you and your partner agreed on the general shape of their role, but not the fine print? A letter of intent is a strong choice when roles have been discussed but not finalized, when the timeline is too tight to negotiate a full MOU, or when partner leadership is supportive but cannot commit to formal terms before award.

How to do it well. A strong letter of intent is signed and dated on organization letterhead. It identifies the signer's title and authority, names the specific grant and project, and describes the partner's role and contributions, including any in-kind (non-cash) resources such as staff time, space, or equipment.

If a partner will receive grant funds, say so, even without dollar figures. For example: "As a partner in this initiative, [Organization X] will receive a subaward to support its role in [activity]." Reviewers watch for undisclosed financial stakes, so transparency matters more than detail, and exact amounts can stay in the budget unless the funder asks otherwise.

To make this process easy on your partners, share the key points you'd like each partner to cover in their letters, but skip the template. Partners given a template tend to copy it largely word for word, leaving reviewers reading near-identical letters that carry less weight. Finally, make sure each letter matches your narrative and budget, since reviewers read them together and any inconsistencies will stand out. For example, if one of your letters of intent notes that the partner will be receiving a subaward, but this is not referenced in the budget, it may raise questions.

BEST: MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)

What it is. An MOU is a jointly developed document that spells out each party's roles, responsibilities, and resource commitments. The STOP NOFO describes it as a "formalized commitment of staff and/or resources that is signed by authorized representatives [individuals with authority to commit their organization] of both partner organizations."

When to use it. An MOU is the strongest choice when grant funds will flow to a partner, when partners share responsibility for key deliverables, or when sensitive data will be shared.

How to do it well. For MOU content, STOP points applicants to OJP's Grant Application Resource Guide, which calls for each MOU to include names of the organizations involved, the service(s) and other work each organization will perform, and the duration of the agreement. Draft the MOU collaboratively, include only commitments each partner can realistically fulfill, and as always, make sure it aligns with your budget and narrative.

Plan for review and signatures. MOUs often need legal and leadership review from each partner, so allow several weeks of lead time. Early on, confirm who at each organization is authorized to sign. Also ask whether partners have internal MOU policies or required templates, since universities, local governments, and larger institutions often do, and take those into account during your planning conversations. If a signature is delayed, check whether your NOFO accepts unsigned drafts. STOP does, as long as a cover page explains why the MOU is unsigned.

WHICH PARTNERSHIP DOCUMENTATION TOOL IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

It depends on how developed each partnership is, and the answer usually becomes clear during partner planning meetings. As you discuss project plans with your partners, work through the following questions together:

- Who will lead each task, and who will support it?
- Will grant funds flow to this partner? If so, for what?
- What in-kind contributions will each partner provide, if any?
- Who is each organization's point of contact, and how often will partners meet?
- Who should partners go to if something isn't working?
- Who will compile and submit reports to the funder?
- Will data be shared between partners, and if so, how will it be protected?
- Who owns materials or products created jointly?
- When does each partner's role begin and end?
- Is there a backup plan if a partner is unable to fulfill its role?
- Will the partnership continue beyond this grant?

The answers to these questions do double duty as they help you choose the right document and they become the raw material for drafting it. If a partner plays an informal or advisory role, a narrative description is likely good enough. If roles have been discussed but are not yet locked in, a letter of intent is the better option. If partners have agreed to specific, mutual commitments, or funds will change hands, an MOU is best. And if an organization is willing to vouch for you but will not play a formal role, a letter of support is the right fit.

Consider a school district proposing a STOP threat assessment team. Because these teams must be multidisciplinary, the district might describe community stakeholders serving in an advisory role in the narrative (good), request a letter of intent from the local sheriff's office while staffing details are still being finalized (better), and develop an MOU with a behavioral health provider that will receive grant funds to staff the team (best).

Above all, the funder's requirements come first. If a NOFO requires an MOU, a letter of intent will not suffice, no matter how strong it is.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Before your next application submission, schedule early planning meetings with each key partner and work through the questions above. Decide whether each relationship is at the good, better, or best level, then start drafting the matching documentation. MOUs in particular can take weeks to finalize, so the earlier you begin, the better. And whatever the outcome, keep partners informed; sharing results and updates builds the trust that makes the next partnership even easier to document.

For more foundational grants knowledge, check out "Back to Basics: How to Decide Whether or Not to Apply to a Specific Grant Opportunity" and "Quick Tip: Leverage Letters of Support to Strengthen Your Grant Applications" from previous FUNDED issues.

Program Snapshot

Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence Program



SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is committed to improving school safety by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, respond quickly to, and help prevent acts of violence.

The purpose of the BJA's STOP School Violence Program is to support efforts to prevent and reduce violence in K–12 schools. Funds can be used for:

- training for school personnel, students, and local law enforcement to prevent student violence against others and self,
- technology solutions such as anonymous reporting systems (mobile apps, hotlines, and websites),
- school threat assessment and intervention teams that coordinate with law enforcement and school personnel, and
- specialized training for school officials in responding to mental health crises.

Funding is offered through two categories. In recent cycles, Category 1 (states and public institutions of higher education) has offered awards of up to $2 million, and Category 2 (localities, federally recognized tribal governments, nonprofits, and school districts) has offered awards of up to $1 million. Periods of performance are typically 36 months. The program has not required a cost match in recent years.

ELIGIBILITY

Category 1 is open to state governments and public and state-controlled institutions of higher education. Category 2 is open to local governments, federally recognized tribal governments, independent school districts, private institutions of higher education, nonprofit organizations, private K–12 schools, and public charter schools. Private K–12 schools, including private charter schools, should apply as nonprofits, and public charter schools should apply as independent school districts. Each applicant may submit only one application under one category. Applications involving multiple partners will be considered, but only one entity may apply; others must be proposed as subrecipients.

DEADLINE

The program is offered annually. The notice of funding opportunity (NOFO) is typically released in late summer or early fall, with applications due in the fall. Applications are submitted in two steps: the SF-424 in Grants.gov, followed by the full application in JustGrants about one week later. Applicants should confirm that their SAM.gov registration is active well before the deadline.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

https://bja.ojp.gov/program/stop-school-violence-program/overview

BUILD Grants for Transportation: What's Next After IIJA Expires

Joseph Phelan, Grants Development Consultant

Over the years, the **Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Grant Program** has undergone several name changes. First, it was called TIGER and then BUILD and then RAISE and back to BUILD it went. The sole purpose of the overall program did not change, however. BUILD funds surface transportation projects, such as the construction of a bridge, the widening of a road, or the expansion of access to a transit authority. With the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) set to expire when the Senate's continuing resolution ends on December 11, 2026, the ongoing future of BUILD (regardless of its name) is in doubt.

The House introduced the BUILD America 250 Act (no relation to the BUILD grant program) in May to replace the IIJA. Included within the reauthorization bill is the consolidation of the US Department of Transportation's (USDOT) surface transportation programs. It is possible that funds previously reserved for BUILD will be folded into a new program called the Surface Transportation Accelerator Grant. Regardless of what it is called, this program could fund similar projects to BUILD.

While we wait for updates from the US government bodies, it is worth exploring what has been funded in recent years since BUILD first replaced TIGER during fiscal year 2018.

THE BASICS

Historically, BUILD has funded surface transportation infrastructure projects with significant local or regional impact. Examples of eligible activities found in the most recent program years include highway and bridge projects, public transportation projects, passenger and freight rail transportation projects, and port infrastructure investments. Most awards go to states, cities, townships, counties, tribes, metropolitan planning organizations, and special district governments such as ports, transit agencies, or airports.





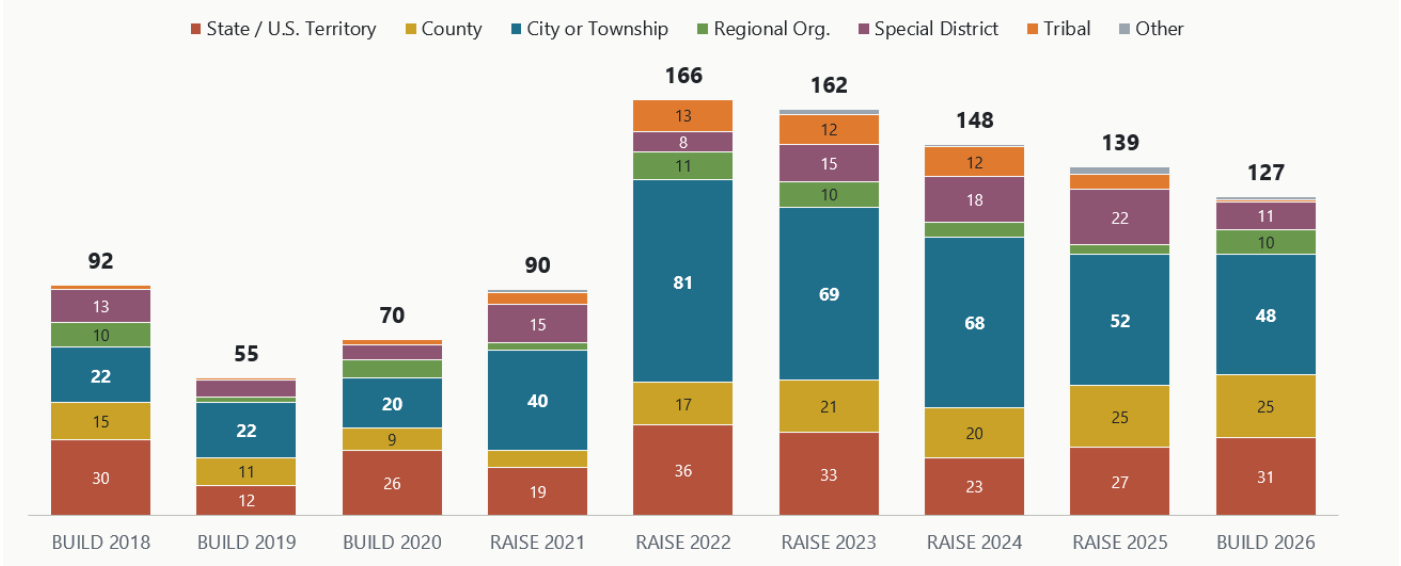
This grant program has long been competitive. On average, since 2018, 914 organizations applied resulting in 117 total awards, which is a 12.5 percent success rate. States had the most success, having a 23 percent success rate, while city and township governments received the largest share of awards at 40 percent. The 2022 program had the highest individual year with 17.7 percent of applicants being awarded. The IIJA introduced more funds to this program, so that's one of the reasons why more organizations applied in 2022 and beyond than they did before IIJA passed in late 2021.

The average award amount was $13.7 million, while the average total project cost was $36.1 million. During the first two years of this program, only capital projects were eligible, but beginning in 2020 applicants could apply for planning grants. After excluding the non-planning award rounds, most awards (67.7 percent) have been capital projects. The past three cycles saw an uptick in planning awards. In fact, 40.6 percent of awards were planning projects. The reason for that could be multiple. There has always been a set aside amount for planning projects, and there is also no floor for a planning project, so when less money was available between 2024 and 2026, it opened the door for a slight emphasis on planning projects.

BUILD has separate rules depending on the location of the applicant. Urban areas had to ask for at least $5 million, while the threshold for a rural area was $1 million. Since 2018, 55.2 percent of awards went to rural applicants. In fact, each year besides 2026, most awards went to rural areas. In 2026, rural applicants dominated the pool with 748 organizations applying, but only 59 were awarded which means only 8 percent of rural applicants were successful in 2026 compared to over 15 percent of urban applicants.

As mentioned above, city or township governments received the most awards, 422 in total over the sample years. Below is a chart featuring the number of awards per applicant type each year. Other includes nonprofit organizations, public institutions of higher education, and housing authorities.

AWARDS BY APPLICANT TYPE



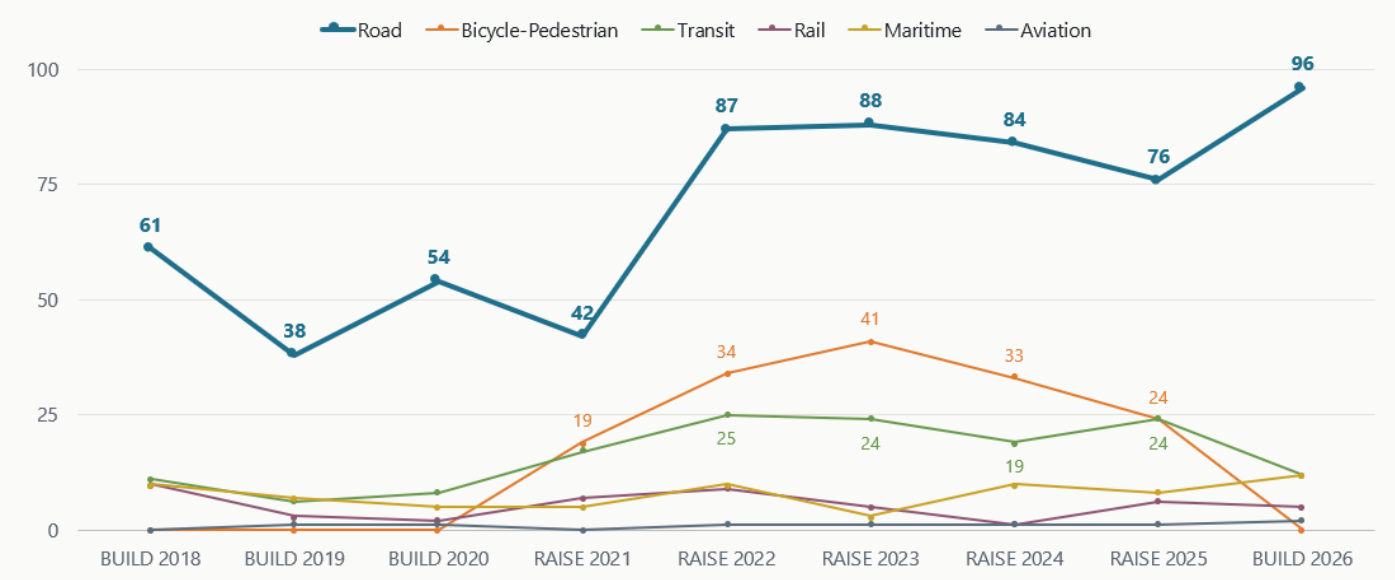
PROJECT TYPES

Unsurprisingly, most awards have been road projects. Nearly 60 percent were described as such. During the Biden administration, since bicycle and pedestrian projects were emphasized, they were briefly the second most common type of funded project. But in most other years where those projects were not prioritized, transit and trail projects were the second and third most common, respectively.

In 2026, over 1,000 road applications were submitted, but only 96 were successful for a 9.5 percent rate. More than a quarter of the maritime applications were accepted in 2026. Transit projects saw their smallest percentage of successful projects since 2021, but historically transit projects have been funded nearly 18 percent of the time, which is the highest among non-bicycle/pedestrian projects. Transit agencies had a whopping 30 percent success rate in 2025.

Road projects would continue to be the highest priority, but if this data is any indication, maritime and rail, which had a two-year average of 21.2 percent in FY 2025 and 2026, could seem to benefit greatly in the next iteration of this program.

AWARDS BY PROJECT TYPE



SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

Innovation became a merit criteria indicator for BUILD grants in 2018. Before, it was considered a secondary criterion. Most funds go towards the construction of roads or bridges, which should still be the case moving forward, but there is a role for technology in many projects. It might be sensors to monitor pavement conditions in an area susceptible to heavy rain. Or drones for an inspection to ensure safety.

Roughly 14 percent of projects have included technology. From adaptive signaling and intelligent transportation systems to sensors and camera advancements, it has been widespread with what types of technology it funds. In 2026, smart traffic signals, cameras, fiber, and surveillance were the most popular technology terms found within awarded projects, so that is worth remembering for 2027.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The future of surface transportation funding hangs in balance, and the rest of the year will be telling. The House's BUILD America 250 Act, which cleared committee and awaits a floor vote, mentioned the Surface Transportation Accelerator Grant (STAG) program as a possible replacement. A final bill still needs Senate action and a negotiated compromise between the chambers. Meanwhile, Congress must either finalize a reauthorization or pass another stopgap once the continuing resolution expires in December.

Three Committees, Three Questions: How to Survive the CFI Innovation Fund's Review Funnel

Elizabeth Evans, Manager of Research and Consultation

The Canada Foundation for Innovation's (CFI) Innovation Fund is one of Canada's largest sources of research infrastructure funding, granting roughly $400 million per competition. In 2025,

Up to $325 million in total funding is available for awards under the 2027 Innovation Fund competition.

CFI invested $425 million across 32 institutions. An additional $751 million leveraged from awardees' provincial, private-sector, and other partners brought the total to $1.2 billion toward new research infrastructure. Demand for the Innovation Fund routinely outpaces the supply of funds. During the 2025 competition, for example, 334 proposals were submitted for a requested total of $1.4 billion. Only 28% of those proposals were awarded. That level of competition was not unique to 2025, however. Over the last several cycles of competition, success rate averaged about 30 percent.

With notices of intent for the 2027 competition submitted, applicants to the Innovation Fund now turn to the real work: preparing full proposals due February 2, 2027. Once submitted, proposals will pass through three rounds of review. Each round is run by a distinct review committee, each with its own focus. Understanding what each committee looks for is one of the best ways to keep a proposal in contention through all three.

THREE COMMITTEES, ONE NARROWING FUNNEL

The table shows how the 2025 pool of proposals narrowed at each stage.

What do these numbers show?

- The first cut is the deepest. In 2025, Expert Committees eliminated 42% of proposals (a 58% pass rate), which is up from 19% in 2023. A proposal that would have advanced two years ago is less likely to do so today.
- Excellence is not the same as relevance. The MACs cut another 36% (a 64% pass rate), even though each proposal had already cleared the Expert Committee's excellence threshold. At this stage, reviewers from other disciplines judge proposals against the competition's broader objectives, not the research alone.
- Being fundable is not the same as getting funded. About one in four proposals the MACs recommended for funding did not make the S-MAC's final list. By this point, every remaining proposal has been judged worthy of funding, and the decision comes down to comparing strong proposals against each other.

Knowing where proposals fall away is only half the picture. The other half is understanding why, and that starts with what each committee looks for. Successful applicants make sure their proposals answer each committee's questions, at every stage of review.

Stage	Review Committee	Starting Proposals	Progressed Proposals	Stage's Pass Rate	Overall Pass Rate
1	Expert Committee	334	195	58%	58%
2	Multidisciplinary Assessment Committee (MAC)	195	125	64%	37%
3	Special Multidisciplinary Assessment Committee (S-MAC)	125	92	74%	28%

STAGE 1: THE EXPERT COMMITTEE ASKS, "IS THIS EXCELLENT?"

Expert Committee members are specialists (usually three to seven per committee). CFI uses submitted Notices of Intent to decide what expertise is needed and to recruit reviewers for the Expert Committee. That means the team and project described in September shapes who reads the full proposal come February. That's why, if the project team, collaborating institutions, or stream has changed since the NOI submission, it is imperative that CFI be notified immediately so that committee members can be appropriately adjusted. The Expert Committee reviews small batches of proposals in or near their own field and rate each proposal against five criteria: research, team, infrastructure, sustainability, and benefits.

These committees produce the biggest cut to the applicant pool, and their threshold for what moves forward is strict: a proposal is eliminated if it receives three or more ratings of "satisfies with minor weaknesses," or a single rating of "partially satisfies" or "does not satisfy."

Because reviewers rate each criterion separately, structure matters. The strongest proposals address every criterion and sub-criterion in the order the call for proposals lists them, under clear subheadings, so reviewers can easily find what they're scoring. They also include every required element, such as a competency matrix for the team and a table matching infrastructure to research activities. A missing table for any of the five criteria automatically invites a lower rating.

Strong science or CVs cannot carry a weak sustainability plan. Every section has to hold up.

Reviewers also look past the numbers. CFI instructs Expert Committee reviewers not to judge a proposal team's quality only by citation counts or similar metrics. Proposals can still include those figures, but the strongest ones also show what the team's work has changed (e.g., a technology adopted by industry, a tool other researchers rely on, or trainees who went on to lead their own programs). Those qualitative examples also increase a proposal's chances at the next stage when Benefits to Canadians is a consideration.

STAGE 2: THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (MAC) ASKS, "DOES THIS MATTER MORE THAN THE OTHERS?"

Proposals that clear stage one move to review by the MACs. These committees compare proposals of similar size or complexity and judge them against the competition's three broad objectives (strengthening international competitiveness, building sustainable capacity, and generating benefits for Canadians), rather than the five detailed criteria.

The reviewer audience changes for stage two. Each MAC typically includes a Chair and about 10 committee members from around the world. MAC members are chosen for their broad understanding of the research environment, rather than expertise in any single field. Every MAC includes members well-versed in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles and members with core facility experience.

A proposal that impressed specialists with technical detail now has to persuade reviewers from other disciplines that it matters. That is why the strongest proposals frame the problem clearly, use language accessible to researchers outside the field, and explicitly link the project to each of the three objectives. Winning proposals also make the infrastructure's reach clear. Core facilities drew roughly 60% of CFI's 2025 investment, so if the infrastructure will truly be shared with other researchers or run as a core facility, the proposal should state that directly.

CFI emphasizes that relying only on institutional EDI guidelines and policies alone is insufficient. Reviewers will look for proposals to have team-specific plans, supporting evidence, and a way to measure whether these plans work.

Institutional size is also accounted for at this stage. In each competition, one or more specialized MACs review only proposals from small institutions (which typically receive less than 1% of the funding awarded by Canada's three federal research funding agencies). CFI credits these dedicated committees with keeping small-institution success rates steady, at roughly 25% of proposals funded in recent competitions. This means that applicants from small institutions don't need to overreach to compete with large universities. These proposals compete only with their peers. The strongest ones show how the proposed infrastructure will transform their institution's research capacity, on a scale that reflects that institution's reality. For small institutions, the MAC stage offers a measure of fairness.



STAGE 3: THE SPECIAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE (S-MAC) ASKS, "IS THIS THE BEST USE OF THE MONEY?"

The test: could a thoughtful stranger who reads only the project summary explain what the project will build, why it matters, and how it meets each of the three objectives?

If MACs are the semifinal judges, then the S-MAC is the selection committee choosing the winners. The S-MAC reviews every proposal the MACs pass forward. In doing so, the S-MAC has two jobs. First, it checks that the MACs rated proposals consistently. Second, if the MAC-recommended proposals total more than the available budget, the S-MAC chooses which ones actually make the cut for funding, aiming for a final mix that will most benefit Canada.

The biggest challenge for proposals at this stage? The only section of the entire application package that the S-MAC receives is the Project Summary. Those three pages (or four if the application is submitted in French) have to make the entire case for the project. To land in the funded pile, applicants should treat the Project Summary as a standalone pitch for the project, not just an abstract.

Project summaries should cover three things: a general description of the research program, an overview of the requested infrastructure, and how the project meets the objectives of the competition. The objectives are what carry the most weight, as the S-MAC's job is to assemble a portfolio of funded projects that will most benefit Canada. Applicants should make the response to each objective easy for the S-MAC reviewers to find, and weave the benefits to Canadians throughout the summary as well as reiterated in the final paragraph.



LOOKING AHEAD

Beyond what each committee looks for, CFI's own results offer clues about what successful proposals have in common. These patterns show association, not cause, but they also correct a few assumptions that can lead applicants astray. Three stand out for teams preparing full proposals now.

1. **Build collaboration into the project, not just the team list.** Adding co-applicants from other institutions does not, on its own, make a proposal collaborative. The 2027 call encourages "meaningful" interinstitutional collaboration, and each collaborating institution's envelope contribution must reflect the infrastructure it will house or its scientific contribution to the project. The effort pays off: in 2025, multi-institutional projects succeeded 43% of the time, compared with 25% for single-institution projects. With the NOI deadline behind them, applicants can still find the right partner. CFI publishes the list of NOIs it received, with a short summary of each, and encourages institutions with complementary projects to consider joining forces. Any new collaborating institution should be reported to CFI as soon as possible.

Any new collaborating institution, team change, or stream change should be reported to CFI as soon as possible, since CFI uses the submitted Notices of Intent to recruit the various review committee members.

2. **Give early-career researchers (ECR) real roles.** In 2025, 77% of funded proposals included at least one ECR on the team, which undercuts the belief that only senior-led teams succeed. That result lines up with the call itself, which names ECRs among the underrepresented groups every team is expected to support. Rather than listing ECRs for appearance, successful teams give them defined responsibilities, such as a seat in the project's leadership or advisory structure.
3. **Don't let budget size, language, or discipline narrow the plan.** In Grants Office's experience, three beliefs tend to hold applicants back: that smaller requests are safer, that English proposals fare better, and that CFI rarely funds the social sciences, humanities, and arts (SSHA). The 2025 results challenge each one of these misconceptions. Requests over $8 million succeeded 40% of the time, and smaller requests still succeeded 25% to 33% of the time, whatever their size. French and English proposals had similar success and funding rates. The funding rate for SSHA projects rose from 4% in 2023 to 18% in 2025, though it still trails the overall rate. In short, applicants do best when they size the request to what the project needs, write in the language the team writes best, and apply to the stream that fits the research, including the dedicated SSHA stream.

Three committees will ask three questions. Proposals that answer all three, in terms each committee values, give themselves the best odds of making the funded list. With the February 2 deadline three months away, now is the time to write for every reader.

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Program Snapshot

Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) Innovation Fund

SUMMARY

The Innovation Fund supports a wide array of research initiatives across various disciplines, including natural sciences, engineering, health, social sciences, humanities, and the arts, as well as interdisciplinary research. Projects funded through this program are designed to help Canada stay at the forefront of global exploration, knowledge generation, and innovation. By supporting groundbreaking research, the Innovation Fund drives progress across multiple sectors, contributing to social, health, environmental, and economic benefits. Additionally, it plays a key role in addressing pressing global challenges, positioning Canada as a leader in advancing solutions that have far-reaching impacts on communities and industries both locally and globally.

The objectives of the 2027 Innovation Fund competition are to:

- Strengthen researchers' ability to excel and compete internationally
- Build sustainable research capacity
- Generate relevant and impactful benefits for Canadians

The competition has three streams with tailored assessment criteria and no predetermined distribution of funding among them:

1. Stream 1: Leading edge of exploration and knowledge generation (open to all disciplines)
2. Stream 2: Leading edge of exploration and knowledge generation in the social sciences, humanities and arts (SSHA)
3. Stream 3: Creation, renewal and upgrade of core facilities



ELIGIBILITY

Canadian universities, colleges, research hospitals and non-profit research institutions recognized as eligible to receive CFI funding can apply. A list of eligible institutions is available at https://www.innovation.ca/apply-manage-awards/resources-apply-manage-award/list-eligible-institutions.

DEADLINE

The deadline to submit the required notices of intent was September 29, 2026, and the deadline to submit full proposals is February 2, 2027.

The CFI Board of Directors will make funding decisions in November 2027. Innovation Fund competitions now run every two years.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

https://www.innovation.ca/apply-manage-awards/funding-opportunities/innovation-fund#!nav-fund-overview

Election Security Funding: A Critical Investment in Free and Fair Elections

Amanda Day, Grants Development Consultant

The 2020 and 2024 presidential elections were among the most secure in American history, thanks to years of investment in modernizing voting equipment, expanding auditing procedures, and coordinating between state and local election officials and federal cybersecurity agencies.

Poll locations across the US deployed a number of paper-based voting and audit practices, which provided a physical trail that could be checked against electronic totals. Increased post-election audits and recounts required in many states ensured that any discrepancies were detected after the initial counts. Entering the 2020 election, agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) shared threat intelligence and provided security assistance to state and local election officials across all 50 states and U.S. territories. Additionally, physical security and cybersecurity measures improved from previous election cycles, with CISA providing physical-security assessments, training, threat information, and specific checklists for securing polling locations and election facilities. State and local election officials were committed to delivering fair and accurate results nationwide, even during a global pandemic that forced jurisdictions to adapt their processes quickly.

Now those same officials are preparing for another safe, secure election in a very different landscape. With the midterm elections just behind us and the 2028 presidential election on the horizon, election security has never been more critical. Poll workers must feel safe reporting for duty, free from threats and harassment. Voters, in turn, need confidence that their ballots will be counted accurately and that the systems safeguarding that count are secure from interference, whether foreign or domestic. Yet federal funding for election security has declined sharply in recent years.

HAVA: THE BACKBONE OF FEDERAL INVESTMENTS IN ELECTIONS

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) was established in 2002 to provide federal funds to states and territories to upgrade voting systems and improve federal election administration. The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) provides formula funds



based on (1) the voting age population of the State (as reported in the most recent decennial census); and (2) the total voting age population of all States (as reported in the most recent decennial census). States have discretion over how they use these funds to improve federal election administration, including physical security improvements, training for election officials, and IT upgrades. Physical security funding may support stronger access controls, surveillance equipment, secure storage, incident-response planning, chain-of-custody procedures, and public communications designed to counter false claims without disclosing sensitive operational details. Common IT investments include replacing aging voting equipment, strengthening voter-registration databases, improving network monitoring, addressing vulnerabilities identified through security assessments, expanding cybersecurity training, and establishing reliable post-election audit procedures.

In 2026, Congress appropriated only $45 million in HAVA funds, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. This is a far cry from the $380 million allocated per year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and HAVA's peak allocation of $425 million in 2020 to support mail-in voting procedures and other supports during the shutdown.

The decline over the last six years stems from a few factors. Several US federal lawmakers argue that after the initial investment, ongoing contributions were not necessary and that states should assume a greater portion of the cost for future election cycles. These lawmakers point to a handful of states with unspent balances from the initial investments in 2018 and 2020 to argue that states should use those funds to support their elections. Currently, states are required to match HAVA allocations from the federal government by a 20% match.

State election agencies have largely pushed back to claim the initial investment helped secure elections at the time, but advances in technology and increased threats from cyber attackers, foreign and domestic, continue to plague federal, state, and local elections. They argue continued election funding from the federal government is necessary to keep up with these threats and upgrade voting equipment, network infrastructure, staff training, and physical security measures.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING MECHANISMS FOR ELECTION SECURITY

In addition to HAVA dollars, the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) requires that states spend at least 3% of their annual allocations on election security. Meanwhile, the Biden-era **State and Local Cybersecurity Grant Program (SLCGP)**, a major source of funding for cybersecurity initiatives, is nearing the end of its four-year life cycle. The SLCGP helps state, local, and territorial governments, including election offices, defend against cyber threats. Coalitions of state and local leaders, including several members of Congress and the National League of Cities (NACIO), continue lobbying to secure an additional $300 million annually to keep this program running through 2035.



Along with HAVA, HSGP, and SLCGP, Congress appropriated more than $39 million for the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) in April 2026. The funds are intended to provide a critical resource: free, voluntary cybersecurity intelligence for state, local, tribal, and territorial election offices nationwide. In 2024, EI-ISAC served about 3,700 jurisdictions with threat intelligence and guidance on protecting against cyberattacks and foreign interference.

APPROPRIATED IS NOT DISBURSED

Unfortunately, some of this funding has not reached its intended recipients. The current federal administration has yet to disburse the $39 million for EI-ISAC in the 2026 budget that ended on September 30th. Further, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), which provides free, voluntary cybersecurity services and tools to state, local, tribal, and territorial election officials, has lost $2.9 billion in funding and roughly one-third of its workforce since 2025. These funding cuts are a result of widespread reductions across federal agencies throughout the government.

On July 10, 2026, DHS announced it would withhold 20% of select FEMA grant funds, including the **State Homeland Security Program (SHSP)**, **Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI)**, and **Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPG)**, totaling more than $220 million, until states adopted election administration practices set by the administration. The conditions include requiring states to submit plans to use equipment that accepts hand-marked paper ballots rather than electronic voting systems that use bar codes and QR codes to count votes. DHS said states would also have to manually audit at least 5% of ballots cast, match the number of voters who participated in each federal election with the number of votes cast, and compare their voter rolls to a DHS database to ensure no non-U.S. citizens were improperly registered to vote. States would also be required to perform citizenship checks of election workers.

Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia, including California, Hawaii, Michigan, New Jersey, and New York, have sued in federal court in Rhode Island, arguing that the mandates exceed the federal government's authority because states, not the federal government, administer elections under the Constitution. The case is still pending as of publication.

FINDING MORE DOLLARS FOR ELECTION SECURITY EFFORTS

States and several federal lawmakers argue these drastic cutbacks can reduce auditing capacity, weaken cyber and physical security measures, leave voting equipment outdated, cut staffing levels, and leave election officials without adequate training. Officials are not standing by while these cuts happen. Beyond the states' lawsuit, U.S. Senators Alex Padilla and Adam Schiff introduced the State and Local Election Security Act (S. 4849) in June 2026. The legislation would fund state and local governments to modernize election infrastructure, improve administrative efficiency, and prevent, prepare for, and respond to election security threats.

Proposed S. 4849 State and Local Election Security Act

- **$10 billion from FY2026-2028**
- **54 States and Territories**
- **50% pass-through required from states to local election administrators**
- **Funds remain available for 5 years**
- **Separately authorizes $50 million per year (FY2026–2028) to CISA specifically for grants to the Center for Internet Security to run EI-ISAC**

Further, some states have begun using funding from their own budgets to create election security programs. In 2025, the Arizona legislature approved $3.4 million to strengthen cybersecurity ahead of this year's midterms. Additionally, the Colorado Election Security Act awarded over $945,000 in security grants to county clerk's offices to upgrade physical security in County election offices across the state.

THE 2028 CLOCK IS ALREADY RUNNING

Though the next presidential election is more than two years away, election infrastructure investments take years to plan and implement. Election security is an ongoing infrastructure function, not something governments can fund only in the final months before an election. Now is the time to invest in voting infrastructure to ensure safe and accurate elections in the future.

Most states and local governments simply do not have the budgets to replace both the direct grant dollars from programs like HAVA and SHSP and the free services from CISA and EI-ISAC. Without a reliable, timely funding stream, the gap between what election offices need and what they can count on will only widen heading into 2028.



Partners, Proof and Place: What Recent Competitions Tell Us About Winning Grants

Christina Fernandez, Grants Development Consultant

Over the years, Grants Office has shared plenty of advice on what it takes to build a winning grant proposal to the US federal government. But the last 24-months have shown substantial shifts in priorities, eligibility rules, and award results that have Grants Office staff and grantseekers alike taking a pause to reevaluate best grantseeking practices. One of the best places to start is to examine awarded applicants that cleared the bar in recent federal competitions.

In this article we will discuss three themes that stand out the most: who you partner with, how you prove it works, and where your project reaches. While our examples will be most relevant to education grantseekers, the foundation holds true for public sector competitors across the US.



PARTNERS

What is happening?

Partnerships have always been important in grantseeking, and they're even more important today. Nearly every federal grant program published for education grantseekers in 2025 and 2026 signaled that partnerships were expected or valued in some way. Some stated this preference explicitly - building partnership requirements into program eligibility and mandating letters of support. Others were less explicit. In reading recent Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs), there are a couple of different ways you can tell if a partnership would strengthen your application:

- **Award sizes-** Large federal awards often signal that the funder expects a project to be broader than one organization could carry out alone.
- **Research questions-** Grant programs that mention developing or testing an innovative approach are often paired with the assumption that applicants will leverage the expertise of an area university or research institute to track progress and measure success.
- **Settings-** Programs that support informal learning outside of the classroom often signal that applicants should engage with community partners who already operate in those spaces rather than starting them from scratch.

Also be on the lookout for the phrase "Applicants are encouraged to…" when it comes to partnerships. While not stated as a hard-and-fast rule, this is the federal government's way of voluntelling you that partnerships will be heavily weighed during the review process.

Federal education funders have always valued collaborative partnerships because they help ensure grant dollars reach beyond a single district or campus and support projects that can be sustained over time. However, recent Department of Education (ED) discretionary grant competitions have introduced a new kind of explicit partnership: the state. Much of this shift traces back to the Secretary's supplemental priority on Returning Education to the States, published in September of 2025. Since then, it has appeared across ED competitions, from **Education Innovation and Research (EIR)** to **Innovative Approaches to Literacy**, and newer programs like **Career Pathways Exploration** and **School Safety Enhancement**, administered by partner agencies under ED's interagency agreements. What's more, many discretionary grant programs have been limiting eligibility to only states, requiring the governor's endorsement, or awarding priority to projects with state agency involvement. State agencies have the capacity to run the large, comprehensive programs federal funders often look for. When a competition is only open to states, states are given the option to regrant their funds either competitively or non-competitively. Making getting on your state's radar more important than ever.



What can you do?

Now, this type of partnership may seem intimidating or discouraging, but it just means a bit more pre-award planning! As you would do with any partnership, you will want to do your research. This time you will be researching your state's priorities to find where they align with your own. You'll also want to begin your outreach efforts several months before a program opens. During this time, you will want to connect with state officials and federal program officers to learn more about the statewide initiatives for that department. Several federal programs require Letters of Intent to Apply or initial consultation with program officers before applying anyways, so you will want to continue those practices. Lastly, you'll want to bring your existing partnerships to those conversations. Showing that you've already built local and regional partners tells the state you're not a single entity asking for support, but a ready partner who can help move a statewide initiative forward.

PROOF

What is happening?

You wouldn't want a doctor to prescribe a treatment that has never been tested. Federal funders approach projects the same way. Every federal grant is an investment of taxpayer dollars, and funders want confidence that their investment will pay off. That's why evidence-based practices have long been a cornerstone of federal education grantmaking.

Today's grant competitions are weighing the strength of that evidence much more. Under ESSA, evidence falls into four tiers: strong, moderate, promising, and demonstrates a rationale. Recent competitions are increasingly rewarding applicants whose project components are backed by strong evidence or have been rigorously evaluated. For example, a recent round of the Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program held only its **Mid-phase** and **Expansion** competitions, skipping the Early-phase tier designed for newer, less-tested ideas, and centered both on evidence-based literacy instruction. The more clearly you can describe that evidence and how it supports your approach, the more competitive your application will be.

What can you do?

There are a number of ways you can show the proof behind your proposal:

Look to federal evidence clearinghouses- Rather than searching for research from scratch, begin with the clearinghouses federal agencies use to review and rate programs. In education, that's the What Works Clearinghouse. For example: If you're pursuing school safety funding like the School Violence Prevention Program through the Department of Justice (DOJ), look to DOJ's CrimeSolutions. Always confirm which clearinghouse and evidence standard the program prefers.

Build a logic model with specific, measurable activities- Most federal education grants request or require a logic model. In order to meet the "demonstrates a rationale" evidence tier, key components of the logic model must be informed by research. Funders look to logic models to see how your resources and activities lead to outputs and intended outcomes. Designing one makes it easier to spot gaps in your project design, connect your activities to the evidence you've found, and build an evaluation plan that measures it all. Even if a logic model is not required, it's worth building one anyway to keep your project rooted in logic.

Show your project is scalable- If you are planning to apply for a program that supports activities rooted in strong evidence, then that means it's likely been tested in multiple settings. So you'll want to dig deeper and think about economies of scale and how you will balance implementation fidelity across settings. EIR is a good example of projects being expected to move through the various evidence tiers.



PLACE

What is happening?

Rural communities have long been a priority in federal grant programs. Longstanding programs like USDA's **Distance Learning and Telemedicine (DLT) program** were created specifically to serve rural end users. Others are required to set aside a portion of their funds for rural projects. Part of the reason is capacity. Many small rural organizations don't have dedicated grant staff, which makes large federal applications hard to pursue on their own.

However in today's landscape, rural communities are coming out ahead in programs that aren't rural-specific. For example, the DOJ's FY 2025 **School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP)** competition granted 76% of its awards towards rural jurisdiction, compared to FY 2020 where only 50% were awarded. We also saw this trend in EDs FY 2025 EIR competition, which directed more than 65% of its awards, over $167 million, to rural projects. This was well above the program's 25% statutory minimum. While this trend may not hold for every program, serving rural populations can strengthen an application.

What can you do?

Think beyond your own area. Reaching rural communities doesn't require being in one. Many rural competitive preference priorities are based on the communities a project serves, not where the applicant is located. As you design your project, ask:

- Are there other populations who would benefit from this program?
- Do similar gaps exist in other communities that your project could address?
- Does the notice target high-need populations? Those definitions may include rural areas, so check whether nearby rural communities qualify.

If the answer to any of these is yes, consider reaching out. When organizations collaborate across settings, each fills a gap for the other: one may bring grant development and evaluation capacity, while the other brings local knowledge and trusted community relationships.

BOTTOM LINE

The fundamentals of grantseeking haven't changed, but recent competitions are raising the bar on how applicants put them into practice. Start building partnerships early, including with your state. Back your approach with strong evidence and a clear plan to measure your results. Look beyond your own community to the populations your project could reach. None of this requires starting from scratch; it builds on the planning strong grantseekers already do. As a general rule, the most competitive proposals today don't just describe a good idea; they show who will carry it out, who it will reach, and how you'll know it worked.

The Criminal Justice Process: From Response to Reentry

Shannon Day, Senior Grants Development Consultant



The criminal justice process is a series of interconnected phases, each with its own unique challenges. In this third in a series of articles, we break down that process, piece by piece. In the last issue of FUNDED® Magazine, we covered courts, prosecution, and defense. This final article moves back to where the process begins: response and investigations. The two go hand in hand and often happen at the same time.

Find our last article on courts, corrections, and reentry in our Summer Issue of FUNDED.

THE CALL

The process often starts with a call to 911. That call is entered into a computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system and dispatched to an officer in the field. Calls could range anywhere from a lost tourist needing directions, to a domestic violence call, to a death investigation. While 911 calltakers get as much information as they can, officers still don't know exactly what they're walking into. A simple fender-bender could devolve into an active chase in moments.

To assist with these calls, the patrol vehicle functions as the officer's office. If you've ever seen the inside of a police car (I hope you haven't), it seems there's barely room for a human in the front seat between the radios, cameras, computers, and related hardware. And officers need reliable equipment; it isn't hyperbole when they say lives depend on it.

GRANTS FOR THE HUMAN COMPONENT

Behind every 911 call, patrol shift, and investigation is a person. Dispatchers, officers, and detectives are the backbone of the process, and keeping those positions funded and filled is a constant challenge for agencies.

Even though law enforcement budgets across the US have steadily increased since 1959 (before adjusting for inflation), departments have a hard time keeping up with the rising cost of equipment, technology, and salaries. Law enforcement agencies regularly use grants to plug these gaps. For staffing shortages and retention challenges, they leverage grants like the federal **COPS Hiring Program (CHP)** and the **Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS)**. State grants like Maryland's **Police Recruitment and Retention Grant Program (PRAR)** can also help with this. Alongside hiring and retention efforts, many agencies are attempting to do more with fewer law enforcement officers on staff - turning instead to technology as a force multiplier.

GRANTS FOR THE TECHNOLOGY MULTIPLIERS

Using technology as a force multiplier essentially means using equipment to help humans do their jobs. In law enforcement, this can be anything from laptops to cameras to software. One small agency I worked with in rural Georgia used the federal **Rural Violent Crime Reduction Initiative** grant to install fixed cameras at busy intersections and in a problem area. These cameras help the two-person department by giving them a view of what's happening before and during response. The department also had a hard time getting eye-witness statements, so the cameras provide an objective view. Even if a human is willing to give a statement, human ears and eyes are unreliable and human memories are faulty. Technology helps to gather information while always remaining neutral and effectively 'on' during challenging response calls and investigations.

GRANTS FOR EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

While departments are leaning on technology to multiply their effectiveness, they experience a new challenge in keeping pace with the evolution of technology itself. As soon as a department purchases the newest, best thing, a newer, better thing is on the market. Federal funders try to align grants with the pace of emerging technologies, but their programs often feel like lumbering mammoths – big and effective, but very slow.

Unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), commonly called drones, are a good example of this phenomenon. Many public safety agencies use drones for search and rescue, crash investigations, and situational awareness during an active shooter event. While Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grants have historically been friendly to drone purchases, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) treated drones as unallowable. That changed in December 2025, when the FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (Public Law 119-60) and 34 U.S. Code § 10152 amended the **Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (JAG)** statute to add two new purpose areas, one for drones and one for counter-drone systems. JAG is now the clearest path for local agencies, but not the only one. The **COPS Technology and Equipment Program**, a congressionally directed funding mechanism, lists drones as allowable equipment. Tribal agencies can also request them through CTAS. But conditions still apply. The drone must be on the Blue UAS Cleared List for example. Agencies also need privacy, civil liberties, and cybersecurity policies in place prior to BJA-approved drone purchases.

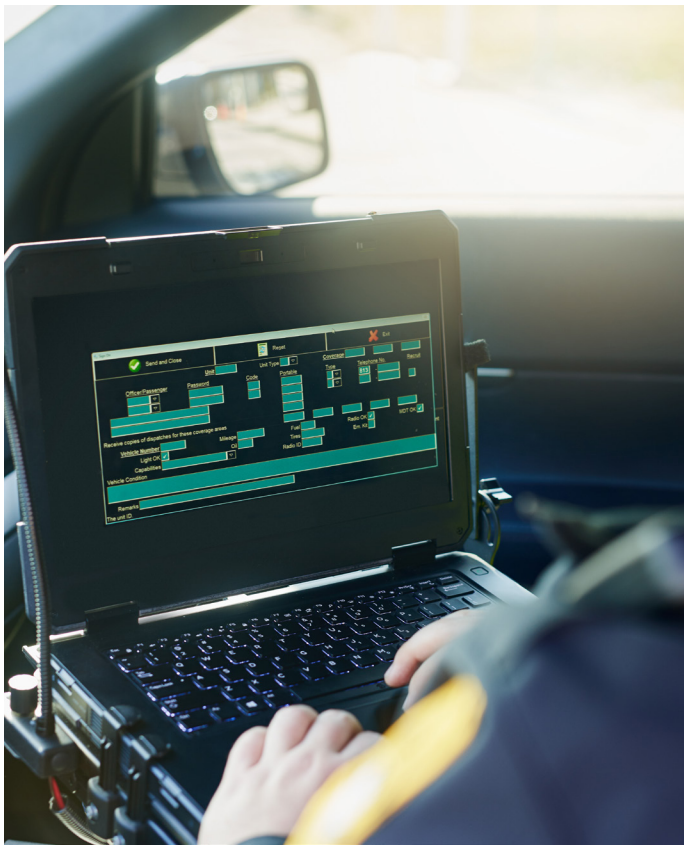
Drones may also create a new threat, and funding has followed. In 2025, Public Law 119-21 (commonly known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act) created the **Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems (C-UAS) Grant Program**. This pass-through program funds technology to detect, identify, monitor, track, and mitigate nefarious or unlawful drone use, helping public safety officials protect the public and critical infrastructure. The program totals $500 million. The first $250 million went to FIFA World Cup and America 250 hosts, and the second round is expected to open to all State Administrative Agencies (SAAs) in the coming months.

Another emerging technology is Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is frequently embedded in standard technology force multipliers, like cameras, laptops, and drones. But it's also now being deployed in more autonomous functions, such as real-time translation for 911 calls, bodyworn cameras with transcription capabilities to aid in report writing, and data analytics for predictive policing. The federal government has responded to these advancements in technology by giving departments more flexibility to request funding for the equipment they need. Federal funders rarely name AI as an allowable cost. Instead, you'll more often see language like, "Comprehensive, real-time, regional information collection, analysis, and dissemination" (from the **Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Site-based Program**) or, "Modernize Electronic Health Record (EHR) systems and related technology to improve data collection, data sharing, coordination, and accountability between justice and behavioral health systems" (from the **Public Safety and Mental Health Initiative**). AI-enabled tools can fit under broad language like this when the project need is clear.

This is why the saying "grants fund projects, not just products" matters so much. Law enforcement agencies have always and will always be there for one reason: to protect and serve. So when thinking about keeping up with the latest thing, remember: what will this thing help me accomplish?

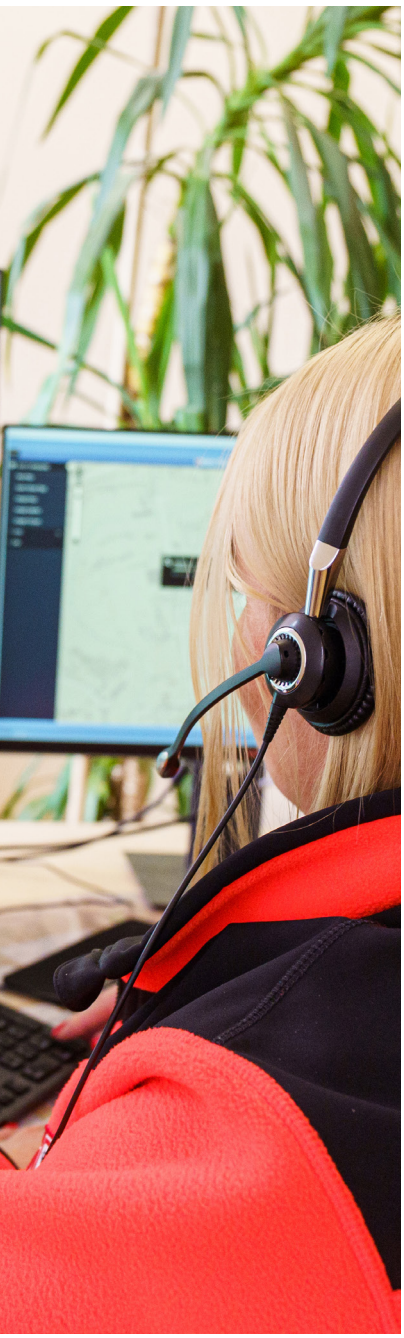
CONCLUSION

This wraps up our series on the criminal justice process, from initial response and investigations through courts, corrections, and reentry. The hope for all criminal justice agencies is that the cycle ends with successful reentry. Recidivism reduction is the ultimate goal, and keeping people out of the justice system completely is the ideal. Until we reach that utopia, we have grants to help the process.



Program Snapshot

Rural Law Enforcement Violent Crime Reduction Initiative (RVCI)



SUMMARY

The Rural Law Enforcement Violent Crime Reduction Initiative (formerly Rural and Small Department Violent Crime Reduction Program) assists local law enforcement in rural jurisdictions to prevent, respond to, and reduce violent crime, utilizing one or more of the following approaches:

- **Personnel, Tactics, Training, and Equipment to Reduce Violent Crime.** This includes updated technology and tools, including records management systems, vehicles, vests, and firearms that assist agencies in responding to and preventing violent crime. This also includes hiring additional personnel such as a prosecutor or criminologist to strategically address persistent crimes, early case management, and increased police training.
- **Technological Enhancements to Reduce Violent Crime.** Technology takes the form of hardware, software, communications systems, intelligence centers, and equipment. Technology systems can create the infrastructure for actionable intelligence, enhance officer safety, support efficient operations, shorten case filing timelines, and manage risk.
- **Data Analytics and Intelligence.** Enhance crime analysis capabilities through personnel, training, and software enhancements to identify crime hotspots, predict high-risk times and locations, and allocate resources more effectively to prevent violent incidents before they occur.
- Other approaches that align with the Department's priorities and provide a significant reduction in violent crime rates.

ELIGIBILITY

State and local governments, units of local government, and Native American tribal governments (federally recognized) serving a rural area are eligible to apply.

DEADLINE

Applicants were to submit SF-424 to Grants.gov by October 30, 2026. Full applications were to be submitted to JustGrants by November 6, 2026.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

https://bja.ojp.gov/program/rvcri/overview

Thinking About SBIR? Confirm Your Business is Ready First

Dr. Liz Shay, Senior Grants Development Consultant

The Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs are a vital source of early funding for research and development for small businesses in the United States as they work towards commercialization. Winning an award gives a small business an opportunity to develop a prototype and expand it into a viable product ready to pursue venture capital funding.

Want to know more about the basics of the SBIR/STTR programs? Check out our article from the February 2026 FUNDED issue.

The ability to move an idea into a realized product on a quick timeline through SBIR funding is tempting for many small businesses, and, as a result, many of the SBIR programs are quite competitive. Awarding agencies want to know that they can trust that everything is in place to move rapidly once you start the SBIR process. Ensuring your concept, project, and organization are all prepared well before putting pen to paper to write an SBIR application will give you the best chance of success. This article assumes your business meets the basic eligibility criteria for SBIR and digs into what successful applicants have in place when they submit that leads to awarded projects.

Basic eligibility requirements for SBIR require that your entity is:

- **A for-profit entity**
- **Federally registered (has an active Unique Entity Identifier (UEI))**
- **Is located in the United States**
- **Is owned and controlled by U.S. citizens or permanent residents**
- **Has fewer than five hundred employees (including affiliates).** *Note: most competitive applications have fewer than ten employees.*



CONCEPT READINESS

Before applying for SBIR, it's important to ensure that your interests are in alignment with the program (and a specific solicitation) and the goals of the SBIR initiative. Now is the time to determine if your idea is sound and appropriate for SBIR, which will result in a review of your application and serious consideration for funding.

Genuine Agency Fit

The eleven participating federal agencies are looking to support you in developing technologies that they will be able to then purchase and utilize in their own work or will solve a problem they're seeing in their sector. For example, the Department of Education is interested in products that improve student learning, while the Department of Transportation is looking for technologies that aid in smart transportation. **Close and clear alignment of your goals with a federal agency and one of its SBIR solicitations ensures your application is taken seriously.** Reviewers screen applications first on fit, so ensuring this alignment will help your application move forward.

Genuine agency fit requires alignment across all these areas:

1. **Agency topic:** each agency has specific priority areas (such as semiconductors for Department of Commerce or biomedical sciences for Department of Health and Human Services), and your idea must fit within that priority area to be a fit for that agency.
2. **Solicitation topic:** many agencies have multiple SBIR solicitations, each with different topic areas. Even if an agency lists a particular priority area, if it doesn't appear within a solicitation, then that is not something they are focused on right now. Your topic must be clearly centered within a single solicitation's area(s) of interest.
3. **Target audience:** federal agencies have known constituent audiences that they are looking to support (such as farmers for Department of Agriculture or defense contractors for Department of Defense). Confirm that your audience is aligned with the audience described in the solicitation. Do not force alignment. Instead, review your business's target customer and look for alignment with a specific solicitation.
4. **Stated goals:** SBIR funding agencies describe their goals in each of their solicitations. Define your own goals and outcomes for your product and ensure alignment with the goals stated in the SBIR guidance.

Actual Innovation

The SBIR program supports "innovative technologies" development. These federal agencies are interested in supporting high-risk research and development projects that push the envelope. In fact, some of the funding agencies use words like "game-changing" and "disruptive" when describing the technologies they are looking to support under SBIR. **Your product idea must meet the level of uncertainty in success that SBIR is looking to support.**

There are many different types of innovation, but the SBIR program is only interested in a subset of those opportunities that have potential but are risky enough to need this seed funding support. SBIR is not looking to fund projects that are incremental improvements on things that are already known to work. They also don't want to support simple combinations of technologies that work in other contexts. If all that is needed to build a successful product is time and money, then the technology is likely not a good fit for SBIR.

Instead, SBIR is focused on products that will require significant research and development to go to market. Your product idea should be grounded in novel scientific or engineering principles and be clearly differentiated from the existing ways that potential customers address the problem you are looking to solve. SBIR funders anticipate that you will be doing regular market testing and refinement throughout the SBIR process to get to a final product that is substantially new from anything seen before.





Clear Market Need

Being able to clearly explain your planned market and the need that you will be addressing is one of the biggest keys to justifying your need for funds. SBIR funding agencies want to understand why they should care. **Quantifiably show why your product is going to solve priority problems for the funding agency.** Specificity in your descriptions will earn funder trust; vague details will lose it. Convey details about your market understanding across these areas:

- **Market gaps:** explore your current market and gather data about the gap that your product will address. You should have theoretical / book information, such as scientific studies about challenges and publicly posted information from your target audience. Don't limit yourself to these types of details though! It's important to also do your own primary research through focus groups, surveys, and other methods to truly understand the problem from the perspective of your potential customers.
- **Adoption customers:** Identify your first two to three customers. These people or organizations will ultimately be helpful for writing letters of support for your SBIR. Before then, get to know them personally (and have them help with your market gap understanding!). You will need to know these entities by name, not just by characteristics, so spend the time to build these relationships now.
- **Competitor landscape and limitations:** Even if your business is planning to be a disruptor, there will always be some number of competitors already in the market who are attempting to address part or all of the problem you are also looking to solve. SBIR funders expect a competitor landscape and naming yours (and their limits) builds credibility. Look at who is currently working in the market and identify their limitations. How will your product resolve these issues?

PROJECT READINESS

Now that you've identified that your concept will align well with the SBIR program, it's time to consider the project that you will be doing to get your technology from concept to market. Here is where you consider if you have an appropriately scoped project that will be able to be successfully executed. You will also consider the alignment of your plans with the framework of the SBIR phase process.

Developed Commercialization Plan

The ultimate goal of the SBIR program is to provide the seed funding so that you can do your high-risk research and development to get your product to a point where it can be commercialized. Although most SBIR applications will be conducted one phase at a time (there are exceptions that allow Phase I and Phase II applications to be submitted simultaneously), the funder still wants to understand your complete roadmap from your current status to commercialization. **A full, phased market roll-out plan is critical to demonstrating readiness.**

- **Phase I:** this early stage is for developing a prototype and testing its capabilities and ability to solve the market need.
- **Phase II:** during this stage, your business will expand the prototype into a fully-fledged product, including through the development of additional features. You will also do additional testing during this time period.
- **Phase III:** this is the commercialization phase, which won't be funded by SBIR. Share your plan for how you will convert your fully-functional product into something that can be produced and sold at scale.

Each of these phases should have clearly defined goals, including all the specifics needed to demonstrate that you are successful. If you get an SBIR award, you will analyze how you are meeting these goals as part of your regular reporting to the funder.

For more details about how to ensure you are defining your goals with sufficient detail and specificity, check out our article on SMART goals in our August 2025 issue.

Prototype Development Possible in Six-Twelve Months

Federal agencies understand that the SBIR program is supporting research and development projects with a high degree of uncertainty. However, they also want to ensure that they will see the impacts of that funding quickly. **Phase I prototyping projects have to be completed in a short six-to-twelve-month timeframe.**

The reviewers take a few months to make decisions about awards after they receive applications. However, they expect that your business will be ready to hit the ground running as soon as an award is made. Design your prototype development and testing timeline to be able to fit within the timeline of the award you're going after (usually between six and nine months, but some funders will support projects of up to twelve months). If your project is not yet at the stage to be able to meet these strict timeline requirements, hold off on applying for SBIR and explore if your state has Phase 0 funding that can give you a bit of money to help you get everything ready to pursue SBIR in earnest.



Complete Feasibility Testing Plan

At each stage of the SBIR process, you must consider both the research and development parts of the programmatic goals. Developing your prototype is an important part of a Phase I project. However, **your business must have a well-defined plan to test your prototype within the project window.**

This plan should discuss how you will systematically test your prototype capabilities against your stated Phase I goals. Have a process for collecting and analyzing data throughout the timeline of your project to ensure that you are meeting your milestones and fulfilling your stated outcomes.

The other important part of this plan is a focused market testing phase. This work should address alignment with the market problem you are looking to solve. In most instances, you will be selling your technology to people and organizations once it's commercialized, so you need to test your prototype with them. Establishing the details of this testing now will inform much of your SBIR application:

- **Testing organization:** in almost all instances, you will be doing this testing with an organization within your target audience. Form a relationship with them now and establish their willingness to participate in the testing.
- **Clear expectations:** meet with the organization that will be contributing to this testing and establish what each entity is contributing. Typical pieces include time of their employees, including that they are people within the relevant space for your product, and space to do the testing. There may be other pieces you need from them as well, so discuss these requirements early. You will eventually need to submit a letter of collaboration, memorandum of understanding, or other formal commitment from this organization with your SBIR application.
- **Defined research procedures:** lay out exactly what you will be testing from the prototype with the participants and how you will be doing that testing (what exact steps will they be following, etc.). Determine how you will analyze these tests for success or places where you will need to further refine your product. Also include opportunities for feedback on your development roadmap through future phases and how your prototype and future plans will align with their lived experiences of the needs. Use this feedback to refine your Phase II and commercialization plans.
- **Institutional Review Board (IRB):** any time you do research with humans, you need to have an IRB review your plans for risks to those people. If you are affiliated with a university, you likely already have access to and an understanding of the IRB process. If you are not able to use an IRB through your affiliations, you must identify a third-party IRB organization to contract as part of your SBIR Phase I project. Engage with them early so that they can provide feedback on your research plans to limit delays during implementation.

ORGANIZATION READINESS

SBIR funders look at your organization, in addition to your project, when deciding which applications to ultimately fund. Meeting the written eligibility requirements of the SBIR program is obviously important when deciding your business is ready to apply. However, there are other features of your organization that you must take into account when deciding if you will be competitive.

Available In-House Expertise

SBIR reviewers want to see that your business is capable of meeting the promises you are making in your application. **For example, for Phase I projects, at least 66.67% of the work will need to be completed in-house**, meaning you are limited in how much you can subcontract to other entities.

Review the expertise of every member of your organization. Consider the skills and knowledge required to build the prototype you are proposing. You will need to have alignment between these two categories to be competitive in the SBIR process. Additionally, the people who will implement the project must be able to demonstrate that expertise through their backgrounds in their resumes. Self-learning of skills and knowledge is fine, but it needs to be backed up with demonstrable evidence of utilizing those capabilities. Reviewers will be looking for you to show you have the expertise, not just state that you do.

Financial Stability

SBIR makes significant awards with many requirements for handling of funds and reporting. **Demonstrate that you have the financial stability to be reliable stewards of these funds.** There are a few aspects of financial responsibility that are important to evaluate now:

- **Tracking and reporting capabilities:** You will need to do appropriate accounting for the entire project, sharing information regularly with the funder. This means that you must be able to clearly track, monitor, report, and explain every expense associated with the SBIR project. This accounting will need to be done in a way that is transparent and separate from other business expenses so that you can share those details with the funder.
- **Evidence of assets:** Although SBIR recipients are often relatively new as organizations, they must be able to demonstrate that they are established sufficiently to complete an SBIR project. As part of your registration process, you will need to tell the Small Business Administration the total value of assets held by your business. That number must be more than $0. Reviewers will be looking for evidence that you are solvent as a company.
- **Ability to handle funds distribution processes:** Most federal grant awards are distributed through a reimbursement process and SBIR typically follows this approach. Your business will need to be able to make purchases and pay employees and other expenses for the SBIR project and then submit for reimbursement. There is often a lag between obligation of an expense and when you see the funds (could be as long as 60-90 days). As part of your application, information you share about your current financials (including the assets described above) will help reviewers understand that you are prepared to successfully implement the project with this type of distribution system.

Openness to Sharing Goals and Results

SBIR, like all federal programs, is funded using tax-payer dollars. This means that the funding agencies must be able to transparently demonstrate they are responsibly distributing the funds for the public good. You will retain intellectual property rights for SBIR-funded work, but **be open to sharing goals and results publicly throughout the SBIR process.**

The Small Business Administration releases abstracts from awarded SBIR projects as soon as the grant award agreements are in place. This means that high-level information about your intended market need and prototype development goals will be publicly available. Some agencies will also publish information from required reporting, including details such as written descriptions of the product, videos of the prototype, and other details (depending on the agency). You will retain intellectual property (IP) rights, and the federal government will not be able to share the full IP information for a time period (typically three to four years), giving your business time to apply for patents and other protections. However, high-level information will be shared openly and your business must be prepared for this publicity.

CONCLUSION

The **SBIR program** is a great way to support innovative technology and product development for many businesses doing work relevant to several different federal agencies and fields. However, the program is highly competitive and moves quickly once you start, so it is vital to have all the pieces in place well before starting an application. Taking the time to consider your concept, project, and organization readiness now will demonstrate to SBIR funders that your business can be trusted to execute your proposed initiative.

Program Snapshot

Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR)



SUMMARY

The SBIR and STTR programs award non-dilutive funding to develop a technology and chart a path toward commercialization for small businesses. SBIR has flexibility in terms of project partners, while STTR requires entrepreneurs to partner with non-profit research institutions. Funding supports projects across a three-phased process:

- Phase I: proof-of-concept over six to twelve months
- Phase II: technology development over approximately 24 months
- Phase III: commercialization (not funded by SBIR or STTR)

A total of eleven federal agencies participate in the SBIR program, with six also participating in the STTR program. These solicitations support a mixture of market-driven and mission-driven investments in technologies to solve problems within their areas of focus.

ELIGIBILITY

Eligible applicants must meet all these requirements:

- For-profit entity located in the United States
- Fewer than 500 employees (most are fewer than 10)
- Owned and controlled by U.S. citizens or permanent residents
- Startups or established companies

DEADLINE

Application deadlines vary by federal agency and specific solicitation.

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