Tips for Writing a Winning Grant Application

May 12, 2015

By Kristen Beckman, Managing Editor
Finding money to fund communications projects is a perpetual challenge for public-safety agencies. Operating budgets are usually constrained, and agencies sometimes have to sideline important projects because the funding to complete them is not available.

To bridge the gap and make important projects possible, a variety of federal and state grants are up for grabs. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) last month announced $1.6 billion in available funding for nine preparedness grants, with May 19 as a deadline for many applications. The Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Justice Programs also lists several open public-safety related grants, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers a variety of non-disaster grant opportunities.

The DHS Office of Emergency Communications offers Safecom guidance for emergency communications grants, including emergency communications policies, eligible costs, best practices and technical standards for state, local, tribal and territorial grantees. The guidelines were updated this year to reflect recent changes to the national emergency communications plan (NECP).

Grant funds are a finite resource, and agencies must find ways to make their application as strong as possible to win initial grant funding and qualify for follow-on funding associated with grants.

To make a grant application as strong as possible, agencies should first thoroughly read the grant guidelines and understand the grant's purpose, as well as any deadlines and milestones, before starting to write the grant application, said Tom Sorley, deputy chief information officer for public safety at Houston IT Services (HITS). A strong grant application should be tailored to the requirements of the grant as outlined in the guidelines, he said.

Involving people who can add value to the grant application and the project work is also key. Successful projects usually have a champion who takes ownership of a project and should be a leader on the steering committee. In addition, financial planners should be involved from the start so they can review budgetary details and keep an eye on funding sources, spending and financial milestones, said Sorley. Ensure all partners, co-applicants and sub-applicants understand the financial process and cost-sharing mechanisms.

Financial experts can help navigate certain legal issues, such as supplanting vs. supplementing funds, said Kenneth Link, a career lieutenant with the Monroe Township (New Jersey) Fire Department and a member of the state of New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, New Jersey Task Force One Urban Search and Rescue. Supplanting funds, which means replacing budgeted funds with grant funds, is not allowed in the federal grant process. Supplementing, or building new funding onto existing funding, is allowed.

"If you've ever budgeted for it, you can't get a grant for it," said Link.

Don't overlook small administrative details, said Link, who has served as a peer reviewer for a variety of grants. Peer review panels are made up of people with various levels of experience and expertise who review a certain number of applications and make recommendations to the grant management team. Oversights as minor as expired passwords can derail a grant application in the peer review process, he said.

When writing the grant application, it is important to demonstrate an ability to complete the project, but be honest about your abilities and commitments to accomplish the work. Don't overpromise on what you can deliver, said Link. On the other hand, not providing enough detail or information on the agency's ability to meet the grant requirements is a pitfall during the peer review process. Grant applications should be honest, clear and realistic, said Link. Vague or confusing applications will have difficulty during the peer review process.

Sorley said it is important to create a defensible project model in a grant application and consider using a variety of vendors and products within the proposed project plan. Write the application so it demonstrates how the agency will meet schedules outlined in the application.

Link also recommends including letters of support from proposed partners to help demonstrate the agency's ability to meet the grant's requirements and milestones.

Identify the reporting requirements for the targeted grant and create a master calendar for performance periods, particularly if the agency is managing several different grants at one time. Assign responsibility to one person to keep track of all the project deadlines, said Sorley.

Finally, be aware of challenges that may affect the agency's ability to meet deadlines, including taking into account the time it takes to get commitments from vendors and third parties and the potential for costs to change. In addition, agencies must be aware of programs such as Environmental Planning and Historic Prevention, which integrates the protection and enhancement of environmental, historic and cultural resources into FEMA initiatives. Programs such as these can include extended timeframes that do not fit into the performance period of the grant, so it is important to do as much work in advance as possible to avoid difficulties with deadlines, said Sorley