

Applicant Feedback Summary

2015 Social Innovation Fund Grant Competition

(Program and Evaluation Reviewers)

Legal Applicant: AARP Foundation

Applicant ID: 15SI172320

Project Name: Achieving Grade Level Reading with Small Group Tutoring

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 has built a 20-year history of application of their 1:1 model through school partnerships and a significant relationship with the campaign GLR that could support their goals. Their existing evaluation of this program is strong, which can serve them well as they scale the group model, particularly with existing subrecipients that can document expansion. Their value added component of accreditation and TA to subrecipients provides a solid foundation around fidelity and capacity building/support. AARP's incorporation of the e-kit is a great resource that supports scalability in addition to already having the systems in place to collect data and report outcomes.

Although the applicant has only been selecting and awarding competitive grants since 2011, they do articulate a comprehensive plan to demonstrate their current capacity and opportunity to implement the SIF grant. Also, given their long history of success with Experience Corps and their theory of change, they are well positioned to assess the readiness and capacity for implementation of their subrecipients. An additional key strength is their AARP brand and local presence, which supports their ability to recruit a substantive number of 50+ adults as volunteers.

The applicant demonstrates an excellent track record in managing Experience Corps through goal setting activities; this is particularly evident by how well they can align recipients' expectations, adapt to market demands and funding and establish explicit performance metrics. A well laid out capacity building and accountability plan, which clearly articulates expectations, provides opportunity for improvement and individualized attention, as well as a clear path to consequences.

The management responsible for this project is well suited and skilled to effectively implement the proposed program; in addition to being capable of managing federal grants and all related compliance requirements. Due to the longevity of their current Experience Corps program, the applicant demonstrates the ability to maintain long-term relationships with subrecipients and the innovation to adapt to different markets.

The AARP Foundation provides strong evidence of their commitment to long-term relationships and experience in overseeing programs of the type proposed, as evidenced by a positive track record and extensive (over 50 years) history in program management, raising funds, grant making, and in building capacity in programs.

The Experience Corps demonstrates their experience and ability to collect and analyze data for evaluation and growth through their established systems of annual goal setting with benchmarks and their data collection systems (i.e. Salesforce) providing targeted TA to each subrecipient working to ensure program outcomes. The AARP Foundation begins goal setting with their Foundation board and works through their Experience Corps on down to the sub recipients.

The applicant effectively justifies the program's focus on children reading on grade level by the end of third grade by establishing this benchmark as predictive of future academic and life success. Statistics on the impact of dropping out of high school and current policies mandating children who are not reading at grade level to repeat third grade provide convincing evidence that the proposed interventions have the potential to alleviate significant social and financial costs for the children and communities served.

The applicant clearly demonstrates the capacity to support subrecipients' growth through Experience Corps statistics indicating substantial growth in the number of students, classrooms, schools, and communities served over time. The City of Phoenix case study also outlines effectively the capacity of the applicant to support subrecipient growth.

The applicant makes the compelling case that subrecipients will benefit through the applicant's provision of resources, individualized technical assistance and training, and models for sustainability. The technical assistance strategy is exemplary in its proposed delivery of in-depth assistance in the field, by phone, and through electronic resources (the Experience Corps e-kit).

The applicant provides a comprehensive plan for monitoring subrecipients' progress towards programmatic, financial, and operational goals throughout the grant period. The plan includes corrective actions should subrecipients not be compliant with the requirements of the grant.

Weaknesses:

Given the importance of volunteers to achieve their goals and, sustainability, they do not offer information about the continued development of their volunteers. In fact, the applicant's hypotheses are solely based on the results of the intervention, excluding the efficacy of the volunteer process. These findings could be significant given that 98% of tutors were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall Experience Corps, but only 44% have served for three or more years. This goes to the root of scalability since volunteers are the driving force.

The applicant did not provide a plan of how they will assist subrecipients secure their match in a sustainable manner. Also, the applicant will expect their subrecipients to use Salesforce, with a license fee, but it is not clear if subrecipients will be encouraged to continue using Salesforce to build on their newly developed data set; or if subrecipients will be expected to continue uploading data, which would positioned them to continue evaluation beyond the grant lifecycle.

Limited information is given about the nature of and research support for the class-wide literacy assistance activities, making it difficult to assess the potential effectiveness of this approach.

EVALUATION REVIEW

Strengths:

The applicant has a strong history of successful program evaluation being cited in the Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse for implementation of evaluation using Randomized Controlled Trials designs. The applicant presents strong organizational skills with specific forms, procedures and policy in existence for evaluation as well as the necessary technical support for individual subrecipients. The applicant has implemented consistent data collection systems likely to result in consistent data reporting and evaluation which allows the applicant to make data-driven decisions across all programs and as an entire entity.

Applicant demonstrates significant capacity and capability in its ability to create and implement an evaluation plan that will yield moderate to strong levels of evidence. It has repeatedly conducted randomized, quasi-experimental, controlled tests in public settings and obtained strong levels of evidence indicating strong capacity and capability. Applicant also demonstrates the ability to take what it learns from its evaluations to make improvements to future programs as evidenced by its change from 1:1 tutoring to the new small group sizing of 1:4 tutoring. There is an abundance of technical assistance opportunity with subgrantees. Applicant's budget appropriately reflects its planned activities.

The applicant demonstrates a clear understanding of the types of issues that will arise in a cross-site evaluation as well as in local evaluations of a multi-site initiative. The organization, both through its own evaluation activities and its collaborations with highly regarded evaluation partners, has demonstrated its ability to conduct rigorous program evaluations. The application provides strong examples of the types of systems and approaches they have implemented in other recent, relatively large projects to establish data and tracking systems, provide technical assistance, and assure data quality. Furthermore, the applicant recognizes the importance of ensuring that the program itself is implemented with fidelity to the intended design. This is a critical aspect of evaluability, i.e., the readiness of a program to be evaluated.

Weaknesses:

The evaluation design is unclear as to the exact role of the third party evaluator in connection to the subrecipients' evaluations as well as how the subrecipients' evaluation supports the applicant's overall evaluation and the evaluation methodologies employed at the subrecipient level.

Applicant provides insufficient details about the evaluation plan subgrantees are expected to follow making it difficult to assess what types of validity issues may arise from the evaluation design. Finally, using teacher assessment reports as a separate metric by which student achievement is measured can present potential problems of validity depending on how the experiment is designed.

An assessment of the quality of the evidence that will be produced for the first three years of the initiative is hard to make, which is particularly important given the decision to wait until the fourth year to implement the QED or RCT. There is limited specific information about how findings from the first three years will be applied for program improvement; e.g., there is mention of a learning community to be established but no glimpse is provided of how often it will be convened or how it will operate. Lastly, while the decision to wait until the fourth year for the cross-site evaluation may indeed be prudent, there is not enough information provided to understand why that approach is being proposed.