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GRANTS WORK IN A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE

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## ABSTRACT

Congressional offices are often approached by constituents seeking funds for proposals of potential benefit to their State or district. This report discusses the grants process and varying approaches and techniques congressional offices have developed in dealing with grants requests.



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INTRODUCTION

Congressional offices are often approached by local officials, organizations, and individuals seeking assistance in obtaining funds for proposals of potential benefit to their State or district. While grants assistance offers one of the most visible means by which Members of Congress can work directly for the people they represent, there can be certain drawbacks to congressional involvement. Each office weighs the advantages and disadvantages of grants assistance before deciding how much help it will offer its constituents. This report is addressed to Members of Congress and their staffs who are either learning to make these decisions, looking for new ideas, or refreshing their memories.

GRANTS WORK IN A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE

I. BENEFITS AND PITFALLS OF GRANTS WORK

Grants work benefits a congressional office when a project is awarded to its district or State as a result of congressional assistance. Congressional help for projects like disaster relief and services to the homebound elderly can earn the gratitude of all constituents, not just beneficiaries of the program and grant applicants. Good will can be generated even from groups whose proposals have been turned down by Federal agencies, but who nonetheless appreciate the congressional guidance and support they have received in the grants process.

As for the problems in grants involvement, it should first be noted that increasing competition for a dwindling pool of funds reduces the likelihood of success for any given proposal. Furthermore, in those cases where several groups in a district or State apply for the same grant and seek congressional endorsement, Member intervention for any constituents can antagonize others.

The very act of helping a constituent get a grant may have certain intrinsic drawbacks. In the first place, some requests are self-seeking and do not represent real needs in the community. There is potential hazard, too, in backing an applicant who may prove unreliable, a hazard which can be lessened by investigating the applicant's record.



A congressional grants staff's effectiveness depends on both an understanding of the grants process and on skill with agency contacts. Different agencies often require different approaches; the wrong approach by a congressional office on a current grant proposal can injure not only its chances, but can jeopardize the chances for future congressional intervention on behalf of other constituents.

## II. DEPTH OF INVOLVEMENT

Every congressional office can serve its constituents by teaching them how the grants system works. The question is how much additional effort can an office--with its limited time, staff, and funds--afford? The answer depends on a variety of factors: What is the Member's philosophy about grants work? What is his or her position on Federal intervention at the local level? How closely does a particular proposal relate to his or her legislative activities? Is a specific project one in which the Member is especially interested?

Economic and political conditions in a given district or State are other factors to be considered before tendering congressional support. What are the areas of greatest need? What is the local attitude toward Federal assistance and regulations? What kinds of assistance have there been in the past? What kinds of assistance have neighboring districts or States received? What will be the implications for a State or district if a particular grant is awarded? (For example, what are the advantages of a new freeway weighed against the displeasure of displaced residents?)

Finally, before offering support, a congressional office will want to assess the merits of each grant proposal and its chance of success.

### III. WAYS CONGRESSIONAL GRANTS STAFF CAN ASSIST CONSTITUENTS

#### A. Explaining How the System Works

A good start towards understanding the grants process can be gained by looking at CRS Info Pack 0050, "Grants and Foundation Support," which discusses sources of information on Federal programs and private foundations and contains a report on how to write a grant proposal. Info Pack 0050 is available for distribution to constituents. Besides the major sources of information on Federal funding (Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance and the Federal Register), certain data bases are available to Congress and provide access to Federal grant information. GRANTS, for example, serves House offices. Senate offices should contact the Senate Library.

Constituents have varying degrees of sophistication when it comes to seeking grants. Many do not know that grants information is readily available and that it is not necessary for them to hire a grants consultant if they are willing to do the work themselves. They may also not know that much of the published material may be available at either a large public or a university library in their area, particularly at libraries that serve as depositories of U.S. Government Publications.

#### B. Notifying Constituents about Available Grants

Mailings are one way to inform constituents of recent developments of special interest. Some offices send out a general grants newsletter or a targeted mailing reporting on notices in the Federal Register, describing new programs and changes in deadlines or regulations for current programs.

Seminars on Federal and private assistance are another information service that can be offered constituents. Some offices sponsor programs which bring together Federal, State, and local officials, academic and corporate specialists, experienced volunteers, and constituents--all with similar concerns. Many agencies are willing to provide speakers for seminars arranged by congressional offices and to provide exhibit materials such as sample proposals and lists of information contacts. Seminars in which congressional offices have been the catalysts between constituents and the bureaucracy have proven especially effective on such topics as energy conservation and historic preservation. While well-planned, balanced programs tailored to the particular concerns of an audience can create good will, coordinating and following through on such meetings take a great deal of staff work and time. If successful, such programs may also result in additional demands being made on an office.

C. Understanding Problems Encountered by Grants Applicants

Congressional staff expertise and contacts can prove to be quite useful to inexperienced grants seekers faced with problems such as identifying the most appropriate funding source, coping with the intricacies of application and follow-up procedures, and dealing with uncertainties about funding, delays, and red tape. Constituents can best be served by being put in touch quickly with program officers at the level closest to them. The same holds true for being put in touch with development districts and councils of governments, which are funded to provide technical assistance in the application process.

Troubleshooting may be the most time-consuming grants operation, but it is often the effort most appreciated by constituents.

D. Suggesting Alternatives to Federal Funding

In budget-cutting times, the success that constituents have in securing assistance can depend on the flexibility and imagination a congressional office can offer in suggesting alternatives to Federal funding. Some requests should be discouraged. Not backing a proposal that is unlikely to win agency approval can save constituents the time and effort they would spend on an application. In other instances, congressional staff can help constituents realize that the regulations, paperwork, and delays required for a particular Federal grant might present too much of a drain on their energy and resources, and encourage them to seek funding elsewhere. It should also be pointed out to constituents seeking Federal assistance from Washington, that as a result of the increased use of block grants, State, city, and county officials now control a much greater share of the distribution of Federal funds.

Funds and other help from private and corporate foundations deserve the attention of congressional offices. So does a possible mix of funding: Federal, State, local, and private. Private foundations, for example, have frequently provided seed money for a demonstration project which later received State or Federal backing.

There will be some projects for which only limited funds are available. However, there may be other resources in a community which can be tapped. Constituents can be alerted to the occasional willingness of local governments, foundations, or individuals to provide assistance by donating property, buildings,

or expertise for a project. Another possibility is the sharing of staff, space, or equipment with other like-minded groups.

Finally, non-profit groups can consider new approaches to fund raising. For example, corporations or local governments may be willing to contract for the services of established groups that have demonstrated their worth, or such groups may have to begin charging fees for some of the services they now offer for free.

E. Counseling on Proposal Writing

Detailed information on proposal writing can be found in CRS Info Pack 0050. While most congressional offices do not actually write proposals, they are able to provide their constituents with an understanding of what makes a good proposal. Some of the suggestions which they can pass on are the following:

--Allow sufficient time to prepare a well-documented proposal, well before the application deadline. If possible, have someone outside the organization critique the proposal prior to submission.

--Follow the instructions given in the application form or in other material provided by the agency or institution. Answer questions as asked.

--Be sure that the proposal is clear and brief. Avoid jargon. Take pains to make the proposal interesting. Reviewing panels have limited time to devote to any single proposal. Whenever possible fit the style of the proposal to the style of the agency or institution being approached.

--When no form or instructions for submitting grant proposals are provided, the proposal should include:

A cover letter on the applicant's letterhead giving a brief description of the purpose and amount of the grant proposal, conveying the applicant's willingness to discuss the proposal in further detail

A half-page summary which includes identification of the applicant, the reasons for the request, proposed objectives and means to accomplish them, along with the total cost of the project, an indication of any funds already obtained, and the amount being requested for this proposal

An introduction, in which the history, credentials, and accomplishments of the applicant are presented

A description of current conditions demonstrating the need for the proposed project

A statement of the project's objectives in specific, measurable terms

A description of the methods to be used to accomplish these objectives

A description of the means by which the project would be monitored

A discussion of any plans that may exist for continuing the project beyond the period covered by the grant

A budget

F. Establishing and Maintaining Contacts

Contacts are particularly valuable when seeking grants; they require time and experience to develop. As a rule, congressional offices seek out agency officials and program officers responsible for the programs of greatest local interest. Also useful are contacts with State and local governments, Federal regional councils, and councils of governments. Good relationships enable congressional staff to call upon the professional expertise of such officials.

For congressional staff who are new to grants work, there are several publications which may prove helpful as a starting point in seeking contacts. Both the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance and the U.S. Government Manual list State and regional offices of executive agencies--the Catalog includes some program officers. State directories list State planning offices and development districts. These initial contacts can lead to the program officials at the local level who are of the greatest help in grants work.

However, the attitudes that offices have about dealing with agency officials vary. Some offices view these contacts as a natural extension of their duties to represent their constituents. Others, however, have expressed concern that such contacts might violate the separation of powers of the legislative and executive branches, and might be viewed as an inappropriate use of their positions.

On occasion, some congressional offices approach an agency before a constituent applies for a particular program to discuss the availability of funds. Sometimes a given project is considered important enough by an office to merit bringing a representative of the office, the constituent, and representatives of an agency together for a discussion of the project.

In other cases, some congressional offices inform their constituents of the willingness of agency officials to provide procedural review of proposals one or two months before the application deadline. Such a review, while not dealing with the substance of a proposal, allows an agency to inform the applicant of any technical problems or omissions to be corrected before the proposal is formally submitted.

Yet another service is offered by some congressional offices. Once their constituents notify them that a proposal has been submitted, a letter is sent to the agency expressing the Member's interest in being kept informed on developments relating to this application. In addition, a congressional office will sometimes ask the agency in question to provide a list of all of the other applicants for a particular grant. This list enables the office, if it wishes, to consider initiating letters from the Member to those applicants in the State or district who had not approached the office prior to submission of their grant application. The letter indicates the willingness of the Member to serve all of those he or she represents. Some offices hesitate to offer such grants assistance, however, for fear of adding extra work to an already heavy load.

If a Member is interested more in the success of a particular applicant either from the start or after a preliminary round of selections, he or she may send a letter of support, along with a request to be kept informed of all developments.

Timing, during this entire procedure, can be critical. Constituents asking for intervention stand the best chance of success if they call upon a congressional office as soon as possible. Some congressional offices keep a follow-up calendar of application and award dates, and notify their constituents of step-by-step developments as they receive progress reports from their agency contacts.



### G. Announcing Grants Awards

While there is some variation, the usual announcement procedure is for the agency that awards the grant to notify the Senate office first, then the House office, and finally the recipient. Not all awards are announced publicly. For example, there is usually no notification of Federal formula grants. Even so, an agency may be willing to alert a congressional office to the issuance of such awards, if the office so wishes.

Congressional offices vary in the extent that they publicize awards to their State or district. An office trying to establish or reconsider its award publicity policy faces several questions: Should all awards of which it has been notified be announced, or only those grants with which the office has been directly involved? When the recipient is a local official, is the office better served by notifying the recipient before or after going to press?

As a follow-up to the announcement of an award, a congressional office may want to send a letter of notification to all of the people who had written them about this particular project. At this time, some offices also make a point of sending letters of appreciation to agency officials who were especially helpful.

In cases where grant applications have been turned down, many offices notify their constituents of their right to know why they have not received the award and what the appeals process is. Constituents can be given the chance to ask the agency for an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of their proposal, or they can give the agency permission to give the congressional office this information. This will help the constituent decide whether or not to reapply.

IV. GRANT OPERATIONS IN A CONGRESSIONAL OFFICE

A. Tools

A Grants Manual outlining policies and procedures can be a valuable tool for insuring continuity, particularly in the case of staff turnover and shifting responsibilities. Some items to be considered for inclusion in such a manual are:

- A written record of the Member's policy on letters of endorsement and on press announcements, along with samples
- A checklist of procedures to facilitate the training of new staffers
- Sample project worksheets, allowing space for agency contacts, status reports, and follow-up timetable

A congressional office may wish to maintain detailed, cross-referenced files, including:

1. Agency Files
  - a. Program files with detailed information on the most frequently used programs in the district or State with a fact sheet on congressional letterhead describing each program, agency brochures, contacts, etc.
  - b. Project files containing lists of applicants for each project. Some offices keep records of the steps taken in support of all grant applications as documentation. (House offices may seek the assistance of the House Information Systems in setting up a computerized grants file.)
  - c. Follow-up calendar
2. Constituent files by county. These can prove especially useful for the Member's visits to his or her State or district. In addition to the correspondence connected with each grant application, local press coverage of awards can be included. These clippings, along with letters from grateful constituents, can serve as a source of favorable quotes in an election year.

A weekly grants report is another tool used by some grants staff to keep their Members and other staffers informed of grants activities. It can include announcements of grants which have been awarded, agency news, visitors, and projections for the future.

B. Working With the Legislative Staff in Your Office on Issues of Interest

Offices having a strong interest in the grants operation usually keep their legislative staff informed about programs which have proven particularly effective in the district or State, and in which there is apt to be strong constituent interest. Once a bill with which the Member has been identified becomes law, constituents will often provide feedback on whether the legislative intent is being carried out. Along with suggestions for ways to improve programs, constituents frequently have comments on proposed regulations and legislative changes. Legislative staff can benefit from the substantial contributions to congressional oversight which come through the grants staff.

C. Cooperation Within Delegations

Cooperation among Members of a State delegation on grants work can cut down considerably on duplication of effort. Moreover, the impact of several Members approaching an agency jointly in support of a project may be greater than that of one Member working individually. However, political considerations can limit the amount of such cooperation.