

Runaway and Homeless Youth Training & Technical Assistance Center

Tips for Sustaining RHY Programs: Writing Proposals for Foundation Funding

Successful proposal writing starts long before you read a grant application. It takes thoughtful preparation and planning and involves understanding your organization's mission, finding appropriate resources, writing concisely and persuasively, paying attention to detail, and nurturing relationships.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR MISSION AND YOUR GOALS

This initial step will probably be the most time-consuming but also the most important. If done well, your preparation now will help simplify the proposal writing.

Avoid "mission drift." If your organization attempts to be too many things to too many people, it may end up trying to support programs not related to its core mission. To avoid this "mission drift," create a strategic plan for your organization. Assess community needs, set goals for the organization for the next several years and outline action steps for achieving each goal. With a strategic plan in hand, it's easier to decide what grants to apply for and which ones aren't a good fit.

Outline your project. The basis of a strong grant proposal is a solid project plan. Clarify the purpose of your project, determine broad project goals and identify specific objectives. Also, establish who will benefit from your project. Benefits may extend beyond the youth you're serving to include families, community members and even businesses in your area. Defining your scope of work will help focus your funding search.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY APPROPRIATE FUNDING SOURCES

Thousands of private charitable foundations give away money and promote certain interests, such as healthy adolescent development or strong families. Target foundations that are most likely to support your mission. Look for a match between the purpose and goals of your project and the funder's priorities and preferences, including geographic areas and populations served.

Do your funding research. If your organization doesn't have grants directories and databases of its own, check with the local public library or university library, if there's one in your area, to find books and reference materials on grant writing. Check out the Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.org) and its Foundation Directory, which catalogs thousands of foundations across the country.

Key words/phrases to search for: Homeless youth services, Runaway youth, Homeless youth shelter, Pregnant/Parenting youth, Youth development, Adolescent health, Youth safety

Contact potential funders. Think of the funder as a resource. Identify a project officer who will answer your questions, and ask about what the foundation looks for when it reviews proposals. You may also inquire about the average size and funding range of awards and request a list of projects previously funded or an annual report, if one is available.

Request proposal guidelines. Read the guidelines carefully, then read them again. Guidelines usually tell you about funding goals and priorities, eligibility, proposal format, restrictions on the number of pages, forms, award levels, budgets, evaluation process and criteria, review timetable, submission deadlines, and of course, how to submit the proposal. Be sure to ask the funder questions if you have them. When you read the guidelines, be realistic about whether you have time to prepare a competitive proposal by the deadline.



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Make a plan. If you decide to go for it, make a plan for writing the proposal. Factor in time to gather relevant materials, write multiple drafts, include comments from others on your staff, and proofread.

STEP 3: WRITE THE PROPOSAL

Outline your proposal. Answer the basic questions:

- What do we want?
- What need will be addressed and why it is important?
- Who are we, and how do we qualify to meet this need?
- Who will benefit and how?
- What specific objectives can be accomplished and how?
- How will results be measured?
- How does this funding request relate to the funder's purpose, objectives and priorities?

Give yourself time. Set aside enough time to prepare for writing the grant and collecting the materials you need. You may need help from colleagues to complete parts of the application, so coordinate with others and make sure everyone understands the deadlines.

Follow instructions. Don't exceed page limits. Follow formatting requirements and be sure to include required forms and documentation.

Highlight your accomplishments. Include articles about your organization from newspapers and local magazines, letters of support from other agencies and from your clients, and any special recognition the organization has received.

Be concise and clear in your writing. Be specific about your goals, project activities, objectives, evaluation methods and intended outcomes. Include a timeline for what you will do and when.

Answer in greater detail the questions addressed in your outline, as well as the following questions about your proposed budget:

- Do the numbers in your budget add up correctly, and are costs reasonable?
- Can the job be accomplished with the proposed budget?
- Is there sufficient budget detail and explanation?
- Have you described what resources your organization will contribute to the project?

STEP 4: FOLLOW UP WITH FUNDERS

Funders receive many more proposals than they can support. You may request feedback about a proposal's strengths and weaknesses, although some funders may not be able to provide that information.

In any case, say thank you. Remember, you're trying to build a relationship with this funder. Even if you don't get any money on your first try, if you leave a positive impression, you may be more successful the next time.



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