

ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS ADVISORY*

Prepared by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) to Assist Applicants to the Community Food Projects (CFP) Program

In recent years, dozens of great Community Food Projects grant applications, many winnable, were not even reviewed. This occurred mainly because basic requirements and guidance from Grants.gov and the National Institute on Food and Agriculture (NIFA) within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) were not followed. **Be aware — this could happen to your application if you don't follow the procedures, particularly if you submit it too close to the deadline.** We urge you to read this advisory to help ensure that your grant application will be reviewed. **First-time Grants.gov users** should see pages six and seven for additional guidance.

THE BOTTOM LINE: BE AWARE THAT DELAYS AND PROBLEMS CAN OCCUR WITH THE ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS PROCESS, AND ALLOW PLENTY OF TIME FOR YOUR APPLICATION TO BE SUBMITTED AND APPROVED.

1. Assistance with using Grants.gov:

- The CFP Request for Applications provides information on how to access a comprehensive guide for preparing and submitting proposals through Grants.gov (see page 2).
- General help with using Grants.gov is available at: <http://www.grants.gov/help/help.jsp>.
- Troubleshooting tips are available at: http://www.grants.gov/help/trouble_tips.jsp.
- For Adobe Reader Error Messages, a new tip sheet “Common Error Messages Defined” is available at: <http://www.grants.gov/assets/AdobeReaderErrorMessages.pdf>.
- **Avoiding common preparation and submission errors:** The National Institutes of Health (NIH) outlines ways to avoid errors that occur frequently in the application process, including use of names, PDF issues, and not heeding common warnings. See: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/ElectronicReceipt/avoiding_errors.htm.

Don't hesitate to contact Grants.gov to identify and correct submission problems. Also, keep an extra backup copy of the application at all times, in case data is lost during the submission process.

* This document was prepared for the CFSC in order to help CFP grant applicants understand and address the challenges connected with the electronic submissions process. It was reviewed by NIFA staff in September 2010 and found to be accurate and up to date. However, this document does not represent official USDA policy, nor is it a substitute for the guidelines from Grants.gov regarding electronic submissions or from NIFA concerning the CFP Program. **Please use this guide only in conjunction with the CFP Request for Applications (RFA) and the NIFA Grants.gov Application Guide.**

2. What can happen if you submit too close to the deadline

In recent years, even some experienced applicants had their proposals rejected due to problems with the submission process. Often this occurred because applicants didn't realize what problems could occur until it was too late to address them. Following are some examples of those problems:

- **Submitting at the last minute:** An application due by 5:00 P.M. on a specific date was submitted at 4:40 P.M. Grants.gov rejected it because of an error. The applicant was not notified for about 10 minutes. By the time they were able to correct the error, the 5:00 P.M. deadline had passed, so their proposal was not reviewed.
- **Submitting on the last day:** A different application was submitted much earlier on the day the proposal was due. The proposal also had errors, but this time several hours passed before the notification came from Grants.gov. It was a busy NIH grant submission day, so the system was slow at times. The applicant did not discover the rejection until the next day, when it was too late to correct it and re-submit.
- **Submitting two days in advance:** Another application went in two days early. The person who submitted it received a notice stating that the application was received, and assumed that was confirmation of a successful submission. Nothing was further from the truth. The message stated: "*Your application has been received and validated by Grants.gov and is being prepared for Grantor agency retrieval and review.*" However, it also stated: "*You will receive a subsequent email when it is accepted or rejected for review by the appropriate agency within the USDA.*" The person submitting the proposal online received no further messages and did not understand that this was not an OK. However, less than three minutes after the submission, a rejection message was sent to the email of the Authorized Representative (AR) – the person authorized by the organization to submit the application. The AR was (as is often the case) the Executive Director. But this person had gone out of town, and did not retrieve the message until four days later – well after the deadline. Nothing could be done to save the grant from being rejected.

There is a reason why larger institutions such as universities have a single unit that is responsible for submitting proposals through Grants.gov. Problems and confusion can occur, especially for those unfamiliar with the process. The application forms are somewhat challenging to complete. Documents need to be converted to PDF and loaded onto the Grants.gov submission form. They need to be checked for errors, and then sent into Grants.gov. Sometimes the submission process is confusing. In general, the burden is on YOU, the applicant, to get your proposal in on time and to deal with Grants.gov and all its foibles. Assume that things can go wrong, and allow time to deal with them.

The bottom line: Any application submitted less than two days before the deadline runs a risk of not being successfully processed by Grants.gov and sent to NIFA for review. If you wait until the last day, especially the last hour, your risk increases

even more. Remember, almost 25% of all CFP applications some years had problems with electronic submission, and as a result, many of them were not accepted or reviewed.

3. Key steps to a successful Grants.gov submission:

Understand that the Grants.gov submission process is not instantaneous. For any reason, at any time, there may be delays in the system. For example, a couple years ago, the system was crashing for several days, and Grants.gov put out this advisory:

*“The system is currently experiencing strain due to frequent user access. System-to-System users are asked to limit their entry into the system for querying opportunities, checking application submission status and application submission or posting to **NO MORE THAN ONCE PER HOUR** to reduce the load on the LDAP server.”*

If you get caught in this situation, you may not have time to get your grant in, have Grants.gov catch errors and respond, and then correct the errors and then resubmit before the deadline. If this occurs, NIFA is not obligated to accept late submissions. In addition, there have been other valid problems with the submissions process attributable to Grants.gov. If you experience problems like this, you should contact Grants.gov as soon as possible to discuss them. If the problem results in your proposal not being fully processed and received by NIFA by their deadline, Grants.gov will assign a case number that you can reference when trying to resolve the problem. After that, you should contact Grants.Gov and NIFA to explain what happened and try to resolve it favorably.

Understand the two-step Grants.gov acceptance process: Once your proposal is submitted, Grants.gov should quickly send a reply message to the person who submitted it, and also to the Authorized Representative, if that is a different person. It includes the following text: *“Once your Submission has been processed, Grants.gov will send email messages to advise you of the progress of your application through the system. Over the next 24 to 48 hours, you should receive two emails. The first will confirm receipt of your application by the Grants.gov system and the second will indicate that the application has either been successfully validated by the system prior to transmission to the grantor agency or has been rejected due to errors.”*

In other words, the initial receipt is only a confirmation that the proposal has been received by Grants.gov, but NOT that it has been successfully processed and forwarded to the granting agency (i.e. NIFA) for funding consideration.

There are two stages where errors are identified:

1. Errors may be found by the applicant when they are checking the application before submission. For example, if a required box is not filled in, an error will be noted. Other errors are described in http://grants.nih.gov/grants/ElectronicReceipt/avoiding_errors.htm. Applications must be error-free to be submitted, so usually this is not a problem by the time a proposal is submitted. However, an applicant that waits until the deadline to finalize a proposal may

run into these errors—and since it can take time to fix them, that may delay the final grant submission.

2. Once an application is submitted online, Grants.gov will examine it for other errors that may not be detected in the initial application process. For example, inconsistent budget numbers may prompt a rejection error after the proposal is submitted. When such errors are found, Grants.gov will notify the applicant, and the problems will need to be fixed and the proposal successfully resubmitted before the deadline. This occurs often, and it may take more than one attempt to fix these error(s), including calls to Grants.gov for assistance. When a deadline is near, their personnel are not always readily available. **Some proposals are doomed each year because of this situation.**

This step is usually quick – just a few minutes – but it can sometimes take hours or more than a day for it to be completed. You must allow time for such delays.

4. Rejection notices from Grants.gov:

Some years, there are problems with rejection notices for grants submitted with errors or other problems. According to this text from Grants.gov, these include:

- *An application will become stalled in the system.*
- *Not being accepted the first time, the system will attempt to resubmit the application as many as ten times.*
- *In the best of cases, the application will be accepted the second time - meaning, the applicant will receive one rejection notice, then an acceptance email.*
- *In the worst of cases, an applicant might receive up to ten rejection emails before receiving an acceptance email.*
- *Confounding the worst case scenario, the emails might not be sent in an orderly manner - meaning that an applicant could receive seven rejection notices, then an acceptance email, followed by two rejection notices.*

Grants.gov states that it “*is working hard to address this issue. In the meantime, here are some steps you should take if you receive a rejection notice for your submission*”:

- *Carefully review your application to make certain there are no legitimate errors. An erroneous rejection notice looks just like a real one.*
- *If you can't identify a legitimate reason for the rejection notice, call the Grants.gov Contact Center for advice and to document your issue. Also notify the eRA Commons Help Desk if your issues threaten on-time submission* (<http://www.grants.gov/help/help.jsp>).
- *Keep your rejection and acceptance notices as further documentation of your submission.*
- *Use eRA Commons to track the status of your submission and to view your assembled application.*
- *Look for and correct any errors identified by the eRA system.*
- *If you submit your application again before the prior submission is pulled from Grants.gov and processed by the agency, there is no guarantee that your submissions will*

reach the agency in order. Give each submission a chance to complete the submission process before retrying and make sure your final application image properly reflects your most recent submission.

• Viewing your assembled application in Commons is the ONLY way to be certain it has properly reached NIFA and is available for further consideration!

5. Who is notified of errors?

There may be as many as three parties from the applicant organization involved in the submission, and they may not all be notified. In larger agencies, the Authorized Representative (AR) named on the application is often the CEO, Executive Director, Development Director or a similar position. While **this may not be the person who actually submits the proposal**, the AR's email address is on the application. Similarly, the Principal Investigator (PI) or Project Director (PD) for the grant may not actually submit the proposal, but their email address is also on the application. So who gets notified when there is a delay or error?

In problem example described above, the initial message acknowledging receipt of the proposal went to the AR and the person submitting the proposal. But the subsequent error message went only to the AR, who was out of town. On the other hand, when grants are successfully processed, the system will notify the person submitting as well as the AR and even the PI.

To be sure your proposal gets to NIFA, **you can monitor its status online** with the tracking number that you receive when you submit it. That way, you do not have to worry about who gets a rejection notice to find out if it is stalled somewhere along the approval process.

6. If a submission problem occurs that you cannot resolve

Contact Grant.gov by phone, and explain the problem. They will assign you a case number that you can use later if you decide to appeal the rejection and try to get your proposal accepted for review. It is important that the case describes the problem clearly. For legitimate grievances, Grants.gov and NIFA may decide to accept the proposal.

If all this sounds daunting, then you got the message! We can sum up this entire advisory as follows: **BE AWARE THAT DELAYS AND PROBLEMS CAN OCCUR WITH THE ELECTRONIC SUBMISSIONS PROCESS, AND ALLOW PLENTY OF TIME FOR YOUR APPLICATION TO BE SUBMITTED AND APPROVED. For all your efforts to plan a great project and write a strong proposal, it is worth it!**

For Applicants New To The Grants.Gov Electronic Submissions Process

Several actions must be taken BEFORE an application can be submitted and accepted through Grants.gov. Please review the CFP Request for Applications (RFA) for details.

If you have not begun this process, you are urged to address these requirements promptly in order to have all the necessary steps completed on time, since this can take up to two months. This includes having a registration with Central Contractor Registration (CCR), and an organizational DUNS number.

Hotlines: NIFA has a hotline for help, as does Grants.gov. Grants.gov is your first line of help for the electronic application process. NIFA also has a help line to help with questions relating to the program. Between the two, you should be able to get all your questions answered and problems resolved. But sometimes it can take more than one call to get what you need, so allow time for this. Also, assistance providers are not always immediately available, and it may be necessary to leave a message or call back. Remember, almost everyone doing an electronic application for the first time will encounter challenges and might need this help. **Please build in enough time for this by starting the application process early!**

Completing an electronic application: It can take a lot more time to complete your first electronic application than you might have imagined! It takes time to get used to each form, to see how the components all work with each other, and to learn how to add, remove and change information. We urge first-time users to start getting familiar with these forms as soon as possible. **Be sure to keep an extra backup of your application at all times, in case data is lost at any time during the process.**

PDF: Take Notice!! Most of the content in the electronic submission process and all documents that are attached must be in PDF format, and this can be a significant challenge for first-time applicants. PDF is short for *Portable Document Format*, a file format developed by Adobe Systems. PDF makes it possible to send formatted documents and have them appear as they were formatted. Most everyone routinely opens PDF-formatted documents using free software such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.

However, Acrobat Reader and similar software will not convert documents into PDF format. For that, you will need a **PDF generator program** (such as Acrobat Professional or other cheaper / free software). If you do not have one of these installed, Grants.gov provides a list of programs that you can download – many are free or inexpensive: http://www.grants.gov/help/download_software.jsp.

(NIFA notes that people have had problems with Blue Squirrel. The Adobe product has been the smoothest, but it is an expense. The other Grants.gov suggestions should be good options).

Be sure to have a PDF program installed and working well in advance of submission. Try it out to be sure it works on various documents in Word, Excel, etc.

Once your proposal is ready, the process to convert documents into PDF and load them onto the electronic application can take a bit of time, especially if this is your first time. Problems you may encounter include changes to the format initially developed in some other program, especially when it is a chart, a spreadsheet, or similar document. This can be a problem especially if the number of pages changes as a result.

PDF and Appendices: Many applicants will be challenged to figure out how to add appendices online, since they must all be in PDF as well. This includes letters of support and commitment, articles, and similar background and supporting materials. Otherwise, your proposal may make it all the way to NIFA before this problem is detected, and the application can then get rejected. Try to get those who provide letters to send them to you in an electronic PDF format, ideally with electronic letterhead and signature. If this is not possible, you may have to scan some of these items. This means making sure you have access to a scanner, and allowing yourself enough time for this. Also, be aware that if you scan too many documents, there may be issues with the file size.

If you can't get a PDF or scanned letter with letterhead and signature, we suggest at least getting an electronic (emailed) copy of the letter and turning it into a PDF. It is better to submit these letters than to omit them due to a lack of a signature or other component. Finally, you may want to combine multiple PDF and non-PDF documents, such as letters of support, before turning them into PDF. This can be tricky and time-consuming until you get the knack of it.

Submitting on time: As described above, your greatest risk with electronic submission is waiting until the last minute to submit the proposal. It might have worked to get a hard copy proposal into overnight mail right at the deadline, but the risks for trying this electronically, especially your first time, are high. Delays at the end can occur for many reasons. Please don't let all your hard work go for nothing by missing the deadline. Your application has to be free of errors and then get to NIFA on time without any email snafus or delays. You will need to have your sign in name and password ready, and be prepared to address any error messages before the application is accepted. NOTE: The authorized representative (AR) electronic signature and password are necessary to submit proposals. Please be sure you have these available!

We hope this advisory helps you understand the electronic submission process and ensure that your application is received on time and reviewed. Good luck!