CONSIDERATIONS, DEFINITIONS AND TIPS
Application Narrative and Performance Measures

A. Rationale and Approach/Program Design

Considerations. *Look for the following in the application:*

- ✓ The theory of change, that is, the program's hypothesis for how an intervention can address or solve the stated problem or need should be clearly articulated.
- ✓ Two types of evidence: The program should provide evidence supporting the community need and evidence supporting the proposed intervention (see definitions)

  *An **evidence based need** refers to the data/research the program uses to demonstrate the existence of the community need/problem that the project will address.* The need should be clearly backed up with data from a reliable source to establish the compelling nature of the need. A reliable source is one that is research-based, current, contains community-level statistics, and comes from a credible source. Watch for sources that are based solely on anecdotes, a small amount of data, or that may be biased.

  *The **evidence based intervention** refers to the data/research that demonstrates the proposed intervention is likely to solve the identified problem. The applicant should describe how the evidence supports the program design and implementation of the proposed intervention.*
- ✓ The need and outcomes should be closely related (aligned). If the need isn't clear, it is difficult to know what to expect for outcomes. (If this is the case, work from intervention description to determine the relationship between the need and outcomes.)

  ***Example**: If the need is that students are reading below grade level then the outcome might be that student will read at/above grade level or show improved reading proficiency.*
- ✓ Describes the way AmeriCorps members are a highly effective means to solving the identified community need. What is the unique value added by AmeriCorps?
- ✓ A set of aligned performance measures (one output, one outcome) is described.
- ✓ Adequate resources for the proposed intervention. Is there enough staff? Are there enough members (and member hours), and do they have the necessary skill set? Are community partners committed to the intervention?
- ✓ The methods and instrument need to be appropriate – the program can manage them – and rigorous – minimizing threats to validity and reliability.
- ✓ Description of how the data will be aggregated and analyzed: This might include reference to a plan and timeline, how they plan to go about coding data or what software or web-based system is being set up.

Common Issues and Errors

- Insufficient supporting evidence of need
- Insufficient evidence to support the theory of change
- Includes irrelevant filler; studies or statistics unrelated to the need or intervention
- Need does not clearly relate to proposed intervention
- Insufficient resources to support the intervention
- Proposed methods/instrument not identified or developed and no attention to data analysis

B. INTERVENTION (STRATEGY)

Considerations. ***Look for the following in the application:***

- ✓ Clear description of the **intervention**, that is the service or strategy that will be provided to the community to produce change. Interventions address the community need and aim to achieve the anticipated results: the output and outcome. The intervention should be described in terms of who is doing what with whom, where, how often (frequency) and over what period of time (intensity).
- ✓ Stating that members will “assist”, “supervise”, “tutor,” “mentor”, or “clean up” does not provide enough descriptive information. For instance, for a tutoring program, look for how the tutoring will be conducted (one-on-one; small groups?), where will the tutoring take place, etc.
- ✓ The intervention is in line with the mission. Stakeholders have been consulted to ensure that the program is measuring the most important outcome.
- ✓ Aligned need and intervention. That is, the intervention is likely to address the identified need.
- ✓ Evidenced-based intervention. Depending on context and program maturation, applicants should present findings from their past program performance measures, their program evaluation, research or evaluation of similar programs with similar outcomes. Ideally, more than one evidence source will be employed.
- ✓ The intervention identified for performance measures should be a significant focus of the program.
- ✓ A clear intervention description sets the stage for both what should be measured for performance and what target number is realistic.

  Example*: If the Intervention is tutoring students in how to read, then you know you will be counting how many students get tutored and what difference the tutoring made.*
- ✓ Description of the selection process and characteristics of the targeted beneficiaries, that the program provides evidence that the service is appropriate for the target population. The intervention section needs to state how often and for how long beneficiaries will receive service (frequency, intensity - days per week, hours per day). (*This is not the same as member service hours/days.*)
- ✓ Consider what member resources are needed to do the Intervention well, in particular, the number of people engaged in a service intervention influences what is realistic in terms of outputs, outcomes and targets.

  Example: *5 members probably can’t effectively mentor 100 students. If the intervention is more intensive, such as 5 members tutoring students daily for 30-60 minutes, then targets for outputs will be relatively low and potentially you can expect greater change than if it was a less intensive tutoring model.*

Common Errors and Issues:

- A small or minor focus strategy is selected as the primary focus (e.g., because it is easier to measure.
- What members/volunteers are actually doing is unclear.
- Level of effort is unclear.
  - Number of members, time spent, over what period
- Who is being served is unclear.

C. OUTPUTS:

Considerations. *Look for the following in the application:*

Result Statement

- ✓ Realistic outputs. **Outputs** are counts of the amount of service produced or completed by members or volunteers. Units are typically "people served" or things completed. They do not provide information on the benefits to or changes in the lives of members and/or beneficiaries.
- ✓ What is counted should represent the core work or clients of the program.

Indicator

- ✓ An output indicator is a specific item of information that describes what the program will track to determine that the output has occurred (e.g., number of economically disadvantaged children).

Target

- ✓ The output target (how many people will be served) should be appropriate to the number of members and hours of service. For example, 5 members cannot train 1,000 parents with any kind of quality.
- ✓ The anticipated output target value (number to be reached by the end of the year) should be both ambitious and manageable. Programs should explain how they came up with the target. They can determine targets in several ways: previous experience with intervention and population, research of similar programs with comparable resources are able to achieve or partner/expert advice.
- ✓ Unduplicated participant counts require programs to develop a structured system, e.g., includes a unique identifier for each participant. Programs that provide "services as needed" or "drop-in services" will be more challenged in making sure they do not double-count participants.

Instrument

- ✓ Typically a single output instrument is sufficient.
- ✓ The application does not require detailed information about the instrument, however look for evidence of rigor. For instance:
    - Method is appropriate for capturing the identified output
    - Instrument has been used successfully before.
    - Program takes precautions to ensure unduplicated counts.
    - Clear definition of participation (i.e., completion)

Data collection

- ✓ Although not a part of the application, look for information about a data collection plan which addresses:
    - When data will be collected, how often and by whom
    - Privacy/confidentially issues

Output Statement

- ✓ The Output PM should include only the output and target; no other information should be added.

Common Errors and Issues:

- Output seems inappropriate to proposed intervention (e.g., not counting people served).
- Indicator is unclear or does not measure result.
- Indicator and target are not aligned.
- Target seems too low/high based on number of members and hours of service.
- Target seems too low/high based on past performance.
- Instrument seems inappropriate (e.g., using a survey or other outcome instrument to measure an output).
- PM Summary includes additional (new) information or is not result + target.

D. OUTCOMES:

Considerations. *Look for the following in the application:*

- ✓ The **Outcome** specifies changes or benefits that have occurred in the lives of members and/or service recipients (beneficiaries) that are measurable during the grant period. Outcomes are reported on an annual basis with applicants setting annual targets.
- ✓ The outcome should represent a meaningful change in the lives of beneficiaries and provide the program with useful information about the impact of the intervention. In other words, the outcome should identify an important change.
- ✓ The outcome should clearly define who and what will change.
- ✓ The outcome and output should be aligned. The outcome should follow logically from the output and focus on the same beneficiaries as those being measured for the output.
- ✓ It is likely that the outcome will occur because of this activity. That is, the intensity of the intervention seems sufficient to achieve a meaningful outcome.
- ✓ The outcome and target need to be rigorous and realistic. Watch for targets that seem too high or too low. Programs that claim high numbers as a target (100% of beneficiaries will achieve the result) most likely are unrealistic, or may indicate a less than ambitious outcome.

  Example: *Five members mentor at-risk youth and state that their desired outcome target is 100% of the youth will eliminate all of their high risk behaviors (drugs, alcohol, and truancy). This would most not likely be realistic.*

<u>Result Statement</u>

- ✓ Outcomes specify changes that will occur in the lives of the beneficiaries within a program year.

<u>Indicator</u>

- ✓ An indicator is a specific item of information that will demonstrate progress toward achieving the outcome.
- ✓ The indicator clarifies or defines what will change and how will it change in measurable terms.

<u>Target</u>

- ✓ The outcome target value (whole number or percent) is ambitious but still realistic given the resources, service activity, and type of population being served and what can be accomplished in the timeframe (usually one year).
- ✓ The target should clearly describe <u>how many will change</u> (*e.g. 75 <u>of the children (out of 125)</u> will pass the test)* or what will be changed and <u>how much change will occur</u> (e.g. 75 of the children will pass the test *<u>by 30 points or more)</u>.*

<u>Instrument</u>

- ✓ The instrument has been clearly identified and is able to measure the outcome.
- ✓ Typically a single outcome instrument is sufficient.
- ✓ The data source describes where the information is coming from; the person completing the instrument or collecting the information needed to measure the outcome. Programs should determine in advance that the data source can provide the necessary information directly, consistently, in the format needed, and in a timely manner (i.e., in time for progress reports).

The application does not require detailed information about the instrument. However when considering the application, look for evidence of rigor. Look for evidence that the instrument can produce reliable and valid data.[1]

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[1] Reliability refers to the extent to which an instrument can give consistent results. Validity refers to the appropriateness of the instrument in measuring the result. An instrument is valid to the extent that it measures what it is intended to measure and not something else.

- The instrument has been successfully used before or pilot tested with people similar to those who will be completing the instrument.
- The questions/test are able to accurately assess the contribution of the intervention. Does the instrument produce unbiased data?
- The instrument has clear instructions and consistent instrument administration.
- The instrument is appropriate for the population (literacy level, language, culture).

Data collection

✓ Although not a distinct section within the eGrants application format, look for an indication of a detailed data collection plan which should address:
  - Consultation with partner agencies to ensure that the program can get the data during the timeframe
  - Collaboration with partner agencies to train data collectors (as needed) and in getting data
  - Pilot testing or trial run of data collection process; a plan in place and data collectors identified
  - Attention to privacy/confidentially

If information about data collection is missing, this could be a good focus for questions during the clarification process.

Outcome Statement

✓ The outcome PM should include only the outcome and target; no other information should be added.

Common Errors and Issues:

- Outcome measures different beneficiary from output (e.g., students vs. teachers).
- Outcome sounds like an output – doesn't reflect change.
- Indicator does not seem to get at result identified.
- Indicator is unclear.
- Indicator and target don't align.
- Target seems too low/high based on number of members and service hours.
- Target seems too low/high based on past performance.
- Instrument is vague (e.g., "database" or "tracking system").
- Instrument seems inappropriate (e.g., using an output instrument to measure an outcome).
- PM Summary includes additional (new) information.
- PM Summary is not result + target.