



The Corporation for National & Community Service
Competitive Grant Review & Selection Process

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Upon request, this material will be made available in alternative formats to accommodate people with special needs.



250 E Street, SW
Washington, DC 20525
Tel: 202-606-5000
www.nationalservice.gov

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INTRODUCTION

This document summarizes the Corporation for National and Community Service's (CNCS) competitive grant application review and selection process. Its purpose is to promote transparency and help prospective applicants to better understand CNCS's grant-making process.¹

The mission of CNCS is to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. Through AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, the Social Innovation Fund, and the Volunteer Generation Fund, CNCS has helped to engage millions of citizens in meeting community and national challenges through service and volunteer action. CNCS fulfills its mission by giving financial assistance to non-federal entities, including Indian Tribes, institutions of higher education, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and states. To learn more about our agency, please visit www.nationalservice.gov.

In line with objectives and strategies included in its [Strategic Plan](#), CNCS applies the following underlying principles to all grant-making activities:

- **Quality:** CNCS is committed to funding the best programs that meet the agency's selection criteria, priorities, and strategic considerations published in Notices of Funding Opportunity (Notices) through a comprehensive review and approval process.
- **Accessibility and Transparency:** CNCS is committed to making the application process clear and easily accessible, widely distributing Notices, and openly sharing grant-making information with stakeholders.
- **Fairness and Equality:** CNCS is committed to being fair to all applicants and potential applicants by remaining unbiased while providing technical assistance, reviewing applications, and making funding decisions.

In addition, CNCS continues to improve and enhance its grant application review and selection process to ensure it is effective, streamlined, and promotes transparency.

¹ The information in this document reflects a summary of the current CNCS review and selection process. Official statutes, CNCS policies and regulations, or specific instructions contained in Notices of Funding Opportunity shall take precedence over any conflicting information contained in this document. Please note that this document is subject to change and non-binding to CNCS.

CNCS'S GRANT-MAKING PROCESS

The diagram below shows CNCS's multi-step grant-making process from the appropriation of funds and awarding grants, through monitoring activities, to close-out.

The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants



BASIS FOR THE GRANT APPLICATION REVIEW

What governs the grant application review process?

The grant application review process is governed by statutory and regulatory requirements, established CNCS policies and procedures, and available appropriated funds.

What are the goals of the review and selection process?

CNCS's review and selection process is designed to ensure that grant applications are evaluated based on a fair, equitable, transparent, bias-free, and timely process, and that grant awards align with the selection criteria, priorities, and strategic considerations stated in the Notice.

What are the main CNCS offices involved in the grant application review and selection process?

The main CNCS offices involved in the grant application review and selection process are the:

- **Program Office** – owns the grant competition and participates in each step of the application review, recommendation, and decision-making process
- **Office of Grant Policy and Operations (OGPO)** – oversees and facilitates the process; ensures that CNCS policies and procedures are followed (or that differences are appropriately justified); and provides business intelligence, administrative, and logistical support

- **Office of Grants Management (OGM)** and the **Field Financial Management Center (FFMC)** – provides budget and financial reviews of grant applications, and makes the actual awards
- **Office of General Counsel (OGC)** – provides legal counsel
- **Office of Government Relations (OGR)** – handles Congressional notifications
- **Office of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)** – provides strategic direction and makes final funding decisions.

How does CNCS disseminate information about funding opportunities?

CNCS develops a Notice of Funding Opportunity (Notice) for each grant competition based upon the requirements outlined in the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards (Uniform Guidance, now consolidated in [2 CFR Parts 200](#) and [2205](#)). Each Notice is aligned with the CNCS Board-approved annual plan, CNCS Strategic Plan, and the final appropriations bill, and is approved prior publication.

The Program Office also develops corresponding Application Instructions, cleared by the Office of Management and Budget's Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, to comply with the Paperwork Reduction Act.

Grant competition announcements are distributed via channels that include:

- [CNCS Funding Opportunities](#)
- [Grants.gov](#)
- [GovDelivery](#)
- [social media](#)
- communications with state offices and State Commissions
- press releases
- regular mail to potential applicants upon request
- internal distribution to involved CNCS offices

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

What is CNCS's approach to make the application process accessible?

All applicants must have access to the same information. CNCS accomplishes this by making all information about grant competitions publicly available to applicants from the time a Notice is published until the application submission deadline. Support to all applicants includes publicly announced:

- technical assistance conference calls; playback recordings of the calls are available until the application deadline
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) posted on the competition webpage that are updated as needed
- contact information for applicants to submit questions and get answers
- an agency TTY number to accommodate people with special needs
- [eGrants](#), CNCS's online system designed to automate the entire grants and project management process from application to closeout
- [National Service Hotline](#), CNCS's Help Desk for eGrants-related questions about the application submission process.

What documents guide the application process?

The application process is guided by the *Notice*, the application instructions, statutes and regulations, and technical assistance documents. For each grant competition, these documents are available on the CNCS website.

How are applications submitted?

Applicants must submit applications electronically via [eGrants](#), CNCS's web-based system. Each competition's Notice and application instructions provide specific instructions and guidance on the submission process, including:

- the timeframe in which an application should be started and submitted
- who from the applicant organization is required to submit the application
- information regarding technical assistance with eGrants
- other submission methods should circumstances prevent an electronic submission.

When is the deadline for the submission of grant applications?

The submission deadline is the time and date by which CNCS must receive all applications for a grant competition. Applicants must submit their application by the application submission deadline published in the Notice, or as otherwise specified to applicants in application submission guidance.

The application submission time for all CNCS grant competitions is **5:00 p.m.** Eastern Time.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

Compliance & Eligibility Review

What is Compliance and Eligibility Review?

Compliance Review is the initial stage of CNCS's review of applications submitted in response to a Notice. It is conducted to determine if an application meets the established compliance requirements published in the Notice in order to be eligible to advance to the review process. CNCS's compliance criteria include the application submission deadline, applicant eligibility, and program-specific criteria.

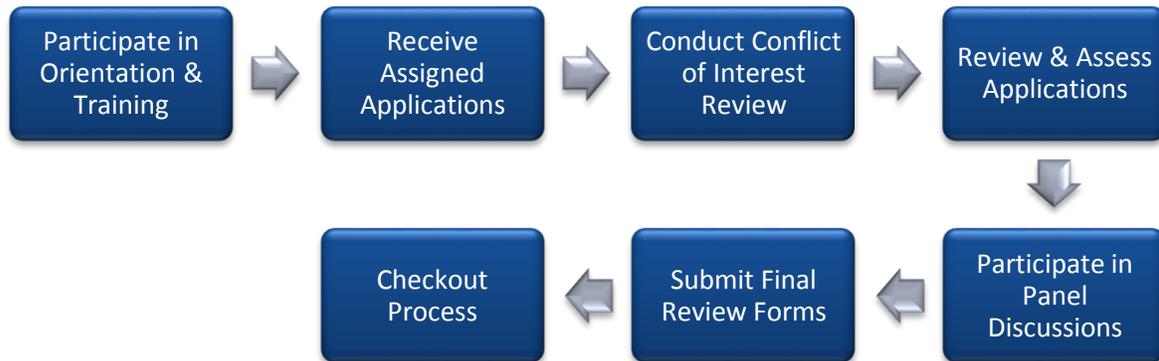
Reviewing for eligibility is intended to ensure that only those applications that are eligible for award are further reviewed. This review can take place at any point during the application review and selection process. Applicants that are determined to be non-compliant and/or ineligible will not receive an award.

Application Review

What is the application review?

CNCS uses a multi-stage review process to review and assess applications. Reviewers read, assess, discuss, and provide feedback on each eligible application. The results of the review are compiled and analyzed, and used to inform CNCS's subsequent decision-making process.

The following graphic depicts a summary of Reviewer participation in the application review process.



How is the application review structured?

CNCS generally uses one of three different review models for each grant competition: **External Review**, **Blended Review**, or **Internal Review**.

The review model is determined based upon the consideration of the following factors:

- the volume of applications and the timeframe in which the review must be completed
- the range of necessary expertise needed
- available human and financial resources
- the complexity of the competition.

In all review models, reviewers are recruited/selected based upon their qualified expertise, receive comprehensive training prior to the review, and are required to assess applications according to the selection criteria published in the Notice.

External Review

External Review uses reviewers external to CNCS and the federal government. Panels are generally comprised of two to four External Reviewers, and may also include an external Panel Coordinator, who facilitates the Panel Discussions and liaises with CNCS staff.

Blended Review

Blended Review uses a combination of External Reviewers, CNCS Staff Reviewers, and/or Federal Staff Reviewers. This model is often selected for grant competitions that involve partnerships with other federal agencies. The composition of Blended Review panels can vary based upon the identified needs of the grant competition.

Internal Review

Internal Review uses CNCS Staff Reviewers with demonstrated programmatic expertise and experience assessing applications. Internal Review differs, however, in that it can be utilized as a standalone model **or** as a second level review in addition to External Review.

When used in CNCS grant competitions, External Reviewers assess applications against all (or a specified subset) of the selection criteria described in the Notice, In Blended Reviews, CNCS Staff Reviewers also assess applications against the selection

criteria published in the Notice. In all grant competitions, CNCS staff, but not External Reviewers, consider how applications address the priorities and strategic considerations that are also detailed in the Notice.

How does CNCS select reviewers?

CNCS carefully chooses reviewers based on their expertise and ability to assess the quality of proposed projects. CNCS strives to recruit and select reviewers who have:

- knowledge and expertise relevant to CNCS Focus Areas
- specific expertise relevant to a particular grant competition
- diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

An individual who wishes to be considered as an External Reviewer must complete and submit to CNCS a reviewer application in eGrants. Please see “*Become a Peer Reviewer*” for more information: <https://www.nationalservice.gov/build-your-capacity/grants/egrants/become-peer-reviewer>.

How are reviewers trained and supported?

All reviewers are required to complete orientation and training sessions prior to the start of the review. Reviewers are given key reference materials that enhance their understanding of and provide context to the Notice and program regulations that govern the competition. At a minimum, the training topics include:

- expectations of reviewers and review responsibilities
- the importance of maintaining confidentiality, reporting conflicts of interest, and understanding potential bias
- the selection criteria and how to apply the rating and scoring system
- how to complete a review form.

Each review panel may be supported by a Review Coordinator, Panel Coordinator, Program Officer Liaison, and/or a Grant Application Review Process (GARP) Liaison:

- **Review Coordinator:** serves as the primary contact for the application review process; coordinates the training and logistics of the review, both internally and externally of CNCS, as required by the review model and competition needs
- **Panel Coordinator:** guides, supports, and monitors the work of their panel; facilitates panel discussions; acts as a liaison with CNCS staff on behalf of the panel
- **Program Officer Liaison:** provides programmatic expertise and guidance to the panel
- **GARP Liaison:** answers all process-related questions and provides all administrative and logistical support to the panel.

The composition of a review panel may vary based upon its review model and competition needs.

How does CNCS establish fair and unbiased reviews?

CNCS is committed to fair and unbiased reviews. This commitment is met by:

- screening reviewers for conflicts of interest
- training reviewers and panel coordinators to maintain confidentiality and to understand potential bias
- grouping applications with common characteristics on review panels
- using only the published selection criteria to assess applications
- conducting quality control reviews.

Conflicts of Interest

CNCS defines a conflict of interest as any private interest, affiliation, or relationship which could potentially compromise a reviewer's ability to impartially carry out official responsibilities.² Reviewers are required to notify CNCS about any actual or perceived conflicts of interest at the time of their selection for a review, and are subsequently trained on CNCS standards of reporting conflicts of interest prior to the competition.

CNCS makes the important distinction that reporting conflicts of interest is an ongoing duty. Reviewers are required to report any actual or perceived conflict of interest at any point during the application review. If a conflict of interest is determined, one of the following actions will be taken:

- the application may be reassigned to another panel
- the reviewer may be:
 - reassigned to another panel
 - recused from reviewing the application
 - removed from the review as a whole.

Confidentiality

Reviewers are expected to consider and maintain two types of confidentiality: applicant confidentiality and participant confidentiality. Per CNCS's Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Guidance, reviewers are ethically responsible to:

- only use applicant information during the review process and in discussions with fellow review participants and CNCS staff
- keep confidential any information the reviewer received or produced during the review
- only use the information to fulfill specific responsibilities as a part of the review process; reviewers are prohibited to use information provided during the review for personal benefit or to make it available for the benefit of any other individual or organization
- dispose of review information in a confidential manner (i.e. shredding of documents, wiping of electronic files)
- protect the identities and personal information of both applicants and other review participants.

Understanding Potential Bias

CNCS expects all reviewers to remain impartial and objective while reviewing and assessing applications. It is the joint responsibility of all panel members to ensure that discussions remain focused only on the information provided in the application and that personal feelings, for or against, do not affect the application's assessment. Most instances of bias are unintentional and reported by other reviewers. For these reasons, it is important to be considerate and respectful, both as the person reporting the bias and as the recipient of constructive feedback. Reviewers are encouraged to consult with their CNCS panel support staff if he or she has any concerns.

² CNCS staff who act as grant reviewers are subject to CNCS's normal ethics review processes which prohibit staff from personally and substantially participating in a matter that may affect an organization in which they have a financial interest.

Establishing Review Panels

Whenever possible, applications with similar characteristics are grouped together and assigned to the same review panel. This gives panels experience with, and a deeper understanding of, similar programs. CNCS considers the following characteristics when grouping applications:

- CNCS Focus Areas
- program models
- program focus
- issue areas
- service categories
- target service audience
- organization type

Once the groups have been determined, CNCS assigns reviewers to panels of applications based on their expertise and skill set.

Selection Criteria

Selection criteria are a set of factors that tell applicants how reviewers will assess the merits of an application in the context of the goals and requirements of the program. Reviewers are required to assess an application based on its response to each of the published selection criteria. Details on the selection criteria and weights are stated in the Notice, as are funding priorities and strategic considerations.

Quality Control

CNCS uses several quality control strategies to (1) validate the results of the review and (2) assess panel activities that might have affected an application's review.

CNCS staff review the results for fairness and consistency after reviewers complete their assessments. Some applications might be selected for a quality control review based on, but not limited to:

- discrepancies identified in reviewer comments and ratings
- anomalies in a review panel, such as a reviewer dropping from the panel or a reported instance of bias
- discrepancies between an application's assessment and staff knowledge of performance by an existing grantee

Quality control strategies include having a second panel review the application(s), having a CNCS staff member read the application, and/or sending the application directly to Internal Review, if applicable.

What rating system is used by reviewers to assess applications?

The quality rating system is based on rating descriptions and a rubric provided to reviewers by CNCS. Reviewers review each criterion and decide which description is the best overall fit in characterizing how an application addresses the criterion being assessed. Reviewers must support their ratings on the review forms by citing significant strengths and/or weaknesses of each application.

The rating system for most programs includes four categories: Excellent, Good, Fair, and Does Not Meet. The rating is adjusted to address program specific needs. Below are summary descriptions for these rating categories.

Rating	Description
Excellent	A high-quality, detailed response that addresses all aspects of the Selection Criteria and exceeds some. Strengths are substantial and solid. No weaknesses are identified, or any weakness has a minimal effect on the overall quality of the response. A high confidence that the proposed activities will achieve and exceed the anticipated results.
Good	A quality response that addresses most or all aspects of the Selection Criteria. Strengths are substantial, but do not exceed what is required. No weaknesses are identified, or any weakness has a minimal effect on the overall quality of the response. Proposed activities should achieve the anticipated results.
Fair	Response addresses some to most aspects of the Selection Criteria, but makes assumptions and leaves aspects unexplained. Strengths are not significant, and some weaknesses affect the overall quality of the response, demonstrating room for improvement. It is unclear how the proposed activities will achieve all of the anticipated results.
Does Not Meet	A low-quality or very weak response that does not address most of the Selection Criteria. Overall response is lacking or inadequate making assumptions in key elements. Weaknesses relating to vague or inaccurate detail are numerous or significantly outweigh the strengths. There is low to zero confidence that the proposed activities will achieve the anticipated results.

How are the review results utilized?

CNCS uses reviewers to help identify the highest-quality applications based upon the selection criteria published in the Notice. Reviewers do not make funding decisions, but their assessment of the quality of applications is used to inform CNCS’s subsequent decision-making process.

What criteria are considered to determine which applications advance from one phase of the review to the next?

The Program Office develops a set of criteria that are used to determine which applications advance from one phase to the next. These criteria are based on the quality assessment results of the applications against the selection criteria and the need to build a diversified portfolio that reflects the strategic considerations published in the Notice such as:

- funding priorities identified in the agency’s Strategic Plan (e.g. Focus Areas)
- additional priorities based on administration interests, Congressional appropriations, or the Board of Directors’ Annual Plan
- meaningful representation of geographic diversity, rural communities, and Focus Areas
- statutory and regulatory considerations that CNCS is required by law to consider when selecting a portfolio of programs for funding.

As much as possible and depending on the data available, the Program Office considers the characteristics of a well-balanced portfolio, in order to ensure adequate representation in the pool of applicants that are selected to advance to each phase of the review and selection process. For example, an application that scores lower in External Review may advance to Internal Review over a higher-scoring application if the application meets a statutory priority or CNCS priority that is under-represented and would give balance to the overall portfolio.

What are the next steps after Internal Review?

Based on the results from Internal Review and a portfolio analysis, the Program Office, led by the Program Director, develops a preliminary portfolio of programs and presents it to the CEO and other CNCS leadership for consideration. The Program Office takes into account the review results, adherence to the priorities and other strategic considerations outlined in the Notice, and funding availability as it builds the preliminary portfolio of recommended programs. The CEO carefully considers the program's preliminary recommendations, provides strategic direction as needed, and agrees on a preliminary portfolio of applications for clarification.

What is applicant clarification?

Applicant clarification refers to CNCS's request to applicants for clarifying information regarding programmatic or budgetary aspects of an application in order to make well-informed final funding decisions.

At this juncture in the application review and selection process, CNCS has not made any final funding decisions. This request for clarification does not mean that an application is approved for funding. Rather, it is an opportunity for an applicant to answer questions and clarify issues identified during the review. An applicant's failure to respond to a request for clarification adequately and in a timely fashion may result in its application being removed from consideration.

Applicant Clarification may take one to five weeks, depending on the number of applications being considered and the complexity of items for clarification.

SELECTION, NOTIFICATIONS, AND FEEDBACK

How are final funding decisions made?

Once clarification is complete, the Program Director and other program staff analyze the results, prepare a draft funding recommendation package that also accounts for priorities and strategic considerations, and submit the package to the CEO and other CNCS leadership for their consideration.

Based on the evaluation of the strategic considerations, applications may be selected for funding over other applications that align more closely with the selection criteria. In selecting applicants to receive award under a Notice, the CEO endeavors to include a diverse portfolio of applicants based on staff recommendations and strategic considerations.

What is the process of announcing award decisions?

The CEO notifies the Board of Directors once the funding decision is final. OGR notifies the Congressional Appropriations Committee, followed by notifications to Congressional representatives from the grantees' districts.

Next, program staff notify the applicants. Applicants that are approved for funding generally receive a formal notification letter from the Program Director. The Program Office sends formal notifications of State Commission competitive decisions to the Commission for distribution to their sub-applicants. Applicants that are not approved for funding receive a notification letter. Concurrent with applicant notifications, the Office of External Affairs distributes a press release with the list of selected applicants.

Once notifications are finalized, OGM or the FFMC processes the grant awards in eGrants.

What is the process for feedback to applicants?

To the extent possible, CNCS provides application review feedback in order to improve the quality and quantity of future applications submitted to CNCS. Feedback may include the context for the competition and the review and selection process, and may be conducted via conference call with all applicants, individual calls to applicants, or in writing.

OVERALL TIMEFRAME

How long does the grant application review and selection process take?

The grant application review and selection process can vary in duration based upon the complexity of the grant competition, the review model, and the anticipated number of applications. Overall, the process may take from two and a half to four and a half months from the application submission deadline to the announcement of funding decisions.

OPEN GOVERNMENT IN THE COMPETITIVE GRANT PROCESS

What grant competition material does CNCS make available to the public?

For all CNCS grant competitions for which the application review includes external review, staff review, or both, and that result in new or re-competing grant awards, including cooperative agreements, the following information is made public.

What information is made public: where and when?

Item(s) to be Published	Description of the Publication	Where/When
<i>Prior to Grant Competitions</i>		
Annual forecast of grant competitions.	List of anticipated CNCS grant competitions for each fiscal year, including key dates. Continuing resolutions and the availability of grant funds may affect actual grant competitions and dates.	Via web posting on CNCS's Open Government page ; created annually at the beginning of each fiscal year then updated as needed.
Agency-wide description of the review and selection process.	Overview of the review and selection process.	Via web posting on CNCS's Open Government page ; annual revision, as needed.
Selection criteria, funding priorities, considerations, and selection factors used for portfolio balancing.	The criteria against which external and/or internal reviewers will assess applications.	In each Notice.

Item(s) to be Published	Description of the Publication	Where/When
Following Grant Awards		
Competition Overview	Includes a brief description of the program and the competition.	Via web posting; as soon as practicable but no later than 90 business days after all grants are awarded for a particular Notice.
Blank external review worksheets, when applicable.	Worksheets used by external reviewers to assess applications.	
Applicant Feedback Summary for successful applicants, when applicable.	Includes the external reviewers' summary comments, when applicable.	
Names of external reviewers who completed the review process.	Individual external reviewers who assessed the grant applications.	
List of compliant applications submitted (except applications withdrawn by the legal applicant during the review and selection process).	Names of organizations that submitted applications, including sub-applicants (if applicable) and program names.	
List of compliant concept papers submitted, when applicable (except concept papers withdrawn by the legal applicant during the review and selection process).	Names of organizations that submitted concept papers.	
Executive summaries of all compliant applications (except applications withdrawn by the legal applicant during the review and selection process).	Executive summary of each compliant application submitted by the applicants as part of their application.	
Successful applications.	Data extracted from the Face Sheet (SF-424) and the submitted program narratives by applicants (excluding budgets and performance measures).	

Notices are posted on CNCS's Funding Opportunities webpage:

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/build-your-capacity/grants/funding-opportunities>

Previous competition information can be found on CNCS's Results of Grant Competitions webpage:

<https://www.nationalservice.gov/about/open-government-initiative/transparency/results-grants-competition>