



February 11, 2025

Constituent Grants Services in a Congressional Member Office: A Brief Guide

This In Focus is intended to assist congressional Member offices in establishing or enhancing a grants services function. It discusses examples of the nature of grant work, notes two aspects of organizing for effective grants work, and offers further resources for consultation.

Grants work in a congressional office can generally be divided into two categories:

Responsive, in which an office serves constituents who approach the office with a grants-related request or question.

Proactive, in which an office undertakes grants-related work to inform and serve their constituents, on the basis of needs identified by the office, often absent a direct request.

Responsive Grants Work

Connecting Constituents with Potential Funding Information

Generally, two types of constituent groups contact congressional offices in search of potential grant funding:

Constituents who have a specific project to fund. If offices choose to conduct preliminary research on behalf of constituents, they may utilize free government websites, CRS products and services, or other resources in identifying potential funding leads for a given project. Discovering possible grant programs for a given project may be complex and labor intensive, as there is no adequately comprehensive one-stop-shop for federal grants. Given potential resource limitations on individual congressional offices, priorities for allocating resources to particular projects can be established by the office according to internal guidance. Alternatively, constituents may benefit from being given tools for conducting their own research; see CRS Report RL34012, *Resources for Grantseekers*.

Constituents who do not have a specific need in mind, but ask “what federal grants are we eligible for?” There are more than 1,700 congressionally authorized federal grant programs. These are administered by numerous federal agencies and contain a diverse range of eligible recipients and allowable uses. In the absence of a specific project, it is difficult to direct grant seekers to relevant grant programs. However, these groups may benefit from being given general guides and tools for conducting grants research on their own; see section above.

Managing High Volumes of Grant Requests

Some congressional offices receive frequent grant funding requests or respond to situations prompting a significant

number of constituent requests. Offices may consider triaging requests according to immediacy of need and first serving those with immediate or urgent needs. For less urgent requests, offices may consider sorting requests into groups by type of assistance needed and work through each group in sequence. Also, high volumes of requests may signal a need to consider more proactive grants work.

Addressing Barriers to Application

Some constituents may have specific needs in mind and have identified programs, but may be reluctant to apply for funding. Offices may want to understand the specific barriers to application in each of these circumstances. For example, some groups may feel uncertain that they have the capacity to staff a project or administer and manage the grant. They also might be unable to meet the specific cost share or matching requirement of a grant program. Knowledge about the specific barriers can assist the office in identifying any possible legislative or administrative options to address the situation.

Writing Letters of Support for Grant Seekers

Sometimes, grant seekers may request a letter of support for their project from Members of Congress. Member offices may wish to develop a process for handling these requests; for example, by creating an intake form for support letter requests. This may be helpful in streamlining and documenting these requests and associated work. Member offices might also consider developing internal guidelines for deciding whether a letter of support might be written, and how that letter might be typically structured.

Facilitating Communication with Agencies

Congressional offices may also be contacted by constituents with grant-related issues other than identifying potential funding opportunities. These might include constituents who would like to find ways to improve a previously rejected application, or a grant awardee who encounters administrative difficulties. Offices may encourage constituents to contact agencies themselves or consider contacting agencies for additional background information on their constituents' behalf. If agency contacts are not evident or helpful, see CRS Report 98-446, *Congressional Liaison Offices of Selected Federal Agencies*. Also, CRS can help offices understand specific aspects of grant program administration through individual consultation.

Proactive Grants Work

Tracking Federal Grant Programs and Awards

An office may wish to identify and track specific grant programs of interest to their constituency—for example, grant programs that frequently award funding within the

district or state. Additionally, offices might consider monitoring the progress of funded projects and evaluating the administration of selected grant programs. This may involve legislative activity to establish, reauthorize, or amend programs, including adjusting program administrative provisions. It may also involve supporting annual or supplemental appropriations for them.

Congressional staff may wish to ask particular agencies to notify the office of pending grant awards for their office's awareness, so that they can inform the affected constituency. Offices also may elect to receive public award notifications from federal agencies by contacting the awarding federal agency. For information on how to track the range of awards that have been obligated within a district or state, see CRS In Focus IF10231, *Tracking Federal Awards in States and Congressional Districts Using USAspending.gov*.

Creating Informational Materials for Grant-Seekers

Some congressional offices send out a special grants newsletter, or include a section on grants in a regular newsletter available to constituents. Staff may also wish to consider developing resource materials for constituents, such as a federal grants manual, flyer(s), or short/targeted resource guides. Resource materials can be used as an outreach tool to connect the office with constituents developing projects that may be in various stages of the application process.

Coordinating Seminars or Workshops

Hosting a grants event is one way for an office to provide general or specific information to interested constituents and continue to build relationships with local grant-seeking stakeholders as well as funding entities. Federal agencies may be able to provide resources such as handouts and program summaries that can be used in developing the workshops. Local organizations such as councils of governments or regional development districts may also provide resources or assistance with presenting seminars or workshops.

Making Note of Trends in the District or State

Many federal grants first get distributed to state agencies, which then may issue federal sub-awards that get "passed through" to local governments, nonprofits, and other entities. The state-level administrator(s) of federal funds may have broad discretion in determining which kind of eligible projects are prioritized for local sub-award funding. A congressional office could consider communicating with state-level administrators of federal funds about the broad needs of a given community.

Meeting with Awarding Agencies

Creating contact lists and hosting periodic informational meetings with federal, state, and local agencies often enables staff to build relationships and become familiar with the grants process. An office could begin the process by considering, selecting, and contacting a few agencies of special interest for the needs of their district or state. Some possible goals for these meetings could be to learn about

various grant programs and get the latest information on available opportunities. Offices may develop questions for the agency, such as asking about timelines for upcoming opportunities, new funding priorities or initiatives at the agency, or changes to the program application process or guidelines since the previous application cycle.

Organizing for Grants Work

Developing Internal Grants-Work Guidance

A written internal grants process or guide may help an office establish key resources and foundational information, as well as ensure continuity when working with constituents. The House Ethics Committee or Senate Select Committee on Ethics may be consulted, as appropriate, for guidance on compliance with chamber rules and other questions related to constituent services. Offices may also consider establishing a grants-work tracking system or process in their correspondence management systems. See section on "Office Grants Manual" in CRS Report RL34035, *Grants Work in a Congressional Office*.

Updating Grants Web Page(s)

Congressional offices may wish to add or review grant-related content on their website. CRS has developed a web page template, *Grants and Federal Domestic Assistance*, that can assist with providing useful information directly to constituents. Alternatively, staff could draft their own web pages with grants information. Potential information on a grants web page may include staff contact details, guidelines on submitting requests for letters of support (e.g., online webform), office-produced resource guides on grants, and press releases or award notifications.

For Further Guidance

These additional CRS resources and products may be helpful:

- CRS's *Grants and Federal Assistance* resource page
- CRS Report RL34035, *Grants Work in a Congressional Office* (for a broader discussion of considerations and options for providing various constituent grants services in a Member's office)
- CRS In Focus IF12696, *CRS Services to District and State Offices: Overview and Selected Resources*
- CRS Report 98-446, *Congressional Liaison Offices of Selected Federal Agencies*
- CRS Report R44726, *Constituent Services: Overview and Resources*.

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IF12906

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