PSGP: How to Apply for and Win Funding — Understanding the Application and Best Practices for Success

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Presented by Elizabeth Evans and Joe Phelan, Grants Office, LLC

Welcome and Introductions

Elizabeth Evans:

Hi everyone, and welcome to our event. My name is Elizabeth Evans, Manager of Research and Consultation here at Grants Office. Today, we'll be discussing the Port Security Grant Program, which awarded $90 million to 200 port organizations last year alone. So the folks here at Grants Office are really excited about today's session. At this point, we've done a few within this grant-specific series of events, each focusing on a specific grant program. If you've been to any of those other ones, as you likely know, we've done a few throughout the year on grants in general — how to position your organization broadly for things like transportation funding or cybersecurity funding or school safety funding.

But these events in particular are aiming to get far more granular in our information and our grantseeking advice around specific grant opportunities, focusing a full 30 to 45 minutes on just one grant that is relevant for this time of year. So we very much hope that you like today's event, and I encourage those of you in the audience who are representing a port authority today to consider who else among your peers may benefit from today's session, and pass along this recording to them. As Joe will detail in a few moments, this is a competitive grant program, so the more folks who can learn about the Port Security Grant and secure that funding for their locations, all the better.

But before we get started, I've got two housekeeping items for you. You can ask questions at any time during today's event using the chat interface on the right-hand side of your screen. Feel free to submit as many questions as you'd like throughout the presentation, and we'll get to as many as possible at the end. Also know that this session is being recorded, and that recording is going to be available by the close of business at the link on our website that our webcast producer, Kate, is going to share in the chat momentarily. Right now that link is pointing to this event's registration page, but it will transition over to become a resources page for this event once we begin the Q&A portion. So the PowerPoint slides that we present here today, along with a free step-by-step application workbook for the Port Security Grant Program, will also be available at that URL. And we'll talk more about that workbook towards the end.

Again, today we're talking about the Port Security Grant Program, and I'm joined by Joe Phelan, our in-house expert on this grant. Joe has helped hundreds of organizations just like yours navigate the ins and outs of grant opportunities across the transportation sector, including the Port Security Grant Program, as well as others. I personally have had the joy of joining him on some of those consultative sessions, doing project development with different ports, and I can attest that he is just so knowledgeable. Joe brings a lot of creative ideas and insightful feedback to the table. So know that he is committed to getting you across that finish line with this challenging and competitive grant program. In short, he's got a lot of expertise, and I think you guys are going to learn a lot from him today.

So here's a quick run-through of our agenda over the next 35 minutes or so. Once I pass things over to Joe, he'll run through a high-level introduction of the Port Security Grant Program, or PSGP, as it's known: what that grant is, what it helps you pay for, who can go after it, things like that. We want to make sure, before we dive into the nitty-gritty details, that this grant is right for you. After we've cleared those approvals, Joe has a lot of information on how to prepare a competitive grant proposal for PSGP. He's going to talk about evaluating if this opportunity is right for your organization, the different elements that make up a successful project, and so much more. And then we'll end with a quick overview of some additional services that Grants Office can provide you in your grantseeking efforts for this or other opportunities, whether that's needing someone to come in and review a draft of your proposal, or maybe you want someone to put pen to paper on your behalf and actually write the grant narrative for you. So with that, I'm going to pass things over to the very capable hands of Joe to get us started. Joe?

Understanding the Port Security Grant Program

Program Goal and Objectives

Joe Phelan:

Thank you so much, Elizabeth, and hi everyone, welcome. Thank you for being here this afternoon or this morning, depending on where you're located. First, let's talk about the actual grant program itself, the Port Security Grant Program, which is a program that has been around for several years now. The goal is really to strengthen port-wide risk management, as well as to protect the critical surface infrastructure from any types of terrorism, major disasters, as well as other emergencies.

This year there are three objectives for the Port Security Grant Program, which tend to be the same year in and year out. It's really focused on sustaining the core capabilities of maritime infrastructure systems in alignment with the fiscal year 2026 national priority areas from the Department of Homeland Security, or DHS. It's to address as well, or close, gaps identified in any Area Maritime Security Plan or Facility Security Plan. And then the final one is to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to

address all types of security needs of communities, that may include planning, training, awareness campaigns, equipment, as well as capital projects and exercises. One thing to keep in mind is that an eligible entity may only submit one application within each port area, and then an application may contain up to five investment justification worksheets, which I'll explain in a little bit.

Funding, Deadline, and Eligibility

For this year, fiscal year 2026, there is $95 million available in funds, which is a $5 million increase from 2024. The range of grants is going to be anywhere from $18,000 to $3.5 million. It's a very quickly approaching deadline of July 24. This program was just announced last Wednesday, so applicants had a little bit over a month to apply, which is actually a step up from last year, fiscal year 2025. For those funds, there was a two-week window to apply, so there's a little bit more time to submit an application this time around. I do want to mention that in 2024 — there's no figure for 2025 — but in 2024, a little over 43% of anyone that applied for this grant program was successful. So it's a pretty high chance of being funded for this Port Security Grant Program. That's something to definitely keep in mind. As far as eligibility goes, port authorities, facility operators, and state and local government agencies are the typical applicant, but I'll get more specific as far as who is most eligible.

Funding Stream, Project Period, and Match Requirements

So as I mentioned before, PSGP comes from DHS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, and it's the competitive grant application process, which is a little different than a lot of the other FEMA and DHS grants. A lot of them are directly allocated to states, who then subaward to eligible applicants, whether it's the State Homeland Security Program or the emergency grant program. And then you also have the Transit Security Grant Program, which actually is like a direct allocation to those transit agencies that are most in need of funding. The Port Security Grant Program is open for anyone that can apply for it, that's eligible for it.

The project period is going to be 36 months, so it will start September 1, 2026, and then it'll end at the end of August 2029. And there is a match requirement for this program. For any public sector or nonprofit organizations, it's going to be a 25% cost share, and then for for-profit organizations, it's going to be a 50% cost share.

Match Exceptions

There are some exceptions to that rule of cost share. For for-profit organizations, if it's going to be a port-wide benefit — so it's going to cover the entire port itself, a security project for that port — it's only a 25% cost share match. For projects under $25,000, there is no cost share. If it's a specific project that's focused on training public safety personnel in enforcing security zones, that's no cost share. If it's

located in any of the insular areas, there's going to be no cost share as long as the project is under $200,000. And then if an organization has any type of hardship — new financial hardship — they can always request a waiver to waive the cost share.

Examples of Projects Funded Under PSGP

So here are some examples of projects that are funded under the Port Security Grant Program. A lot of them are going to be training, whether it's cybersecurity training or any type of shipboard firefighting training — anything to help better prepare and provide assessments for ports. And then there are also some funds for actual physical security upgrades or cybersecurity improvements. It could be unmanned aircraft systems as well as detection technologies. It could be boats for preventing or responding to security incidents on waterways. So it's a pretty wide range as far as what's eligible under the Port Security Grant Program.

The Application Review Process

And then as far as the actual application process — one of the things that I haven't mentioned until right now: the applications need to be from those port authorities, facility operators, or state and local government agencies that are subject to the Area Maritime Security Plan. So only those eligible can apply for this program. And there are three aspects to the application process. You have the initial screening, which is going to basically be just like a confirmation that all the required forms that need to be completed are completed, eligibility is confirmed, as well as an authorized representative that works for the port is confirmed as well.

And then the field review is where the U.S. Coast Guard Captain of the Port is going to lead that field review, and they're going to basically ensure that the core scoring criteria is met. That's going to be projects that support development and sustainment of the core capabilities in the goal that's presented in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, or NOFO; projects that address priorities outlined in any applicable Area Maritime Security Plan, Facility Security Plan, and/or Vessel Security Plans. It really depends on the applicant type, but all those are mandated under the MTSA, which is the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002, and/or if it's applicable to any type of port-wide risk management plan. So that's always going to be associated with wherever the port is located, dependent on which one of those plans it falls under. And then the last part is making sure that the projects are feasible based on the period of performance, so it's really making sure that the timeline that's associated with the investment justifications is realistic and can be met.

And then the final step is the national review, which is going to be reviewed by a panel of subject matter experts from DHS and FEMA, as well as other federal partners, that are going to validate the U.S. Coast

Guard's — the port's — field review results. And then there's also a detailed administrative and financial review of the applications that are recommended for funding.

Risk Score and Scoring Bonuses

So a risk score is going to be determined as a kind of independent aspect of this grant program. It's going to be calculated based off of the threat — so it's going to be the likelihood of an attack being attempted by an adversary; vulnerability — so the likelihood that an attack is successful given that it is attempted; and then the consequence — so what's the impact of an event, an incident, or occurrence? There are some kind of bonus points you receive depending on your application itself. So if you do provide a port-wide benefit, your final score will be increased by at least 10%. And then — and this is in the NOFO — the projects that sufficiently address one or more of the national priority areas, as well as being a distinct and standalone project, will have an increased score of 20%. So that is mentioned in the NOFO for that aspect of the grant program.

Evaluating if PSGP Is Right for You

The Non-Negotiables

So moving on, I definitely want to evaluate if this program, the Port Security Grant Program, is the right fit for you — the non-negotiables. So here are six aspects that are non-negotiables for applying for this program. Your entity has to be subjected to an Area Maritime Security Plan. You cannot provide maritime security services on a for-hire basis, so if you're a security company, you cannot apply for this grant program. You have to plan to only submit one application per port area. And then as far as eligible projects go, it can't be a proof-of-concept project. It can't be a subaward project, so you can't apply on behalf of an organization that's not eligible to apply. And then the main goal of this program is to provide security, so the projects that do not primarily enhance maritime security are ineligible for this grant program.

The MOU/MOA Requirement for Security Services Providers

And then in the application, there is a Memorandum of Understanding or Memorandum of Agreement — an MOU or MOA — requirement for any type of security services providers. If you're an organization that is mandated within the Area Maritime Security Plan from the Captain of the Port or the Federal Maritime Security Coordinator as a security services provider, then there's no need for you to attach this MOU/MOA requirement. But if you are an organization that is not identified in the Area Maritime Security Plan, but you are required to provide port security services, then you must submit an MOU or an MOA.

What a Competitive Applicant Must Do

So for an applicant to be most competitive, you have to be comprehensive with your application. You have to address at least one of the national priorities. You can submit as many investment justifications, up to five, as projects that you have. You should only focus on one port area. You have to complete the required SF forms, as well as — and this is standard practice — just reviewing the NOFO. You'll see in a little bit the workbook itself; you're able to easily fill out some of the questions there without looking at the NOFO. But up on the top of the workbook, it literally says to review the NOFO, because it goes into some very specific details as far as what it's looking for from the applicant itself as far as answers go.

Preparing a Competitive PSGP Proposal

Application Requirements and Forms

And with that, this is the section basically about how to prepare the most competitive PSGP application. So the requirements: there's just one investment justification and detailed budget worksheet, so that's going to be an attachment that you find on Grants.gov. It's alongside the NOFO, and that's just going to be an Excel spreadsheet that you can fill out and answer the questions and fill out the budget. And then in addition to that, there are several SF forms that have to do with just basic information about your organization, including information like your unique entity identifier. And then you have some Grants.gov lobbying forms and some SF-LLL forms, and then the SF-424A as well as the SF-424B — that's to do with non-construction projects and the budget that's associated with that. So those are just required forms that you have to submit through FEMA GO alongside that Excel spreadsheet.

The Investment Justification Worksheet

So as I mentioned, the worksheet — if you see the worksheet that you download through Grants.gov, it has investment justification one, budget one, investment justification two, budget two, and so on and so forth, up to five. So if you are submitting more than one investment justification, then it's all just on one document. There are eleven sections that are associated with the worksheet components. Some of them won't be applicable for you if you're, like, a port authority and not a state or local government agency. It really just depends on your entity that's applying for it. But the bulk of what you're going to be judged based off of is the investment justification abstract, and that's really just making sure that your program aligns with the NOFO and you're addressing one of the core areas, whether it's cybersecurity or physical security — anything to protect the port from any type of acts of terrorism, natural disasters, or any other events.

Tips for Drafting a Compelling Investment Justification

So here are some tips for drafting a compelling investment justification. Really important is to show, and do not just tell, what exactly you're looking for. Every award is expected to answer a problem, so you want to demonstrate the problem, whether it's a vulnerability assessment and something you found in your vulnerability assessment that showcases why your port needs this type of security upgrade or training, or any type of connection there — because you show exactly why your organization needs this, because of the vulnerabilities you have within your system. There could have been incidents that have taken place at your port, and that's another area where you want to show exactly why your organization needs this funding. It could be an audit gap as well.

Metrics help to tell that story, and that could be before and after. So, reduced response time: this technology will allow for our organization to respond to calls more quickly, and you give that percentage of time that your organization can save with this upgrade in technology or this piece of equipment. Increased camera coverage of critical zones: so it could be an area that only has 50% coverage, and with a camera purchase you can get up to 95 or 100 percent. So you have to really show what the impact of this purchase is going to have on your organization. It could be the number of IT systems being monitored for cyber threats. Your organization might not have the strongest cyber response time, so leaving some vulnerability within your system, and this purchase will allow for your organization to be better covered and be better prepared for any type of cyber threat.

I mentioned this a little bit earlier, but just be specific and realistic with your goals. It's either italicized or bolded in the actual NOFO: these projects are at least 36 months, so the most it can be is 36 months, and you want to make sure that whatever you're proposing is very feasible and can also effectively reduce risk. That's the goal of the program, so they want to focus on those projects that have the most likely success rate as far as being feasible, being able to be completed within that 36-month time frame, and having the ability to reduce risk.

And then you definitely want to think about the future when it comes to sustainability of the grant itself. You might request equipment or those types of capital purchases, and you're going to want to make sure that it's not just a singular purchase — that it doesn't just have a three-year shelf life and then you need to get something else, or you need to apply for the grant program again. You want to be able to show that you can sustain this project well after the end of August of 2029, and you can use this equipment moving forward to help strengthen your organization against various acts of terrorism or any type of natural disasters.

And then the last piece of advice is really to keep things simple. Funders are going to tell you exactly what they want from the application; that's mentioned in the NOFO. So make sure that reviewers can easily understand the answers that you provide in the worksheet. It's right there — you get reviewed

based off of the answers to the worksheet — so make sure that you're reviewing the NOFO and making sure that every answer is as specific as the NOFO asks of it. So definitely make sure that you keep things simple when you write the application itself.

The Free Eligibility and Proposal Workbook

And we do have this free eligibility and proposal workbook that you're able to download and access, that provides a lot of the questions that are going to be in the worksheet under the Grants.gov grant posting, with this investment justification. So you're able to answer these questions and provide it to us — which I'm going to pass it to Elizabeth to wrap things up — but this is really the focal point of this presentation: you can download this workbook and prepare for the Port Security Grant Program. It is a quickly approaching deadline, so we definitely have some services, which Elizabeth will explain, about how you can connect with us. So I will allow Elizabeth to do that now.

Engaging with Grants Office Services

Grant Writing and Editing Services

Elizabeth Evans:

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Joe, for all of that amazing knowledge that you just shared with the audience. It's really excellent information. I'm going to give you a few minutes to grab a glass of water and catch your breath before we start our Q&A session. So, for those joining us today, if you do have any questions, please look at the bottom right-hand corner of your screen to drop them into the chat box.

I do want to call out Grants Office's grant writing and editing services that I referred to at the beginning of today's event. Our team here is filled with folks just like Joe. We have over 25 years of experience across both the US and Canada in proposal development work. We have helped organizations just like yours to plan out and articulate their projects in a way that's going to really speak to the funder's goals and objectives. So if you followed along with today's session and plan to apply to the Port Security Grant Program but feel like you're going to need some assistance to help you get across that finish line, especially given the short window, definitely reach out. We're here.

And if you need it, we offer that full proposal development and writing. What that means for the Port Security Grant is that, basically, if you come to us with that completed Port Security Grant application workbook, we'll get you linked up with a grant writer who can translate all those ideas into a competitive narrative that you can then submit to the Port Security Grant Program. So to be clear, that workbook is not the application itself. It's a great parking lot for your ideas and gathering all the

information that's eventually going to go into the application that you do submit. But if you give it a good old college try and fill it out to the best of your ability, we'll really have what we need to get going. So, if you are writing the proposal yourself, but you do want an extra set of eyes on your draft to make sure you've dotted all your i's, if you will, and crossed all your t's, we do offer proposal editing services at 25% of the cost of full writing.

How Working with Grants Office Looks

So, what does working with Grants Office look like? If you're interested in exploring our support, the first step is to contact us at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com. You'll want to come to that email having already read and worked through most of the questions in that workbook that Joe mentioned earlier. Like I said, again, you don't need to have full sentences or beautiful prose for all those prompts, but we do ask that you've given each component of your project a good amount of thought. From there, you'll get to meet with Joe or one of his amazing colleagues to discuss your project goals and your development needs.

If you contract with us for writing, we'll get you connected with a writer who can start putting pen to paper on your behalf right away. We try to give you at least two opportunities to review those drafts and provide feedback to make sure we've captured your organization's goals and vision correctly. I realize that's a very ambitious thing for such a short application window, but we're definitely going to do our darndest. And as you work towards that looming deadline, we will give you all the application materials so you can upload them into the portal and click submit when the day comes. So again, if that is something that you are interested in, please reach out to grantwriting@grantsoffice.com to get started.

Other Grants Office Services

So if you followed along with today's event and you don't think the Port Security Grant Program is right for you, I also want to call your attention to the other Grants Office services that are available, just very briefly. We do have research and consultation support that would allow you to sit down with experts to discuss your upcoming projects and then be provided with a list of state, federal, and foundation grants to support those initiatives. We also have project building services that, again, allow you to sit down with a consultant to build out the competitive application to an entirely different grant program.

And last but certainly not least, we have our subscription service, Grants Office Communities, which gives you access to our database of more than 26,000 state, federal, and foundation grants, so that you can do the research and project building all on your own inside a singular platform that was designed for and designed by grants people. Grants Office Communities always offers a free two-week trial, so if you haven't hopped over there to check it out yet, I encourage you to do so, and our great webinar

producer, Kate, will drop a link in the chat in case you didn't get a chance to capture that QR code earlier.

Q&A Session

Elizabeth Evans:

Okay, so now that we've got that out of the way, it's time for some questions. Looking through the chat here, I see just a couple that have come in, so if there are more audience questions, definitely please feel free to submit those into the chat box now.

Audience Questions

Q1: Do we need a vulnerability assessment to apply?

Elizabeth Evans:

For the first question that we have: Can you tell me, do we need a vulnerability assessment to apply? Is that a hard requirement?

Joe Phelan:

It's a great question. It's not a hard requirement for this program. I know the Nonprofit Security Grant Program does require a site assessment of your building as a nonprofit organization, but since these port organizations are already part of the Area Maritime Security Plans, there's no need to have any type of vulnerability assessment as part of the application. Now, if your organization knows that there are some weaknesses within your organization, then you definitely want to explain that in the investment justification documentation. But there are no actual requirements to include a vulnerability assessment as part of your application.

Q2: How do you go about getting an MOU or MOA if you don't know where to start?

Elizabeth Evans:

Great. Thank you so much, Joe. All right, let's pull another question from the chat. It looks like there's one on the MOUs and those requirements, asking for you to dig in and provide just a little bit more context about how someone could go about getting one of those if they don't know where to start.

Joe Phelan:

So, as long as your organization — if they provide security services as a responsibility in your organization — whoever the Captain of the Port is should have that information. So you're going to have to coordinate with the Captain of the Port and the Federal Maritime Security Coordinator within your port, who then will submit the MOU and MOA on your behalf. So that's how you connect with the port

to start that process. And there's also an example in the NOFO of a port that is not a part of the Area Maritime Security Plan, but they're required to provide port security services. It's an example from a Texas community and their MOU/MOA that's attached in the NOFO.

Q3: Are trainings an allowable request under the Port Security Grant Program?

Elizabeth Evans:

Great, thanks so much. All right, I see one last question here. Are trainings considered an allowable request to be made under the Port Security Grant Program?

Joe Phelan:

Yes, training is allowed. When you submit, or when you request, a training, you have to have a course number as well as a title required in the investment justification for the training. So that's going to be an eligible expense. As I mentioned earlier with some of the exemptions for this program, there is that public safety personnel security zone training that's going to require no cost share. If your organization is focused on that type of training, then there's no cost share for that application. But then other trainings as well are eligible under this program.

Closing

Elizabeth Evans:

Great. Thank you so much, Joe. I think that wraps up all the questions we have for today; I don't see anything else in the chat box. So I want to thank everyone so much for hanging on with us as we addressed everything around the Port Security Grant Program. If you do think of a question later that you didn't have a chance to ask today, please feel free to email us at grantwriting@grantsoffice.com. So again, thank you for joining us today, and as always, we hope you think it was a valuable use of your time. Take care.

— End of Transcript —

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