

PUBLIC SAFETY REPORT

COMMUNICATIONS SOLUTIONS FOR PUBLIC SAFETY

CONTENTS

FEDERAL FUNDING 55 VOIP UPDATE 62 COGNITIVE RADIO 66



Grant Grab

Steps to Gain and Maximize Federal Funding Dollars

By Mike Stanley and David Ethridge

Does federal grant money survive all the required paperwork and approvals to improve interoperable communications for first responders? In other words, does the process work? That's certainly an appropriate question for any public-safety agency seeking federal funding for upgrading radio communications. Without question the process works, but the results aren't consistent everywhere or for every group seeking funding opportunities.

Awareness of available funding pro-

grams and following the appropriate application processes are the keys to grant success. Sometimes responders don't understand the scope of what funding programs are designed to accomplish or whether a specific program actually fits the needs of an individual public-safety agency. There are some fundamentals that any public-safety agency should consider when pursuing funding opportunities. Field experiences in South Dakota and Florida contrast lessons learned and highlight some key advantages for

successful grant awards. The following steps can help your agency gain federal monies.

Know the Grants

The first step in successfully obtaining federal grant dollars is to understand your organization's needs, goals and requirements and then match those to the appropriate grant program, ensuring that your goals will align with the goals of the grant program and resonate with the review committee. Are you primarily interested in upgrading radio systems

PSIC Details

According to the PSIC funding program, all states and territories submitted final investment justifications to the federal government by Dec. 3. Grant awards will be distributed in early 2008, and all grant projects must be completed by 2010.

Actual field data from PSIC grant awardees will determine how they use the grant dollars to improve interoperability for emergency-response workers.

for improved interoperability? If so, grant programs such as the Public Safety Interoperable Communications (PSIC) grant program, designed to promote multijurisdictional interoperability among regional public-safety organizations, are a good fit. Are you looking to improve communications infrastructure as part of an emergency-preparedness initiative associated with recovery from a natural disaster? In that case, the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) might be a good match for your goals.

Many types of government grant programs are available for qualified applicants, but an interested group should do enough research to ensure the group applies for the most appropriate, reasonable and timely type of grant and that all requirements are met according to posted schedules.

Grants.gov is a good place to start researching grant-funding opportunities. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is the managing partner of the Web site. Watch for grant program updates and changes posted to various government Web sites and make course corrections as necessary. For example, the original PSIC grant program design allowed grant funding only to public-safety groups that used or interoperated with systems operating in the 700 MHz frequency band.

Sell your Benefits

Grants aren't generic one-size-fits-all affairs. Review committees want to know that the grant monies will be used to implement a well-designed,



A Florida agency recently won a major grant award by offering its towers as potential collocation opportunities for state or federal agencies.

well-planned system. Therefore, a well-written grant proposal will explain how the proposed project offers a good return on the investment of grant funds, furthering the goals and spirit of the program. Describe the primary plan of action with key milestones and implementation steps, then describe potential challenges to the proposed plan and mitigation strategies for dealing with challenges if they arise. This way, the review committee will see that the project is a "good risk" and even if the grantee needs to deviate from its original plans because of technical, logistical, administrative or financial issues, they have alternate plans enabling them to advance the goals of the grant program.

Another question to ask is what does your organization have that competing applicants might not be able to offer that will be valued by the review committee? Such assets could include existing radio towers or other facilities with space for federal agencies, radio frequencies that could be contributed to a shared system or existing relationships with organizations targeted by the grant for mutual aid.

The Research Maze

A recent Web search about federal grant programs revealed differing perspectives. One site states, "Over \$1.5 trillion available. Never repay. Apply today." But another Web site reads, "Beware of government grant scams. Read this today before it's too late."

These two divergent positions express the maze a person can enter when seeking federal grant programs.

As an example, a Florida agency recently won a major grant award from the PSIC program by leveraging its unique jurisdictional footprint. The agency maintains radio systems in two of the largest metropolitan areas in the state and has plans to build additional towers in the state's interior, which could be offered as potential collocation opportunities for state or federal organizations.

The agency also maintains working relationships with more than 40 federal, state and local agencies to provide law enforcement, fire, EMS, disaster-recovery services and first responder mutual-aid assistance. This includes more than 30 counties and their communities in the state of Florida, covering 22,856 square miles with a total population of almost 10 million citizens. By emphasizing these points, the grant application demonstrated that a grant for the group's proposed radio project would be an investment in the public-safety communities of central and south Florida at large, providing benefits beyond the immediate help to the applicant.

Keep Current

When pursuing federal grant programs, someone or some group must completely commit to understanding the grant funding process. This includes staying current of any program changes, monitoring deadlines for plan submissions, contacting state interoperability officials, providing representation for state interoperability committees and attending meetings, acquiring professional grant writing support, and acquiring technical support for system evaluations and documentation development for grant

proposal submissions. These resources can be internal or contracted, but regardless, unless basic resources are in place, any group will be hindered in acquiring federal funding.

In South Dakota, many local groups depend on internal communications received from larger networks such as regional public-safety consortiums or state homeland security task groups for information about grant funding programs. The process can prove problematic because meaning can be lost in translation and legitimate opportunities lost or incomplete assessments and responses denied prematurely.

For example, few tribal groups in South Dakota understood or even knew about the PSIC grant program months after its official announcement. The realization eventually led to a meeting among state homeland security officials, state technical support officials and tribal emergency management representatives to talk about state interoperability initiatives. This was the first meeting of its type ever held in South Dakota. The sole purpose was to discuss how the state and tribal public-safety agencies can work together for interoperable communications that benefits everyone. This is an excellent start, but there is much to accomplish.

To start late in a grant process is a huge obstacle in the application process because federal grant money is tied to specific and definable objectives managed according to approved schedules. Maintain as many networks as possible to gain access to new information. Seek state interoperability committees and attend with regularity. Make your presence known and network with members, associates and other attendees. Write reports of the meetings and distribute to the user

Dialogue Details

For a successful grant application, both internal and external dialogue is required to identify hurdles, determine an organization's goals, identify selling points and frame an appropriate strategy:

Internal Dialogue

Legal: Are there any legal or legislative implications of applying for or accepting the grant funding?

Finance: Will the grant require matching funds? If so, must the match be in cash or will "in kind" contributions be considered — sharing space on an organization's radio towers or sharing frequencies, for example?

Radio User Groups: What are the most pressing communications needs, and how will the grant monies be used to address these needs? Form user group meetings and determine the core issues with existing radio communications. Take the issues to the next level and evaluate whether the issues are user defined or system issues.

External Dialogue

Regional Organizations: Do you know someone who understands the grant who can help understand what would be the best match for your needs?

Review Boards: The federal government often relies on state or regional review boards as part of the grant assessment process. These may be people you know professionally who can help understand the spirit of the grant and what the evaluation criteria will be.

Radio Neighbors: Does it make sense to jointly apply with a local cooperating agency?

groups you represent.

Use professional consultants as appropriate to help understand your organization's needs, sell benefits, initiate dialogue and craft responses. If you don't know, seek the correct answer. Don't assume that any communications, verbal or electronic, is the final word. Do research and get involved at every level possible. Mistakes can be made and will be made, and interpretation is open for review.

In grant funding, prepare and never leave results to chance. Remember, the effort is in the details. Time will tell whether the PSIC grant program money survives the journey through federal channels to the state management levels and on to local public-safety agencies. But regardless of the outcome of the program, preparation is

the key to grant awards.

If after everything possible has been done and your request isn't at the top of the list of awardees, or rejected outright, this should start a new process of discovery. There will be other grant programs and new opportunities to align individual goals with larger programs, so start preparing now. ■

Mike Stanley is director of customer relations — wireless for Mindbank Technical Solutions in Golden, Colo. Stanley has supported contracts with several federal agencies, including the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Bureau of Land Management. David Ethridge is director of business development for Mindbank. Ethridge's background includes work in LMR, satellite, cellular and broadband communications systems. E-mail comments to editor@RRMediaGroup.com.