# FUNDRAISING: ELEMENTS OF A PROPOSAL

This tutorial outlines the components of a typical eight- to 10-page proposal. It is merely a guideline. First and foremost, your proposal should be easy to read, follow the required format (e.g., type, spacing, margins, ordering, etc.) and provide a compelling case for why funding is being requested. It is also important to remember that the basic requirements, application forms and procedures vary with each funder. Some funders will request shorter proposals, a letter of inquiry or the completion of an application. In these cases, it should be easy to provide much of the information and language from the proposal you have developed using this guide.

*Please note that this outline sometimes refers to the typical number of pages that comprise a particular section. This estimate is based on an eight- to 10-page proposal. The length of each section may differ, depending on the funder's requirements, the focus of the proposal and the total number of pages allowed.*

### *I. Executive Summary*

In a grantmaker's eyes, the executive summary is often the most important piece of the proposal. This section will allow reviewers to quickly ascertain if a proposal fits into their giving guidelines and merits a more thorough review. As the writer, your goal is to succinctly summarize the key elements of the proposal while piquing a reviewer's interest.

The executive summary is typically no more than one page in length. It is usually easier to write the summary after completing the entire proposal. The summary includes:

- Problem: A one- to two-paragraph summary of the problem (of uninsured children and/or families) as it relates to your community, state and region

- Solution: A one- to two-paragraph summary of your work plan that includes a brief description of the CKF project, how many children and/or families will benefit, the location of your offices, the timeline, and a description of your staff

- Organization: A one-paragraph description of your organization, its history, and its capability to manage the request

- Funding request: One paragraph specifically identifying who is making the request, of whom, and in what amount:

  > The ABC Organization is pleased to submit this request to the XYZ Foundation for $100,000 to support our program to develop and distribute a toolkit in Spanish.

  *(If another organization or funder has already committed significant funds, you may want to mention this as well.)*

***II. Statement of Need***

The statement of need is the writer's opportunity to persuade the funder that the problem (of uninsured children and/or families) deserves an investment of their grant dollars. This section is typically two pages in length and should succinctly and persuasively:

- Educate the reviewer about the scope of the problem
- Instill a sense of optimism that the problem can be addressed/resolved
- Build confidence in your coalition or organization's ability to address/resolve the problem

To begin writing this section, outline and organize your arguments for (1) the need to address the problem (of uninsured children and/or families), and (2) receiving funds to help remedy this problem.

Next, gather all of the facts and figures needed to describe the scope of the problem, including who is affected, how many are affected, how they are affected, and what the impact is on the larger community. Also, gather evidence that supports your case for how to address the problem, but be selective about what data you include. The evidence should be both quantitative (hard data that describes the extent of the problem) and, if available and appropriate, qualitative (case studies or anecdotes that help to humanize the impact of the problem). Be sure to include data that is tailored to the interests of the funder. For example, if a funder is interested in projects that address the needs of the Hispanic community, be sure to include data on how your project will affect the lives of Hispanics in your community.

Restrict the use of national data or evidence to those times when it is absolutely necessary to back up your case or provide important context. For example, if an organization in another community has successfully implemented a program similar to your project (e.g., outreach to very similar populations), refer to its data as evidence of the project's potential impact.

When developing this section, spend some time playing devil's advocate by trying to anticipate a reviewer's concerns. This will help you ensure that you include information to answer any questions before they arise. For example, if there is another organization in the community doing similar work, be sure to address why your project is different or complementary to that work. Never criticize another organization's efforts. Funders have finite resources and often encourage collaboration between organizations with similar projects. It would be in your best interest to research those possibilities if applicable.

Two criteria that funders use to evaluate proposals are reasonableness and credibility. Can this problem be addressed/resolved? Can your organization make an impact? Make sure the answer to each of these questions is "yes!" by carefully defining the scope of the problem and displaying your expertise on the subject through coherent and concise arguments.

## *III. Program Plan*

The program plan provides details on the elements of your project. It describes your plan to address the problem (of uninsured children and/or families) in your community. The goal of this section is to demonstrate to the funder that your approach is thoughtful, feasible and cost-effective. The main components of this section are:

- Objectives – What do you propose to do?
- Methods and timeline – What are the steps for each area and how long will each one take?
- Staffing – Who will undertake these actions?
- Evaluation – How will you know that you have made a difference?

This section is typically three pages in length.

### *1. Objectives*

Objectives are specific, measurable and feasible (e.g., enrolling [X] children and families in Medicaid or SCHIP—be sure to use your state's program name—within the next [X] months, or documenting procedural barriers to the enrollment of children and families in Medicaid and SCHIP). While you may have multiple objectives in your *Covering Kids & Families* work plan, you should only include in the request those objectives the requested funds are targeted to achieve. Do not include objectives that may only be by-products of your work. In addition, be realistic about objectives. Exaggerating expectations will raise red flags with potential funders and possibly place you in a difficult position when it is time to evaluate the success of your project.

*Formatting Tip*: It is helpful to bullet or highlight your objectives in a visual way so there is no question about what you will be measuring in order to define success.

### *2. Methods and Timeline*

The methods and timeline section should describe the specific actions (e.g., conducting outreach events) you plan to take, when you plan to take them, and why you chose these courses of action. If the project is ongoing at the time you submit your proposal, or significant research and planning has already taken or will take place, be sure to include a description in relation to how this funding request will be incorporated into the larger plan.

It is important to be thorough and clear about what you intend to do and why because it will justify the budget for the project. You must show that you have been thoughtful about what will be most effectual and cost-effective, in order to make the potential funder confident in your ability to accomplish the work.

*Formatting Tip*: To create a more credible and reader-friendly proposal, include a chart of your timeline that delineates the projected starting date and completion date for each activity. The timeline should begin with the project start date (i.e., when you intend to begin spending money) and conclude with the project end date.

*3. Staffing*
This section describes the roles, responsibilities, expertise and credentials of key staff, consultants and/or volunteers involved with the project. Funders will review this information to determine if (1) staff has the capabilities to complete the project, and (2) the salaries and time dedicated to the project are justified.

*Formatting Tip*: You should include all key individuals who will work on the project in the staffing section. If you need to hire people, include brief job descriptions. If many people need to be included, you might consider limiting your discussion in the body of the proposal to one or two key people and adding a staffing section to the appendix. Do not promise the participation of individual staff members unless they are truly available to do the work.

*4. Evaluation*
The evaluation component is important because it demonstrates your commitment to meeting the objectives set forth in the proposal. It will also help you assess the effectiveness of your methods and refine them during the course of the program.

The evaluation section should describe what benchmarks will be measured for each of the objectives. Other questions this section should answer include: What data will be gathered? How will it be gathered? When will it be gathered? How will it be analyzed? When will reports be made?

Tracking your progress can help identify both successes and needs to shift direction. An important point to remember is that most funders, if kept apprised on issues/changes to the initial program plan, will allow revisions over the course of the project as long as there is documentation to ensure that funds are being used in the most effective manner and in line with the initial request.

***IV. Budget***
The budget section delineates all of the costs associated with the program. This section is often the second most important piece of a proposal, following the executive summary, because it shows the thoroughness of your planning to ensure that your approach is cost-effective. A poorly devised budget will raise red flags with an experienced grant reviewer. (See the Sample Budget for Proposal.)

**Remember that once approved, the end budget amount is final.** Typically, you cannot go back to your funders and ask for more money, even if an essential program element was not included in the original budget.

- The budget needs to be consistent with the program plan and should not contain items not mentioned in the program plan. Similarly, items mentioned in the program plan must be realistically budgeted.

- Think carefully about every expense you may incur. If you will be hiring new people, for example, include costs associated with recruiting them (e.g., classified ads) and any necessary costs for additional office space and equipment.

- Take time to get accurate estimates (e.g., if you will be printing a brochure, call a printer, provide as specific a description as possible, and get an estimate).

- When in doubt, err on the side of overestimation. Inevitably, you will forget certain expenses or there will be cost overruns, which you may have to absorb.

- If your project is multi-year, you will need to include annual increases in certain expenses (e.g., salary increases) in your estimates.

Begin by carefully reviewing your program plan and staffing needs and itemizing every expense required. Expenses are typically divided into personnel expenses, direct project expenses, and administrative/overhead expenses. Be sure to use funder generated forms if requested and place items in the categories as indicated by the funder. Following are some general rules to remember:

- *Personnel expenses* include the salaries and benefits for each person working on the project. For employees, list the title, pay rate (plus benefits) and the percentage of time dedicated to the project. For contractors, list the flat fee or rate plus the estimated time. Because benefits can easily add 20 percent or more to personnel costs, it is important to include them in your calculations. Examples:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ? | Project director (75%) | $45,600 |
| ? | Communications consultant (5 days @ $750) | $3,750 |

- *Direct project* expenses are the specific costs associated with implementing the program plan and may include travel, printing, office equipment, long distance, postage, meeting expenses, etc. Many funders will allow costs such as rent, utilities and equipment usage in direct proportion to the project (e.g., the project staff may require 15 percent of existing office space). Grant writers often confuse these items with “overhead” and do not include them. Review the funder’s guidelines carefully to determine if you can include these costs. Examples:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ? | Brochures (qty. 10,000) | $3,500 |
| ? | Airfare (6 trips @ $500) | $3,000 |

- *Administrative/overhead expenses* are non-personnel operating expenses that your organization will incur even if this specific project does not get funded, including accounting, equipment leases, etc. Many organizations develop a formula to determine overhead expenses based on the percentage of the organization’s total budget that will be expenses for the program. For example, if your organization has a $1 million annual budget and the project and personnel expenses for this request are $200,000, then you may request that 20 percent of your overhead expenses be allocated to this project. Review the funder's guidelines carefully to determine what, if any, administrative expenses it will cover.

Budgets are typically one page in length. For formatting purposes, you will likely want to group expenses together (such as in the categories above) and list major line items. Minor expenses can be grouped together (e.g., group health insurance premiums, disability coverage and life insurance under the heading of benefits). If the budget or project is very complex, you may want to consider breaking down expenses further (e.g., organize by year or project phase) and making your section titles more descriptive.

**If your proposal is for partial funding of the project, be sure to discuss how you will secure or have secured the other funding needed. Prospective funders will want to know that you have or will have the funding to complete the program plan described in the proposal. If specific commitments have been made, this may be as simple as adding an income section to your budget and itemizing other contributions. It is also important to include whether the funds you are seeking are matching funds and a requirement of a grant that has already been awarded. Some donors will find this fact more appealing, while other funders will not complete funding projects that other funders have initiated.**

Use a budget narrative if there are unusual items in your budget that need clarification or if the funder requires this section. Often, footnotes will suffice if further explanation is needed.

***V. Organizational Description***

Once you have convinced the funder that the problem merits attention and that your approach to the problem merits investment, it is time to convince the funder of your organization's ability to oversee the effort. The organization description is typically one page in length and includes information on the organization's mission, history, expertise, other programs and key successes, as well as the names, affiliations and brief biographies of the board of directors, staff and pertinent volunteers. Be sure to mention the expertise and responsibilities of your coalition/partnerships in this section as well. It is often simpler to add the information about the board, coalition, staff and volunteers in the appendix.

***VI. Conclusion***

The conclusion is your last shot to sell the funder on your project. In this section, you should recap the key details and make a somewhat more emotional plea for support of the project, without undermining the rational case you have made for this investment heretofore. The conclusion is typically one to two paragraphs in length.

***VII. Appendices***

Appendices serve two purposes: (1) attaching information the funder requires, such as your Internal Revenue Service letter of 501(c)(3) determination, and (2) supplying any supplementary information that supports your proposal but did not fit into the body of the proposal (e.g., a study authored by the project director that addresses the topic).

Most funders will request the following:

- Copy of the IRS letter declaring that your organization is tax exempt
- Listing of the board of directors and their affiliations (include coalition lists here)
- Financial statement from your last complete fiscal year
- Budget for current fiscal year

The appendix should be attached separately from the body of the proposal.

**Formatting Your Proposal**
In addition to having compelling information, your proposal should be aesthetically pleasing. Be sure to check any funder formatting requirements first and foremost. Following are some tips to consider when formatting your documents.

- Add a cover page that includes a descriptive title for the proposal, the name of the funder you are approaching and the amount you are requesting (e.g., A Proposal to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for $100,000), as well as contact information for your executive director and organization. (See the Template Proposal Cover Page and Title.)

- Include a table of contents delineating the page numbers for the major sections.

- Assemble the body of the proposal and staple the appendices separately. Do not bind the proposal, since funders will sometimes circulate sections of your proposal for review. Be sure to include the requested number of copies.

- The formatting should be visually appealing, leaving a sufficient amount of white space.

You should always send a cover letter with your proposal. It is important to begin with your request (e.g., "The [X] organization is pleased to submit this proposal for educating middle school children in Alaska about the dangers of tobacco smoke. We are requesting $100,000 from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for this 12-month project."). The cover letter should also demonstrate that you have done your research by explaining why you are submitting your proposal to the funder. If you have had any conversations with staff members or received any previous contributions, your cover letter should reference these as well. The president or executive director should sign the cover letter and contact information should be included. (See Appendix M: Template Proposal Cover Letter on p. xviii.)

Remember, the basic requirements, application forms and procedures will vary with each funder. **Your proposal should be tailored to meet those requirements, while taking into account the focus of your project and the interests of the funder.** The Proposal Checklist Worksheet (Appendix R on p. xxiii) provides a checklist of characteristics to help you grade your proposal.

Good luck!