

Applicant Feedback Summary

2015 Social Innovation Fund Grant Competition

(Program and Evaluation Reviewers)

Legal Applicant: Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Applicant ID: 15SI172188

Project Name: Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)

For the purpose of enhancing our programs by improving the quality and quantity of applications to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), we are providing specific feedback regarding the strengths and weaknesses of this application. These comments are not meant to represent a comprehensive assessment; rather the analysis represents those elements that had the greatest bearing on the rating of the application. Please note that this feedback consists of summary comments from more than one reviewer. For this reason, some of the comments may seem to be inconsistent or contradictory. Comments are not representative of all of the information used in the final funding decision.

Reviewer's Summary Comments:

PROGRAM REVIEW

Strengths:

The applicant clearly defines their issue focus as improving the employability and earning power of hard-to-employ low skill workers.

The applicant makes a strong case that current programs for this population that seek to address their basic educational needs, their vocational training needs and their financial situations separately are not as effective as the integrated approach that the applicant's Bridges to Career Opportunity model can be.

The applicant presents a compelling plan that builds on work they have already done, including with a previous Social Innovation Fund award. The plan clearly describes the types of organizations that they will invest in, as subrecipients, and the substantial value-added activities that they will undertake to support subrecipients in achieving the hoped for outcomes, which include more fully testing and documenting the impact of the model and its key components.

The applicant has extensive experience as a grant maker and capacity builder and has provided a strong and detailed plan for subrecipient selection through a competitive process.

The applicant's track record in building their Financial Opportunity Centers with a 2010 Social Innovation Fund award, and then in further growing that network based on the effectiveness of the model, tangibly demonstrates their capacity to identify and effectively support high-performing subrecipients and manage the kind of large-scale national replication project that they propose.

The applicant describes a robust set of supports that it will offer subrecipients, including: technical assistance, training, peer-to-peer networking, and data systems. These supports are well-tested by their financial Opportunity Center work and seem likely to be highly effective in helping subrecipients to replicate the model and position themselves for sustainability beyond the award period.

The applicant has a long history as a recipient of federal awards and in making awards to subrecipients with federal funding. They appear to have a strong understanding of Social Innovation Fund and federal requirements and well-developed systems for supporting subrecipients in meeting those requirements.

The applicant raises substantial funds annually and has the capacity to raise or contribute additional funds for this effort.

The applicant's strategy for sustainability is grounded in their aim of carefully testing the model and documenting its impact, to make it a compelling proposition for funders and at the national, state and local level.

As an existing SIF grantee and an organization with the capacity to make \$1 billion in program related investment, the applicant presents as a strong candidate for the grant.

The proposed project, Bridges to Career Opportunity, builds on an existing service, Financial Opportunity Centers, which have been implemented for a decade and bring tested program implementation tools and methodologies to the proposed project.

The proposed project takes a 'coach' approach vs. 'case manager' approach. Psychologically, it makes a big difference in people, who have historically not had many options, to view this process as a collaborative coach approach.

The applicant has secured matching funding sources, indicating its preparedness for project implementation.

The applicant proposes to provide local and national training and technical support, oversight of each proposed site, accountability and quality control. This is essential for building capacity and ensuring that the project is implemented uniformly through multiple sites.

The applicant proposes a national database, a performance measurement framework, and a framework for national and peer learning for sub-grantees, which would increase support for program delivery and outcome tracking.

The budget provides ample funding for staff at both the local and national level as well as travel costs for site visits and training. This mix is a key factor in the ability of LISC to provide support and oversight, which is clearly outlined in the narrative. The amount budgeted for subgrants is also adequately justified in the narrative.

Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) plans to expand their Bridges to Opportunity program from 14 to 32 sites. The applicant effectively demonstrates that the current workforce development system is not adequately meeting the needs of low-wage workers and they outline a sound plan to overcome these obstacles. Since LISC has already piloted their Bridges model, they have developed performance measures, quality control standards, and program methodology that can be replicated. LISC has considerable experience in selecting and supporting sub-recipients, both for SIF awards as well as other Federal awards. The presence and involvement of local LISC offices is a critical factor in effectively meeting the needs of the local labor markets and employers. LISC will assist sub-recipients with securing their matching funds and help them connect to other stakeholders, which will ensure long-term success of their programs.

Weaknesses:

The applicant provides limited statistical information and examples about existing program structures and their shortcomings.

Although the applicant describes how it hopes that subrecipients in each of the selected communities will build local support, they do not provide as much specificity and detail as would be helpful to understand that process and the role that the applicant will play in it.

The structure of their planned program evaluation is such that not every subrecipient would be involved in the

process and, because it is a nationally directed activity, it is not clear whether or how individual subrecipients would continue the evaluation process beyond the grant period.

The applicant's description of how they will assist subrecipients in raising match is not very detailed and suggests that fundraising ability is likely to be a significant factor in the selection of subrecipients.

The explanation of expenditures is not very detailed with respect to line staff and contract and consulting costs.

Even though the applicant has identified several locations throughout the country, it has not provided sufficient reasoning for why it is seeking to solicit application from those areas.

The applicant has not identified the target demographics intended to be served by this proposal.

The applicant fails to detail the level of fair and open selection process since some of the sub-grantees' Financial Opportunity Centers will seemingly have an advantage over a traditional workforce development organization in philosophy and tools for implementation of the project.

A large amount of budget has been allocated to contractual and consultants categories without sufficient explanation. Their roles should be more well-defined, but they are only mentioned briefly in the narrative. Qualifications should be outlined for those candidates who might be considered to serve as a consultant.

Qualifications for the local site administrators are absent, which make up half of the personnel assigned to this project. Particularly, since the staff at the local LISC offices plays such an important role in supporting the subrecipients, much more detail is needed. In addition, defined roles and desired qualifications for the four consultants are not included.

EVALUATION REVIEW

Strengths:

Overall, the applicant provides clear evidence of its capacity to use data and evaluation in past collective efforts. The applicant provides evidence of accountability of industry, philanthropic and government support for program expansion, and a replication and sustainability strategy.

The application meets most of the SIF evaluation requirements. Among the most convincing aspects of the proposed evaluation approach were that the applicant already provides fairly precise evaluation parameters, such as (1) lists of established outcome indicators and most critical evaluation questions, (2) the requirement to conduct pre-/post-testing with matching comparison groups, and (3) multiple readily available data collection options. In addition, the applicant demonstrates a sound understanding of subrecipients' technical assistance needs for evaluation design and implementation, which is among others demonstrated by the fact that training in data management/review and performance analysis are considered key investments to support subrecipients' use of evidence to improve program performance.

The applicant identifies specific challenges that prevent hard-to-employ, unskilled workers, its target population, from accessing the skills training they need to improve their opportunities. It proposes a solution to fill the gap in service delivery that will address this challenge. The applicant provides ample evidence regarding its experience with programmatic implementation and grant making, along with evidence about its experience with research and the application of data to shape its programming. The applicant has well developed subrecipient selection criteria.

Weaknesses:

The applicant does not adequately describe a clear evaluation program design to warrant the proposed strong levels of effectiveness for desired impact outcomes. It also proposes a budget that seems inadequate to meet evaluation and staffing requirements. Finally, it is also not clear on how collaborative supports will be engaged with subgrantees and

applicants to ensure fidelity and quality in program evaluation design.

The applicant's approach to only optionally consider the use of a randomized control trial design does not satisfy the strong evidence tier requirements of the SIF Notice. The evaluation budget's justification is inconclusive, as the actual proposed annual budget share for evaluation amounts to 4.3% (compared to the total annual budget of \$8M), which is unlikely to meet the costs of evaluation activities required to establish strong evidence of effectiveness. The staff allocation for evaluation is similarly limited (7.7% of the applicant's human resources), and lacks an explanation regarding how applicant staff and the external evaluator will actually collaborate to ensure a successful evaluation of the subrecipients' implementation efforts.

The applicant does not provide a plan to include individuals receiving no treatment in its control groups. As a result, its evaluation plan will compare different forms of the treatment variables (e.g., exposure to the bridge program alone, exposure to the bridge program combined with coaching), but will not provide evidence about whether individuals receiving any treatment have better outcomes than those who do not.