

Forefront and Association of Consultants to Nonprofits

Ask a Consultant
November 10, 2020

This session focused on hiring a grantwriter. Yusef Garcia, Forefront, moderated a panel that included Liz Duffrin (eaduffrin@att.net); Theresa Lipo, Youth Guidance (tgliipo@sbcglobal.net); Joyce Golbus Poll, J.G. Poll & Associates (joyce@jgpollassociates.com); and Rachel Sacks, Leading Healthy Futures (rachel@leadinghealthyfutures.com). The discussion included the following points:

- Developing a grant strategy now is important in order to anticipate possible future decreases in funding. Potential impacts might be especially felt by smaller organizations.
- There is no one grant writer who is right for all situations.
- The infrastructure required to work well with a grant writer includes the ability to put together the necessary financial documents and outcome data, strong leadership to support organizational strategy, and capacity to plan for a grant. Leadership needs to be aligned and collaborative.
- Grant writers could help build capacity in an organization, including by working on board development, finding prospects, forging relationships with donors, and building an individual giving platform.
- Organizations like the Association of Consultants to Nonprofits (ACN) and Forefront can help demystify consultants and the grant writing process, and also help organizations make connections. ACN has a site where RFPs can be uploaded and then reviewed by members (<https://www.acnconsult.org/submit-an-rfp>).
- Grant seeking is cyclical, including steps such as identifying well-aligned prospects, cultivating relationships with them, preparing applications, grant stewardship, and reporting. Consultants can be used in any or all of these stages; organizations should look at what they do well and where they need outside expertise.
- The grant writing process often works like this: Initial discussions and planning are held to cover what the grant is about, the grant writer produces a first draft that usually has holes and needs clarification, they get feedback and then plug the holes in the second draft. More drafts might happen based on feedback. Then they move into polishing, proofing, and error checking.
- Grant writing is not a quick fix to a financial shortfall. It should be part of a clear, concerted program strategy, and an organization needs realistic expectations about when money will come in and how it will affect the organization.
- Organizations should think about what makes them stand out. This may be delivering a certain service to an underserved area, or it could be delivering a program in an innovative way.
- Grant writers should not be paid based in a commission of the grants they help apply for. The funding decisions are not in a grant writer's control, and they should be paid as professionals providing a service. Even if a grant is not received, the process brings organizations closer to receiving the next grant by building internal strength and knowledge, which means it has value.
- The costs of a grant writer are related to the length and intensity of the services provided. A grant writer is likely not just going to be hired and start writing; they need to learn about an organization, its goals, and its plans.
- Having as many regularly updated pieces in place as possible—annual budget, program budget, 501(c)3 letter, 990, board list and so on—will help the process run smoother.
- Mentoring could help diversify the consultant and grant writing fields and provide opportunities.
- Organizations like ACN and Forefront can elevate consultants who have skills and knowledge in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Grant writers can also play a role in giving a voice to marginalized communities and organizations, helping them build their organizational capacity and fundraising abilities.