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Planning Ahead: You Got the Grant, Now What? A Guide to Post-Award Compliance

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Hosted by Elizabeth Evans • Presented by Sandy Trowbridge • Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Elizabeth Evans:
Hi everyone, my name is Elizabeth Evans here at Grants Office, and I am the Manager of Research and Consultation for our North American operations. It's a pleasure to be with you. Today we will be discussing planning ahead — you got the grant, now what? Basically, it's a guide to post-award compliance.

Housekeeping

Before we get started, I've got a few housekeeping items for you. First and foremost, know that you may listen hands-free over your computer speakers or headphones. There's absolutely no need to dial in, but if your audio does become disconnected, you can use the audio and video menu at the top of your screen to access this feed.

You can also ask questions at any time during today's event using the question and answer interface on the right-hand side of your screen. Please feel free to submit as many questions as you'd like — don't be shy. We'll get to as many as possible towards the end of our time together. If we do run out of time and don't have a chance to get to your question, you can always email us directly. If you don't see that Q&A box automatically on the right-hand side of your screen, just look for the three little dots at the bottom of your screen to find the options for more features of this interface. From there, you can select to have the Q&A and other features pop up.

Finally, know that this session is being recorded. The recording will be available for download at the Grants Office website starting tomorrow — our super amazing Multimedia Coordinator Kate will drop that URL in the chat box for you. The PowerPoint slides being presented here today are also going to be available at that same location in a PDF format. And if you are interested in getting them a little sooner, you can always send us a quick email to education@grantsoffice.com, which Kate will also put into the chat box now.

Today's Speaker and Agenda

So again, for today's mini learning event, we're talking about post-award compliance. And joining me today, we have an amazing team member speaking, Miss Sandy Trowbridge, who is a Grants Development Associate here at Grants Office. I'd like to say thank you so much to Sandy for joining us and sharing her knowledge with everyone who's attending today and watching this future replay. If you have any questions throughout the event for Sandy, please send those questions in. You can use that question and answer interface on your screen, and again, don't be shy — we've budgeted plenty of time to answer your questions towards the end of the presentation.

We've got a jam-packed session for you, and it's going to cover a lot of wonderful information. We're going to start by having Sandy lay out some foundational information about understanding the post-award process. Then she's going to share a few considerations for as you're getting things started up, talking about implementation, and then finally, what's involved with closeout and what should be top of mind for you as you're working on those aspects. We're going to wrap up with some Q&A, and then we'll briefly touch on the Grants Office services that are available to grant seekers and how you can engage us for support if that's of interest to you. With that, enough from me. I'm now going to hand things over to the real star of the show, Miss Sandy Trowbridge, to talk about post-award compliance. Sandy, please take it away.

Understanding the Post-Award Process

Sandy Trowbridge:
Thanks, Elizabeth. As Elizabeth noted, the purpose of this session is to discuss post-award compliance. Getting post-award compliance right ensures that you're able to effectively implement your project while also fully complying with funder requirements, which ultimately improves your chances of future awards. Getting this part of the grant process wrong could potentially result in loss of funds and even financial penalties. So throughout the session, we'll explore how we can manage our grant awards successfully. But before we dive into specific actions to take upon award, we'll start with a quick overview of the grant life cycle so that we understand where post-award fits in the life of a grant.

The Grant Life Cycle

The grant process follows a life cycle that encompasses three main phases: pre-award, award, and post-award. During the pre-award stage, you define your need statement and develop your project plan. The funder posts a grant opportunity and requests applications. You search out these opportunities and apply to those that are in alignment with your project need. And then you wait anxiously to hear whether you've been awarded while the funder completes their application review process.

During the award stage, the funder announces award recipients and works with them to finalize the legal framework for the funding agreements. And finally, during the post-award stage, you as an awardee get to go ahead and implement your projects. The key part of this stage is full adherence with the funder's requirements, which will likely include both financial and programmatic reporting, as well as full adherence with any of your organization's internal policies and procedures — both of which we'll dive into further throughout this session.

Grant Life Cycle Timeline

So what time frame are we looking at when considering the grant life cycle? Traditional grant opportunities, while cyclical in nature, only occur at certain times throughout the year. Application windows are typically open for one or two months, and then funders take anywhere from 4 to 8 months to make a decision. State opportunities typically happen a little bit faster, between 2 and 4 months, while federal grants might take 6 to 8 months. Foundations can vary widely, with some making awards on a rolling basis as applications are received, and others doing so just following quarterly board meetings or just awarding once a year.

At the award stage, the funder announces winners and then takes some time to finalize the grant agreements. This step could take four to eight weeks when considering state or federal grants, or just a few days or weeks when looking at foundation grants. And then in terms of project implementation at the post-award stage, project lengths can vary widely — from a few months to a year, which is common for many foundation grants, up to three, four, or even 5 years, which is common for many of our larger research-based grants. The final step, of course, is the final project closeout activities, which again will vary based on the funder but may include submission of a final programmatic and financial report. So the timeline really represents the general grant funding timeline, but this may vary depending on the specific funding opportunity you decide to pursue.

Overview of the Post-Award Stage

So you've done the work — you've dreamed up a project that addressed a specific need, found a grant that spoke to that need, submitted an application, and found out that you were awarded. This provides a general overview of what comes next in the post-award stage. We'll drill into each of these points more throughout this presentation, but as you'll see — and as you likely would have guessed — the post-award stage is really where the bulk of the work actually takes place.

This is where you implement the project that you developed, report on your project to the funder so they can be confident that their money is being put to good use, be prepared to respond to any audit requests by keeping a detailed paper trail that justifies all expenditures, and then complete any closeout requirements, ensuring that you have set yourself up well for future grant opportunities with the funder.

Roles and Responsibilities

When considering all of this, it's helpful to understand how it all applies to you in terms of roles and responsibilities within the post-award stage. Generally speaking, upon award, you will be contacted by the grantor, and they'll advise you of the good news that you've been awarded and further who your point of contact will be moving forward. This individual is typically referred to as a program officer.

On the side of the grant award recipient, there are likely multiple folks that comprise the full project implementation team, but you'll want to have one main point of contact that will be formally interacting with the funder, just to keep things streamlined. And then we also have your project beneficiaries and project partners, who will be key to project success through their ongoing involvement throughout the grant's period of performance.

While you may have drafted the grant, this doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be the one implementing it. You may have separate proposal development and project implementation teams, wherein upon award you would simply hand everything over to the project implementation team to take things from there. This will very much look different at different organizations. But if you are a member of the project implementation team, your key objectives are to monitor grant activities, expenditures, and deadlines to ensure that project beneficiaries receive the maximum benefit from the grant funds; ensure that all purchases are aligned to the grant plan and were included in the approved grant budget; prepare and file all reports on time; ensure that you fully spend the funds within the grant's period of performance without exceeding your allocation; and ensure the completion of the activities that you committed to in your grant application.

Project Startup Considerations

There are a whole host of things to be tackled in the initial startup stage of project implementation. In this section, I'm going to focus on those things that should typically be done on day one, week one, and month one, so you can break down this stage into actionable pieces.

Day One: Review Your Grant Materials

First things first, after taking a moment to celebrate your award, start by reviewing your grant materials. As we discussed when reviewing the standard grants life cycle timeline, the time between when you applied and when you have a signed grant agreement in hand can take a few months up to a year — and a lot can change during that time, both internally and externally. So it's essential to refresh yourself on what was promised, how success is defined, and what reporting is required.

Read and reread your grant documents. Read the initial Notice of Funding Opportunity, your grant application, the grant award agreement, and — if a state or federal opportunity — even the authorizing legislation and federal regulations on grant management, 2 CFR Part 200. The most important of these,

of course, is the grant award agreement, which documents what you will be held to in accepting the funding. These other documents all help provide the broader context, which is helpful to keep in mind at this stage. It's really just important to know what you agreed to do, so that you can now put a plan in place to do it.

When reviewing the grant agreement, I like to specifically highlight any sections that outline my obligations — such as reporting requirements or activity milestones, anything requiring advanced funder approval, confirmation of allowable and unallowable costs, or other budget constraints such as line-item ceilings. Drilling in on these important pieces in the initial days ensures that there are no — or at least fewer — surprises later on.

Day One: Schedule a Proposal-to-Implementation Handover Meeting

Second, go ahead and schedule a proposal-to-implementation handover meeting. This is key in cases where the proposal development team differs from the project implementation team. Scheduling a quick call between the two teams is important to ensure that all of the information gleaned during the proposal stage is passed forward to those that will now be doing the work. For example: did the grant writer interact with the funder at all, and if so, did they get a sense of their preferred methods of communication? Did the proposal team work closely with partners in drafting the proposal, and if so, can they share any things to be aware of in terms of partner strengths or weaknesses that will be helpful to keep in mind as you kick off the project? This doesn't have to be anything too formal — just an opportunity to share knowledge forward to help that project implementation team really hit the ground running.

Day One: Schedule a Startup Team Meeting

Finally, schedule a startup team meeting with everyone that will have a hand in implementing the project moving forward. This step helps build alignment and ownership from the very start. Include key project team members in this first meeting, and ask that all parties thoroughly review the grant award agreement in advance of attendance. Use the startup meeting to confirm roles, assign startup tasks, and agree to a regular schedule for ongoing updates and collaboration.

Example startup tasks might include requesting a project-specific accounting code from the finance team to allow everyone to track grant spending against the approved project budget, setting up a project-specific folder structure in your organization's preferred online filing system for easy future documentation, or scheduling a collaboration session to create a full-blown project work plan — which brings me to my next point.

Week One: Create a Detailed Project Work Plan

In week one, focus should be placed on creation or finalization of a detailed project work plan. You may have included a work plan in your grant application — if so, this is an opportunity to revisit and finalize. If not, this is an opportunity to think through your project in even more detail and turn those goals from your grant proposal into actionable steps. Creation of a solid project work plan early on is truly one of the most effective things you can do to stay on track and avoid surprises down the line.

A project work plan helps you take everything in your grant proposal — goals, timelines, deliverables — and break it down into a clear, actionable roadmap. Think of it as your grants playbook. It answers questions like: What are we doing? Who's doing it? When is it due? How will we know we're on track? To help you organize this all effectively, we recommend creating a Gantt chart so you can visually see the progress of your project. The work plan should specify specific activities, who's responsible for each activity, deadlines for completion of each activity, and deliverables or outputs resulting from each activity. The key is really just to ensure that this work plan aligns with the grant agreement. So use this as an opportunity to compile all requirements and deadlines into one place to help streamline your project implementation and limit the potential for non-compliance.

Week One: Create a Reporting Calendar

In addition, go ahead and create a reporting calendar. There are likely to be a wide variety of financial and programmatic reporting requirements that your organization will need to adhere to once awarded. For example, some funders may require monthly budget updates. Others may require quarterly programmatic reports. These requirements will likely require the ongoing collection of data and close tracking of financial expenditures, all requiring time and effort. One easy way to stay on top of reporting is just to build a reporting calendar.

Take the reporting deadlines from your grant agreement and copy them into your Outlook or Google calendar — whatever tool your organization uses. Set reminders a few weeks before each deadline to give yourself time to gather notes, data, and documentation. Consider if you'll need to request data from any of your partners or subrecipients, and if yes, when you'll need it by. If you have someone in your organization responsible for editing and formatting, or someone who needs to provide a final review, include internal deadlines for when you have to get everything over to them for finalization. Make note of where the final report is ultimately filed in your shared drives for easy access. Here, it's easy to overlook the time that is required to collect the data that will feed into your reports, so closely consider your methodology and level of effort required for all things data, and build this into your reporting calendar as well.

Month One: Refresh Knowledge of Regulations, Policies, and Procedures

When time allows, refresh your understanding of all external and internal regulations, policies, and procedures. Refresh yourself on all internal controls, competitive bidding practices, and processes for tracking spending against the approved project budget. Auditors are interested in your compliance with external regulations, but they're also interested in your compliance with your internal policies and procedures. Take some time to refresh yourself on these requirements during the startup period, and ask questions of your colleagues as needed to ensure that you and your team are well prepared to adhere to these requirements moving forward.

Month One: Develop or Confirm Reporting Templates

During the initial weeks of your period of performance, also work to develop or confirm templates for all of your project reporting. Your grant agreement is likely to detail what reports are required and what needs to be included in each. Some funders may even provide preferred templates — if so, download these and review them closely so that you know what specific data you need to track and capture moving forward. If not, create your own templates that cover each of the reporting requirements detailed in the grant agreement to simplify the ongoing reporting process for your team. When creating your reporting calendar, you'll already have thought through roles and responsibilities, so simply ensure that each party knows where to access these templates moving forward.

Feel free to think broader than contractual requirements as well. If your grant agreement notes that you need to report on project spending quarterly and at a high level, but you know that your team would benefit from tracking at a more granular level more regularly, feel free to pull together internal templates as well to help keep your team on track. The same thing goes when looking ahead at the requirements for the final report. For example, will the inclusion of success stories be required? If yes, be sure to capture these as you work through the period of performance, so you can capture feedback as it's fresh on people's minds. This can be aided by compiling a quick success story template and example for easy use and reference by the team.

Month One: Document Management and Centralized Access

Which brings me to my next point: the importance of document management and centralized access. Everything should be stored in a centralized, accessible location — not on someone's personal desktop. This ensures your whole team and any new staff who come in mid-stream can stay aligned and access what they need. All the better if you pull together a quick filing policy so that folks are all in agreement as to what is stored where. We'll touch on this later, but this would be incredibly helpful should you ever be audited. If in question, store it. In the event of an audit, if there isn't a paper trail, then it didn't happen. So just be diligent about filing as you go, so this is never a concern.

If you're the project lead, consider doing periodic checks of these shared files, particularly early on, and follow up with team members as needed to make sure you get this right. It is so much easier to do this as you go rather than to scramble and backfill when questions inevitably arise down the line.

Month One: Schedule Regular Team Check-Ins

Finally, schedule and facilitate regular team check-ins. At these check-ins, utilize your project work plan and your reporting calendar as unifying team resources. Pull them up and share them on your screen. Ask for updates. Use them as a tool to keep yourself honest as to progress being made — or not made — and troubleshoot as needed. Similarly, use these check-ins, be they weekly or otherwise, to monitor your project spending. Are you where you thought you would be? Are you under spending, overspending? Is what's getting charged to the project reasonable, allowable, and necessary according to the grant agreement? Staying on top of this through regular and open communication is key to project success, as it ensures that your team members have the opportunity to collaborate as you go and address any issues or delays before they become bigger issues.

Project Implementation Considerations

Now that we have some of these initial startup tasks out of the way, let's shift to key considerations at the implementation stage. First and most obvious is simply the implementation of your project activities according to the detailed plan you put in place in your project work plan during the startup phase, which should be in full alignment with the requirements and deadlines spelled out in your grant agreement. So this is just where you do what you said you would do in your grant application, as formalized in your grant agreement and detailed in your project work plan.

Tracking, Monitoring, and Evaluation

A core part of the implementation stage is the tracking, monitoring, and evaluation of your programmatic and financial performance. This is admittedly where a lot of people get overwhelmed, but it doesn't have to be that way. Just track everything as you go. Keep organized records of receipts, invoices, data, and correspondence. Again, if it's not documented, it didn't happen.

For example, if one of your work plan activities is implementation of a training, make sure that you have all attendees sign an attendance sheet, including any data that will be helpful for your future reporting, such as what organization they're a part of, what their role is, and so on. File this along with any training materials, pictures of the event, bids, and receipts for the training venue, and so on. Really, anything and everything that proves that you implemented the training as required when looking back at the files years down the line.

Once your project is in motion, you'll also want to keep a close eye on your budget. When you make purchases, make sure they're logged correctly under the right budget lines. This helps ensure your spending lines up with your approved grant budget. Be sure you're saving your purchase orders, receipts, invoices, and supporting documents for the record. You should also review your project milestones regularly. If you committed to delivering a certain number of trainings or reaching a specific number of attendees, make sure you're completing those accordingly. And finally, prepare and submit all reports by the deadlines detailed in the grant agreements. During the startup phase, you'll have already created your reporting calendar and finalized your reporting templates, so these deadlines and requirements should not come as a surprise.

Change Management

We all know that despite our best-laid plans, unforeseen things happen, and sometimes adjustments to project schedule are needed. Maybe your region experienced a natural disaster, or procurement delays outside of your control resulted in a need to shift an activity back a bit. If your project deviates from the plan, take every effort to bring it back into alignment internally. But if not possible, this is where open communication with the funder is key. Depending on the funder, a formal change request may be required. Having thoroughly read all documentation at startup, you should be aware of these requirements. But if they're not spelled out, just ask the funder for guidance on how best to proceed. They may have a form for you to fill out or may simply ask that you circulate an email with your request and reasoning for their written approval. Any change to the project plan must be formally documented in writing.

Audits

This is especially important when considering audits. When considering audits, it's important to note and remember that you're held to more than what is directly stated in your grant agreement. It's also important to ensure that, as noted earlier, you're adhering to your internal policies and procedures. The same goes for ensuring that your project complies with all applicable federal, state, and funder regulations, such as labor laws or environmental laws. A thorough review of your grant agreement, internal policies and procedures, and state, federal, and funder requirements at startup helps ensure that none of this comes as a surprise. The key is to build all of these internal and external requirements into your project work plan and reporting calendar, and file all documentation as you go. Don't be afraid to write a memo to the file to explain a certain action or approach, should you feel it would be helpful for folks looking back at your documentation in the future. Ideally, auditors should be able to review the project files and understand how everything fits together without additional explanation. This is greatly aided by a clear filing system. A best practice is also to conduct periodic internal audits to confirm compliance throughout the period of performance.

Funder Relationship Management

And finally, funder relationship management. Regular and transparent communication with the funder is key. Check with the funder early on to confirm preferred communication. Consider scheduling periodic meetings to review project progress, discuss challenges, and strategize on solutions. We find that if they're in the loop from the start, they're better equipped to troubleshoot and have a better understanding of the challenges on the ground. The same goes for celebrating wins — invite them to project events, share out success stories. But keep in mind that some funders simply don't have the bandwidth to engage at this level of detail and are perfectly content to just review scheduled reporting. So just have a quick conversation on communication preferences at the outset so that you can ensure you're meeting their needs from the beginning.

Project Closeout Considerations

Finally, let's consider some key considerations at the project closeout stage. First, start planning for closeout sooner rather than later, to ensure that you have sufficient time to compile all final data and documentation in advance of deadlines. Part of this early planning just includes a close review of any closeout terms and conditions in your grant award — just put a plan in place to adhere to each by any noted deadlines.

Notify your subrecipients or vendors at least 90 days before closeout of the closeout timeline, and request final invoices and reporting. Critically think through any final project spending, and ensure that all costs will be processed prior to the end of the project's period of performance. Capture any lessons learned for reference by future proposal development and project implementation teams.

All funders are also likely to require a final report, but how extensive these reports are may vary. This usually includes narrative about what you did, challenges and lessons learned, a financial section showing how the money was spent, and a short summary of outcomes highlighting what changed or improved because of the project. Make sure you plan for this well in advance, as final reports tend to be a bit of a heavier lift than periodic reporting. And finally, thank the funder for their partnership and note a desire to partner together again in the future. Share project successes more broadly so that others can learn from your experiences, and of course celebrate a job well done.

Summary

All of this can feel like a lot, but breaking these post-award compliance considerations up into different stages — and understanding that project implementation is very much a team effort — is beneficial. Just focus on knowing and understanding all internal and external requirements, building these requirements into an actionable project plan, documenting anything and everything as you go, and ultimately staying in close communication with your project team and your funder throughout the

period of performance. All of this will help build a strong relationship with the funder and enhance your opportunities for future awards. So, I'll pass it back over to Elizabeth now to highlight what additional resources are available to aid you in your grants efforts.

Grants Office Services

Elizabeth Evans:
Great, thank you so much, Sandy, for sharing all of that amazing information. As always, Grants Office is here to help. Just like this webinar, we have several free resources available on our website, grantsoffice.com, including our free Guidance for Grant Seekers resource library, which this video is a part of. We invite you to check it out. Feel free to scan the QR code you see here on the screen to find short how-to videos, articles, and other resources to help you on your grant-seeking journey.

If you do decide to engage with Grants Office on your grant-seeking journey for a particular project, initiative, or program — whatever it may be — you can start by filling out the form that we have available on the page where the QR code is going to take you, or through our website. You can also contact us that way. We'll set up a meeting to discuss your goals and determine appropriate next steps and levels of support based on that. Whether that is a detailed funding opportunity report where we're researching the relevant grant opportunities for your need, one-on-one time with our expert consultants talking about developing your project's next steps, reviewing applications you're writing yourself, or full proposal development where our writers are pulling those thoughts out of your head and putting them on the page for you — we are a full-service grants intelligence and consulting firm. We are actually celebrating 25 years of helping grant-seeking agencies across North America this year. If you need any help, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. We'd love to chat with you.

Q&A Session

With that, again, thank you to everyone who's joined us today. Thank you to Sandy for sharing her knowledge. We have a few minutes left here for questions, so we'll just dive right in.

Q1: Can you speak to budget modification, time and effort reporting requirements, and no-cost extensions?

Sandy Trowbridge:
I would just highlight that it really varies by the funder. Oftentimes in the grant agreement, it will specify what process needs to be followed for that. It can be very simple for some funders — just an email where they say, “Yeah, that's all good.” Other times it can be very extensive and a long process. So it depends on the funder. I would just refer first to any of your grant agreement documentation to verify,

and then follow up with them for questions on how they specifically want to handle things like budget modifications or no-cost extensions.

Elizabeth Evans:
That's a great point, Sandy. It really just depends, because there's so much variety even just between private funders and federal or even state funders and what they expect.

Q2: Any best tips or tools to keep in mind with multiple awards management at one time, helping to keep everything organized and straight when someone asks a question?

Sandy Trowbridge:
Gosh, I feel your pain, having managed multiple awards at once. One thing that I found was helpful was keeping siloed folder structures. So, while each folder structure might be the same in your organization for how you file for a project, each project should be kept completely separate in your filing system. And then I do the same in my email inbox as well — I just keep all of my project communications separate in different folders so I can quickly go and search and find the relevant answer for the specific question being asked. So those are just quick tips from my experience.

Elizabeth Evans:
That's a great free resource, too, because there are definitely a lot of tools for award management organization that cost something, but with a little bit of extra front-end effort setting up that infrastructure, you can get by without having to pay those additional costs for sure.

Q3: What size grant can include an admin fee, and how is this accounted for?

Sandy Trowbridge:
Elizabeth, do you want to speak to that one?

Elizabeth Evans:
Yeah. I'll actually echo something that Sandy said. It really is going to depend on the grant, Randy. Unfortunately, because grant funders are so diverse in how they set up their award agreements and what they will and will not allow for included costs, it just depends. Certain federal agencies will cap what is known as an indirect cost rate. Same with other state agencies. Some foundations will do that. It just really depends.

The thing to keep in mind is that funders want to see the majority of the money they're investing in your organization and the project go to the project itself, not administrative fees. So if we can't connect the dots between how that administrative fee is an essential component of the direct cost of having that project occur, it's something they're not likely to want to invest a lot of time in. But if you're able to say, “Hey, we anticipate needing 5% of admin's time, so we are requesting 5% of this person's salary be covered through the funded effort,” that might be something to investigate with the funder, and check

again that allowable and unallowable list. And if they don't have a list of allowable and unallowable costs, call the funder and ask. That's usually how you can find out if it is possible — just asking, if you don't see it written in the actual application materials or other materials they've put out there for consideration by potential awardees.

Closing

With that, that is all the time we have for questions today, but again, thank you to Sandy for sharing her expertise, and thank you to all of you for joining us. If you think of something later or we didn't get a chance to answer any of your questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to us at education@grantsoffice.com, and someone will be in touch shortly. And remember, again, today's session has been recorded, and this recording as well as the slides will be available on the event's resources page within the next 24 hours. So if you missed anything, your audio got disconnected temporarily, you had to step away to answer the door, or if you want to share this event with a colleague or acquaintance — maybe even come back for a refresher a little later down the road — you can always go back and review today's content at your convenience on the Grants Office website. With that, we hope you found today's event to be a valuable use of your time, and we look forward to seeing you on future GrantsCasts. Have a great rest of your day, everybody, and thank you for joining us.

— End of Transcript —

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