

The 2019 Community Food Projects Grant Writing Guide

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New Entry Sustainable Farming Project
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INTRODUCTION

This guide was prepared for the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (NESFP) to assist prospective applicants for the 2019 Community Food Projects funding cycle. The announcement for these funds is titled, Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program: Fiscal Year 2019 Request for Applications. It is available at the CFPCGP [website](#).

NESFP also hosts additional guidance documents on CFP, including “Planning Successful Community Based Food Projects,” “Guide to Preparing Planning Grant Proposals” and “The CFP Electronic Submissions Advisory for 2016.” These guides are posted separately on the [NESFP website](#).

What this guide is for:

This CFP Grant writing Guide is designed as a companion to the CFP FY 2019 Request for Applications (RFA), to help you to:

- Interpret some of the language and specific terminology;
- Plan project proposals that incorporate the overall concepts and goals of the legislation and of community food security (CFS);
- Develop winning proposals as part of this competitive grants process.

Please note:

This guide is designed to supplement the Community Food Projects RFA, NOT to serve as a substitute. Applicants will need to carefully review the RFA itself for guidance in preparing an application. The order of this guide and the letters and numbers that designate each section do not necessarily correspond to the sections in the RFA. However, when we refer to language in the RFA, we do reference the page numbers in that document.

Disclaimer: The author has reviewed the 2019 RFA and has intended to assure the accuracy of the information provided, but NESFP is not responsible for errors or omissions in the enclosed guidance. Applicants should always rely on the RFA itself for final language regarding the preparation of proposals.

Recommendations in this guide do not necessarily reflect the views of USDA/NIFA or any of its staff. However, we express our appreciation to NIFA staff and some past panel reviewers for their input on this document.

CHANGES IN RFA FOR 2019

The RFA for 2019 is very similar to that for 2017. The major differences are:

- USDA requires the submission of a Data Management Plan, of no more two pages in length, as part of the appendices.

ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY

Who is eligible to apply for Community Food Projects grants?

According to the RFA, applicants must be “public food service program providers, tribal organizations or private nonprofit entities, including gleaners. A letter stating the non-profit status should be included with the application. Failure to meet an eligibility criterion by the application deadline may result in the application being excluded from consideration or, even though an application may be reviewed, will preclude NIFA from making an award.” Applicants must meet the following four criteria as well: (1) have relevant experience; (2) be sufficiently competent to implement a project; (3) be willing to share results with researchers; and (4) collaborate with at least one organization to achieve a [hunger-free community goal](#), which includes working to attain deeper understanding of hunger in our communities and among our political leaders, greater capacity and better coordination of emergency food programs, and improved access to and enrollment in public nutrition programs. Complete descriptions of these four criteria can be found in the RFA Part III.A. pg. 8.

By and large, applicant organizations must be incorporated nonprofits. Projects that are not incorporated as nonprofit entities are required to apply through such an organization, known as a fiscal agent (see RFA Part III.A.2. pg. 8). There is no penalty for doing this, and there are many advantages in terms of meeting USDA’s financial administration requirements for grants they award. **Please note:** Only the lead applicant must meet eligibility requirements. Partners and other collaborators do not need to meet eligibility requirements.

Anyone who has received a federal grant can appreciate the importance of having the fiscal and administrative capabilities to handle the paperwork and accounting requirements during the application process and after being awarded. Reviewers will carefully consider the qualifications of the lead applicant organization, with respect to its fiscal competency, its experience/capability in managing such a project, and its direct role in and contributions to the activities of the specific project. In the case of a project executed by a collaborative group, a proposal will be stronger if the conduit organization also plays a key role in the project itself, in addition to providing sponsorship and administrative responsibilities.

Academic institutions and public institutions with a non-profit arm are eligible to apply **if** they meet the criteria described above. However, the Community Food Projects program generally does not encourage them to be the lead applicants. Such eligible institutions (e.g., universities, hospitals) and non-eligible entities (such as local government agencies and for-profits) are preferably encouraged to participate as part of an application submitted by a community-based non-profit. But they are encouraged to play important roles in these projects, because they can bring a number of strengths to the project, and because this shows evidence of broader collaboration.

If a collaborative group such as a coalition is going to carry out the project, one of the partners with non-profit status should serve as the applicant unless the coalition itself is a qualified nonprofit. Be sure the specific roles of the applicant and the other parties in the collaboration are clearly explained in the proposal, particularly in the narrative section addressing the organizations and communities involved in the project.

Partners and subcontracts

As described in the RFA, you may certainly subcontract with one or more partners to carry out part of the work, and this may in fact strengthen the proposal, particularly if the partner brings expertise to the project. However, subcontracts often add to administrative costs, so consider arrangements in which the usual overhead is reduced or eliminated by at least one of the parties (e.g. using no-cost or pass-through sub-contracts). This can be particularly important for contracts with academic institutions, which generally carry a high indirect rate. The value of reduced rates can also count as in-kind contributions to help you meet your match requirements, as long as this is documented. Also, take note that no more than one-half of the budget may be sub-awarded.

New and resubmitted applications will be accepted

CFP is accepting new and resubmitted applications. They will **not** fund projects that have previously been awarded funding, but an application that was not funded may be resubmitted. A resubmitted application must respond to the reviewers' comments from the application that was not funded. A Response to Previous Review attachment is required in which PDs must respond to the previous review summary on no more than one page titled "RESPONSE TO PREVIOUS REVIEW" and save the file as ResponsetoPreviousReview. If desired, additional comments may be included in the text of the Project Narrative if space limitations allow.

WHAT DOES AND DOESN'T GET FUNDED BY CFP

The Community Food Projects (CFP) grant process has been competitive. In 2017, 18% of the applications submitted were funded. So it is very important to be aware of what kind of proposals do and don't get funded by CFP.

Attributes of winning proposals

Winning CFP grants are submitted by a diverse range of community-based organizations. The types of projects vary greatly and are difficult to categorize because they usually integrate a number of different components. Activities commonly supported include combinations of local food production, value-added or food service entrepreneurship, food marketing, food and nutrition education, and skills training.

Winning proposals come together in a number of important ways. USDA staff and to the review panels are looking for proposals that:

- Are for innovative and exciting projects;
- Incorporate CFP objectives in a well-organized manner;
- Show sufficient planning and understanding of community food needs;
- Demonstrate genuine collaboration among partners and involvement of the community;
- Contain a well-prepared, well-written narrative; and,
- Meet all other RFA guidelines.

CFP reviewers are very interested in supporting worthy, community-based projects, and may give them the benefit of the doubt if the quality of the proposal writing is lacking in some ways, as long as all the program requirements are met. For example, many worthwhile proposals come from programs in which the English literacy skills of participants may be limited. Reviewers are involved in and knowledgeable about community food work. Successful proposals tend to be based on well-designed programs as well as are well-written.

Past winners

A good first step to determine if your project fits the profile of a fundable Community Food Projects grant is to look at what has been funded in the past. You will find summaries of past grants in the [Food Security Learning Center](#) or by reviewing abstracts of past funded projects on [NIFA's website](#). The descriptions provided can give you an overall sense of the types of activities that get funded as well as the amounts awarded.

What does not get funded

Please know that many worthwhile activities do not receive CFP support. Understanding the characteristics of proposals that are awarded as well as proposals that are **not** awarded can help you prepare your application. Some of the major weaknesses of declined CFP proposals include:

Failing to address the full RFA intent: Community Food Projects have a very unique set of priorities. Applicants may try to fit a similar type of food or farm project into the CFP mold, but it doesn't really conform well. However, CFP is broader in its intent. The RFA emphasizes the need for integrating multiple objectives that include linkages among food sectors, comprehensive planning, multi-agency approaches, and building long-term solutions to problems. In other words, CFP wants the players to develop more comprehensive approaches that involve the community in building longer-term solutions to food insecurity. Winning proposals address these priorities best.

Unbalanced narratives: With only 10 pages of narrative available, well-written grants economize on space and focus only on what is clearly important to reviewers. A poorly prepared narrative often places too much emphasis on some components. For example, the proposal has three to four pages documenting

poverty and hunger in the community, but only a page or so describing the program objectives and activities. As a result, the reviewers don't understand the proposed project well enough to adequately assess its merits. The RFA includes guidance on the recommended length of each component in the Project Narrative, which should help reduce this problem. Using charts and tables (up to 5 additional pages) can really make a difference here.

Unbalanced scope of work and budget: A well-balanced proposal matches resources to the work plan, both in terms of total request and how it is allocated. It does not promise too much or too little for the level of funding requested, and allocates the budget according to the types of work to be carried out. Proposals that promise the sky or make overly optimistic claims will reduce your proposal's credibility. Reviewers have a pretty good sense of what things cost and what is practical given the proposed budget, personnel, and other resources.

Activities not appropriate to the overall guidelines: Some proposals are for projects and activities that are in themselves worthwhile but just don't fit well within the scope of the CFP program. Proposals that do not incorporate the broad Community Food Projects objectives don't get far. Many proposals basically duplicate well-developed programs, but they are not comprehensive in the sense of building in other community economic goals (e.g. skills development, employment, entrepreneurship), or additional environmental or food system enhancements. Some proposals aren't funded because they do not sufficiently target low-income/underserved constituencies.

Top-down projects: Similarly, projects are weaker if they clearly emerge from the agendas of single organizations or from individuals, and do not reflect or incorporate grass roots or multi-organization participation in planning and implementation. A good project or idea may start off this way, but needs to build in broader community input, support, and participation.

Redundant or ongoing funding: Proposals are weaker if they merely seek Community Food Project funds to support an existing activity, without building in a new component and other important characteristics. The overall project or the specific activities proposed need to be sufficiently distinct so that a CFP grant will provide onetime funding to implement key aspects of the program.

Requests mainly for single expenditures: Requests for a large piece of equipment or a vehicle can be problematic. Certainly Community Food Projects funds can pay for some of these costs, but as part of a more integrated program and budget. It is important that it be integrated within a broader programmatic context.

Funding restrictions: Please note that the RFA states in Part IV Section D, With prior approval, and in accordance with applicable Federal cost principles, grant funds may be used to plan, acquire, or construct a building or facility, or to acquire land; and for improvements, alterations, renovations, or repairs to land or buildings, necessary to carry out a funded

project under this program. However, requests to use grant funds for such purposes must demonstrate that such expenditures are essential to achieving the major purpose for which the grant request is made.

Please note: We strongly encourage applicants who are considering requesting CFP funds for a construction or renovation project to contact NIFA prior to preparing your application to seek approval. Please note that if an applicant organization plans to construct a building or other facility that will be used expressly for the funded project, NIFA will not allow those costs to be put toward match. NIFA explains that construction costs typically outweigh the benefits of what the CFP program is designed to carry out, thus large expenses like construction of buildings are typically not favored for CFP. If you have further questions about construction costs or funding requests to support construction or renovation, do contact NIFA directly prior to the preparation of your application.

Are you ready to apply?

As a prospective applicant, you will review the RFA and decide if your proposed project is appropriate. But even if it appears to fit many of the guidelines, you ought to assess whether you and your collaborators are ready to apply for this round. You may also want to consider the option of submitting a Planning Project grant, especially if your project is still in the relatively early stages of planning and development. (See separate [guide](#) to developing Planning Project grants).

Newly formed projects: Projects are expected to fulfill a challenging list of criteria to merit a high rating. If the entire project is new, in that even the planning is being carried out for the first time after this RFA is issued, applicants will have a real challenge to address all CFP objectives. In particular, collaboration is one of the more challenging aspects of community food strategies. It is a process that requires time, careful planning, and skilled leadership to work effectively. Your proposal will need to show evidence of prior efforts to build bridges with multiple organizations and community leaders. Reviewers will generally detect the difference between a project that has built true linkages and one in which collaborators have been signed up at the last minute.

Community food assessments: Sometimes, a new project (and proposal) emerges from a community-based needs assessment or similar strategic planning process, wherein there is no prior program structure but the planning is well along, the community needs are established, and the partners are identified. New projects that emerge from this type of process tend to be better positioned to meet all the CFP criteria.

Community needs may be different from those of a single organization, which has a specific mission. Similarly, the proposed responses or solutions that community members and other organizations want may not match what your particular organization is planning. You may want to consider conducting a community food assessment (CFA) to address this. A CFA is a participatory and collaborative process that examines a broad range of food-related issues and assets in order to

improve the community's food system. Through such assessments, diverse stakeholders work together to research their local food system, establish community needs and priorities, and take action to address them.

A CFA process can take you through planning steps that identify resources and needs, collaboration and community participation opportunities, and follow-up activities. It is a useful strategy through which to develop a Community Food Project because CFAs often create the collaborative structure from which a successful CFP proposal can be developed. Alternatively, CFP can provide funding for food assessments, especially as part of a broader project proposal. In this context, the applicants and the community have honed in on priority areas but may want to do more strategic planning and assessment to refine their overall program and scope of work—a stand-alone assessment would be less likely to be funded. For more information on community food assessments, see the guidebook, [“What’s Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment”](#)

Building on established projects: Many of the proposals that are funded grow out of programs that are already underway or even well established. Sometimes the application proposes an innovative enhancement to an existing initiative. Here, many of the building blocks that are needed to make CFP projects work are in place—key personnel, community input and linkages, matching funds, and other programmatic building blocks.

PREPARING WINNING PROPOSAL APPLICATIONS

Allow sufficient lead-time

USDA/CFP proposals are time consuming and relatively challenging proposals to complete. Leave yourselves sufficient time to coordinate with partners, write a good narrative, get all necessary letters of commitment, and complete all other requirements. In fact, since the RFA does not change much from year to year, the advantage goes to applicants who get started early on their proposal—even before the official RFA is issued. Also, the electronic submissions process through Grants.gov requires additional work that makes it even more important to start early. See [NESFP’s Electronic Submissions Advisory](#) for more information.

Prepare original text

The RFA is requesting specific information based on expressed legislative objectives—collaboration, community linkages, entrepreneurship, etc. You may not find these topics emphasized in other grant application requirements. While it may be helpful to draw from past proposal language that your organization has used for other grant submissions, it is best to write new text for your application. It is usually obvious to reviewers when applications are just cut and pasted from other proposals.

Be coherent and convincing

While NIFA makes the final determination of who gets grants, they rely heavily on a review panel comprised essentially of experienced community food practitioners and academics. Your goal is to convince a wide range of reviewers that your project is worthwhile, even if not everyone is familiar with your specific type of project.

Provide adequate writing quality

Good proposals are generally well written and organized. The limited page length for the narrative forces you to be concise but also to the point. While it is important to be competent, proposals do not necessarily need to be expertly crafted by professional grant writers. The bottom line is: can these reviewers get a clear understanding of your project from what you are writing?

Follow instructions

Many proposals get off to a bad start because they fail to fulfill all the requirements laid out in the RFA. It is essential that all requirements listed in the RFA be met, especially with the electronic submissions process. Leaving out key forms or other required information can, at worst, disqualify an application, and at best indicates a degree of disorganization in the proposal preparation process.

Be sure to read and reread the RFA thoroughly and pay attention to rules about page limits, font size, file names, and similar details. Like most federal grant programs, these conditions are scattered throughout the RFA, so create a checklist of requirements. Never assume there is flexibility in these guidelines without confirming it first with NIFA staff.

The electronic submission requires very exacting steps to assure satisfactory completion. If there are errors in the process, these will be pointed out to you before the application can be completed. If this is your organization's first electronic submission, be sure to allow time to become familiar with the requirements and to correct errors.

Pay attention to the Project Abstract

The 250-word project abstract is one of the last documents you should prepare, but it's the first page read by the reviewers. It sets the tone for your entire proposal. Therefore, it is well worth your time to craft not only a well-written and comprehensive summary statement, but also one that really "sells" your project. In preparing the summary, assume that the reader gets no additional information.

FUNDING LEVELS AND MATCHING FUNDS

Size of grant requests

Maximum grant amounts: \$4.8 million is available for all projects funded this year. The maximum allowable grant for CFP is \$400,000 over the lifetime of the project (up to four years) and \$125,000 in any single year. The program does make awards that approach these maximum levels, but many of the grants are smaller. The maximum grant for Planning Projects is \$35,000 total for up to three years. Reviewers rate every proposal on its merits, without any consideration of budgets. After the proposals are ranked, they go back and review the budgets to see if there are opportunities to reduce expenses.

Larger grant requests need to be clearly justified. If the project spans multiple years, impacts a lot of people, and proposes activities that are costly but appropriate, it can justify a larger award. Note: If the proposal is highly rated but funds are limited, USDA will sometimes fund it at a lower level than requested. The project scope and budget will then need to be revised to reflect the lower award level. USDA reserves the right to negotiate final budgets with successful applicants.

Budgets should be appropriate. Reviewers don't want excessive requests for limited activities, but also don't like proposals that appear too ambitious for the amount being sought.

Consider smaller requests for shorter time periods. While these are one-time awards for projects, applicant organizations may still apply for a different project in future years. Several grantees have received additional awards for a different initiative.

Matching funds requirements

Community Food Projects legislation requires that federal funds be matched dollar-for-dollar by non-federal resources. Specifically, this can be achieved through cash and/or in-kind contributions, including third-party in-kind contributions. Third party in-kind contributions means non-cash contributions provided by non-Federal third parties that directly benefits and are specifically identifiable to the project. Contributions may include property or services such as real property, equipment, or supplies.

Sources of match: Actual matching funds can come from a state or local government agency, or private sources such as foundations or charities. "In-kind" refers to resources that are contributed to the project, but not paid for by funds from a grant or contract that is directed to the project. Examples of in-kind funds include the value of office space used exclusively for the funded project, or the value, fairly assessed, of transportation, photocopying, postage or other costs

covered by the applicant organization or by a project partner. Personnel time—either volunteered or paid by a participating organization from other funding—is a valuable in-kind contribution.

Inappropriate match: Some types of match may be considered unsuitable, often because they are not directly related to the project itself, or uncertain in nature. Examples include:

- a grant for a related but separate project;
- a loan to purchase a piece of equipment or land used in the project;
- the value of food grown and marketed as part of the project;
- volunteer time that is already integral to a project (e.g., as a requirement for participation in a food coop).

Overmatching: The legislation does not require that you contribute matching resources beyond the one-to-one requirement. However, evidence of additional funding can increase the project's self-reliance and make it more self-sustaining. On the other hand, projects with so much funding that Community Food Projects support do not represent a major or critical component, do not meet the legislative intent to "support the development of Community Food Projects with a one-time infusion of Federal dollars to make such projects self-sustaining."

Timing for raising matching funds: A frequent comment we hear is the challenge of raising matching money before USDA has awarded a grant. Many private sector donors, such as foundations, like to fund projects as a challenge or as a matching grant, so having the USDA award in hand can be helpful for leveraging additional funds. However, NIFA does not want to delay the startup of projects, so you will need to have definite commitments for matching resources for the life of the proposed project secured before the CFP grant funds are released in the fall.

Please note: Revenues received as a component of the project may not be counted, because they cannot be verified before the grant is awarded. For example, revenue from the sale of food or income from service delivery that is clearly associated with the project is not eligible to be counted as matching.

Verification of matching resources: For this RFA period, proposals do not need to include written verification of commitments of matching support from third parties. However, the RFA states that applicants must have written verification of matching support at the time of application in case the application is called into question for any reason, or if NIFA requests a site visit or audit.

Written verification means sufficient documentation to allow USDA to assess the value of the contribution, and providing evidence that a person with the appropriate level of authority has made this commitment. It should be on letterhead and signed by the authorized organizational representative. To reiterate, these letters are not required to be attached to the application package

this year but applicants must be able to furnish the letters upon NIFA's request if needed, thus it is encouraged that you have them on hand at the time of application.

Documenting matching funds: For matching funds (cash), a list of the funds' sources must be provided. However, applicants who already have funds on hand can avoid potential complications in the grants management process by simply stating the amount of cash they have available, rather than linking it to a specific grant commitment.

The RFA states this year that for third party cash contributions (i.e., by a partner in the project), a separate pledge agreement is no longer required for each donation; however, the matching funds should appear in the budget and budget narrative.

Valuing in-kind: Applicants do not need to attach separate pledge agreements (letters) for third party in-kind contributions. The RFA states that you are still subject to documentation, valuing and reporting requirements, etc. as specified in 2 CFR Part 200, "Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (the Uniform Guidance)," 7 CFR 3430, "Competitive and Noncompetitive Non-Formula Federal Assistance Programs – General Award Administrative Provisions," and program-specific regulations, as applicable.

For [further guidance](#) on requirements relating to matching and allowable costs, see the OMB circular A-122.

Providing a good faith estimate of the current fair market value of the third party in-kind contribution: NIFA will look for you to provide evidence that the value of the in-kind provided is accurate and reasonable. Examples of this documentation may include the following:

Personnel: For each person for whom in-kind time is being claimed, specify the number of hours and the hourly rate or determined value for that person's time. This should match their current salary or wage rates for other work done for the organization they are affiliated with or for similar activities they conduct. For example, if an organization is donating time of an employee who makes \$30,000 per year, it can break this down into an hourly rate, and include the proportional value of fringe benefits and overhead if these are applicable.

In addition, the activities being carried out by that person will need to be described, and given a proportional allotment if possible. For example, person XYZ will state that he will spend 50 hours in year one loading a truck (one hr. per week).

Vehicles: Describe the vehicle. Evidence of the market value of the vehicle may be requested. Describe how that value was determined. NIFA may ask for the

Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) and for you to obtain an outside appraisal of the vehicle's value, even if you have to pay to get that estimate.

Land donation: As with vehicles, NIFA may request an independent appraisal of the value of the land—either purchased or leased. It should not be valued above the rate provided for other groups (if applicable). Similarly, buildings or other large donations such as equipment may need independent appraisal.

Space: NIFA may request evidence of the rental value of office space, such as a lease agreement.

Post-award verification of match: After a proposal is funded, NIFA will closely scrutinize all matching funds and in-kind. In effect, they consider these to be as important as the federal Community Food Projects funding itself in terms of oversight and verification. Requests for additional documentation of match are now fairly routine procedures before grant funds are released in part or in total.

Budget Narrative

Your budget needs to mirror the objectives of your proposal. Because the USDA budget forms combine many line item categories, explaining the details can make the difference between whether an otherwise good application gets to be a finalist or not. It also helps you defend each line item, because USDA will look for areas where your budget could be reduced.

Budget justification page(s): The budget justification should explain every budget line item, and break down large categories into specific expenditures. This is also the place to explain any unusual expenditures—particularly if they are relatively large and not clearly detailed in the narrative section.

The budget justification should be neat and avoid redundancy. Splitting out costs for each year of the project is clearer, but it is not necessary to repeat lengthy information for each of those years—just the items that change, such as new supplies and equipment, salary increases, and the like.

The matching funds justification should be a separate document from the Federal funds justification but the two should be combined into one PDF document and attached as Budget Justification in the application. As stated on page 49 of the NIFA Grants.gov Application Guide, “The budget justification detail should follow the same order as the budget. While you should provide information for each item of the budget, you must justify the following budget categories, where applicable: salaries (justification is to include the Base Annual Salary for each key person), equipment, travel, participant/trainee support and other direct cost categories. Only one file may be attached.”

Letters of commitment and support

Letters are important: The narrative section of your application is limited to 10 pages, and this means limited space for describing the role of each project partner. Letters from major participating organizations (or individuals such as a consultant) are key to communicating to the reviewers that each entity is aware of and fully committed to their role in the project. Letters can also help provide additional details about the project that could not be fit into the narrative. In addition to letters from collaborators, the RFA also states that, “a limited number of other support letters... where appropriate, are encouraged to provide evidence of broad community involvement” (see RFA Part IV.B.3.b.1.(b) p. 13). A smaller number of individualized and specific letters is considered more persuasive than large numbers of fairly standardized letters.

Letter content: Reviewers read these letters carefully to assess the degree of commitment and involvement of each organization. Form letters or oversimplified letters will signify to reviewers that the group has not been very involved in the planning of the project. On the other hand, a unique letter that details the specific role of the organization, its past contributions, and its proposed activities in the planning and implementation of the project will be much more compelling. If a project has true collaboration, this will show in the level of substantive information and consistency in the details provided in these letters. Letters of commitment can also be used to document the contributions of cash or in-kind support.

Providing guidance for letters: Your organizational collaborators will need guidance on what to include in their letters of commitment regarding documentation of matching funds or in-kind. Because you need very specific types of information, it is important to communicate what particular details you need included and how you want these described. (Note—this is not the same as writing the letter for them! If they are genuinely involved in the project, their letters will stand out as both sincere and original.) The matching resources information should be as accurate and complete as possible. Otherwise, it may hold up your grant award should your proposal be successful. Feel free to provide partner groups a copy of the specific guidance for match contained in the RFA.

PROJECT NARRATIVE

You have only 10 pages to answer many complex questions in your project narrative. However, you can free up space in the narrative by adding information via charts and tables and attaching these according to the electronic filing guidelines. Indeed, the RFA allows up to five extra pages for figures and tables. The RFA encourages you to use up to three of these five pages for a detailed activity summary. Another key to using these page restrictions wisely is to be succinct, yet complete. Avoid redundant information, and put together an overall description that makes sense to outsiders who may know little about your local area, organization(s), and background experience.

(a) The Community to Be Involved and the Needs to Be Addressed (up to 1.5 pages suggested; but you can use more space in the extra five pages allowed as tables and graphs)

This section is your opportunity to frame your overall project, to tell the story of why you want this project to be funded. Important components that should be incorporated include:

- *Community conditions:* You should briefly document socio-economic conditions, food insecurity, and/or environmental and food system problems by providing demographic and other information. Focus on those aspects that will be most impacted by the project you are proposing. For example, if your proposal offers job training, provide relevant employment-related information. In general, the program is intended to primarily serve low-income constituents and communities. Evidence of this is important, but can be provided in summary form. Focus in particular on unique factors that make your project relevant.
- *Context and history:* It is not enough to demonstrate that there is poverty and food insecurity in your target area or population. You will also want to discuss the rationale for selecting the particular project and activities that will address it. Here, you are distinguishing your project and your approach from those being proposed by the other 100-200 applicants. **In other words, connect your proposed project to the broader underlying conditions you are referencing.** What led to the strategies proposed? Why are they the appropriate response? Explain the background work, the community planning, and the organizational priorities that provide the context for your unique approaches.
- *Targeted participants:* It is important to clearly identify who your project is targeting – those who will likely participate and benefit from your activities.

Provide demographic details: socio-economic data, ages, gender, education. Also, factors such as relevant experience, living conditions, land ownership, and such can be included where appropriate. Describe how these participants were identified/selected. In addition, reviewers want to know whether and how your partners and participants or residents of the target community have contributed to the project planning process. There is additional opportunity to build on this in the next section.

- *What IS your proposed project?* In one way or another, this section is a good place to frame the project in a general way. Summarize what you want to do. Going forward, you will describe partners, participants, outcomes, activities, etc., so it is really helpful to provide reviewers with an initial overview of the project. Keep this brief to avoid redundancy with later sections of the proposal.

- *Evidence-based approaches and outcomes*: An important element of any approach to change is explaining why you consider it will be effective. What is the evidence (experience, data, research) to suggest your proposal is going to work to address the specific needs being identified? What prior efforts are you building on that provide a framework for the activities going forward? Has your community tried this before, and what were the results? Have other communities done this effectively? If you are taking on a challenging approach in terms of changing behaviors, conditions, and systems, what unique steps will make a difference, and why?

(b) The Organizations and Communities Involved in the Project (up to 2 pages)

This section should accomplish three things: describe the expertise and role of the primary partners in the project including the lead applicant and how they are connected; discuss the qualifications of the lead staff; and provide information on the communities involved in the project and the extent of community participation in the project.

Reviewers will be assessing the overall relationship—past and current—between the partners, and the degree to which each will be involved in the initiative. Although participation by several organizations is expected, it is not the number that counts as much as the role(s) each will play.

To save space, avoid lengthy details in this section—either by relying on letters of commitment from each organization or key player to provide specific details about their roles, and/or to provide additional information about the partners as part of the five pages of tables allowed.

NIFA expects CFP projects to be community-based. This suggests “of the community” or “by the community” rather than “for the community” or “to the community”. In other words, they are looking for more of a bottom-up versus a top-down planning approach, wherein priorities are driven by residents/stakeholders rather than just by the applicant organization and its partners. This is the place to describe how collaborative efforts—meetings, interviews, community-based needs assessments, and/or other input strategies—were used in planning the initiative.

In addressing this aspect, there is an expectation that the project reflects needs and priorities that are supported by those intended to benefit from it; that they will support it and will participate as projected. This input can be garnered by bringing broader representation into the initial planning process. It may occur through community food assessments, or through working with community-based collaborations. Interviews, forums, focus groups, and other strategies are also informative to the planning process. This takes some time to build into the planning. It doesn’t easily occur once the RFA comes out.

(c) Project Goals and Intended Outcomes (up to 2 pages)

Goals and objectives are often written in very general terms. Goals often are written to reflect the overall vision or desired long-term impacts. They communicate: “This is what we would like to achieve.”

The RFA asks for intended outcomes, which are constructed in more succinct, specific, and quantifiable language that is meant to carefully define the results of the initiative. Outcomes communicate: “These will be the results when the project is completed.”

Please note the difference between **outputs and outcomes**. Outputs are what you do and who you reach through your activities (for example 40 immigrant farmers will complete an 18-week training program offered between 2017-2019). Outcomes are the resulting impact of demonstrating the difference that your activities made (for example 80% of the immigrant farmers trained through our program will report using the knowledge gained to expand into new market outlets diversifying their market mix).

Short-term outcomes: These can be easily identifiable and measurable changes in participants and benefits in conditions caused by program activities. These may be short or intermediate term duration depending on the length of your project.

Long-term outcomes: These constitute changes in individual or group behaviors, and/or in environments or community conditions that a program hopes to achieve over time. Short-term outcomes contribute to the achievement of long-term outcomes, but other factors often influence these as well.

Longer-term outcomes or impacts are typically more difficult and costly to measure or track. Determining results like these can involve scientifically designed studies, complex surveys and statistical analysis, and other evaluation strategies generally beyond the capacity of most CFP grantees. As a result, your project is not expected to propose or to demonstrate such results. Your project however is expected to demonstrate success or progress towards achieving long-term outcomes through interim (shorter-term) outcome measures.

Constructing outcome statements

Be mindful of using outcome-focused language. Outcomes are sometimes called performance targets, and they are meant to define success for your project in specific terms. Outcomes describe specific changes in behaviors or conditions that are projected or expected to result from the activities undertaken. What kinds of changes will occur in the targeted groups, how many will change, and by when? In other words, you are asked to qualify and quantify your outcomes to the extent possible and reasonable. The RFA states: “Outcomes should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely, describe what will be accomplished and who and how many people, e.g., residents, participants, will benefit.” This is known as the S.M.A.R.T. approach. Its components include:

- **Specific:** Be clear about exactly what action is going to be taken, and by whom. Outcomes are as precise as possible—not general or vague.
- **Measurable:** Quantify or otherwise show the change that will occur; using numbers, time periods, etc. as to when these will occur. How will you and others know when you have achieved your outcomes using common standards?
- **Attainable/achievable:** Make sure that you are able to attain the results with your available resources—set your sights high, but not too high!
- **Realistic:** try to make sure that the action you are planning is practical. Setting yourself impossible goals will only end in disappointment. Make your goals challenging, but realistic. If you are not sure how much time and effort is involved in a new initiative, take the time to contact others who have done this work. Also be sure they are relevant to the overall picture of conditions, needs and opportunities you have outlined.
- **Time-bound:** Set a time scale for completion of each goal. Even if you have to adjust this as you progress, it will help to keep you motivated to move forward. A well-devised work-plan is a first step to setting a logical timetable.

Participants or beneficiaries:

How many people are targeted to benefit from the changes proposed? This may be a total number or a percentage of the targeted constituencies. This may also be expressed as a percent of those initially targeted who end up changing or getting the benefits. For example: “20% of school children (about 250) in the district will participate in the program. Of these, about half (or 125) are expected to complete the course and begin growing food in the school-based gardens.”

Example of an outcome statement: The following was written for a project to assist immigrant producers to progress from participants in a farm training program to becoming independent farmers:

- *Stated as a goal:* Through effective outreach, training and technical assistance strategies, assist immigrant and refugee producers to establish independent farming enterprises and to accelerate their success as part of the next generation of farmers in the region.
- *Stated as an outcome:* Of 40 immigrant farmers who complete 18-week training programs offered between 2014-2016, 20-25 will participate in a 3-year Independent Farmer Program to develop sustainable farming enterprises. Of these, 8-10 will develop independent farm operations, and another 8-10 will make significant progress towards developing self-supporting farm enterprises.

(d) Activities to Achieve the Goals (2 pages)

The RFA suggests that you create a table of up to three pages that details the activities. Each activity in the table should reference the goal, objective, steps

needed to achieve the objective, organizations and/or individuals involved in the process, number of participants, and a timeline.

In the narrative itself, a general description of the implementation can be provided for each objective or milestone. Here, you can summarize essential elements and emphasize critical elements for success, as well as lay out your rationale and strategy for going down this path of action.

(e) Relationship to Program Objectives (1 page or less)

The CFP program has multiple objectives, as listed in the RFA. This section should focus on how this project relates back to CFPCGP objectives. Try to provide a concise, but descriptive explanation of why this is a good project from a CFPCGP perspective, rather than providing overly technical explanations.

(f) Evaluation (1 page or less)

This section should describe your overall evaluation strategy and philosophy. It should include a brief description of the resources you will put into evaluation, external personnel that will be utilized, how evaluation results will be utilized, and what you will track. It should also address how you will build evaluation into the planning of the project so that it is not an add-on tacked on at the end.

A strong evaluation also will substantially help USDA, researchers, and your fellow practitioners understand what makes projects succeed (or fail), particularly where model initiatives are involved. Evaluation is a valuable but often underused tool to provide feedback to project staff, sponsors and participants, to other members of the community, and to policy makers both during a project and after it has ended.

If none of the project participants has true evaluation skills, it can be very valuable to find an outside specialist to assist this effort. We encourage applicants to seek expert assistance with evaluation design and implementation, as appropriate and available. Academic institutions may collaborate for free or at a fairly low cost, out of interest in the project. Otherwise, independent consultants can also provide such assistance, though probably at a much higher cost. If using an outside evaluator, a letter of commitment from this provider can be a useful place to expand on approaches to be used for your evaluation. (Note: See the CFSC's [Evaluation Handbook and Toolkit](#) for additional guidance on evaluation and logic models.)

The RFA notes that evaluations should focus on logic models and indicators of success. Logic models create a picture of what the project hopes to achieve and how, which then provides a basis for the evaluation. Indicators of Success are measurements that allow for the compilation of data across the wide variety of Community Food Projects to enable comprehensive CFPCGP reporting. They were developed in conjunction with the Community Food Security Coalition, CFP applicants and evaluation experts. They also provide a framework

for collecting data about the short term impacts of funded projects. This level of data collection is the very basic and minimum that a project will be required to do. However, reviewers generally expect much more emphasis on evaluation as a tool for improving a project, for engaging participants, and for documenting successes and failures.

Planning your evaluation: Your evaluation objectives should be identified in advance in order to help you determine your project's design, identify evaluation costs and resource needs, and shape data collection from the onset. Initial steps can include:

- deciding at least in general terms what to evaluate and what process to use (e.g., empowerment strategies);
- determining who will oversee or coordinate evaluation activities;
- identifying participants—whom your evaluation will focus on and who will participate in its design and implementation;
- identifying baseline data that is available; and
- estimating costs and the need for outside expertise at the onset of the project.

In deciding how to implement the evaluation process, many steps can be considered, such as:

- how to involve stakeholders to provide insights and identify priorities for evaluation;
- selecting practical indicators and associated measurement tools such as surveys to gather information and track developments;
- how to interpret the information you derive;
- steps to refine evaluation procedures on an ongoing basis; and
- ongoing record-keeping, data collection, and monitoring steps.

Types of evaluation: The RFA asks applicants to incorporate “both process evaluations (developing and monitoring indicators of progress towards the objectives) and outcome evaluations (to determine whether the objectives were met).” It also encourages use of “innovative evaluation strategies.”

Process evaluations are a means to review operational or implementation aspects of your program. These may include:

- the efficacy of specific practices or procedures;
- adequacy of space, personnel, and other resources;
- degree of participation and collaboration;
- program costs and cost-effectiveness;
- appropriateness of schedules and other program logistics.

Regularly reviewing your program throughout the life of the project can be extremely useful, by helping you to identify problems and make ongoing

changes/improvements as needed. And for long-term planning and sustainability, this process evaluation can help you address questions such as:

- What has worked well?
- What hasn't worked well, and what might improve these aspects?
- What is the cost-effectiveness of alternative strategies?
- What are the stages of program development and steps needed to bring each program component to a mature and sustainable stage?

Outcome evaluations measure the extent to which a project produces the desired set of changes or results described in the objectives and activities portions of your proposal.

In other words, what are the achievements of the project, quantitatively and qualitatively? Did your project accomplish what it said it would, and how well? What targets were not met, and which were exceeded?

Note: Impact evaluations are a type of outcome evaluation—they are designed to assess the more substantive effects or benefits of these outcomes for organization(s), participants, and the larger community. Examples include the impact of your program on participants' overall diets or health status, or its economic impact on a community. NIFA does not expect you to assess large-scale or longer-term impacts, which are costly and difficult to obtain. However, you can determine more short-term benefits (and problems) by collecting and analyzing data before and after implementation of a project, for example the reported number of servings of fresh produce that participants eat per day.

Innovative approaches: One form of innovative evaluation is to use the [Whole Measures](#) methodology, developed by CFP grantees with the Community Food Security Coalition. This approach strives to engage the full participation of all project stakeholders in the project, and is based on the values of these stakeholders—staff, collaborators, participants, and others involved from the affected community.

With an empowerment evaluation approach, criteria for program effectiveness reflect the goals, aspirations, and concepts of success of these stakeholders. This strategy builds their capacity to identify and utilize their assets to conduct programs to attain goals they value. It makes evaluation a key activity itself, by building stakeholders' capacities to envision, enact, and sustain effective programs in their community. Empowerment evaluation requires careful consideration about how to collect and interpret information and how to use findings to improve the program. You may not be collecting conventional information or focusing on traditional evaluation priorities. For example, the participants may care less about the projects' administrative efficiencies or how your organization benefits, and more about how it affected participants and their community.

Data Management Plan: USDA now requires the submission of a data management plan of no more than two pages in length as part of the appendices. This plan should include the types of information that the project will collect (e.g. surveys, sign in sheets), how the data will be stored in a secure manner, and how the project will participate in the collection of required indicators for submission to USDA. More information about this requirement can be found on NIFA's [website](#), and the [DMP Tool](#) can help you construct a plan.

(g) Self-Sustainability (1 page or less)

Because Community Food Projects awards are intended as one-time funding, NIFA is interested in how you will continue the project or sustain its outcomes after the CFP grant ends. Sustainability should make sense in terms of project priorities and strategies. There is no inherent expectation that the sustaining process requires a revenue-based or similar ongoing funding structure, unless there is a strong entrepreneurial component. For example, if a program involves ongoing training and/or technical assistance to low-income participants, then proposing self-supporting approaches mainly through revenues will probably not be practical.

In discussing sustainability, identify those aspects of the program that you intend to see continued with your efforts or on their own. Some aspects of CFP projects are time-delimited; for example, a community food assessment, the construction of facilities, the development phase of a garden or farm or market, the design and development of an educational curriculum; or one-time events. For ongoing efforts, options to consider as viable sustainability strategies include:

- *Self-supporting:* If parts of, or all of the project, will be self-sufficient after CFP funding ends, explain that. For example, an urban garden or farmers' market is often self-sufficient after a startup period. Perhaps a training program is completed and some permanent jobs result, requiring no more support.
- *In kind and institutionalization:* Consider the roles of partners and of the community more broadly in providing ongoing assistance and support to keep activities going or sustain the outcomes. How can institutions (government agencies, schools, Extension, hospitals) assume ongoing sponsorship of project components? What help can voluntary organizations provide?
- *Continued grant or other fund-raising:* If the project will always depend on outside funds, articulate where you expect that to come from (i.e., what funders and revenue sources). For example, you may propose a demonstration training program for a specific number of residents during the project, and to extend this to more participants in future years. If so, you will need to indicate the source of these future training funds. This

may come from new grants, from local fundraising activities, or other revenues source. Be clear when this is the case.

- *Revenues and entrepreneurship:* Smaller entrepreneurial activities should become largely or completely self-supporting if they are successful. For example, most farmers' markets and community gardens should be able to support themselves through participant revenues, small fundraising efforts, local institutional support, and voluntary contributions of members, neighbors, and others in the community. Small businesses may be more challenged to be self-supporting in their start-up phase, especially if the business has a social component or is sponsored by a non-profit. A three-to-five or even ten-year period to achieve complete self-reliance or profitability may be more realistic. For such initiatives, a plan to support the enterprise beyond the CFP phase is important.

If your project is more entrepreneurial, such as a value-added enterprise, and you propose to generate income through business activities such as the sales of products or services, then details are expected. Wishful projections without clear backing by a business plan can create skepticism. These details can make a big difference in demonstrating that such initiatives can survive and become viable.

We hope this document has been helpful to you in your proposal planning, and wish you all the best in your important work!