

## Using Congressmen for Discretionary Grants

### Congressional Support for Local Funding Requests

Thinking about applying for a competitive (“discretionary”) federal grant and need some help? Congressional offices routinely receive requests for help from local governments seeking federal funding. And while each office handles grants requests in its own way – depending upon the Member’s philosophy on federal support for local projects, the relation of certain proposals to his or her legislative activity, or the Member’s particular interest in specific locations or types of projects – there are some common services that are routinely provided to local governments seeking federal grants or loans. Having surveyed 47 House and Senate offices this past year about the kinds of assistance they offer, let’s take a look at some of our findings.

### Grant Staff

Senate and House offices usually allocate staff to grants and projects activities in order to assist constituents with projects of potential benefit to their districts, cities, or states. Most offices divide responsibility by function, and devote a full-time grants specialist or several staff members under the supervision of a grants coordinator working solely in the area of grants, loans, and other funding efforts. In some offices, all grants requests are either handled in the district (or state office) or they are answered by the Washington staff. In others, Members divide grants and projects between their district (or state office) and the Washington office depending on project type.

### Identifying Funding

The first step of applying for a grant or loan is, of course, to identify what funding is available. Luckily, most congressional offices are quite good at assisting state and local governments and eligible private sector organizations in becoming aware of available money and how to go about obtaining it. In our survey, participating congressional staff pointed out a number of ways that funding information is disseminated to local government bodies, including:

- Congressional offices often prepare their own information packets on federal grants programs. Such packets generally include program descriptions, brochures, the latest rules and regulations, changes in agency policy, and application forms.
- Some congressional offices occasionally implement targeted mailings to inform constituents of important deadlines, the possible impact of new legislative or executive actions that might revise existing programs, create new ones, or alter funding levels for popular programs.
- Congressional offices are increasingly coordinating seminars on federal and private assistance at state and district locations. Many agencies and corporations are willing to provide speakers for district seminars arranged by congressional offices and also to provide such materials as brochures, sample proposals, and lists of information contacts.
- Congressional offices can channel requests for program funding information and get help identifying appropriate grants officers through federal department and agency congressional liaison offices.

### Federal Agencies

Although most offices do not actually write proposals, staff dedicated to grant and loan funding requests are not only a good source of information, but can also serve as a facilitator with agencies, and, in some cases, even as an advocate. To assist constituents applying for federal funds, congressional offices can develop working relationships with grants officers in federal departments and agencies, including their state and regional offices. Similarly, if the constituent decides to submit a formal grant application for a particular program, the congressional office may recommend or arrange a meeting with agency offices in the district or state. Many agencies provide a procedural review of proposals one or two months before the application deadline. Such a review, while not dealing with the substance of the proposal, allows an agency to inform the applicant of any technical problems or omissions to be corrected before the proposal is formally submitted.

Staff members can contact federal agencies to determine agency interest in certain projects, relay the findings to those interested and qualified for assistance in their states and districts, track department and agency disbursements, and notify local governments of what funds are available. Once a grant application is filed, offices frequently keep in touch with agencies.

### Letters of Support

When a constituent notifies the congressional office that a proposal has been submitted, the office can send a letter to the agency expressing the Member's interest in being kept informed of developments relating to the application.

In addition, the letter may also request a list of all applicants for the particular grant. This enables the office to consider initiating letters of support from the Member to those applicants in his or her state or district who did not approach the office prior to submission of their application. Whether the Member chooses to support an applicant or extends support to all applicants from the state or district is another story. Every congressional office we surveyed listed "letters of support" as a service they routinely provide.

### Follow-Up

Although there is some variation, the usual announcement procedure in cases of allocated federal funds is for the agency making the award to notify the Senate office first, then the House office, and finally the recipient. This allows Members of Congress an opportunity to notify recipients of grants before they might otherwise receive word from the awarding agency. It should be noted, however, that not all awards are announced publicly. In cases where grant applications are made and turned down, a congressional office may notify local government staff of their right to know why the award was not granted and what the appeals process is. For instance, congressional staff can also help a local government get the agency to provide an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal or suggest alternative programs or approaches following an adverse decision, allowing the constituent to improve the initial application and start the process again. §

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