

No Front Door:

Barriers to Access for Small Communities Seeking Federal Grants

U.S. Digital Response | August 2023



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Executive Summary

Too many small cities, townships, counties and villages opt out of pursuing a grant because the journey is so complex. This study seeks to understand where process improvements and new tools can help channel resources more effectively to these communities with fewer than 1 million people. After speaking to individuals and groups representing over 350 different small communities, we are certain that **improvements in the Federal grants process will bring outside benefits to small communities.**

With the passage of ARPA, IIJA, IRA and the CHIPS act, the grant resources flowing to states and localities are a generational investment in an energy efficient, healthy, competitive economy. **But the complexity of the Federal grant process threatens the ability of small communities to participate in or benefit from these programs.**

We should aspire to a Federal grants process that is transparent, simple and easy to use. Federal grantmaking uses an array of different systems, designed for the convenience of the single sponsoring agency, not usability for applicants, who are often the sole administrator in a small local government. A **user-based approach** for every step in the grant-seeking process that emphasizes **clarity and communications, right-sizing and rationalization** and **simplicity and streamlining**, will advance us towards our goal.

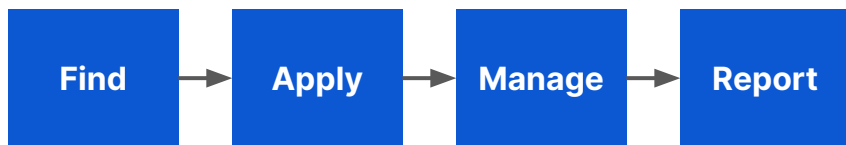


Context



No Front Door

Communities that are successful in seeking grants will be rewarded with resources to help them invest in services for their people. In theory, the grant-seeking journey consists of four fairly distinct phases:



As each of our interviews demonstrated, the grants journey has blind alleys, false starts and conflicting directions, which are tough for small communities to manage. The goal of this report is to illuminate that experience from the grantseeker's point of view, revealing ways that the grants journey for small communities can be simplified and streamlined.

“Small communities and businesses are frustrated when there is no ‘front door’... They need an easy way to navigate to opportunities available to them.”

– Midwest Director, National Small Business Advocacy Organization

Goals of this report

Inform decision-makers

at all levels of government about barriers faced by small communities.

Inform small communities about promising practices and tools that can make the grants journey easier.

Provide insights on new tools that could be developed to assist in making grants more accessible to small communities.

About U.S. Digital Response

U.S. Digital Response (USDR) is a nonprofit organization pairing the best of pro bono technical talent with the people solving our most important public problems. Our vision is a government that keeps up: one that delivers for people on their most critical needs, now and into the future. **We're fast, free and non-partisan.**

Since March 2020, USDR has partnered with over 300 organizations on almost 400 projects across over 40 states and territories. USDR has built a dedicated community of over 8,000 pro bono technologists who are ready to serve, and has expanded its team of dedicated staff members to over 30.



About USDR's Grant Program

USDR has developed two tools to assist government in discovering and reporting on Federal grants, helping over 120 government and non-profit partners better manage their grant seeking and reporting responsibilities.

Our work with our partners in the grants space spurred our interest in diving more deeply into the experience of smaller communities in navigating the Federal grants process.

USDR Federal Grant Finder

US Digital Response Grant Finder

City of Reno **1,195 | \$2,905,110** Grants Identified

In Progress (14) Applied (2) Not Considering (132) Available Grants (72,310)

Search My Saved Searches Export CSV

Grant ID	Active Teams	My Team Status	Recent Activity
FY23 IUA Bureau of Land Management Nevada (NV) Invasive and Noxious Plant Management 11/23/23 Closing Date - \$340,044 Ceiling	City of Reno Department of Water Management Office of Environmental Preservation	Supporting	Mary Walter / City of Reno Set Status as Supporting 2:19PM Today
FY23 IUA Bureau of Land Management Nevada (NV) Invasive and Noxious Plant Management 11/23/23 Closing Date - \$340,044 Ceiling	City of Reno City of Sparks	Considering	Jess Watson / City of Sparks Set Status as Considering 10:21 PM Yesterday
FY23 IUA Bureau of Land Management Nevada (NV) Invasive and Noxious Plant Management 11/23/23 Closing Date - \$340,044 Ceiling	City of Reno	Applying	Brandon Wu / City of Reno Set Status as Applying 2:19PM Yesterday
FY23 IUA Bureau of Land Management Nevada (NV) Invasive and Noxious Plant Management 11/23/23 Closing Date - \$340,044 Ceiling	City of Reno Office of Environmental Preservation	Considering	Talia Clark / Department of Wat... Set Status as Supporting 2:19PM Yesterday

USDR ARPA P&E Reporter

ARPA Reporter Reporting Period Ending: Quarterly 1

Dashboard Uploads Agencies Subrecipients Users Reporting Periods Validation

Uploads

Download Single Template Submit Spreadsheet

Only exported to treasury? Group by agency? Reset Filter

ID	Agency	EC Code	Uploaded By	Filename	Validated?
c32f5629	DHS	2.32	par@usdrgrantsresponse.org	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL (1).xlsx	Aug 17th 2022, 2:37:57 PM
9b5a2508	DHS	2.32	nhuang@usdrgrantsresponse.org	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL (1).xlsx	Jul 18th 2022, 10:11:58 AM
c8f22769	DHS	2.32	nhuang@usdrgrantsresponse.org	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL (1).xlsx	Jul 18th 2022, 3:55:51 PM
794667a2	DHS	2.32	nhuang@usdrgrantsresponse.org	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL (1).xlsx	Jul 18th 2022, 3:54:59 PM
8346a77d	DHS	2.32	nhuang@usdrgrantsresponse.org	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL (1).xlsx	Jul 18th 2022, 3:56:59 PM
5c6e7a6f	DHS	2.32	pacomaeu7@gmail.com	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL.xlsx	Jul 13th 2022, 9:37:04 AM
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0aaf594c	DHS	2.32	pacomaeu7@gmail.com	10002 - DHS - EC2 32 - Child Care Family Provider Support - CY22Q1 SFRR Reporting Workbook - FINAL.xlsx	Not set



The grant seeking journey

Why is the grant seeking journey so important?

In the last two years, the federal government has rolled out grants for pandemic recovery, infrastructure and services, which, taken together with other funding sources, has increased grants to states and local governments by 93% from fiscal year 2008 to 2020. Many of these programs have been designed with the intent to reach smaller municipalities and local governments—historically less successful in acquiring federal grant money. The journey a grant applicant takes before application is often invisible to grantors; and the grant seeking journey itself is often inscrutable to the grant applicant.

- Many grant managers dream of a world where they can **identify federal grants with pinpoint accuracy, apply for them with the click of a button, and automatically produce reports in exactly the format required** by the funder.
- Funders and grant managers running programs are **operating under a backlog of applications, overdue reports, and other demands**. Job boards are overloaded with open positions for people with grant administration experience.
- The complexity of the grants process means that **grant resources are often out of reach for exactly those communities they are meant to serve**.

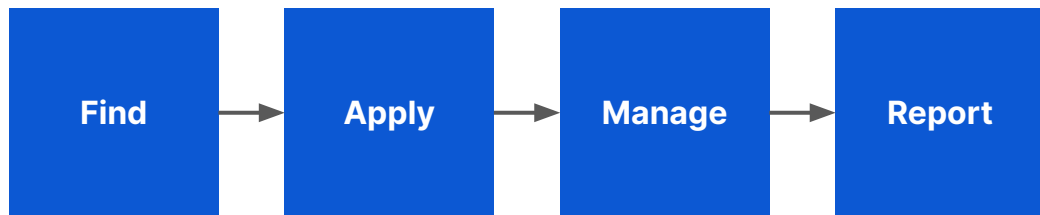
A deep understanding of the grant-seeking journey from the user point of view shows there are key opportunities for reform and simplification and new ways for government needs to be met at scale.

Mapping the grant seeking journey

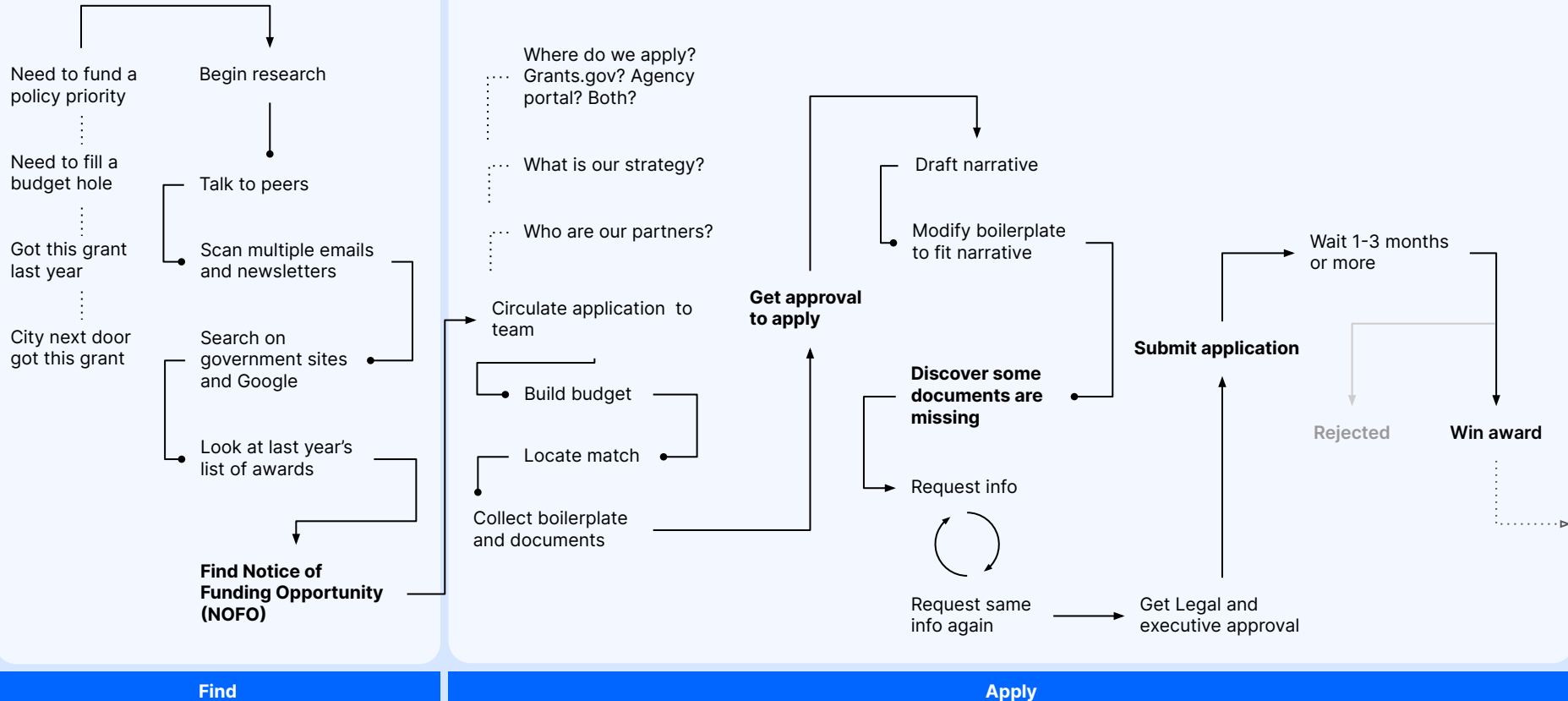
The grant seeking journey for small communities follows the same distinct phases: find a grant, apply for it, manage it, and report on it. For under-resourced communities, these functions are not a part of routine municipal operations. For that reason, they are typically filled by fractional employees or outsourced to contractors. Some communities more flush with resources have built new systems to manage pandemic recovery resources made available by the Federal government.

“ARPA was just a huge wake up call and we had to get things done so quickly that [systems will] be in place if that ever happens again.”

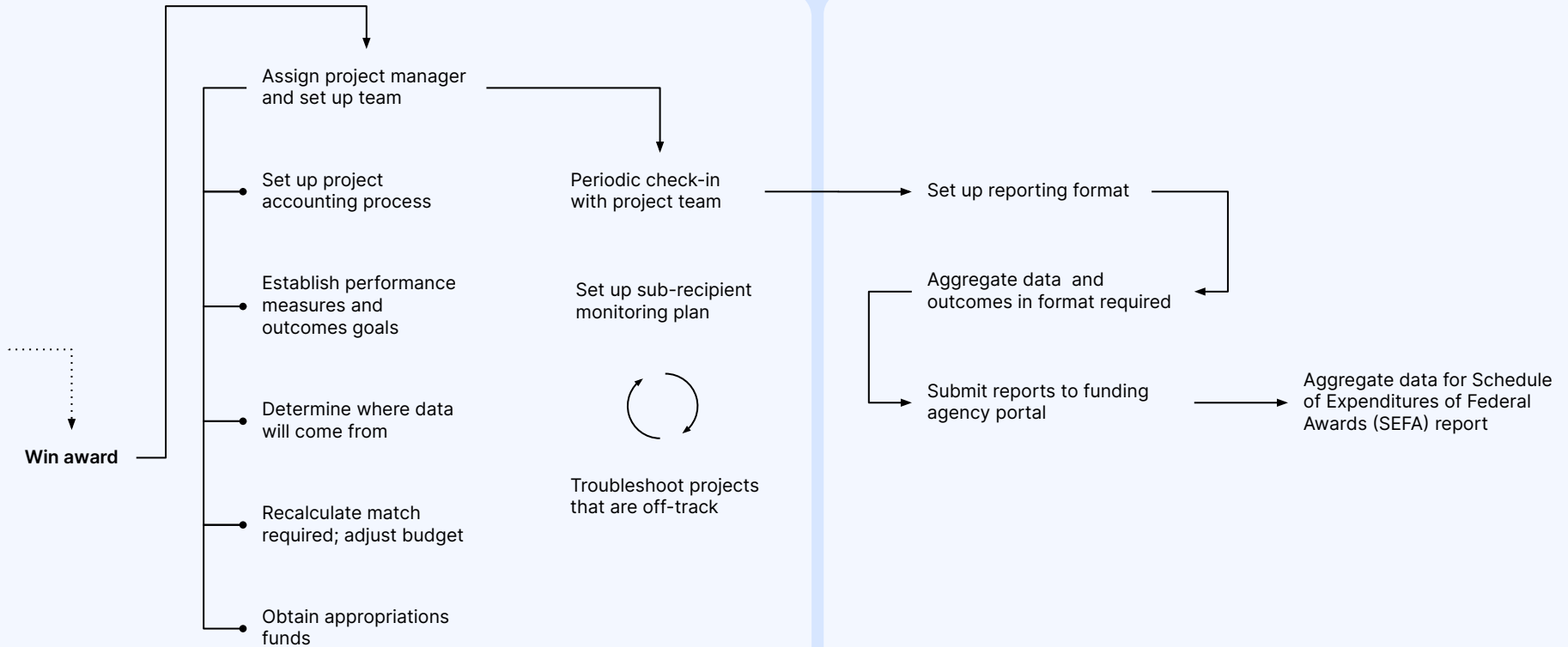
– Grants Administrator, Small City



A small community's grant-seeking journey (1 of 2)



A small community's grant-seeking journey (2 of 2)



Are there any fun parts about applying for a grant?

“I get the same feeling playing blackjack that I do writing grants, and that ought to tell you something about the stupidity of grant writing.

But I like the chase; I enjoy the challenge. It's invigorating to say I used my brain and the collection of stories that we've put together to talk somebody into giving us money. That's fun to me.”

– Leader, Intermediary Organization

Journey map: Goals, Actions and Tools

Phase	Find	Apply	Manage	Report
Goal	Find a grant that meets the community's needs	Collect materials and obtain approval to successfully submit grant application	Create program to distribute and monitor grant spending.	Submit accurate results to grantor that meet all program requirements
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Learn about opportunities from newsletters, trade associations, google, list-servs. -Assess against community priorities to determine "fit" -Is grant amount worth the effort to apply? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Develop the "story" -Find Partners -Assess probability of success and make decision to apply -Complete application -Get approval (Council, Mayor, Legislature) -Submit proposal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Answer policy and procedure questions -Get all sub-recipients registered in SAM.gov -Contract with sub-recipients, passing down all Federal rules -Monitor performance, program compliance and ensure money is well spent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Assemble data from source systems and sub-recipients -Complete federal reports - -Report to local government leaders, city councils, etc. -Upload data as required into Federal portals -Troubleshoot with sub-recipients -Sub-recipient monitoring activities
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Grants.gov -Email and List-servs -Peers and Networks -Media -Luck 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Excel -Word -PDF -Sharepoint -Google Drive -Portal tools as prescribed by Federal program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Email -Excel -Word -Forms -Grants Management System (larger communities) - Case management system (human services) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Email -Excel -Word -Forms -Templates prescribed by Federal grants portals

Journey map: Pain Points and Opportunities

Phase	Find	Apply	Manage	Report
Pain Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Grants.gov not friendly-Notices of Funding Opportunity are intimidating and time-consuming to assess-Questions to grantor go unanswered	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Two sign-ins for Grants.Gov and SAMs is mysterious and confusing-every application is slightly different-no idea whether it is worth the time to apply; no feedback for rejected apps-no central storage for reusable app information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Risk of duplicative work is high; no standardized tracking-Resource contention between 'boots on ground' and compliance/monitoring activities-compliance activities require a consultant to be hired	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-different grants require different reports using different data in different formats-every grant can have a different federal portal and system to report into-compliance activities are difficult for sub-recipients
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Provide executive summaries for NOFOs so scanning is easier-Two-way communication between grant program and applicant-Provide liaison to answer questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Support intermediaries who can channel funds to smaller communities without having to pass down all federal requirements-Develop "common app" approach, like college common app-Liaison for all grant programs to answer questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Advise smaller communities on less costly ways to comply with federal requirements-Provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants so they know why they were not funded and can improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Provide a central location for reusable application components also used for reporting-Develop a common reporting, easy-to-use reporting tool and provide it to communities-Provide common datasets in a consumable form to applicants to design performance metrics

“With all of the different parameters that the US Treasury gives us, it's hard to keep subrecipients who are representing disadvantaged communities up to compliance. There is a steep learning curve for a lot of these organizations to just make them able to handle this federal money because [it] has so many strings attached to it.”

– Grants Manager, Small City



Recommendations and findings

Summary and Findings

A deep dive into the grant-seeking journey from the user point of view shows there are key opportunities for reform and simplification and new ways for government needs to be met at scale. The table below summarizes our findings for the Federal Government as well as small communities; please read further on for our findings.

	Federal Government	Small Communities
Clarify and communicate	Boost interaction between government program managers, and the communities they aim to help.	Seek out information to realistically target grant opportunities that fit your needs.
Right-size and rationalize	Deploy “T-Shirt” models for grant programs, designed for small, medium and large sized communities Provide support for intermediaries and technical assistance in grantseeking	Centralize risk assessment, compliance and reporting functions to streamline grant operations
Simplify and streamline	Use a common application, developed in a modular way to allow for the wide variety of government programs. Pre-fill fields with data for convenience and to show applicants how they are likely to stack up	Use data to communicate your community context and to inform performance and outcome measures.

Clarify and Communicate

Why is clarity and communication important and what might it change?

- More robust interaction across the entire grants process will help both **grantees and grantors better understand how to communicate** about, apply for and benefit from Federal grants.
- **Federal grants programs will be less inundated** by grant applications from those who are not qualified to apply.
- Transparency in the system will help both Federal program managers and local communities **better target efforts for intended results.**
- Shortening the distance between Federal program managers and small communities will **boost confidence in the grants process, and the place for small communities in it.**

MODERNIZATION

Nevada latest to adopt nonprofit's grant discovery tool

The U.S. Digital Response developed an enterprise grant discovery tool that state and local agencies say is more helpful than the federal government's outdated portal.

BY COLIN WOOD • APRIL 20, 2023



State of Nevada fosters collaboration between state and local governments, nonprofits and educational institutions:

43 nonprofits and community-based organizations, 18 local agencies (fire department, school districts, sheriff, etc.), 3 educational institutions, 3 vendors, and 1 Federal agency (US Department of Agriculture).

Clarify and Communicate

More high quality interactions between grant providers and applicants would make the journey more productive and positive

- **Feedback is critical.** Applicants want to know why their grant applications were rejected, so they can improve. Data on peers would also yield insights.
- **Grant providers should provide numerous ways to answer applicant questions throughout the process.** The use of recorded webinars should be augmented with structured Q&A sessions or chat spaces that enable direct interaction between Federal program managers and grant-seekers.
 - For example, notices of funding opportunities (NOFOs) should be assigned a **liaison to answer questions** from communities as they make the decision to pursue an opportunity.

“When I think of a true federal application, I think of throwing a tennis ball into an abyss and then it just goes off and it might come back or it might not come back. You don't really know.”

– Grant Technical Advisor

Clarify and Communicate

Small communities should strategically evaluate community needs and focus on “high likelihood” grant opportunities

- Maintain an **updated list of departmental funding priorities** for which block grant or other generalized funding support could be used quickly.
- Use free search tools like USDR’s Grant Identification Tool to **better pinpoint grant opportunities**.
- Actively **seek out data** from Federal program managers and trade associations **about their performance in relation to their peers**, especially in seeking competitive grants.
- Use checklists and other tools to help **filter out NOFOs and other grant opportunities** for which you may not qualify.

“Communities need to figure out [if] the cost benefit is worth it so that they don't spend so much time that there isn't a good chance of winning the money or it is going to be a headache to manage it.”

– Small Community Technical Assistance Provider

Right-Size and Rationalize

Why is this important and what might it change?

- A simple, clear and easy-to-access grants ecosystem will help smaller communities grapple with the escalating burdens they face in measuring performance and outcomes.
- When processes and systems are easy to use, compliance increases.
- Easy ways to navigate the Federal ecosystem means fewer disappointed communities, and a higher level of satisfaction with the quality and accessibility of Federal resources to support critical community services and needs.

“Unless you have robust intermediaries helping to get those [grant] resources into communities, they are highly unlikely to navigate these processes in time, [creating] rapidly growing inequities between those who have the [staff] resources to figure this stuff out and those who don't.”

– Leader, Non-profit intermediary

Right-size and Rationalize

Move away from “one size fits all” compliance models and consider more flexible, “T-Shirt” sized grant program management structures, tailored to the needs and risk levels of small, medium, and large government entities.

- **Develop grant compliance models for small, medium and large communities**, aligned with the compliance and risk assessment guidelines required by [2 CFR 200](#).
- **Consider funding intermediary organizations** who play an important role in seeding and supporting regional collaboratives of small communities.
- **Relieve smaller communities of significant administrative burdens**

“Capacity through the entire process (awareness, application, contracting, execution) is a huge challenge, and a continued mistake of the federal government is overly burdensome grant funded opportunities vs. direct allocation of funds for capacity building. They could use it for public works and general city staff, that is, provide funding that includes capacity building \$\$”

– Researcher, Urban Data Consultancy

Right-Size and Rationalize

Centralizing grants reporting, compliance and reporting functions can help smaller communities to manage grants better and boost compliance.

- Risk assessments, subrecipient monitoring and grant reporting are three operations that many respondents indicated that they are centralizing.
- A central grants office provides accountability, support and materials to make grantseeking easier, monitor completion of grants and serve as a central coordinator for community-wide grant efforts, policy, and monitoring.

“The entire federal grants system is stressful – I’m twirling my ring around and around my finger as I talk to you”

– Grants Manager, Parks and Recreation

Simplify and Streamline

Why is it important to simplify and streamline the process and what might it change?

- Policy imperatives to channel resources to small and vulnerable communities are more likely to be met.
- More communities will apply for Federal grants so that resources are directed where they are most needed.
- Grant-seeking will be a better experience for all users if tools and resources are easy to use.

“Gosh, I mean, I could, I could spend my entire life applying for grants that we could make a legitimate claim to.

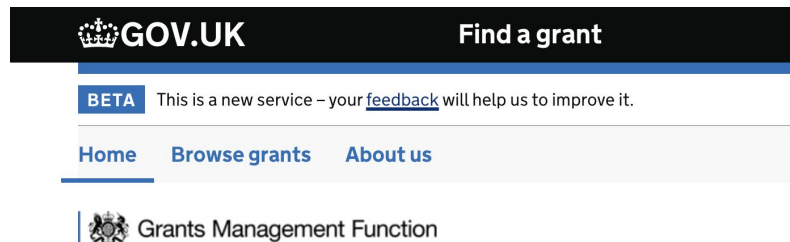
And, you know, we've gone through the hassle fewer than five times.”

- Director, Small Town Transportation Department

Simplify and Streamline

Rely on user input to build “one front door” and a standard grant application.

- The Federal grants ecosystem is complex and varied. Steps have been taken to codify and standardize many reports (SF 425, etc.) but many documents used widely by communities are frustratingly different.
- Take a modular approach, like that used in the college “common application” or by the UK “Find A Grant” beta website
 - Basic information is carried in a single, standard module.
 - Grant programs with specific requirements can add on supplemental parts to fit their needs.



Find a grant

Find a grant is a service that allows you to search government grants. This is a pilot service and it is being co-created with our users.

You can use this service to:

- access government grant funding
- search and filter to find a grant that matches your needs
- find out if you are eligible to apply for a grant
- find out how to apply for a grant

The [UK Find A Grant](#) tool was developed with extensive user research. Its beta test site already has 70,000 users

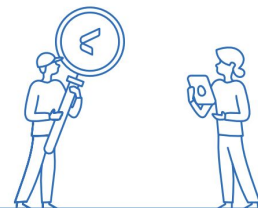
Simplify and Streamline

A Common Application might ease the Federal grant review process and improve the applicant experience:

- A common application could support “pre-qualification” rounds to filter out communities that might not be competitive
 - Applicants who do not meet the requirements of the program can be notified very quickly upon submission.
 - Rejected applicants need not take additional time to fill out the entire remaining application components.
- Lowering the number of extensive applications would ease the review process for Federal agencies as well



What is Common App?



“We support those who need it most by making the application simple, the process logical and the experience joyful.” – [Common App mission](#)

Simplify and streamline

Grantee-supplied information should be available across all Federal grant applications

- Use of a single identifier, like the SAM.gov number, should allow every application to pull in the key identification data required, rather than requiring an applicant to repeat that information.

Common Federal source data useful to quantify community needs can be “Pre-filled”

- Census, LED or other data could be used to quantify key community needs for the funding
- It could also provide the baseline for performance measures for the program and for peer comparisons across applicants

What do you dream about?...

“If you were able to have kind of like a TurboTax for the grant application process ...and the application validates...or has a spell checker ... or it gives you the text version of the form so that you can preview what you need to get.”

– Non-Profit Board Member

The background is a solid dark blue. On the left, there is a white parallelogram tilted upwards. On the right, there are three horizontal bars: a light blue one at the top, a white one in the middle, and a bright blue one at the bottom.

Methodology and focus

Who is this research for?

- **Teams and individuals involved with grants** at all levels of government
- **Policymakers and legislative leaders** focused on ways to improve utilization and outcomes from government spending, particularly in small communities
- **Technologists from the public and private sector** who design and build websites, applications and services intended for those seeking, managing and reporting on grants

Are there any fun parts to working on grants?

“I think it's fun to be able to open up those resources to our partners and like, we're going to build a park in a community that's been disinvested for 30 years. You know, like you're going see the universe change as a result of what we're doing.

That's invigorating.”

– Grants Administrator, Parks and Recreation

Setting expectations

This research...

- **Describes the journey that small communities take** when they navigate the federal grants ecosystem, and identifies general experiences, sentiments, and areas of interest at each step of the journey.
- Is qualitative and **suggests the “why” behind the statistics** and surveys conducted by other research teams.
- Is generative research. Our interviews with intermediaries and small communities provide **insights into the underserved and vulnerable communities** that federal grants are intended to reach, and ways to more effectively reach them.

This research does not...

- Tell you about specific opportunities for improvement in your state or local government. We broadly analyzed experiences of small communities and intermediaries serving those communities.
- Provide data which is statistically significant or representative of all small communities in the U.S.
- Directly address the role of state, city or county government organizations, regional offices of Federal agencies or the myriad vendors that provide grant writing and technical assistance to small communities.

Research methods



1. Use USDR's Federal Grants experience as a foundation

Over the past three years, USDR has responded to needs around grants for governments nationwide as they have confronted the issues associated with reporting for the Coronavirus Relief Fund and ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund. The insights, issues and concerns voiced by our USDR government partners led us to take on this research project.



2. Supplement with desk research

We performed desk research across a number of periodicals with surveys of government and non-government grant professionals. Additionally, we consulted with leaders in the grants management field, such as the National Grants Management Association, grantseekers, and leading grants management system vendors.



3. Conduct user interviews

A research team at U.S. Digital Response conducted deep-dive interviews with over 24 people associated with the grants process, representing over 350 communities, actively applying for and managing the grants process. Additionally, we have gotten the views of a number of organizations that provide grantseeking services to small communities.

Research questions

Questions focused on the experience of navigating the grants journey for smaller communities, governments and nonprofits working with government.

Roles and Collaboration

- How do you work with others in your government to identify and pursue grants? Manage them? Report on them?
- What decisions are you required to make?

Intelligence Gathering and Decision-making

- Where do you get your information from about new grant opportunities you might pursue?
- How do you decide what grants to pursue?

Overcoming challenges in grants management

- What are the most challenging aspects of applying for federal grants? Managing or reporting on them?
- What practices have you adopted to make this easier for yourselves?

Influx of Funding during and after pandemic

- How has the influx of federal funding during and after the pandemic impacted your ability to apply for and pursue grants?

Participants

21 individuals from local governments, intermediaries, non-profits and technical assistance providers **representing over 350 local governments** in **every major geographic region in the continental US.**

- **Local governments** operate with no more than 1 or 2 people who were responsible for all aspects of the grants journey for their communities.
- **Intermediary organizations and non-profits** help very small communities come together to share capabilities and pool resources in working with either state or federal agencies.
- **Technical assistance providers** spend a tremendous amount of time demystifying and providing technical assistance to small communities applying for grants.



Acknowledgements

This report was developed through the insightful interviews performed by a team of dedicated USDR staff and volunteers:



We are deeply grateful to members of the Federal grants community who have supported this work and helped us to understand current barriers and efforts being made to address them, as well as USDR team members and volunteers.

USDR Grants Research Lead: Pari Sabety | **USDR Team Support:** Mindy Huang, Jessica Watson, Saad Asad, Kristen Eberlin | **USDR Volunteers:** Anna Hoffman, Jackie Strawbridge, Yu-Fu Michael Chen, Steven Todd, Lauren Phillips, Sara Miller, Renee Findley, Lucy Bierer, *Kathryn Brookshier (not pictured)

