

Tips for Writing a Successful Drug Free Communities Application
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Writing a successful Drug Free Communities (DFC) grant has become increasingly challenging with level funding for the program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 and continued high numbers of applicants. In the FY2006 funding cycle, for example, applicants had to score 82 or better to receive funding. In FY2007, the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) anticipates only awarding sixty new applications. There are some basic steps, however, that coalitions can take to increase the likelihood that their application will be sent to peer review and will receive a favorable score. Below are some guidelines to developing a successful DFC application.

Start With a Solid Strategic Plan

In order to have a successful application, you should start with an organized coalition built on a solid strategic plan. Program planning and grant writing are intricately linked. Before you begin to write the DFC application, develop your strategic plan or take a look at the plan you have in place. The DFC program requires that grantees use the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF) for program planning. Take time to align your existing strategic plan with the SPF or use the SPF when developing your plan. If you have not properly planned for how you are going to use the DFC funds and if your plan is not based on the community needs, your application will not be as strong as it could be. Adequate planning will also ensure that the application describes a cohesive and comprehensive approach from assessment to evaluation.

Follow the Application Format and Guidelines

Reviewers are required to read and score multiple applications. If your application does not follow the format and guidelines, it is difficult for the reviewer to score the sections of the application. Pay close attention to the guidelines as you develop your application.

Focus on the Eligibility Criteria

In order to make it to peer review, every application must first make it through an eligibility screening. The eligibility criteria are outlined in the Request for Proposals (RFP) and the DFC legislation. Hundreds of applications are usually screened for eligibility in a short amount of time. Therefore, it is essential that applicants make it easy for the readers to quickly determine that they meet the criteria. Below are several of the areas that applicants have historically failed to demonstrate that they meet.

Twelve Sectors

All applicants must include a table of individuals who represent the twelve sectors in the community (youth, parents, business community, media, school, youth-serving organization, law enforcement agencies, religious or fraternal organizations, civic or volunteer groups, healthcare professionals, State, local, or tribal governmental agencies with expertise in the field of substance abuse, and other organizations involved in reducing substance abuse). If the application does not include this table or is missing any one of the twelve sectors, the application

will not be sent to peer review. Therefore, it is essential to include this table and make it clear that each of the twelve sectors is represented on the list. Also note that one individual can not represent more than one sector.

Mission Statement

The coalition must have as part of its principal mission the goal of reducing substance abuse among youth. When submitting the mission statement, make sure that it includes the words “substance abuse reduction” and “youth.” Many organizations submit applications with mission statements that discuss community health, prevention, or treatment. When the reviewer reads these, it is difficult for them to determine if it is the mission statement for an anti-drug coalition or a health clinic, prevention program, school, or treatment center.

Goals and Objectives

The DFC application requires that you describe objectives under each of the DFC program goals. This makes it easy for applicants to ensure that they are addressing the two goals of the DFC program. The objectives, however, must also address multiple drugs. Coalitions, for example, can not solely focus on alcohol. In order to be funded under the DFC program, the objectives must address more than one drug.

Meeting Minutes

Meeting minutes are an important aspect of the application. The minutes are used for two primary purposes. First, the minutes are read to determine if the coalition meets the six month requirement. As long as one set of minutes reflect a meeting held six months prior to the application due date and one not more than three months before the application due date, this requirement is met. Second, the reviewer can use the minutes to help determine community and sector participation and level of coalition activity. Additionally, meeting minutes often reveal if the coalition is focusing on drug prevention or other community health problems. When determining which set of minutes to include with the application, take time to read them to make sure that most, or all, sectors are represented. Also ensure that the minutes reflect the activities of the coalition and reveal an array of strategies employed by the coalition. Additionally, it will strengthen the application to include minutes in which the coalition is discussing strategies outlined in the application.

Assume the Reader is not Familiar with Your Coalition or Community

Because individuals writing grants know every detail of the coalition and community, it is easy for grant writers to forget that the person reviewing the grant knows nothing about either the organization or community. Therefore, it is important to include as much detail in as clear a format as possible so that the reader gets a complete picture of the community that the coalition is trying to change and the strategies and activities that they are using. Avoid, when possible, too many acronyms and clearly describe programs, activities, strategies, organizations, and individuals that you include in the grant. It may

also help to have someone who is unfamiliar with your coalition and community to read your application and provide feedback before submission.

Develop a Plan for Data Collection and Reporting

In order to score high in both the Assessment section and the Evaluation section of the DFC application, you must demonstrate the ability to collect and report on the four core outcome measures (age of onset, 30-day use, perception of risk or harm, and perception of parental disapproval for alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana). The Assessment and Evaluation sections account for 42 of the 100 available points in the application.

Therefore, it is important for applicants to have mechanisms in place to collect the core measures and to clearly define in the application how they plan to report on and use the data to improve coalition performance.

Make Sure the Budget Matches Your Strategic Plan

Reviewers will look at the budget to ensure that what the coalition says they are going to do throughout the application is how they are using the money. Often, reviewers see that applicants describe numerous activities throughout the application, but find that the budget only reflects a single strategy or program. Keeping in mind that the DFC is a relatively small grant, applicants can use the majority of the grant money for one activity, but the majority of requested DFC funds should not be dedicated to funding direct services. Instead, DFC funds should be used primarily for supporting environmentally-focused community change. If the bulk of DFC funds are going to be dedicated to one activity or project, it is wise to show that the matching funds are contributing to the other activities described in the application. Otherwise, reviewers will likely wonder how the coalition will implement the strategies described throughout the application.

The DFC funds are unique in that they can be used for coalition infrastructure. While the process of applying for this grant may seem tedious, if done well, the application development can lead to a stronger community coalition, strategic plan, and ultimately, more funding. Utilizing the above tips should lead to a strong application. Good Luck!

Keri-Lyn Coleman, Founder of Community Solutions, has nearly ten years experience as a Federal grant program administrator and local program director. Mrs. Coleman served as the Administrator for the Drug Free Communities program and has reviewed hundreds of grant applications, wrote the 2005 and 2006 Request for Applications, and provided technical assistance for coalitions across the country. For additional guidance and support as you prepare your DFC application, you can email Keri-Lyn Coleman at keri-lyn.coleman@hotmail.com or call at 240-731-1889.