

2015 RSVP BLENDED REVIEWER HANDBOOK



Corporation for
NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE 



This page intentionally left blank.



Table of Contents

Section 1.0: Introduction.....1

1.1 Welcome to the 2015 RSVP Blended Review Handbook..... 1

1.2 Welcome to Senior Corps’ RSVP Competition 2

Section 2.0: CNCS Grant Application Review Process.....3

2.1 The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants 3

2.2 The Grant Application Review Process 3

 2.2.1 *The Blended Review Process* 3

 2.2.2 *Roles and Responsibilities* 5

Section 3.0: Ensuring an Equitable Review7

3.1 Diversity in Programs..... 7

3.2 Conflict of Interest 7

3.3 Bias..... 9

3.4 Confidentiality..... 9

3.5 Verify Page Limits to Ensure Equity for all Applicants..... 9

Section 4.0: Preparing for the 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review.....10

4.1 Reviewer Timeline and Milestones..... 10

4.2 Key Review Forms..... 11

Section 5.0: Reviewing the 2015 RSVP Applications14

5.1 Consideration of the Performance Measures and Work Plans during Blended Review 14

5.2 Conducting the Individual Review..... 14

 5.2.1 *Accessing the Assigned Panel Applications*..... 14

 5.2.2 *Read the Applications* 14

 5.2.3 *Completing the Individual Reviewer Form (IRF)*..... 15

5.3 Participating in Panel Discussions 16

 5.3.1 *Tips for Productive Panel Discussions* 17

 5.3.2 *Completing the Panel Discussion Report* 17

5.4 Submitting Final IRFs 18

5.5 Completing the Close-Out Process 18

List of Tables

Table 1: RSVP 2015 Timeline and Milestones for Reviewers..... 10

Table 2: Synopsis of Review Products 12



List of Figures

Figure 1: The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants.....	3
Figure 2: The Blended Review Process.....	4

NOTE: Please email PeerReviewers@cns.gov with any questions or suggestions about this Handbook or any of the training materials. Emails to this address are received by GARP support staff and every effort is made to respond within one business day.



This page intentionally left blank.



Section 1.0: Introduction

1.1 Welcome to the 2015 RSVP Blended Review Handbook

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) developed this Handbook and other training materials to prepare Reviewers for their role in the 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review Process (GARP). As part of the training curriculum, this Handbook serves as the central reference for preparing for the Blended review activities.

CNCS has developed online Orientation Sessions that complement particular sections in this Handbook to ensure that Reviewers are fully prepared for the Blended Review experience. It is recommended that Reviewers first read through the sections of the Handbook and then access the corresponding Orientation Sessions when indicated in the text.

These Sessions include:

- ◆ Welcome to CNCS (External Reviewers only)
- ◆ RSVP 101 for Reviewers
- ◆ Preparing for the Grant Application Review
- ◆ Reviewing with the Selection Criteria
- ◆ Completing the IRF
- ◆ Panel Coordinator Role (Panel Coordinators only)

All Review Participants (new and experienced) are expected to familiarize themselves with all review material and participate in the orientation sessions.

CNCS conducts some orientations live to provide an opportunity for questions. All Orientation Sessions are required (except where noted); therefore, a recording of each session is available to Review Participants to ensure access and full orientation.

All training and reference materials will be available on the **CNCS Reviewer Resource webpage** (www.nationalservice.gov/node/24654) where Reviewers will access key forms in the appropriate electronic format. There are two types of forms: Administrative and Review.

Administrative forms include Conflict of Interest (COI) and External Reviewer Participation Agreement. These forms are available as PDFs to download, complete (sign), and submit via fax or email.

Review Forms include the Individual Reviewer Form (IRF) and Panel Discussion Report (PDR). The PDR is available in a Word format and the IRF is in an Excel format to enable Review Participants to download and use the forms to prepare their draft before submitting them to the POL and GL. Reviewers conclude the review by receiving final approval on all IRFs from their Program Office Liaison (POL) who will send approved IRFs to their GL. PDRs will be submitted directly to the GL.

After reading this Handbook and reviewing the required orientation sessions, Reviewers will understand:

- ◆ The steps of the Blended Review process for the 2015 competition
- ◆ The expectations of the Reviewer role, and other Review Participants in the Blended review process
- ◆ The schedule and requirements for participation in the Review process
- ◆ The RSVP Selection Criteria that are considered in the Blended review
- ◆ How to evaluate applications according to the RSVP Selection Criteria
- ◆ How to write meaningful, evaluative comments for applications
- ◆ The importance of fairness and equity in the Review, and how each Review Participant fits into that responsibility
- ◆ How to serve as a productive member on a review panel
- ◆ How to participate effectively in panel discussions



This Handbook is structured as follows:

CNCS Grant Review Process

The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants: overview of CNCS' competitive grant life cycle and the context for the Blended review of applications

The Grant Application Review Process: description of CNCS' application review process and expectations of Review Participants

- ◆ The Blended Review Process
- ◆ Roles and Responsibilities in Blended Review

The 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review

- ◆ Preparing for the 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review – overall guidance regarding initial steps and basic planning information
- ◆ Reviewer Timeline and Milestones
- ◆ Key Review Forms
- ◆ Conflict of Interest, Bias, and Confidentiality

Reviewing the RSVP 2015 Applications – comprehensive guidance on participating in the review process as a Reviewer

- ◆ Conducting the Individual Reviews
 - The RSVP Selection Criteria
- ◆ Participating in the panel discussions
- ◆ Finalizing the Individual Reviewer Forms
- ◆ Completing the Close Out Process

1.2 Welcome to Senior Corps' RSVP Competition

What is Senior Corps?

Senior Corps taps the skills, talents, and experience of more than 330,000 Americans age 55 and over to meet a wide range of community challenges through three programs — RSVP, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program. RSVP volunteers recruit and manage other volunteers, participate in environmental projects, mentor and tutor children, and respond to natural disasters, among many other activities. Foster Grandparents serve one-on-one as tutors and mentors to young people with special needs. Senior Companions help frail seniors and other adults maintain independence primarily in the clients' own homes.

What is RSVP?

Established in 1971 and now one of the largest senior volunteer organizations in the nation, RSVP engages more than 296,000 people age 55 and older in a diverse range of volunteer activities. Volunteers tutor children, renovate homes, teach English to immigrants, assist victims of natural disasters, provide independent living services, recruit and manage other volunteers, and serve their communities in many other ways. RSVP volunteers choose how, where, and the frequency with which they want to serve, with commitments ranging from a few hours to 40 hours per week. Eligibility: RSVP is open to all people age 55 and over. Volunteers do not receive monetary incentives, but sponsoring organizations may reimburse them for some costs incurred during service, including meals and transportation.

Appendices are provided that include essential reference tools, including specific RSVP materials, copies of all review-related forms and additional guidance and tips.



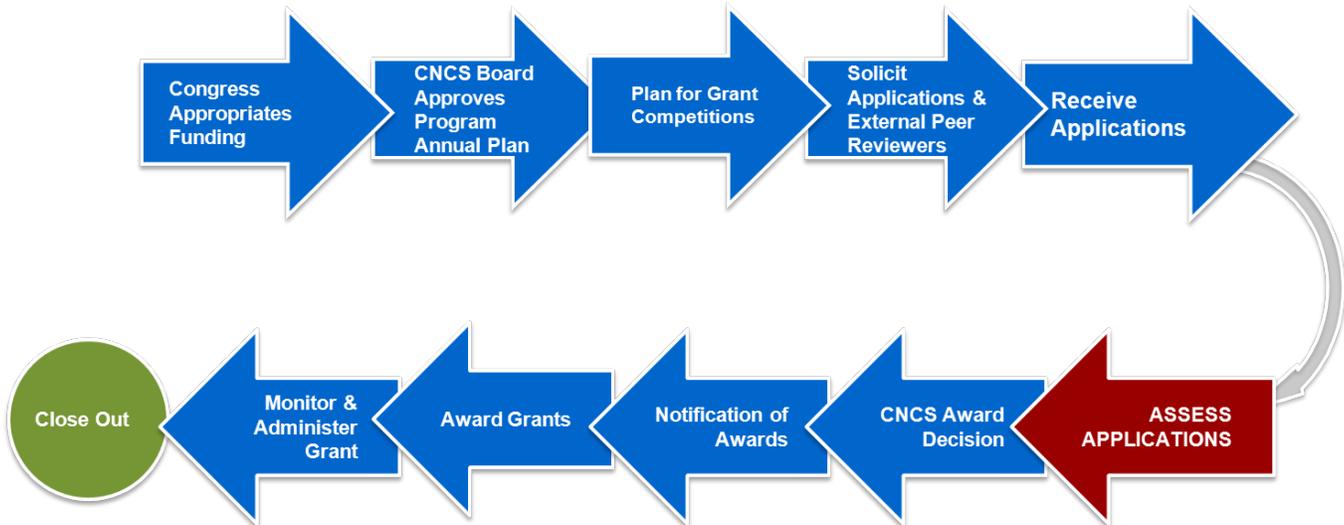
Section 2.0: CNCS Grant Application Review Process

CNCS is a federal agency created to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering; it has become the nation’s largest grant-making agency supporting national and community service programs and volunteerism. CNCS engages more than five million Americans who volunteer to meet local needs and improve communities through a wide array of service opportunities. Additional information on CNCS and its programs is available online at www.nationalservice.gov.

2.1 The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants

CNCS has established a multi-step grant-making process from the appropriation of funds and awarding grants, through monitoring activities, to close out. A summary of this process is presented in Figure 1, The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants. A description of each step and more specifics about CNCS grant-making process is available at: www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/cnsggrantreviewandselectionprocessdescription.pdf

Figure 1: The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants



For the RSVP competitions: CNCS utilizes a multi-stage review process to assess applications, which includes the involvement of reviewers both externally recruited and who are CNCS Staff. A Blended Review, consisting of CNCS Staff and External Reviewers conducting individual reviews and panel discussions, is conducted for each eligible application. Based on the results from the Blended Review, an Internal Staff Review is conducted for applications that meet the criteria to advance in the review process and is further detailed in subsequent sections of this Handbook and the corresponding orientation sessions. The *Assess Applications* step is where the Blended Reviewer, contributes to the CNCS grant process.

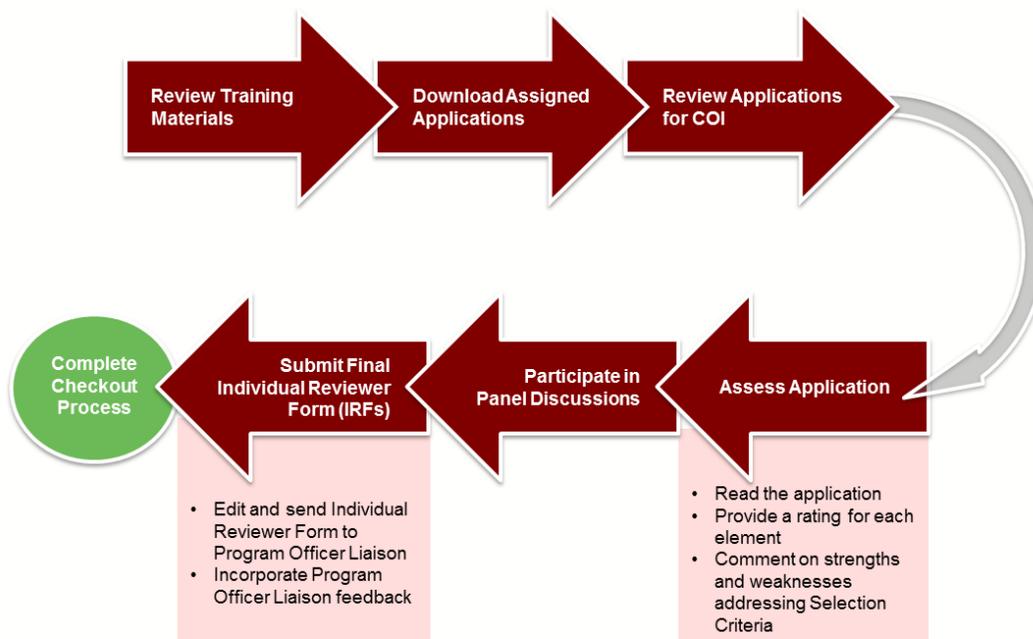
2.2 The Grant Application Review Process

2.2.1 The Blended Review Process

The purpose of this review process is to identify the highest-quality applications based on the Selection Criteria published in the Notice of Funding Opportunity (*Notice*) that are established in CNCS regulations and applicable statutes. CNCS carefully chooses Review Participants for their expertise and ability to objectively assess the quality of proposed projects. Review Participants are not making judgments or determinations on whether applications should be funded, but are providing an assessment of the quality of the applications. CNCS Chief Executive Officer makes all funding decisions and utilizes Blended review results as input to help inform those decisions.

CNCS developed a process for conducting the Blended Review of grant applications, which is depicted in Figure 2, *The Blended Review Process*. Each step is briefly described below. An in-depth discussion of these steps and activities in the Blended review process is provided in subsequent sections of this Handbook.

Figure 2: The Blended Review Process



Reviewer Training and Orientation Materials: All Review Participants are required to review the training materials including this Handbook and a series of Orientation Sessions. This ensures that Review Participants are fully prepared for their role, in order to provide a meaningful review and standardized assessment of the applications.

Accessing Assigned Applications: A set of applications is assigned to each panel and made available for download from the Shared Drive for Internal Reviewers and for External Reviewers downloaded from eGrants, the process of downloading applications is detailed on the Reviewer Resource Webpage. Each panel only has access to its assigned applications.

Review Applications for Conflicts of Interest (COI): The first step in beginning the review of an application is to determine if there are any potential conflicts of interest. This must take place within the first day of receiving panel assignments, prior to delving into the technical content of the application in case recusals or reassignments are necessary.

Assess Applications: Each Reviewer conducts a detailed individual review of each assigned application according to the Selection Criteria specified by CNCS. The individual review includes reading the application, providing a rating for each element, and commenting on strengths and weaknesses. After the panel discussions, Reviewers seek feedback from Program Office Liaison (POL) and may return to their IRFs to amend their comments and ratings to ensure that they reflect their conclusive assessment (See Prepare IRFs).

Participate in Panel Discussion: Reviewers participate in a discussion with their panel for each assigned application to share thoughts and discuss their assessments. Each panel has an assigned Panel Coordinator who helps prepare the Reviewers for the discussions and schedule the discussions. While consensus is not a requirement of the panel discussion, Reviewers are asked to listen and consider the assessments and findings of fellow panel members. The Panel Coordinator helps guide the panel to discuss only the relevant aspects of the application in their assessment, consider the areas of agreement and disagreement, and ensure that each Reviewer is addressing only relevant aspects of the application in his/her assessment.



Prepare IRFs: Each Reviewer prepares a draft IRF documenting his/her assessment of each application and submits the IRF to the POL for review and feedback. Reviewers make necessary modifications to revise the draft IRF based on the POL feedback. Once the POL approves the final IRF, the POL submits the Final IRF to the GARP Liaison. All IRFs will go through the same process of sending drafts to the POL, the POL approves the IRF and may request changes, the Reviewer makes changes, the POL approves as final, and the POL sends the approved version to the GARP Liaison.

Reviewer Comments: Each Reviewer completes all strengths and weaknesses sections and provides factual and constructive summary comments on his/her assessment of the applications.

- ◆ The Reviewer Comments should not contain any direct suggestions or recommendations for improvement, and should only address the quality of the information that was in the application (as required by the Selection Criteria).
- ◆ The comments must focus on the most relevant Strengths and Weaknesses that had the greatest impact on the selected Ratings for the different Selection Criteria elements.

Finalize and Submit IRFs: Reviewers re-examine their IRFs and proofread for grammar and other elements before sending the IRF to the POL. When POL approves the IRF, the POL will send the final IRF to the GL with a copy to the Reviewer.

Complete Close Out Process: To receive their honorarium payment (for External Reviewers only) and finalize their review participation, each Review Participant completes a close out process including: disposing of confidential review materials properly, providing feedback in the Review Process Evaluation, and ensuring that all review requirements are satisfied.

2.2.2 Roles and Responsibilities

There are several important roles in the Blended review process. The general responsibilities of these roles, along with expectations and interactions are listed below. Please note that this Handbook provides detailed guidance on only the Reviewer role; a separate Panel Coordinator supplement is provided for Panel Coordinators.

Reviewer

Reviewers evaluate applications according to the published Selection Criteria. Primary responsibilities include: **producing high-quality IRFs**, participating in panel discussions, and finalizing the assessment of an application on the IRFs after the panel discussion. There are three Reviewers assigned to each panel, one External Reviewer and two CNCS Staff Reviewers. One CNCS Staff Reviewer will act as the Panel Coordinator. Reviewers interact primarily with their Panel and their Program Officer Liaison, and are expected to be responsive throughout the review.

In addition to reviewing training and background materials, Reviewers are responsible for reporting any actual or potential conflict of interest and complying with confidentiality expectations.

Panel Coordinator

The Panel Coordinator is a role fulfilled by a Staff Reviewer to guide, support and monitor the work of the Reviewers assigned to his/her panel; manage panel logistics; and help schedule the panel discussions. These Reviewers will have a strong background in RSVP and will act as subject matter experts for their panels; however, the POL will be the final authority on questions about the selection criteria. The Panel Coordinator will keep the panel on track, ensure people speak in turn, etc. The Panel Coordinator works in several capacities to ensure that Reviewers complete a thorough, non-biased review that aligns with the Selection Criteria.

Panel Coordinators serve as the first point of contact by both their Reviewers and CNCS GARP Staff regarding any concerns, or information for the panel—essentially serving as the primary liaison or link between GARP Program Staff and the panel. Panel Coordinators are also Reviewers and will help resolve any conflicts among the panel members. If any panel anomalies arise, the Panel Coordinator notifies the GARP Liaison who determines next steps.



Lead Reviewer

The Lead Reviewer is a role everyone on the panel will fulfill for various applications. The panel will assign Lead Reviewers to each application in order to help lead the discussion of that application. Assignments may be equitably distributed throughout the panel. This role is mainly to help lead the discussions.

Each Reviewer is still responsible for producing an IRF for each application, regardless of whether they are the Lead Reviewer or not. In addition, Lead Reviewers will produce the Panel Discussion Report for each application which they lead the panel discussion.

Grant Application Review Process (GARP) Liaison

Each panel will be assigned a GARP Liaison who will answer all process-related questions and provide all administrative and logistic support to the panel. The GARP Liaison can provide assistance with obtaining grant applications and administrative forms (electronic versions), access to review resources, assistance filling out the IRF, reminders throughout the process, and assistance with navigating in eGrants. The GARP Liaison is the point of contact (after the Panel Coordinator) for any immediate needs with review materials or any roadblocks encountered in participating in the review and completing the review process. All Final Review Products will be sent to the GARP Liaison at PeerReviewers@cns.gov. **Correspondence should include the Panel # in the Subject.** GARP Liaisons will be reviewing the PDRs and will collect the final IRF from the POL once it has been approved.

Program Officer Liaison (POL)

A POL will serve as a resource to the panel on programmatic elements. The POL can provide clarification or guidance on any aspect of the RSVP Selection Criteria.

The POL will also be the audience reviewing the Individual Reviewer Forms (IRF) from Reviewers and follow up (as needed) with Reviewers on areas that the panel may need to revisit assessments. **All correspondence with POLs should be sent to POLRSVP@cns.gov and include the Panel # in the Subject.**

Additional expectations for POL interactions may be provided to Panel Coordinators during the Panel Coordinator Check-In calls.

High Quality IRFs SHOULD:

- Only include comments that address RSVP Selection Criteria
- Reflect writing that is clear and concise
- Ensure comments do not contradict each other
- Ensure comments are aligned with and support the rating selection for each section.
- Be free of spelling and grammar errors
- Contain no inflammatory language



Section 3.0: Ensuring an Equitable Review

An essential goal of the CNCS review process is ensuring that each grant application submitted for funding consideration is evaluated based on a fair and equitable process in the interest of transparency and integrity of the full grant process.

3.1 Diversity in Programs

RSVP proposals are very diverse. This is common and is encouraged and embraced in the RSVP program. RSVP programs are not seen as standard, or cookie-cutter proposals. There is also diversity in program models and designs, location, size, scope, organization type, and target populations. Understanding and expecting these differences will help evaluate an applicant's proposed project in a fair and objective manner. Some areas of potential diversity of the 2015 RSVP applications include:

Focus Areas

- ◆ Potential Diversity: One Focus Area, multiple Focus Areas
- ◆ The number of CNCS Focus Areas addressed by an application is not a selection criterion. The weights assigned to each category are listed below. Reviewers will assess application narratives against these Selection Criteria and weight them accordingly.

Type of Organization

- ◆ Potential Diversity: faith-based, Indian tribes, government entities, and other organizations eligible to apply as outlined in the Notice of Funding Opportunity,

Program Design

- ◆ Potential Diversity: Team-based, individually placed, working in pairs

Program Size

- ◆ Potential Diversity: Large, small, partnering or network

Target Populations

- ◆ Potential Diversity: Rural residents, low income individuals, Native Americans, New Americans, Older Americans (seniors), or Communities of Color, etc.

3.2 Conflict of Interest

CNCS implements several procedures throughout the review process to ensure fair and equitable reviews. One such procedure is requiring all Reviewers to report any actual or potential conflicts of interest concerning the competition and applications assigned to them.

The following guidance applies to External Reviewers.

- ◆ CNCS Staff Reviewers should consult the Conflict of Interest Training in the Learning Management System, provided by the Office of General Counsel, and contact the designated ethics team in Office of General Counsel with questions. For assistance accessing the training, contact the assigned GARP Liaison.
- ◆ External Reviewers and CNCS Staff Reviewers have separate and unique Conflict of Interest Forms to complete. Please ensure review and completion of the appropriate form.
- ◆ A conflict of interest is a situation in which conflict exists between one's private interest and official responsibility. Such competing interests can make it difficult for a Reviewer to fulfill his/her duties impartially. A conflict of interest exists even if no unethical or improper act results from it.

Each Review Participant must complete a Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Statement (COI Form) for the applications they are assigned to review. This is found on the Reviewer Resource webpage. Because of the unique



nature of the review process and the sensitivity of the information through the review, **CNCS determines the potential for both Direct (actual) and Indirect (perceived) conflicts of interest as defined below.**

Be sure to examine the applications and alert the GARP Liaison of any potential conflict of interest.

A direct conflict of interest – often through personal involvement, connection to, or benefit from an application submitted to CNCS

An indirect conflict of interest – through various forms of affiliation, personally or professionally with an applicant institution

Prior to reviewing any grant applications, Reviewers must inform CNCS of any potential conflicts of interest or appearances thereof. If Reviewers become aware of any potential conflict of interest during application review, they must immediately notify a CNCS representative (your Panel Coordinator or GARP Liaison). This notification should happen directly via phone or email. CNCS will determine how to handle any appearances of perceived or actual conflicts of interest and will inform the Reviewer regarding what further steps, if any, to take. It is possible that the Reviewer will not be able to serve as a Reviewer or Panel Coordinator for this grant competition if a conflict of interest exists or even if it would *appear* to others that you have a conflict of interest.

When examining for conflicts of interest, consider the following: any affiliation or relationship of a spouse, minor child, a relative living in the immediate household, or anyone who is legally the Reviewer's partner with any of the relationships above. Examples of potentially biasing affiliations or relationships are listed below (see the COI Statement for more information).

One's personal submission of an application to CNCS

Affiliation with an applicant institution. A conflict may be present if one has/holds (a):

- ◆ Current employment, are being considered for employment, or are consulting, advising, or other similar affiliation at the institution
- ◆ Any formal or informal employment arrangement with the institution
- ◆ Current membership on a visiting committee, board or similar body at the institution
- ◆ Current enrollment as a student
- ◆ Received and retained an honorarium or award from the institution within the last 12 months
- ◆ Personal financial interest that would be affected by the outcome of this grant competition
- ◆ Organization that is a potential sub-recipient, named in an intermediary application (as a pre-selected subgrantee), or is an actual applicant in the pre-award competition conducted by an intermediary organization applying for this competition

Relationship with someone who has personal interest in the proposal or other application, such as:

- ◆ Related by marriage or through family membership
- ◆ Past or present business, professional, academic, volunteer or personal relationship
- ◆ Employment at the institution within the last 12 months
- ◆ Collaboration on a project or on a book, article, report or paper within the last 48 months

Note that Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality form should be completed whether the Reviewer has or has not identified potential conflicts—as it represents the understanding of responsibility regarding COIs, Confidentiality, and the agreement to adhere to the guidelines in the instance that a COI circumstance arises.

NOTE: Complete and submit the COI Statement by **close of business on September 30, 2014**. Be sure to follow the directions on the COI Statement for submission.



3.3 Bias

Bias is a preference or inclination that may inhibit impartial judgment or objectivity. One’s bias is not limited to a negative judgment, or dislike of an application, and is more often found in favor, or an unfounded positive preference of an applicant or an aspect of an application.

Often, individuals are unaware of having a bias, and it may be flagged by another Review Participant, based on a comment made during discussion, or a consistent inflation or deflation in the Reviewer’s assessment. Biases are often rooted in opinions and past experiences—which Reviewers are asked to bring in a structured format to this review. Utilizing one’s opinion in some ways, but not in others can be difficult to separate—especially as it is likely that a positive inclination or preference may be founded in a Reviewer’s passion and excitement about a program. It is important that Reviewers are open to reconsideration should the issue of potential bias come to light.

To avoid the insertion of bias, all Reviewers are asked to base their assessments solely on the facts and assertions contained in the application, return to re-evaluate an application, if needed; eliminate consideration of outside sources or information, and exercise consideration and respect throughout the review.

3.4 Confidentiality

The designation as a Review Participant gives Reviewers access to information not generally available to the public and accords them with special professional and ethical responsibilities. Panelists are given access to information about applicants for use only during the evaluation process and for discussion only with fellow panel members and CNCS personnel. Therefore, Reviewers must not use that information for personal benefit or make it available for the benefit of any other individual or organization. Reviewers may, however, share any general information about CNCS that you learn.

After a Reviewer completes their work as a Review Participant, they may maintain archival copies of review-related information. If Reviewers choose to keep archival copies, they must maintain them in a manner consistent with confidentiality obligations. If Reviewers choose not to maintain archival copies, they must dispose of the information in a manner consistent with confidentiality obligations.

CNCS is committed to Open Government policy, and may make the names of all Review Participants available to the public after awards are made. However, Reviewer confidentiality with regard to the specific applications reviewed will be maintained: Review Participant’s names for the application reviews will be protected to the extent provided by law.

Details regarding confidentiality obligations are provided and discussed in the *Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Statement for External Reviewers*. Reviewers need to access the External Reviewer COI form, **not** the CNCS Staff Reviewer COI form.

3.5 Verify Page Limits to Ensure Equity for all Applicants

Applications are limited to 25 double-spaced pages in the Narratives, including the Executive Summary and Cover Page, as the pages print out from eGrants. Reviewers will not consider material submitted over the page limit. This limit does not include the Budget Narrative and Performance Measures. Note that the Performance Measures are printed at the end of the application narrative—if any panel has an application that exceeds the 25-page limit, the Panel Coordinator needs to contact the GARP Liaison for a final determination and guidance. Review Participants must follow CNCS guidance, as this is a matter of equity to all applicants.



Section 4.0: Preparing for the 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review

Prior to commencing the grant application review process, Reviewers must complete the orientation session requirements and become familiar with key background material. The Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity (*Notice*) and the Application Instructions govern the 2015 RSVP competition (see links on the Reviewer Webpage). These documents detail the requirements and Selection Criteria that applicants used to write their applications and that Reviewers will use to evaluate the applications. Comprehensive understanding of these requirements and documents is critical to a fair, successful and objective review.

In addition to reviewing training resources and background material, Reviewers must address Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality considerations. These topics are discussed in the previous section. The key review forms and the Reviewer timeline are addressed below.

4.1 Reviewer Timeline and Milestones

The Blended review process (excluding orientation sessions and other preliminary steps) is 19 days. *Table 1* specifies the general timeline and key milestones for Reviewers. This is meant to be a guide. Each Panel agrees upon specifics and details for their panel.

Table 1: RSVP 2015 Timeline and Milestones for Reviewers

Date	Task	Milestone
Mon 9/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive panel assignments • Open applications received • Preview all applications for Conflicts of Interest (COI) • Download COI Statement and External Reviewer Participant Participation Agreement from Reviewer Resource Webpage 	
Tues 9/30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit COI Statement and External Reviewer Participant Participation Agreement to CNCS • Read first group of applications • Download the IRF from website • Begin review/assess first group of applications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit COI Form and External Reviewer Participant Participation Agreement (email/fax)
Wed 10/1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete review of first group of applications • Prepare for panel discussion on first group of applications 	
Thur 10/2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in panel discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Start with discussion of one application, complete IRF, and submit for feedback ○ Quickly follow with second panel discussion for 2-3 applications • Revise and send IRFs to the POL for feedback • Lead Reviewer completes PDR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete first draft of IRFs • Panel discussion of first group • Reviewers send PDR to GARP Liaison CC's POL
Fri 10/3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive and incorporate POL feedback on draft IRFs • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit final IRFs to POL
Mon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read second group of applications 	



Date	Task	Milestone
10/6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin review/assess second group of applications 	
Tues 10/7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete review of second group of applications Prepare for panel discussion on second group of applications 	
Wed 10/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participate in panel discussion Lead Reviewer completes PDR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel discussion of second group Lead Reviewer sends PDR to GARP Liaison and CC's POL
Thur 10/9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise and send IRFs to POL for feedback (if applicable)Receive POL feedback and approval on draft IRFs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete draft IRFs for second group, send to POL
Fri 10/10- Tues 10/14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise and submit IRFs to reflect POL feedback; Send Final IRF to POL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit final IRFs
Thur 10/16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete check-out process 	
Fri 10/17- – Tue 10/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GARP Staff check scores for any anomalies and contact panel if there are questions 	

September/ October 2014

4.2 Key Review Forms

Review Participants are involved in the development of two documents that record review results. A copy of each

Sun	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Sat
28	29 Receive Panel Assignments	30 Submit COI	1 PC-Check In Call, 1 p.m. EST	2 1 st Panel Discussion	3	4
5	6	7 PC-Check In Call 2, 1 p.m. EST	8	9 2 nd Panel Discussion	10	11
12	13 Columbus Day CNCS Closed	14 PC-Check In Call 3, 1 p.m.	15 3 rd Panel Discussion	16	17 Check-out	18
19	20 GARP Staff QA	21 GARP Staff QA	22	23	24	25

form is available on **CNCS Reviewer Resource Webpage.** (www.nationalservice.gov/node/24654)

- ◆ IRF: Completed by the Reviewer during the assessment of each application. A copy is saved for each application; the Reviewer sends the final version to the POL. When IRF is approved by POL, POL sends it to the GL with a copy to the Reviewer.



- ◆ PDR: A report completed by the Lead Reviewer during the panel discussions. The Lead Reviewer sends it to GARP Liaison and POL after the discussion.

Table 2: Synopsis of Review Products

	Purpose	Audience	Use	Content
Individual Reviewer Form <i>(Reviewer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To document a Reviewer’s individual assessment of one application To provide useful analysis to CNCS on the application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CNCS Staff Public (potentially subject to Freedom of Information Act or FOIA requests) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies strengths and weaknesses in an application Used by CNCS to assist in decision-making process Used by CNCS to develop feedback to the applicant Used by CNCS for applicant clarification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ratings on each Selection Criteria element Overall Reviewer Comments addressing Selection Criteria Clarification questions that may be used for clarifying information with an applicant
Panel Discussion Report <i>(Lead Reviewer)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To document aspects of the panel’s discussion and assessment of an application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CNCS Staff, primarily the POL and GARP Liaison 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarizes the areas of agreement and disagreement Describes any Lead Reviewer observations Used by CNCS to assist in decision-making process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narrative comments on discussion points Lead Reviewer notes and observations Reviewer scores pre and post discussion

The Individual Reviewer Form (IRF)

The 2015 RSVP Blended Review will utilize Microsoft Excel for the IRF.

All Reviewers and Panel Coordinators must complete an IRF for each application assigned to the panel. The form is in Excel format with each cell providing either a space to enter information or a drop-down menu. When you click on each individual cell, you will see Help text that can assist you in completing the information.

Please be sure to review the detailed “Instructions and Tips” found below and on the fourth tab of the IRF workbook.

Filling Out the IRF

1. Make sure Macros are enabled correctly before saving the IRF to your desktop
2. Complete all of the Reviewer and Application information found at the top of the IRF. Please make sure you enter only your first initial and last name for G. Reviewer (e.g.: JSmith)
3. Utilizing the Rubric provided, select the appropriate rating from the drop down menu for each selection criteria
4. Provide comments on significant strengths and weaknesses for each section of the IRF. Reviewers should provide comments for all areas in (white/yellow)



5. Provide Comprehensive Applicant Feedback Summary and Items for Clarification sections found at the end of the form
6. Ensure your final score tallied correctly

Instructions and Tips for completing the IRF

- Save the blank IRF to your computer. Do not work from the S drive or your email
- Do NOT paste into the form. Type directly into the cells
- Complete all (white/yellow) cells. (Most (white/yellow/grey) cells are locked.) Type in the boxes or select from the drop-down menu
- Do not use periods (“.”) or slashes (“/” or “\”) in the Program Name field. These characters will prevent the IRF from being submitted correctly. If an applicant uses one of these characters in their Program Name, please replace it with a dash (“-”)
- Follow the instructions for each cell
- For the text boxes, cells will auto-fit as you type. Use Alt+Enter to start a new line. Note: Excel will display/print only the first 1,024 characters in each cell. The rest of the text can be seen in the formula bar.
- With the top rows frozen, a scroll may result in not viewing some cells. Using the Enter or Arrow buttons to navigate will ensure you are viewing each cell.
- Use File-Save As to save each IRF to your computer with a unique name. Save early and often!

Other questions or problems? Email peerreviewers@cns.gov or contact your GARP Liaison



Section 5.0: Reviewing the 2015 RSVP Applications

The 2015 RSVP Grant Application Review Process (GARP) is based on a non-consensus model – meaning Reviewers do not need to reach consensus (unified group agreements) regarding the assessment of an application. Different perspectives and opinions are acceptable and welcomed.

Each Reviewer is assigned to a panel consisting of one External Reviewer and two Staff Reviewers, one of the Staff Reviewers will also act as the Panel Coordinator. Each panel is assigned between five and seven applications, which are reviewed individually by each Reviewer and then discussed collectively by the entire panel on a rolling basis.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Required Online Orientation Session:

Preparing for the Review

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

5.1 Consideration of the Performance Measures and Work Plans during Blended Review

Each application is made up of three parts: the 424 Facesheet, the Budget Narrative, and the Budget. Each applicant’s Performance Measures and Work Plans are included at the end of their 424 Narrative. The content from the Performance Measures can and should be considered in making selection criteria assessments.

Work Plan criteria weight is incorporated into the IRF.

5.2 Conducting the Individual Review

5.2.1 Accessing the Assigned Panel Applications

The GARP Liaison assigned to a panel sends all the Reviewers on that panel an email with Reviewer contact information and a list of the applications to be reviewed. External Reviewers then go into eGrants and download their applications. Staff Reviewers download their applications from the CNCS shared drive. All panel emails come from the email box PeerReviewers@cns.gov.

Directions on accessing External Reviewer assigned applications from eGrants are located on the Reviewer Webpage.

5.2.2 Read the Applications

Reviewers read each application, focusing on the quality of the applicant’s response. Applicants provide responses in three categories: (1) Program Design, (2) Organizational Capacity and Management, and (3) Cost Effectiveness & Budget Adequacy. Within each category the specific Selection Criteria have been broken out. Please read through the IRF before you begin reading the applications. Blended Review participants will be reviewing only the first two categories (Program Design and Organizational Capacity and Management). The third category will be reviewed by CNCS’ Field Financial Management Center.

Reviewers then assess the application, highlighting the application’s significant strengths and weaknesses relative to the Selection Criteria for each of the selection criteria elements, and assign a rating to each element.

Significant Strengths	Significant Weaknesses
Shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of, and the ability to address, a key issue in program implementation or management.	Criteria are either unaddressed or addressed so poorly that it causes concern about the applicant’s ability to successfully implement the proposed project.



The applications are generally reviewed in two to three groups, and it is important to read the applications in the order that the panel will discuss them. Focus on assessing how well the application has addressed the established Selection Criteria described in *the Notice*. The assigned applications are downloaded by Reviewers either from eGrants or CNCS' shared drive on the first day of the Review Period: September 29, 2014.

Reviewers do not need to produce one or more “highly-rated” applications. Although applicants may be competing against each other, **Reviewers should consider the applications significant strengths and weaknesses when measured against the Selection Criteria, NOT measured against other applications.** The goal for Reviewers when reading an application is to seek out information in the application that enables Reviewers to answer the following questions:

Does the application address the Selection Criteria?

- ◆ If yes, to what degree and what is the quality/feasibility of what is proposed?
- ◆ If not, what is lacking or unclear?

5.2.3 Completing the Individual Reviewer Form (IRF)

All Reviewers must complete an IRF for each application assigned to their panel. There are five components to the IRF:

1. **Rating** the application based on selection criteria, using the Rubric built into the IRF
2. Providing **comments** on strengths and weaknesses addressing Selection Criteria at the end of every subcategory
3. Checking to ensure the **Total Score** is correct
4. Identify **Clarification Questions**
5. Assembling the **Applicant Feedback Comments** that are the most significant in scoring decisions from previous comments

How to complete the IRF:

1. Download the IRF from the Reviewer Webpage
2. Complete a draft IRF
3. Save the draft IRF using the naming convention:
 - a. “*IRF.legal applicant name. last four digits of application ID.Reviewer last name*”
 - b. example “*IRF.SuperApplicant.5177.Smith*”
4. Discuss the application with the panel and go over the IRF with the fellow Reviewers; make any adjustments to the score or ratings based on the panel discussion
5. Send the IRF to the POL for review
6. Receive and incorporate feedback from POL
7. Receive final approval from POL
8. POL sends the final IRF to the GARP Liaison with a copy to the Reviewer

In the IRF, Reviewers evaluate the extent to which the application meets each of the Selection Criteria elements specified in *the Notice*. Each element will be rated as *Excellent*, *Good*, *Fair*, or *Does Not Meet*. Specific definitions for each rating are provided in the IRF (see the Reviewer Resource Webpage for an example of a completed IRF). Each Reviewer's assessment is based on their evaluation of the quality of the applicant's response to the Selection Criteria when reading the application.

For each application reviewed, Reviewer Comments will:



- ◆ Capture the assessment of the application’s significant strengths and weaknesses with respect to the Selection Criteria in the Reviewer Comments sections
- ◆ Provide a basis for the Ratings the Reviewer assigned to the Selection Criteria elements
- ◆ Provide CNCS Staff with insights into why the Reviewer selected a specific rating for an application

Although Reviewers may identify many strengths and weaknesses in each application, Reviewers are not expected to list each one – only the **significant** ones (see Reviewer Website for *Reviewer Tips - Writing Meaningful Comments and Sentence Starters*).

It is important to keep in mind when reviewing the applications, what types of information Reviewers should NOT assess or comment on (see also *Reviewer Tips-Writing Meaningful Comments and Sentence Starter* for more information):

What NOT to Write in the IRFs

- Do not include Page #s instead of content
- Do not make suggestions or recommendations for improvement (e.g., “Application would have been better if...”)
- Do not refer to other Reviewers, speak about the Panel, or compare applications to one another. For example:
 - “The panel felt that...”
 - “One Reviewer noted”
 - “The XYZ model of learning was stronger in the...”
- Do not copy and paste from the Application, or restate a summary of the application information, in place of an assessment

In completing the IRFs, if the Reviewer is concerned that they did not understand something in the application, do not presume to know what the applicant meant to say or tried to say. Instead, assess the application based on what was understood; anything that is unclear can be addressed during the panel discussion (or *noted as unclear* in the IRF comments). Similarly, Reviewers should exercise caution about how they reference information that was in other parts of the application. Because applicants might often include information in another narrative section that speaks directly to the Selection Criteria, Reviewers **should** note the information that was addressed in another section and it should be considered.

5.3 Participating in Panel Discussions

After the individual reviews for each group of applications have been completed, the panels will convene by conference calls to discuss each application within that group. The purpose of the panel discussion is to share thoughts and discuss each Reviewer’s assessment of the application based on the Selection Criteria. While consensus is not a requirement of the panel discussion, Reviewers are asked to engage in discussion about the Selection Criteria and consider the assessments and findings of fellow panel members. The discussion should cover each of the relevant elements of the application, and explore the points of agreement and disagreement among Reviewer IRFs.

Lead Reviewers complete a Panel Discussion Report (PDR) for each application and share the draft with the GARP Liaison (CC'ing the POL) for review, comment and approval (one PDR per application).

How to complete the PDR:

1. Download the PDR from the Reviewer Webpage
2. Complete a draft PDR



3. Save the draft PDR using the naming convention:
 - a. *“PDR.legal applicant name. last four digits of application ID.Reviewer last name”*
 - b. example *“PDR.SuperApplicant.5177.Smith”*
4. Share the PDR with fellow Reviewers; make any adjustments to the scores or comments based on the panel discussion
5. Send the PDR to the GL for review and CC the POL

5.3.1 Tips for Productive Panel Discussions

During the panel discussion, all Reviewers participate in the conference call. The average time for discussion is expected to be no more than 30 minutes per application. Panels will engage in discussion focused on the comments, assessments and ratings resulting from the individual reviews. The panel discussion should be well rounded and focused on a discussion of the quality of the application based on the Selection Criteria—the **discussion should not revolve solely around the areas where panel members provided differing ratings** for a section.

Sharing scores before the call can be a helpful guide in completing the Panel Discussion Report, especially with documenting changes in reviewers’ ratings reached through discussion. At the beginning of each discussion, please record the scores for each application on the PDR. If there have been scoring changes as a result of the discussion, please record those on the PDR as well.

Reviewers may agree, disagree, clarify individual assessments and misunderstandings, and ask questions while collectively discussing an application. Based on these discussions, a Reviewer may come to view aspects of the application differently than they did during the individual review. Preparedness, tact, patience and conscious participation are just some of the ways Reviewers can assist in the process of assessing applications, and in making panel discussions meaningful.

Helpful Tips on How to be an Effective Panel Member

1. Review and be familiar with the Notice, the Selection Criteria, the IRF and other relevant documents.
2. Allow the Lead Reviewer to lead the discussion. Reviewers have different styles and will assert themselves in different ways and at different times. Recognize the importance of the Lead Reviewer role and respect it.
3. Have both the application and your IRF in front of you for each discussion.
4. Ask others to explain or clarify their positions and be an active listener. Do not be afraid to ask questions.
5. Focus on the content of what is being said and not the person.
6. Participate actively in the discussion, using supporting evidence from the application to discuss points.
7. Be receptive to opposing viewpoints and put your emotions aside.
8. Answer other panel members’ questions and challenges cordially and diplomatically.
9. Expect to return to each IRF and make revisions after receiving feedback from the POL before finalizing the review product.
10. Copy the Panel Coordinator on e-mails to the POL regarding any selection criteria questions about an application.

5.3.2 Completing the Panel Discussion Report

The PDR serves to document the substance of a panel’s discussion for an application and your observations or concerns. The PDR should capture elements of the Selection Criteria that the panel members discussed, if there were major varying opinions, concerns that were noted outside of the Selection Criteria, or difficult areas of conversation on an aspect of the application.



Because the discussion does not require consensus, there will inevitably be varying opinions, ratings and assessments from the panel members, the PDR should offer an objective summary of the discussion. When presenting issues or hiccups that arose, be sure to provide information on how each Reviewer or the panel responded/addressed the matter.

Panels divide the responsibility to complete the PDRs. Each reviewer completes the PDR for the applications on which they are the Lead Reviewer. Each Reviewer should complete roughly an equal number of PDRs (approximately 2-3 in most cases).

To complete the PDR, include the pre and post-discussion scores. This is to provide context to the GARP Liaison reviewing the PDR.

Include the areas the panel generally agreed or disagreed, providing a specific example of each.

Indicate if any point was contentious, or if multiple panel members held strong, differing opinions. Provide an explanation of those points.

The PDR is available on the Reviewer Resource Webpage. The Lead Reviewer prepares a draft PDR for each application discussed and provides the draft PDR to their GARP Liaison at (PeerReviewers@cns.gov) for their review. The POL should be copied, but the POL does not provide feedback on the PDR.

The GARP Liaison may have feedback or questions about the PDR. It is important to quickly respond to and incorporate the feedback, and return it to the GARP Liaison in order to receive final approval and stay on the review schedule.

If scores reflect a wide variance between Reviewers, the GARP Liaison may ask the panel to revisit the discussion.

Include your Panel # in the Subject Line when sending the PDR to the assigned GARP Liaison at PeerReviewers@cns.gov.

5.4 Submitting Final IRFs

After the panel discussions are completed, Reviewers share their draft IRFs with the POL for feedback, review and approval. Once POL provides feedback, Reviewers revisit the IRFs and make any appropriate amendments to the comments or ratings to reflect the conclusive assessment and incorporating the POL feedback. If Reviewers must incorporate feedback, provide the updated version to the POL for their final approval. All Reviewers must send all IRFs to the POL for feedback. Once the IRF is approved by the POL, the POL sends the final version of the IRF to their GARP Liaison with “Approved” in the subject line.

The overall score from each Review Participant’s IRF for an application is averaged by CNCS and added to the score from the Field Financial Management Center to represent the overall score for that application.

5.5 Completing the Close-Out Process

After all review materials are final, all Review Participants and Panel Coordinators complete their individual close outs. Close out is considered complete when the Reviewer has ensured that all IRFs are complete by:

- ◆ Reviewing IRF for improper language (refer to Reviewer Tips/*Meaningful Comments* on the Website)
- ◆ Completing Reviewer Comments at the end of each section, including the Applicant Feedback Summary Comments
- ◆ Ensuring comments address the Selection Criteria
- ◆ Entered any Clarification Questions
- ◆ Ensuring Ratings are correctly added for a proper Overall Score
- ◆ Ensuring that the POL has approved all IRFs as final
- ◆ Submitting approved versions of the IRFs to the GL (ensure that old versions, incomplete forms, or mismatched sections are not errantly placed in the form)



- ◆ Completed and submitted the 2015 RSVP Blended Review Process Evaluation. Reviewers receive a URL for the evaluation form after the review has ended.

CNCS confirms that each Review Participant has satisfied the requirements of the review, as described in the External Reviewer Participation Agreement. Honoraria checks (for External Reviewers only) will be paid to each External Review Participant electronically via direct deposit within 30 days after you receive confirmation from CNCS that Reviewers have satisfactorily completed all requirements stated in the External Reviewer Participation Agreement. **Please consult the External Reviewer Participation Agreement and the information covered in the Orientation Sessions for conditions that may prevent Reviewers from receiving part or all of their honorarium payment.**

**Thank you for being a Review Participant in the
2015 RSVP Blended Review!**

