

Funding Local Subrecipients Toolkit

Executive Summary

Funding subrecipients to implement public health strategies in local communities can complement public health agency efforts and expand community reach. This toolkit outlines considerations for health agencies as they navigate each stage of the funding process and provides resources to dive a bit deeper. Key takeaways from each section include:

1. **Engage communities** prior to announcing a new funding opportunity. Reflect on how their insights, perspectives, challenges, and expertise might shift your funding announcement decisions.
2. **Identify the allowable strategies** of the funding source and the **populations or communities** where your funds have the most potential for impact.
3. **Reduce application burden** by being clear, reducing jargon, and providing sufficient budget support.
4. **Align application review and scoring** to drive funding toward subrecipients that can impact health outcomes with populations bearing the largest burden.
5. **Identify contracting processes that can maximize impact** by using existing interagency agreements or braiding and layering funds.

Introduction

The strategies and implementation steps outlined in this toolkit are meant to help health agencies fund local organizations that are prepared to drive results. Funding high-capacity subrecipients increases a health agency's ability to achieve its objectives while also focusing funding on communities where the funds will have the most potential for impact. To give subrecipients flexibility to address the health outcomes across different groups in specific, sensitive ways, health agencies must be thoughtful in their approach to disseminating funding.

A thorough funding strategy for subrecipients can help to:

- Identify a more diverse pool of applicants.
- Reduce administrative burden on the agencies and organizations that choose to apply.
- Reduce barriers to accessing government funds to improve public health outcomes.
- Put funding in the hands of agencies and organizations with strong and trusted relationships with the populations of priority of impact.
- Build buy-in for government funding decisions across partner agencies who participate in the application review process.
- Reduce the burden of participation in the application review process.
- Result in more efficient use of government funds.

How to Use This Toolkit

Any public health agency planning to fund additional organizations in pursuit of their health outcomes or goals can use and find benefit in this toolkit. This includes state or territorial health agencies distributing funds to local public health agencies or community-based organizations (CBOs). The toolkit provides guidance that can help advance planning prior to any new funding availability or grant cycle renewal, and outlines considerations to improve:

- Flexibility of funds to meet community needs.
- Access to funds by diverse organizations.
- Assessment of organizations best prepared to reach populations with the greatest needs.

Defining Toolkit Terms

While there are various definitions for the terms that agencies may use to define the funding process, ASTHO uses the following definitions in this toolkit for clarity and consistency:

- **Funding opportunity:** A jurisdiction's written funding announcement and application guidance from which potential subrecipient's write and submit a request to receive funding. Some jurisdictions refer to these opportunities as Requests for Proposals (RFP) or Requests for Applications (RFA).
- **Subrecipient:** An organization that receives funding to implement public health strategies through a formal agreement from a state or local public health agency.
- **Program staff:** Public health jurisdiction staff responsible for and most attuned to the program budget availability, outcomes of interest, allowable strategies, and communities or populations of focus for the desired health outcomes.
- **Contracting staff:** Public health jurisdiction staff responsible for the contracting process and requirements to generate agreements with subrecipients. Typically, these staff are best positioned to understand the rules, regulations, and procedures for generating contracts.

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Engage Communities To Learn From Their Experiences

Understand the Community Experience

- Engage communities prior to announcing a new funding opportunity. Reflect on how their insights, perspectives, challenges, and expertise might shift your funding announcement decisions.
- Explore how local communities define the problems and challenges they face and how those challenges influence identified health outcomes.
- Invite local communities to share the strategies and solutions they would prioritize. Use this information to inform your funding strategies (e.g., providing as much local implementation flexibility as possible while keeping the funding aligned to the outcomes).

Reduce the Burden of Providing Feedback

- Pay community members for their time and expertise to provide this feedback (e.g., paying honoraria without exceeding the IRS limit of \$600 total in a calendar year or paying with gift cards). Some organizations may recruit and pay a standing advisory council of community members or provide funds to a local CBO to pay community members directly. CBOs may have more flexibility to fund community members in ways that meet their needs.
- Ease the burden of community participation in these feedback sessions. Schedule them when community members are not working, provide food and childcare, consider accessibility to the location, provide interpretation and translation services, etc.
- Share eligibility parameters for the funding opportunity throughout the community engagement process. This prevents organizations from anticipating the possibility of funds for which they will not be eligible.

Identify Lessons Learned from Prior Funding Opportunities

- Ask CBOs about their prior experiences receiving funding from the public health agency. Solicit their suggestions for improvement.
- Explore existing funding strategies. Consider the gaps that remain and how your funding opportunity could help fill those gaps.
- Use these community engagement sessions to generate a list of agencies to whom you will send the funding opportunity announcement once it is public.

Examples

- [Community Compensation Guidelines](#) by the Washington State Office of Equity: Explore guidelines for community compensation and examples of practices from other state agencies to inform your community compensation strategies.
- [Incorporating Health Equity Into Overdose Prevention](#) by ASTHO: Review case studies from other jurisdictions that engaged communities with lived and living experience to inform their strategies.

Resources

- [Transformational Community Engagement to Advance Health Equity](#) by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Identify key characteristics that make engagement efforts for strategic and impactful to advance public health.
- [Leveraging Healthy People 2030 to Build Non-Traditional Multisector Partnerships](#) by ASTHO: Expand your insights into the factors influencing the health and safety of the environments that influence community health.
- [Establishing an Office of Health Equity or Minority Health](#) by ASTHO: Consider using an established Office of Health Equity to support and inform your community engagement strategies.
- [Best Practices for Sustained Community Engagement Learned from the STRETCH 2.0 Midpoint](#) by ASTHO: Reflect on lessons learned from seven participating jurisdictions.
- [Building Trusting Relationships](#) by the National Network of Public Health Institute: Explore recommendations on building community trust to advance health outcomes.

How will your agency build in time for community engagement and feedback prior to releasing a funding opportunity?

Notes

Identify Allowable Strategies and Populations of Focus

Communities should have the flexibility to allocate funds toward strategies that reach the populations/places most impacted by the given issue. Flexible public health funding opportunities can demonstrate respect for communities by allowing them to choose the evidence-informed interventions best tailored to their needs.

Allowable Strategies

- Most funding sources have reporting requirements or evaluation measures that may limit the breadth of allowable strategies. Enhance your familiarity with all reporting requirements so you can strategize just how flexible you can be with your funding approach.
- Identify evidence-informed prevention or intervention strategies appropriate for this funding opportunity. These include upstream prevention strategies that impact the factors that put people at risk for or protect them from negative health outcomes. It also includes mitigation or harm reduction and improved access to treatment or ongoing care.
- For all people to experience well-being—good mental, emotional, and physical health—having access to resources like good housing, reliable transportation, and safe places to live, work, and play is vital. Community members likely identified similar solutions in the community feedback sessions. Identify whether your funding can support the implementation of evidence-informed strategies to improve these building blocks of health in communities.

Populations or Communities of Focus

- Review the outcome data to identify which populations or communities are disproportionately affected by the health outcome(s) you are trying to impact.
- Where available, review data on the full range of potential implementation strategies. Identify which populations or places demonstrate the greatest need for these interventions (i.e. if your funds can support improved access to stable housing, assess the populations and places most in need of housing interventions).

Examples

- [Flexible Funding to Support Public Health Innovation](#) by ASTHO: Review case studies about how flexible funding enhances the capacity of public health agencies and partners to generate innovation in improving health outcomes.
- [Needs Assessment Toolkit](#) by ASTHO: Conduct a population-focused needs assessment to dive further into the complex issues that certain communities face, and review this example of a comprehensive approach to understanding specific community needs.

Reduce Application Burden

Consider how your funding opportunity announcement clearly articulates expectations for implementing public health strategies that have the greatest impact on the populations or places most in need.

Prior to Releasing the Funding Opportunity Announcement

- Consider implementing a process improvement project to streamline the application process and all requirements put in place by your agency.
- Prior to the release of your funding opportunity, provide access to free grant-writing trainings that will help applicants navigate your agency's specific application requirements. Remind them of these resources when your application is live.
- Ask colleagues for lessons learned from their recent funding opportunity announcements.
- If applicable, reflect on lessons learned from the prior round of subrecipients. Consider whether those agencies were appropriate for the work, where they excelled, and where they faced challenges to implement the work and generate impact.
- Reflect on your timeline for funding. To make sure there is not a funding gap for agencies already implementing the work, generate a funding application, review, and contracting process that results in generating new contracts in time for continuous work. If there is a gap in funding, some agencies are not able to retain high quality and experienced staff to continue the work.

While Drafting the Funding Opportunity Announcement

Application Accessibility and Clarity

- Reduce the potential for language barriers in your application and reporting guidance by:
 - Eliminating the use of public health jargon.
 - Providing translated application materials where possible and accepting applications or letters of support written in other languages.
 - Writing the application and reporting requirements using clear and concise language.
- Extend application deadlines beyond the minimum required by your agency.
- Minimize the length of the required application narrative and workplan to only what is necessary to demonstrate readiness to implement.
- Clearly list which interventions these funds cannot support while still allowing flexibility for the community to choose strategies based on local needs. Clear, upfront communication ensures time isn't wasted submitting or reviewing applications that do not align with the funding source (e.g., sexual assault prevention funds intended to address primary prevention would not be available to fund victims' support services; however, there are multiple ways to address primary prevention).

Expectations and Requirements

- Clearly outline expectations for impact among populations disproportionately affected by the health outcome. Request that they demonstrate community outreach and trust.
- Outline expectations for community engagement throughout project implementation. Consider asking about community involvement in the application process (e.g., how were community members outside of the organization who may benefit from the grant involved in the strategy selection, writing, review, and budget decisions?)
- Provide example position descriptions for roles that are vital to implementation of the project. This ensures applicants are aware of the level of expertise and role requirements needed for effective implementation.
- Inquire about the proposed project staff's level of involvement in writing the grant application. Some agencies use professional grant writers that may submit a strong application that lacks awareness and buy-in of the staff that will be responsible for the work moving forward.

Application Design and Scoring

- Draft high-quality responses to each of the funding opportunity questions. This can help you reflect on the overall burden of the application, page limit considerations, and criteria to score a high-quality response per question (which will help with application scoring and review outlined in the next section).
- Align the funding opportunity narrative questions to the scoring criteria (see recommendations in the next section, Application Scoring and Review Processes) to ensure you are not asking applicants to provide irrelevant or unhelpful information.
- Embed scoring criteria within the funding opportunity narrative so that applicants can prioritize responses to the questions that most demonstrate their readiness to receive funding. This may include making the scoring rubric also available for review by applicants (outlined further in the Application Scoring and Review Processes section).
- Request feedback from an experienced grant application reviewer on the clarity of your funding opportunity announcement.

While Considering Budget Parameters

- Provide adequate funding per award and give explicit permission for a range of expenses that support project implementation. Examples may include:
 - Strategies that simplify and incentivize community participation, as outlined in the first section.
 - A livable wage for project staff, aligned with the level of expertise required to complete the work in the communities funded.
 - Employee retention strategies, including opportunities for professional development.
 - Staff roles that support effective implementation, including program assistance, data collection, and evaluation.

- Software supports that improve project efficiency.
- Encourage larger organizations to partner with smaller CBOs serving subpopulations important to this work—particularly if those smaller CBOs struggle to have the fiscal infrastructure in place to navigate government reimbursement timelines.
- Consider reserving some of your overall budget to pay for implementation support, training, or cross-site program evaluation to demonstrate impact of your program.
- Outline a list of example activities that may be allowable within the project funding or guidance for selecting activities. Some jurisdictions use the following budget guidance: All expenses must be necessary to complete the contracted work, allocable (where expenses are shared appropriately across the budget lines that will benefit from the expense), and reasonable (appropriately sized to the need for the project implementation).
- Consider [advanced grant payments](#) that provide up-front funding for implementation to support smaller organizations who may not have the operating funds available to wait for reimbursement.
- Since budget writing is challenging for many organizations, include a sample budget for a fundable project within your application. Additionally, create a partially filled-out budget template with justifications already included for core functions of the expected work (e.g., a project director, an evaluator, a community engagement specialist, food for community engagement meetings, interpretation and translation costs, etc.).

Examples

- [State Department of Health’s Equitable Funding Allocation Methodology to COVID-19 Health Disparities Among High-Risk and Underserved Populations](#) by AJPB: Explore how the Washington State Department of Health developed an equitable funding allocation methodology to address COVID-19 health disparities among high-risk and underserved populations. This may generate ideas for other funding sources.
- [County Procurement Workshop Series](#) by San Diego County: Review a grant-writing training series created to help potential applicants navigate complex application systems.
- [Funding for Foundational Public Health Responsibilities](#) by Minnesota Department of Health: Access clear and detailed information for grantees to apply for funding and manage grant activities and reporting.

Resources

- [Guidance for Integrating Health Equity Language Into Funding Announcements](#) by ASTHO: Understand federal and state initiatives to advance equity in funding opportunities. ASTHO also hosted a [webinar](#) exploring this resource, and provided [Example Language for State Health Agencies](#).
- [Incorporating Health in All Policies: Tips for Grantmakers](#) by ASTHO: Use these tips and strategies to incorporate a “Health in All Policies” approach to the development and implementation of funding opportunity announcements.

Align Application Scoring and Review Processes

Reflect on how your application review and scoring can help you achieve your impact and community engagement goals.

Rethinking Your Scoring Criteria for Your Application

- Work collaboratively with program, contracting, and fiscal staff to outline the criteria that best demonstrate the capacity to implement a project.
- Rank those criteria from most to least important, such as:
 - Organization eligibility to receive the funds.
 - Organization leadership/location (i.e. veteran-owned, based in a rural community, etc.).
 - Reach and trust built with the population of focus.
 - Capacity to implement the scope of the project.
 - Staff with appropriate professional training, lived experience, or community capital to lead the work.
- Double check that the application questions and requirements adequately assess each of your criteria. Organize your application questions and requirements to align to each of the criteria listed.
- Assign weighted scores to each question that aligns with your ranked results.
- Consider how you might allow and score non-traditional letters of support from community members. Ideally, testimonials submitted in multiple languages and audio or video formats could demonstrate whether a given population trusts the lead applicant and that they can effectively engage them. Some applicants may require support with video editing. This may also require adjusting your capacity to receive large video or audio files with the submission.

Reducing the Burden of Scoring for Reviewers

Review Process Planning

- Be sure all reviewers are aware of the open records requirements for all scoring documentation. Some jurisdictions only require that one final compilation of the scores from each reviewer be kept on file. Consider providing reviewers with an identification number instead of using names to protect their identity of which reviewer provided each score in the event of an open records request.
- Request that potential applicants submit an Intent to Apply midway through the application process. This will give you an idea of the number of reviewers to recruit to score applicants so that the burden is spread across multiple review committees.
- Assess the make-up of your review and scoring committee. Does it reflect the diverse perspectives and subject matter expertise needed to appropriately assess applications? Include both internal staff and external stakeholders, where appropriate.

- Separate out technical criteria that assess the eligibility of each application to be considered for funding from those that assess the quality of the application. Technical criteria are often more of a binary assessment of whether the applicant is eligible, in good standing with the state, and the application is complete. Internal program staff often assess applications for the technical criteria first and only share applications that pass all criteria for scoring by members of the review committee.

Scoring Rubric Design

- Design an easy-to-use rubric that provides examples of responses that may warrant a low, average, or high score. Outline the intention for each question so that reviewers understand what you were looking for in response.
- Simplify scoring for external reviewers. Make sure each question and its related scoring criteria are mutually exclusive. It is more challenging for reviewers to try to award points across multiple questions.
- Request feedback from an experienced grant application reviewer on the clarity of your scoring rubric.

Reviewer Training and Support

- Assess whether your external reviewers have the skills for budget assessment. Consider including some aspects of the budget scoring as part of the internal technical review to ease the burden on reviewers.
- Train internal review and scoring personnel in advance to make sure that they understand expectations and the scoring rubric. Record the training so that they can revisit the content later if they face challenges in scoring. Offer office hours to answer scoring questions from reviewers.
- Adhere to the timeline set forth in the application regarding review of applications and notification of selection status. Make sure you built in enough time for reviewers to read and score all applications and meet to discuss scores.

Communicating with All Applicants About Award Decisions

- Compile an overarching announcement of awarded organizations with a general overview of the strengths noted across all the awarded subrecipients.
- Create one document for each application (funded and not funded) that provides an overview of the strengths and potential areas for improvement that aligns with the scores and comments from reviewers. You can use this document to provide technical assistance to those awarded subrecipients to improve their project implementation and to applicant organizations that are not funded to help increase their skills to receive future funding opportunities.
- Make sure your contracts team approves all communications.

Identify Contracting Processes That Can Maximize Impact

Once you have identified the full range of allowable strategies as well as the population of focus, you can assess a wider range of available contracting processes. Your organization may have existing agreements with subrecipients best prepared to align with your priorities, or you may identify new opportunities to braid and layer funds collaboratively with another program or organization.

Identifying Existing Agreements That Can Simplify Contracting Processes

- Many jurisdictions have existing agreements (e.g., master service agreements) with organizations, such as local health departments, that allow for simpler contracting processes.
- Many jurisdictions use approved vendor lists which can simplify the contracting process. Jurisdictions can offer trainings for CBOs about the approval process.
- Jurisdictions may also allow contracts between government entities to avoid lengthy competitive application processes. This could include funding local governments, other state government agencies (e.g., institutes of higher education), and funding tribes.
- Balance the benefits of expedited contract processes with the desire to identify the best-positioned organization to accomplish your public health goals. In some cases, identifying a CBO that has higher capacity for a certain approach or holds the trust of local under-resourced populations will expedite implementation and impact—even if it means choosing a longer competitive application process rather than an expedited process with an existing partner.
- Explore local or national non-profits that can manage and disburse funding in partnership with the jurisdiction to a variety of CBOs. This may include membership groups or organizations with chapters that span multiple state, territorial, or local jurisdictions.

Braiding and Layering Funds

Braiding and layering funds are two approaches to combine funding from various resources to support specific public health efforts or to achieve a common goal. It helps to: achieve economies of scale by funding comprehensive services that meet multiple goals, strengthen infrastructure supports, break down internal silos and increase collaboration, and improve efforts to address the social components that impact health outcomes.

Collaborate with other programs or agencies that may hold contracts with CBOs or contractors well positioned to accomplish your funding opportunity objectives. Consider adding funding to existing contracts to achieve any of the following objectives:

- Achieve a larger reach across the jurisdiction for existing work.
- Fund new strategies that complement existing work.
- Increase continuity of efforts if existing funding sources are diminishing.
- Improve the recipient's ability to address emerging concerns or challenges.

Examples

- [Minnesota Streamlines Public Health Funding and Technical Assistance](#) by ASTHO: Review this case example from Minnesota to learn how they used master grant contracts to streamline funding for local public health.
- [Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zones](#) by Rhode Island Department of Health: Review Rhode Island’s summary of their process and impact from successfully braiding and layering funds for local communities.

Resources

- ASTHO Braiding and Layering Resources:
 - [Public Health Impact](#)
 - [Social Determinants of Health](#)
 - [Supportive Housing](#)
 - [Food Insecurity](#)
 - [Adverse Childhood Experiences Prevention](#)
 - [Braiding and Layering Course](#)
- [Health Equity Zones: A Toolkit for Building Healthy and Resilient Communities](#) by Change Lab Solutions: Review recommendations generated from the successful braiding and layering efforts Rhode Island Department of Health employed.

How can you benefit from contracting efficiencies within your organization without losing the potential for impact with your population?

Notes
