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# Letters of Support for Grant Seekers: Considerations for a Congressional Office

Congressional Member offices are often approached by constituents who are applying for federal grants and would like the Member to write a letter of support to accompany the application.

The handling of support letter requests is largely determined by each Member office. Similar to other constituent service efforts—including casework or other activities related to grants—if offices choose to engage in writing support letters, they may wish to establish and document procedures for how they handle requests for these letters. This is not required, but some offices may find it useful in ensuring that requests are addressed in a consistent manner.

This *In Focus* presents some selected considerations for offices. It is not meant to be a substitute for formal advice or guidance made available from the House or Senate Committees on Ethics. Beyond federal grants, constituents may also request letters of support for other reasons, which are not discussed in this *In Focus*. The House and Senate Ethics Committees can provide additional guidance on those matters.

As with other constituent service matters, congressional offices cannot compel a federal agency to act in favor of a particular grant seeker, but in certain circumstances, they may be permitted to encourage an agency to give a grant application consideration.

Letters of support are bound by House and Senate ethics guidance, which limits a support letter to encouraging the agency to give all due consideration under applicable law and regulation. Additional guidance on ethics and standards include the following:

**For the House:** See the House Committee on Ethics' Congressional Standards for casework (part of the *House Ethics Manual*); House standards regarding casework services are discussed more fully in the *House Ethics Manual*. Contact the House Committee on Ethics for specific questions.

**For the Senate:** See the Senate Select Committee on Ethics' "Constituent Service" web page under "Rules & Standards of Conduct"; the *Senate Ethics Manual* establishes parameters for casework services in the chamber. Contact the Senate Select Committee on Ethics for specific questions.

**For more information on grants,** see the CRS "Grants Resource" web page, which includes CRS Report RL34035, *Grants Work in a Congressional Office*.

## General Considerations

### Competition and Expectations

Generally, applications submitted to federal discretionary grant competitions are evaluated and scored by an agency-based review panel on evaluation criteria provided in a published Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Some agencies may also refer to these as Funding Opportunity Announcements, or FOAs, or Notices of Funding Availability, or NOFAs.

The need for, or willingness to accept, a letter of congressional support varies among grant-making agencies and programs, and the relevant NOFO might not provide guidance. Some federal agencies have communicated broadly that congressional letters of support may be welcome but do not affect an application's score (e.g., see the State Justice Institute's web page "What is important to know about letters of support when writing federal grants?"). An agency might also communicate where letters should be sent, or that they have no bearing on the agency's decisionmaking process (as another example, see FEMA's web page *Where should Letters of Support be sent?*).

When reviewing requests for letters of support, a congressional office also may make note of any instances where different constituent groups are applying for the same funding opportunity. Should this occur, the Member office may consult ethical guidelines to ensure consistency in casework practices.

In conjunction with considering grant seekers' requests for support, a congressional office may need to manage the expectations of grant seekers. This could include reminding the constituent that a letter of support might not necessarily influence a competitive review process or guarantee an award.

For more information on casework matters, see the CRS "Casework Resources" web page, which includes resources such as CRS Report RL33209, *Casework in a Congressional Office*, and CRS Report R44696, *Casework in Congressional Offices: Frequently Asked Questions*.

### Grant Program Requirements and Other Letters of Support

Some federal grant programs may require, as part of an application, letters of support or a reference from the grant seeker's institution, collaborators, or other community stakeholders. For some federal grant programs, there might also be requirements for a "letter of commitment" from critical project partners (e.g., see the U.S. Dept. of Transportation's sample letter of commitment template) or

other types of letters from stakeholders indicating the extent of their involvement in the proposed project (e.g., see the National Institutes of Health web page “Types of Letters for Grant Applications”).

These are distinct from *congressional* letters of support. In some instances, a grant applicant might believe that a congressional letter is a necessary requirement—when in fact, the “letter(s) of support” required instead might be one of the other required documents in the previous paragraph, or may need to originate from *noncongressional* parties, such as other community leaders.

## Process Considerations for Congressional Offices

A congressional office might wish to develop an intake process for letter requests. Considerations for establishing an intake process might include developing criteria for prioritizing the letter requests, identifying information that needs to be provided by the constituent on the proposed project, and providing justifications for why a letter may not be provided.

An internal administrative process could take the form of an online or emailed support letter intake form for grant seekers to complete, or a document providing general Member office guidance for requesting letters (e.g., how much advance notice the office would like to have prior to the deadline for submission of materials).

Offices might seek the following information on a grant project:

- name of applicant or contact person for the project;
- specific grant program name and assistance listing number;
- agency contact address and grants officer’s name, if available, of the applicant;
- deadline for proposal submission;
- project name and summary;
- what the project/program does;
- how many people will benefit;
- why this program is important to the community;
- unique features of the project, such as needs not already being met;
- what makes the applicant a suitable candidate for the grant;
- other support for the project, such as from a state or local government; or
- a detailed budget for the proposed project indicating how and when the grant money will be used.

Some additional considerations for the Member’s office could include the following questions, some of which the office may answer internally, or with outside information provided by the grant seeker or grant program materials:

- Is the application for a *federally funded* grant program?
- Is there generally an understanding by the grant seeker and the Member office of the goals and objectives of the

federal grant program, as well as an understanding of other features, such as the project funding caps?

- What is the background of the applicant organization?
- Has the applicant previously applied for or received this funding (or other federal funding)?
- How does the applicant plan to meet any cost-share or match requirements?
- Does the project have a nexus with the Member’s representational jurisdiction or policy goals?
- Is there any local stakeholder support or opposition to the proposed project, or other community-based context associated with the proposed project?

Member offices might consider writing a letter only when the grant seeker is ready to submit the grant proposal to the department or agency. The finalized grant proposal will provide detailed information about the project that may help the office decide its approach or write the support letter, should the Member decide to provide one.

If desired, an office could consider developing an internal “decision memorandum” template for letter requests. The document would summarize key features of the project associated with the letter request, such as the applicant, funding program, a summary of the project, any pertinent background the Member may wish to be aware of, any known issues associated with the project, any additional stakeholder support for the project, and whether a letter is recommended by the congressional office staff. Member offices might use these memos to assess requests for support letters, and to inform internal discussions related to the project.

The letter of support could close by asking the department or agency to let the Member know when a decision will be made, and asking that the office be informed about the progress of the proposal.

Congressional offices may wish to check with the federal department or agency congressional liaison to determine where letters should be sent (see CRS Report 98-446, *Congressional Liaison Offices of Selected Federal Agencies*). Offices could also consider having an internal policy on distribution of copies of support letters. For example, some offices do not provide a copy to the grant applicant or any other stakeholders, and provide a support letter only to the grantmaking agency. Letters of support may not necessarily remain confidential within a federal agency—due to federal records rules or grant management practices—so the office may wish to consider any potential implications of the letter being publicized.

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**Maria Kreiser**, Senior Research Librarian  
**Adam G. Levin**, Analyst in Economic Development Policy

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