

# **Community Food Projects 2006 Planning Guide**

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**The Community Food Security Coalition**

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## **A. INTRODUCTION**

This guide was prepared by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) to assist prospective applicants for the 2006 Community Food Projects funding cycle. The announcement for these funds is titled, *Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program: Fiscal Year 2006 Request for Applications*. It is available at <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/fundview.cfm?fonum=1080>. Key changes in the guidelines and procedures this year are summarized in the next section of this Guide.

CFSC has also developed two separate guidance documents covering major new components of the CFP grant process for 2006: Letters of Intent and Planning Projects. See section B for more information on these changes. These two guides are posted separately on the CFSC website.

### **What this guide is for:**

This *Community Food Projects 2006 Planning Guide* is designed as a companion to the CFP FY 2006 Request for Applications (RFA), to help you to:

- \* Interpret some of the language and specific terminology;
- \* Plan project proposals that incorporate the overall concepts and goals of the legislation and of community food security (CFS);
- \* Develop winning proposals as part of this competitive grants process.

### **Please note:**

This guide is designed to supplement the Community Food Projects RFA, not to serve as a substitute. Not all requirements in the RFA are reviewed here. Applicants will need to carefully review the RFA itself for guidance in preparing an application.

The order of this guide and the letters and numbers that designate each section do not necessarily correspond to the sections in the RFA. However, when we refer to language in the RFA, we do reference the page numbers in that document.

### **Disclaimer:**

The authors have conducted a careful review of the 2006 RFA and have done their best to assure the accuracy of the information provided, but neither they nor the CFSC can be responsible for errors or omissions in the enclosed guidance. Applicants should always rely on the RFA itself for final language regarding the preparation of proposals.

Recommendations in this guide do not necessarily reflect the views of USDA/CSREES or any of its staff. However, we express our appreciation to CSREES/CFP staff and some past panel reviewers for their input to this document.

## **B. SUMMARY OF SUBSTANTIVE CHANGES IN RFA FOR 2006**

*There are two key changes this year, described under the first two items below. The other items reflect changes in emphasis rather than major new developments.*

### **1. There is a new two-step application process, with a brief Letter of Intent (LOI) due February 13 and a full proposal due by April 13.**

In this new process, the Letters of Intent will be used primarily to identify viable and appropriate projects and applications, and to weed out those proposals that are not a good fit for the CFP program. It is expected that a large majority of LOI submissions will be approved for full proposals. Letters will be reviewed and applicants will be notified if they are invited to submit a full proposal by February 28.

**IMPORTANT:** We recommend that anyone who is developing a Letter of Intent review the seven-page document, *Guidance for Preparing Letters of Intent for the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program*, also available on the CFSC website.

### **2. There is a new category of stand-alone Planning Projects.**

Planning has always been encouraged as part of regular CFP grant proposals, but this is the first time that stand-alone planning grants have been invited by CFP. The RFA defines a Planning Project as “an activity initiated by an eligible organization to assess food security in a defined community and develop plans aimed to improve community food security” (page 37). Grants are limited to between \$10,000 and \$25,000 total for one to three years.

**IMPORTANT:** We recommend that anyone who is considering submitting a planning grant review the six-page document, *Guidance for Preparing Planning Proposals for the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program*, also available on the CFSC website.

### **3. The allocation of funds between the three types of grants is different.**

Approximately \$4,600,000 will be available for grants in FY 2006. Of that amount, up to 10 percent (\$460,000) may be awarded for Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Projects and up to five percent (\$230,000) may be awarded for Planning Projects. With the addition of the new Planning Project category this year, the allocations for T&TA and CFP are a little lower than in the past several years.

Since the planning grant category is new and the maximum grant amount is much lower than for regular CFP or T&TA grants, that category is likely to be less competitive than the other two.

### **4. There is a greater emphasis on involving low-income communities in project planning and implementation.**

Language has been added in several places to reinforce that low-income people should be substantially involved in project planning and implementation, as well as being the beneficiaries of project activities. This has always been a strong focus of the CFP Program, but the additional language gives it even greater emphasis.

The RFA states that proposed projects must “substantially involve and/or be generated by members of the low-income community; i.e., be ‘community-based’ not just ‘community-placed’” (page 6). Under the Project Description, the RFA asks for a description of the capabilities of local low-income communities in the context of the project, and states that “low-income residents should be actively engaged in planning project goals, objectives, and outcomes” (page 17). This theme has also been strengthened in the evaluation criteria in several places.

#### **5. Participation in an annual meeting of Project Directors is required.**

The RFA states that, “Project Directors must attend a Project Director’s meeting each year at an announced location” (page 21), and that applicants should budget for one to two people to attend. As in the past several years, CFP grantees will still be “invited” to attend an evaluation training. The addition of a general meeting for Project Directors to discuss project and grant management is new, and the expectation that all grantees attend appears to be stronger.

#### **6. Use of the Common Output Tracking Form (COTF) is no longer required, but is still strongly encouraged.**

References to the Common Output Tracking Form (COTF) have been removed from the RFA this year, although CFP will continue to encourage grantees to use it. In 2004 and 2005, the RFA included a requirement for grantees to report annually on certain activities using the COTF, which was created to help CFP grantees compile information on the results of their activities, as well as to facilitate data collection across projects. However, because this requirement has not yet been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), CFP cannot require grantees to complete the COTF. Still, they will continue to strongly encourage grantees to complete the form annually to help provide information on the collective performance and the impact of the program.

### **C. ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY**

#### **1. Who is eligible to apply for Community Food Projects grants?**

Applicants must be private non-profits, such as anti-hunger organizations, farm groups, community development corporations, neighborhood alliances, or similar entities. A fuller definition is provided in the RFA (page 11). An applicant need not have 501(c) 3 status (i.e., tax-exempt), but should have sufficient organizational capacity and relevant experience as described in the RFA. Anyone who has received a federal grant can appreciate having the requisite fiscal and administrative capabilities to handle the paperwork and accounting requirements. Projects that are not incorporated 501(c) 3 entities are strongly urged to apply through such an organization. There is no penalty for doing this, and there are many advantages in terms of meeting USDA’s financial administration requirements for grants they award. The RFA clarifies that a consulting firm, even if it is non-profit, should not be the lead applicant.

Reviewers will carefully consider the qualifications of the applicant organization serving as a conduit for a collaborative group, with respect to its fiscal competency, its experience/capability in managing such a project, and its direct role in and contributions to the activities of the specific project. A proposal will be stronger if the conduit organization also plays a key role in the project

itself, in addition to providing sponsorship and administrative responsibilities. In addition, the applicant organization and most major partners should, in particular, have experience with community food and/or agriculture work, or with food-related job training and business development activities affecting low-income communities.

Although academic institutions are eligible to apply, the Community Food Projects Program does not strongly encourage them to be the lead applicants. Such eligible institutions (e.g., universities, hospitals) and non-eligible entities (such as local government agencies and for-profits) are preferably encouraged to participate as part of an application submitted by a community-based non-profit. They are, in fact, encouraged to play important roles in these projects, because they can bring a number of strengths to the project, and because this shows evidence of broader collaboration.

If a collaborative group such as a coalition is going to carry out the project, one of the partners with non-profit status should serve as the applicant unless the alliance itself is a qualified non-profit. Be sure the specific roles of the applicant and the other parties in the collaboration are clearly explained in the proposal.

## **2. Partners and subcontracts**

As described in the RFA, you may certainly subcontract with one or more partners to carry out part of the work, and this may in fact strengthen the proposal. However, subcontracts often add to administrative costs, so consider arrangements in which the usual overhead is reduced or eliminated by at least one of the parties. This can be particularly important for contracts with academic institutions, which generally carry a high indirect rate. The value of reduced rates can also count as in kind contributions to help you meet your match requirements, as long as this is documented. Also, take note that no more than one-third of the budget may be sub-awarded to for-profit organizations.

## **3. New and resubmitted applications**

CFP applications may be either “new” or “resubmitted.” All applications will be fully reviewed using the same process and evaluation criteria. It is quite appropriate to revise an application that was not funded in the past and submit it again. Some applicants have tried for several years before being funded by CFP. When revising applications, it is very important to take the reviewers’ comments into consideration. Applicants who check the resubmission box will be given the option of responding to reviewers’ comments, in the “Response to Previous Review” section (page 16). Responding to the comments is recommended, to demonstrate that an effort has been made to understand and address past reviewers’ concerns.

## **4. Training and technical assistance (T&TA) grants**

This year the Community Food Projects Program again provides opportunities to apply for training and technical assistance (T&TA) grants. The RFA outlines the criteria for eligibility for T&TA grants, focusing on the capacity to provide T&TA in community food security; demonstrated competency and accountability; and demonstrated willingness to share information (see page 11). The criteria are broader than for regular CFP grants, but applicants still require the requisite experience and capacity to deliver services to the geographic area proposed.

T&TA grants also differ in that a broader geographic scope is encouraged. While regular CFP proposals may target a small community or communities in a defined area, T&TA may cover a region or the entire country. As with regular proposals, multi-partner collaboration is encouraged in the design and delivery of the work involved. T&TA projects may serve CFP applicants, prospective applicants, and/or grantees. There is additional clarification of the scope and focus of T&TA projects in Part I. Section C of the RFA and in Part E of this guide.

## **D. WHAT DOES AND DOESN'T GET FUNDED BY CFP**

The Community Food Projects (CFP) grant process has been very competitive. In 2004, only about one in five applications was funded, and last year it was only about one in seven. So it is very important to be aware of what kind of proposals do and don't get funded by CFP.

### **1. Attributes of winning proposals**

Winning CFP grants are submitted by a diverse range of community-based organizations, including food banks, Community Development Corporations (CDCs), religious organizations, anti-poverty groups, educational organizations, youth projects, farmers' markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) sponsors, among others. The types of projects vary greatly and are difficult to categorize because they usually integrate a number of different components. Activities commonly supported include combinations of local food production, value-added or food service entrepreneurship, food marketing, food and nutrition education, and skills training.

Winning proposals come together in a number of important ways. That is, to USDA staff and to the review panelists, these proposals, at a minimum:

- \* Are for innovative and exciting projects;
- \* Incorporate CFP objectives in a well-organized manner;
- \* Show sufficient planning and understanding of community food needs;
- \* Demonstrate genuine collaboration among partners and involvement of the community;
- \* Contain a well-prepared, well-written narrative; and
- \* Meet all other RFA guidelines.

When reviewers classify proposals for funding, the applications generally fall into three ranking categories:

**Must Fund:** These proposals are well prepared, with well-planned and well-explained projects. These will likely all receive funding.

**Maybe:** These projects are worthwhile; however, they have weaknesses that make them less than certain for funding. Out of this pool, maybe half will get support, as reviewers try to balance strengths and weaknesses among the competing applications.

**No funding:** These proposals are not recommended for funding; they really missed the mark in a number of ways.

CFP reviewers are very interested in supporting worthy, community-based projects, and may give them the benefit of the doubt if the quality of the proposal writing is lacking in some ways, as long as all the program requirements are met. For example, many worthwhile proposals come from programs in which the English literacy skills of participants may be limited. Reviewers are involved in and knowledgeable about community food work, and they are seeking to fund the best projects more than the best-written proposals.

## **2. Past winners:**

A good first step to determine if your project fits the profile of a fundable Community Food Projects grant is to look at what has been funded in the past. On the CFP website, you will find summaries of past grants at [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/sri/hunger\\_sri\\_awards.html](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/nea/food/sri/hunger_sri_awards.html). The descriptions provided can give you an overall sense of the types of activities that get funded as well as the amounts awarded. Examples of highly rated CFP proposals and case studies of CFP-funded projects are available on the CFSC website at <http://www.foodsecurity.org/funding.html>.

## **3. What does not get funded:**

It's important to understand that many worthwhile activities do not get CFP support. You can get good ideas for preparing better proposals by understanding characteristics of applications that do not win as well as those that do get funding. Some of the major weaknesses of CFP proposals include:

### **(a) Failing to address the full RFA intent:**

Community Food Projects have a very unique set of priorities. Applicants may try to fit a similar type of food or farm project into the CFP mold, but it doesn't really conform well. There are so many excellent community food initiatives going – they run urban farms; they establish markets; they sponsor feeding programs; they set up community gardens. They are often under-funded and struggling initiatives, and CFP appears to address their goals to feed low-income residents with locally produced foods. However, CFP is broader in its intent. The RFA emphasizes the need for integrating multiple objectives that include linkages among food sectors; comprehensive planning; multi-agency approaches; incorporating other (USDA) food assistance programs; and building long-term solutions to problems. In other words, CFP wants the players to develop more comprehensive approaches that involve the community in building longer-term solutions to food insecurity. Winning proposals address these priorities best.

### **(b) Unbalanced narratives:**

With only 10 pages of narrative available, well-written grants economize on space and focus only on what is clearly important to reviewers. A poorly prepared narrative often places too much emphasis on some components. For example, the proposal has 3-4 pages documenting poverty and hunger in the community, but only a page or so describing the program objectives and activities. As a result, the reviewers don't understand the proposed project well enough to adequately assess its merits.

### **(c) Unbalanced scope of work and budget:**

A well-balanced proposal matches resources to the work plan, both in terms of total request and how it is allocated. It does not promise too much or too little for the level of funding requested, and allocates the budget according to the types of work to be carried out. Proposals that promise the sky or make overly optimistic claims will reduce your proposal's credibility. They have a pretty good sense of what things cost and what is practical given the proposed budget, personnel, and other resources.

Other common weaknesses include the following:

**Activities not appropriate to the overall guidelines:** Some proposals are for projects and activities that are in themselves worthwhile but just don't fit well within the scope of the CFP program. These include expanding existing emergency feeding programs, distributing vegetable seeds, and setting up SHARE programs. Such activities, particularly if they are stand-alone, can usually be supported by other sources of funding and lack the innovation and comprehensive focus expected for this program. Some proposals aren't funded because they do not sufficiently target low-income / underserved constituencies.

**Single or limited purpose projects:** Proposals that do not incorporate the broad Community Food Projects objectives don't get far. Many proposals basically duplicate well-developed programs such as community gardens, farmers' markets, or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models, but they are not comprehensive in the sense of building in other community economic goals (e.g. skills development, employment, entrepreneurship), or additional environmental or food system enhancements.

**Top-down projects:** Similarly, projects are weaker if they clearly emerge from the agendas of single organizations or from individuals, and do not reflect or incorporate grass roots or multi-organization participation in planning and implementation. A good project or idea may start off this way, but needs to build in broader community input, support and participation to address CFP criteria such as building linkages among food system sectors, and promoting comprehensive responses to the problems being addressed. Changes to the RFA in 2006 place an even greater emphasis on involving low-income community members in project planning and implementation.

**Redundant or ongoing funding:** Proposals are weaker if they merely seek Community Food Projects funds to support an existing activity, without building in a new component and other important characteristics. CFP is not just another pot of money for continuing a well-established program, however worthwhile. It can help a relatively new project with limited funds expand to meet its initial objectives, with the other funding serving as match. But the overall project or the specific activities proposed need to be sufficiently distinct so that a CFP grant will provide one-time funding to get key aspects of the program implemented.

**Requests mainly for single expenditures**—such as a large piece of equipment or a vehicle. Certainly Community Food Projects funds can pay for some of these costs, but as part of a more integrated program and budget. “Infrastructure improvement and development” is included among the program goals, but it is important that it be integrated within a broader programmatic context.

#### 4. Are you ready to apply?

As a prospective applicant, you will review the RFA and decide if your proposed project is appropriate. But even if it appears to fit many of the guidelines, you ought to assess whether you and your collaborators are ready to apply for this round. You may also want to consider the option of submitting a Planning Project grant, especially if your project is still in the relatively early stages of planning and development. (See separate guide to developing Planning Project grants, available on the CFSC website).

**(a) New projects:** Projects are expected to fulfill a challenging list of criteria to merit a high rating. If the entire project is new, in that even the planning is being carried out for the first time after this RFA is issued, applicants will have a real challenge to address all CFP objectives. In particular, collaboration is one of the more challenging aspects of community food strategies. It is a process that requires time, careful planning, and skilled leadership to work effectively. Your proposal will need to show evidence of prior efforts to build bridges with multiple organizations and community leaders. Such linkages and strategies cannot simply materialize from the pen of a grant-writer. Reviewers will generally detect the difference between a project that has built true linkages and one in which collaborators have been signed up at the last minute.

**(b) Community food assessments (CFAs):** Sometimes, a new project (and proposal) emerges from a community-based needs assessment or similar strategic planning process, wherein there is no prior program structure but the planning is well along, the community needs are established, and the partners are identified. New projects that emerge from this type of process tend to be better positioned to meet all the CFP criteria.

Community needs may be different from those of a single organization, which has a specific mission. Similarly, the proposed responses or solutions that community members and other organizations want may not match what your particular organization is planning. You may want to consider conducting a community food assessment (CFA) to address this. A CFA is a participatory and collaborative process that examines a broad range of food-related issues and assets in order to improve the community's food system. Through such assessments, diverse stakeholders work together to research their local food system, establish community needs and priorities, and take action to address them.

A CFA process can take you through planning steps that identify resources and needs, collaboration and community participation opportunities, and follow-up activities. It is a useful strategy to develop a CFP project because CFAs often create the collaborative structure from which a successful Community Food Projects proposal can be developed. Alternatively, CFP can provide funding for food assessments, especially as part of a broader project proposal. In this context, the applicants and the community have honed in on priority areas but may want to do more strategic planning and assessment to refine their overall program and scope of work—a stand-alone assessment would be less likely to be funded.

For more information on community food assessments, see the CFA Program page on CFSC's website at [http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfa\\_home.html](http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfa_home.html); or the CFSC guidebook, "What's Cooking in Your Food System? A Guide to Community Food Assessment" (<http://www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html>.)

**(c) Building on established projects:** Many of the proposals that are funded grow out of programs that are already underway or even well established. Sometimes the application proposes an innovative enhancement to an existing initiative. Here, many of the building blocks that are needed to make CFP projects work are in place—key personnel, community input and linkages, matching funds, and other programmatic building blocks.

## **E. NEWER AREAS OF EMPHASIS IN THE RFA**

In 2003, the RFA was amended to provide additional emphasis on several areas: infrastructure, planning, and marketing. Also in 2003, training and technical assistance (T&TA) grants were offered again, and for the first time multiple grants were made in this area. These areas are included again in 2006, along with a new category of Planning Projects. Below is some additional clarification on these newer areas of emphasis in the RFA.

### **1. Infrastructure improvement and development**

Infrastructure improvement and development means the purchase or lease of equipment necessary for the production, handling, or marketing of locally produced food (page 37).

The Community Food Projects program has always allowed funding for infrastructure, but in prior years there has been some reluctance to focus too much on this category. With funding for capital costs for facilities and equipment difficult to find, this new emphasis is welcome. However, expenditures for infrastructure should not be the main focus of a grant or its main cost category; rather, such expenditures should be part of a well-planned, comprehensive project. For example, securing a vehicle as part of a marketing plan or renovating a facility as part of a food storage or processing enterprise are examples of how infrastructure would best fit within an overall CFP proposal. In addition, reviewers are likely to favor funding these types of expenditures where there is good evidence of cost-share or in-kind match for the infrastructure component; for example, where a community makes a building available at a subsidized rent, but the facility needs to be retrofitted for an intended community food use.

### **2. Planning for long-term solutions:**

Planning grants or even planning as part of a CFP grant were discouraged in past years, but now these have been incorporated into the overall CFP approach to project development. Now, independent planning projects such as a community food assessment (CFA) can be funded, either as a stand-alone Project Planning grant or as part of a ‘regular’ CFP-funded initiative. Keep in mind that CSREES is increasingly looking for evidence of community involvement in project development, particularly from low-income constituents. (See separate guide to developing Planning Project grants, available on the CFSC website).

Planning can occur before a CFP project is proposed, or as part of the CFP initiative itself. Community food assessment is an example of a one-time activity that can take place before a project is proposed. More focused CFAs can be integrated into a regular proposal as well. Another type of planning grant is one that sets up a more lasting planning structure, such as a Food Policy Council (FPC). In the RFA, “Food policy council means a representative, multi-stakeholder, inter-agency body at the state, regional, or local level that is sanctioned by a

government entity to address a broad range of food, nutrition, or agriculture issues in a manner that is comprehensive and self-sustaining and mutually benefits agricultural producers and low-income consumers” (page 37).

In this case, the FPC is the key focus of the proposal, rather than specific activities that will presumably result from the establishment of the FPC. Nevertheless, FPC proposals that have already defined priority areas may be reviewed more favorably than those that appear more open-ended in their focus at the time they are proposed, if part of a ‘regular’ proposal. As part of a Planning Project, however, the end-points of FPC planning may not be known – the point is to have a planning process to establish these priorities.

Similarly, a food planning association can be set up as an ongoing body – a collaboration involving multiple players in the community. A community food assessment (CFA) is a great way to create such a group, but it can also be pulled together without conducting a CFA. Food planning bodies represent an excellent way to link disparate food, nutrition, and agriculture interests, along with education, public health, environment, and other sectors, and are increasingly being integrated into CFP proposals. They provide evidence of community-based planning and multi-sector linkages, and they encourage project continuity and sustainability.

In either case, community-based planning should take place as part of developing the initiative. CSREES is increasingly looking for evidence of community involvement in planning, especially including the low-income communities targeted by a food project. This may begin as a community food assessment or similar approach to generating community-based input. But planning may be worked into a regular proposal as well. For example, a community has already carried out an initial planning process and those involved have decided they want to develop an urban farming initiative, but are not sure quite how to do it. They apply for funds to develop a specific urban agriculture strategy, business plan, or whatever other tools are needed to implement a focused project, and then implement those specific activities that emerge from further planning work.

### **3. Marketing**

One of the CFP program objectives is “the creation of innovative marketing activities that mutually benefit agricultural producers and low-income consumers” (page 3). CFP has always shown a strong preference for entrepreneurial activities, which usually include marketing, and since 2003 marketing has received additional emphasis. So look for continued if not expanded support for marketing-based proposals that incorporate other key priorities such as entrepreneurship, long-term sustainability of the project, and links between for-profit and non-profit sectors.

### **4. Training and technical assistance (T&TA) grants**

This year the Community Food Projects Program again provides opportunities to apply for training and technical assistance (T&TA) grants on a nationwide or regional. Of the \$4.6 million available this fiscal year, up to \$460,000 may be awarded for T&TA projects. The RFA defines a T&TA project as “a project of regional or national scope that requests federal assistance to help community-based entities develop proposals for funding under the CFPCGP and/or to provide

information, education, and skills training to Community Food Project applicants, potential applicants, and grantees” (page 38).

T&TA grants are still a relatively new area for CFP awards, with 2003 being the first year that CSREES provided multiple T&TA grant awards and supported regional as well as national projects. Therefore, there is limited additional information available to guide prospective applicants in developing such applications. However, the RFA provides some helpful clarification of the scope and focus of T&TA projects. It states that “regional projects may address a particular region of the nation or of a state, or target a particular type of activity (e.g. gardening) or particular low-income/food insecure constituency (e.g., African American or Native American organizations or sustainable agriculture groups)” (p.8). It also includes information on what types of T&TA services may be funded, including “general capacity-building for CFP applicants or grantees in areas such as project evaluation, leadership development, or coalition building; or assistance on a particular type of project, such as farm-to-institution methods, food system assessment, food system planning, or local or regional food system development” (page 8).

Past T&TA grants have supported outreach to prospective applicants about the CFP program; assistance to CFP applicants with planning projects and preparing CFP proposals; workshops on CFS issues and organizational development skills; capacity building for youth leaders; and assistance to CFP grantees with program evaluation and with development of farm to school programs.

T&TA grants are not the same as regular CFP grants, and they cannot be combined. However, a standard CFP proposal can certainly incorporate training and/or technical assistance as part of its work plan; this is common and encouraged. But that is not the same as a T&TA grant, and such work must be matched along with the rest of the activities being proposed. By contrast, an exclusive T&TA proposal does not require a match, but is meant to focus exclusively on training and/or technical assistance activities for CFP applicants, potential applicants, and grantees on a regional or national scale. Organizations that want to provide T&TA on a smaller scale or with less of a focus on the CFP program are encouraged to submit regular CFP grant proposals instead.

## **F. PREPARING WINNING PROPOSAL APPLICATIONS**

### **1. Allow sufficient lead-time**

USDA/CFP proposals are not the hardest to prepare, but they are not the easiest either. Leave yourselves sufficient time to coordinate with partners, write a good narrative, get all necessary letters of commitment, and complete all other requirements. Waiting until a week or two before the application is due will likely leave you with an inadequate proposal. In fact, since the RFA does not change much from year to year, the advantage goes to applicants who get started early on their proposal—even before the official RFA is issued.

### **2. Prepare original text**

The RFA is requesting specific information based on expressed legislative objectives—collaboration, community linkages, entrepreneurship, etc. Many of these topics are typically not emphasized in other grant application requirements. It is usually obvious to reviewers when applications are just cut and pasted from other proposals.

### **3. Be coherent and convincing**

While CSREES makes the final determination of who gets grants, they rely heavily on a review panel comprised essentially of experienced community food practitioners and academics. Your goal is to convince a wide range of reviewers that your project is worthwhile, even if not everyone is familiar with your specific type of project.

### **4. Provide adequate writing quality**

Good proposals are generally well written and organized. The limited page length for the narrative forces you to be concise but also to the point. While it is important to be competent, proposals do not necessarily need to be expertly crafted by professional grant writers. The bottom line is: can these reviewers get a clear understanding of your project from what you are writing?

The reviewers are your peers, and they are generally sensitive to the limited resources many groups have when it comes to "development" or fund raising. Having a sophisticated grant-writer is not necessarily the solution, if the result is a slick but poorly thought-out project that doesn't convey the heart and soul of the project and its participants. Reviewers are very interested in supporting worthy, community-based projects, and may give them the benefit of the doubt if the quality of the proposal writing is lacking in some ways, as long as all the program requirements are met.

Many good applications come from programs in which the English literacy skills of those involved may be limited, and reviewers recognize this. However, an application should be neatly prepared and have correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure, or it risks biasing some reviewers. Basically, they feel that if you have put sufficient effort into the grant proposal, you are more likely to do the same for your project! The bottom line is: prepare your best proposal with whatever resources you have available, and expect that you will be judged fairly by your peers.

### **5. Follow instructions**

Many proposals get off to a bad start because they fail to fulfill all the requirements laid out in the RFA. "Don't sweat the small stuff" may be an adage for a good relationship but not for a good proposal! It is essential that all requirements listed in the RFA be met. Leaving out key forms or other required information can, at worst, disqualify an application, and at best indicates to a reviewer that the applicant perhaps didn't care enough or was hastily pulling the proposal together at the last minute.

When only a small share of proposals get accepted, a few small errors or oversights can lead to an otherwise good proposal not being funded. So be sure to read and reread the RFA thoroughly and pay attention to rules about page limits, font size, and similar details. Like most federal grant

programs, these conditions are scattered throughout the RFA, so it helps to go over it carefully to catch every detail. Never assume there is flexibility in these guidelines—there generally is not—from getting it in on time, to page limits and required attachments.

A very important guideline is to collate your application in the order specified in the RFA. This reduces the likelihood of confusion by reviewers who may be reading 20 or more proposals. Making it easy on reviewers in this way reduces the chances they will rate the proposal a lower score for technical reasons.

## **6. Pay attention to the Project Summary**

The 250-word project summary is one of the last documents you should prepare, but it's the first page read by the reviewers. It sets the tone for your entire proposal. Therefore, it is well worth your time to craft not only a well-written and comprehensive summary statement, but also one that really "sells" your project. In preparing the summary, assume that the reader gets no additional information; i.e., that your entire application will be judged by this short statement. This will help you compose a compelling statement.

## **G. FUNDING LEVELS AND MATCHING FUNDS**

### **1. Size of grant requests**

**(a) Maximum grant amounts:** About \$4.6 million is available for all projects funded this year and the RFA states that up to ten percent (\$460,000) may be awarded for T&TA Projects and up to five percent (\$230,000) may be awarded for Planning Projects. The maximum allowable grant is \$300,000 over the lifetime of the project and \$125,000 in any single year. The program does make awards that approach these maximum levels, but most of the grants are smaller. The RFA provides an option for TA grants to exceed these limits if they are “fully justified,” but to date no grants have been made over the regular limits. Reviewers rate every proposal on its merits, without any consideration of budgets. After the proposals are ranked, they go back and review the budgets to see if there are opportunities to reduce expenses.

**(b) Larger grant requests need to be clearly justified.** If the activity is for multiple years, impacts a lot of people, and proposes activities that are costly but appropriate, it can justify a larger award. On the other hand, if reviewers look at two projects that propose essentially similar activities and see vastly different budgets, they may question whether the more costly one needs as much funding as requested. Note: If the proposal is highly rated but funds are limited, USDA will sometimes fund it at a lower level than requested. The project scope and budget will then need to be revised to reflect the lower award level.

**(c) Budgets should be appropriate.** Reviewers don't want excessive requests for limited activities, but also don't like proposals that appear too ambitious for the amount being sought.

**(d) Consider smaller requests for shorter time periods.** While these are one-time awards for projects, applicant organizations may still apply for a different project in future years. Several grantees have received additional awards for a different initiative.

**(e) Budget pages:** Be sure to provide a separate budget page for each year of the proposed project, as well as a cumulative budget (i.e., including all years together).

## **2. Matching funds requirements**

Community Food Projects legislation requires that the federal funds you are seeking be matched dollar-for-dollar by non-federal resources. Specifically, this can be achieved through "cash and/or in-kind contributions, including third-party in-kind contributions, fairly evaluated" (page 11). Third party in-kind contributions means non-cash contributions of property or services including real property, equipment, or supplies, provided by non-Federal third parties and directly benefiting and specifically identifiable to the project.

**(a) Sources of match:** Actual matching funds can come from a state or local government agency, or private sources such as foundations or charities. "In kind" is a bit trickier. It refers to resources that are contributed to the project, but not paid for by funds from a grant or contract that is directed to the project. Examples of in kind funds include the value of office space used *exclusively* for the funded project, or the value, fairly assessed, of transportation, photocopying, postage or other costs covered by the applicant organization or by a project partner. Personnel time—either volunteered or paid by a participating organization from other funding—is a valuable in kind contribution.

**(b) Inappropriate match:** Some types of match may be considered unsuitable, often because they are less a real match than an intended outcome or integral part of a program. Examples include:

- \* food donations (e.g., the value of foods gleaned and donated to a food bank);
- \* investment funds for new enterprises (e.g., money raised from investors for a retail food store);
- \* food production (e.g., the value of food grown and marketed as part of the project);
- \* volunteer time that is already integral to a project (e.g., as a requirement for participation in a food coop).

**(c) Overmatching:** The legislation does not require that you contribute matching resources beyond the one-to-one requirement. However, evidence of additional funding can increase the project's self-reliance and make it more self-sustaining. On the other hand, if your project has so much funding that Community Food Projects support will not represent a major or critical component, then your proposal may not fit the intent of this program to "support the development of Community Food Projects with a one-time infusion of Federal dollars to make such projects self-sustaining." CFP is not looking to be a small part of a big, long-term program. It wants to play a significant role in funding specific initiatives that might otherwise not take place. For example, Community Food Projects funds would not be appropriate to support or expand the regular activities of a food bank. But they could well be suited to assist the food bank to set up a food sector skills training program, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm / donation initiative, or other activities along those lines.

**(d) Timing for raising matching funds:** A frequent comment we hear is the challenge of raising matching money before USDA has awarded a grant. Many private sector donors, such as foundations, like to fund projects as a challenge or as a matching grant, so having the USDA

award in hand can be helpful to leveraging additional funds. However, CSREES does not want to delay the start up of projects, so you will need to have secured and carefully documented at least the first year's match. Finding some of the match for the second or third year of a grant (if applicable) can be delayed, but your proposal should include a clear plan as to how you intend to secure it. You will not get your funds for that year released until the match has been satisfactorily documented.

Please note: Revenues received as a component of the project may be counted, but only after the fact. For example, revenue from the sale of a value-added product or income from service delivery that is clearly associated with the project can count as match, but it cannot be forecasted and applied in the same year. Rather, this income must be documented, and then can apply to a subsequent year of a multi-year grant.

**(e) Verification of matching resources:** Proposals should include written verification of commitments of matching support (including both cash and in-kind contributions) from third parties. Written verification means sufficient documentation to allow USDA to assess the value of the contribution, and providing evidence that a person with the appropriate level of authority has made this commitment; i.e., it should be signed by the authorized organizational representatives. The RFA includes additional details regarding what information is needed to verify matching support (page 21).

**(f) Documenting matching funds:** For matching funds (cash), verification of the funds source must be provided. However, applicants who already have funds on hand can avoid potential complications in the grants management process by simply stating the amount of cash they have available, rather than linking it to a specific grant commitment.

If documentation of another grant received by the applicant is provided, it should include a copy of the award letter stating the purpose(s) for which the funding was provided. If this is not clear, then other backup documents may need to be included, such that CSREES is satisfied that the funds are for programmatic activities consistent with this proposal you are submitting to CFP, and for the same project period.

The RFA states that for any third party cash contributions (i.e., by a partner in the project), a separate pledge agreement is required for each donation, signed by the authorized organizational representatives of the donor organization and the applicant organization, which must include specific information stipulated on page 21. The applicant organization should indicate that it can and will accept transference of funds (if applicable) or apply the funds as part of the project. This can be done through such an agreement, or in a letter prepared by the applicant, as well as in the budget and budget narrative. Applicants are encouraged to assist collaborating / third party donors to prepare the necessary documentation, to be sure it contains the required information.

**(g) Valuing in kind:** For third party in-kind contributions, you will need specific separate pledge agreement (i.e., a letter) for such contributions, which must include a good faith estimate of the current fair market value of the contribution and other details specified in the RFA (page 21).

The RFA states that the value of applicant contributions to the project shall be established in accordance with applicable cost principles. Again, clear details are needed for each item or type

of in kind provided. In addition, the applicant organization should demonstrate that it is willing and able to receive the items contributed and apply them toward the project. This can be done through an applicant letter or elsewhere in the proposal if appropriate.

The RFA provides details of where to find further guidance on requirements relating to matching and allowable costs. These documents may be downloaded from the following websites: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants/index.html> and <http://www.arnet.gov/far>.

**(h) Providing a good faith estimate of the current fair market value of the third party in kind contribution:** CSREES will look for you to provide evidence that the value of the in kind provided is accurate and reasonable. Examples of this documentation may include the following:

**Personnel:** For each person for whom in kind time is being claimed, specify the number of hours and the hourly rate that person is paid at or valued at. This should match their current salary or wage rates for other work done for the organization they are affiliated with or for similar activities they carry out. For example, if an organization is donating time of an employee who makes \$30,000 per year, it can break this down into an hourly rate, and include the proportional value of fringe benefits and overhead if these are applicable.

In addition, the activities being carried out by that person will need to be described, and given a proportional allotment if possible. For example, person XYZ will state that he will spend 50 hours in year one loading a truck (one hr. per week).

**Vehicles:** Describe the vehicle. Evidence of the market value of the vehicle may be requested. Describe how that value was determined. CSREES may ask for the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) and for you to obtain an outside appraisal of the vehicle's value, even if you have to pay to get that estimate.

**Land donation:** As with vehicles, CSREES may request an independent appraisal of the value of the land—either purchased or leased. It should not be valued above the rate provided for other groups (if applicable). Similarly, buildings or other large donations such as equipment may need independent appraisal.

**Space:** CSREES may request evidence of the rental value of office space. A lease agreement would be suitable. The value should not exceed that applied to other users of the space under similar arrangements, if applicable.

The RFA refers applicants to a series of government documents that provide further guidance and other requirements relating to matching and allowable costs (page 21).

**Post-award verification of match:** After a proposal is funded, CSREES will closely scrutinize all matching funds and in kind. In effect, they consider these to be as important as the federal Community Food Projects funding itself in terms of oversight and verification. Requests for additional documentation of match are now fairly routine procedures before grant funds are released in part or in total.

### **3. Budget Narrative**

Reviewers will judge your proposal mainly by what it proposes to achieve and how it will accomplish its objectives. But your budget needs to make sense. Because the USDA budget forms combine many line item categories, explaining the details can make the difference between whether an otherwise good application gets to be a finalist or not. It also helps you defend each line item, because USDA will look for areas where your budget could be reduced. This often occurs because they are trying to fund as many worthwhile projects as possible with very limited funding, and they trim many requests to find this extra money.

**(a) Budget justification page(s):** The budget justification is an add-on you attach after the formal budget pages. It should explain every budget line item, and break down large categories into specific expenditures. This is also the place to explain any unusual expenditures—particularly if they are relatively large and not clearly detailed in the narrative section. Reviewers and USDA will look at these details to make sure they are consistent with your proposed activities, and also will consider whether there is sufficient funding to accomplish what you are proposing to do.

Give particular attention to the budget justification section; it should be neat and avoid redundancy. Splitting out costs for each year of the project is clearer, but it is not necessary to repeat lengthy information for each of those years—just the items that change, such as new supplies and equipment, salary increases, and the like.

Be sure to explain / detail matching funds and in kind as well as USDA/CFP line items. Some of this may be in the letters of commitment. If so, refer to these in the budget justification, but still repeat the information here. In other words, show the matching resources, including in kind, in the same way as the USDA CFP budget line items are presented. For example, in kind personnel time should not be stated as a simple amount. It should be broken down to show the hourly wage and benefits equivalent, or with other details similar to those you use to explain CFP-funded personnel time.

**(b) Where to place match funds documentation in your proposal:** The RFA specifies that the applicant institution should also summarize sources and amounts of all matching support on a separate page immediately following the Budget Narrative. All pledge agreements must be placed immediately after the summary of matching support.

#### **4. Letters of commitment and support**

**(a) Letters are important:** The narrative section of your application is limited to 10 pages, and this means limited space for describing the role of each project partner. Therefore, letters from each major participating organization (or individual such as a consultant) are important, including one by the applicant organization. Letters can also help provide additional details about the project that could not be fit into the narrative. Take advantage of this opportunity!

In addition to letters from collaborators, the RFA also states that, “a limited number of other support letters... where appropriate, are encouraged to provide evidence of broad community involvement” (page 17). A smaller number of individualized and specific letters is considered more persuasive than large numbers of fairly standardized letters.

**(b) Letter content:** Reviewers read these letters carefully to assess the degree of commitment and involvement of each organization. Form letters or letters that simply state the project is important and that the organization will support it will signify to reviewers that the group has not been very involved in the planning of the project. On the other hand, a unique letter that details the specific role of the organization, its past contributions, and its proposed activities in the planning and implementation of the project will be much more useful. If a project has true collaboration, this will show in the level of substantive information and consistency in the details provided in these letters. Letters of commitment also should carefully document the contributions of cash or in kind (see Section G.2 above). This may be included in the same letter or as a separate letter of commitment.

**(c) Providing guidance for letters:** Your organizational collaborators will need guidance on what to include in their letters of commitment regarding documentation of matching funds or in kind. Because you need very specific types of information, it is important to communicate what particular details you need included and how you want these described. (Note—this is not the same as writing the letter for them! If they are genuinely involved in the project, their letters will stand out as both sincere and original.) But you want the matching resources information to be as accurate and complete as possible. Otherwise, it may hold up your grant award should your proposal be successful. Feel free to provide partner groups a copy of the specific guidance for match contained in the RFA (and/or in this guide).

## **H. PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

You have only 10 pages to answer many complex questions in your narrative. The key to brevity is to be succinct, yet complete—avoid redundant statements and put together an overall description that makes sense. You can free up space in the main narrative by communicating some information via charts and tables and placing them in the appendix section; indeed the RFA encourages this strategy. For example, a table of demographic data can free up space you might otherwise use to document conditions of need (e.g., poverty and food insecurity in the community). Similarly, you might prepare a timeline and activity summary as a table.

The RFA outlines the criteria for the narrative for T&TA grants (page 18). While the components are similar to those for regular grants, the overall context clearly needs to be very different. Rather than focusing on the conditions in individual communities, the context for the needs or background section should focus on the CFP-related issues and/or needs to be addressed.

Note that you are asked to repeat each item before responding to it. It is fine to repeat only the initial statement (i.e., summarized), as we have done below. Below are some additional suggestions for each narrative item:

### **4. The Community To Be Served and the Needs To Be Addressed**

Your narrative should briefly document socio-economic conditions, food insecurity, and/or environmental and food system problems by providing demographic and other information. This may include, for example, poverty rates, enrollment in federal food programs (including those listed in the RFA), use of emergency food systems, declining farm populations, or related indicators of need. But do not go overboard in providing extensive demographic information—focus on aspects that will be impacted by the project you are proposing. For example, if your

proposal proposes job training, provide unemployment information; if it proposes working with local farms, then include data about trends in local agriculture. This helps show the need for the project. The RFA also states that, “the emphasis should be on a local analysis of community conditions, although relevant, outside analyses may be cited” (page 17).

A second type of needs description should be some rationale connecting the proposed project to the broader needs being addressed. In other words, it is not enough to demonstrate that there is food insecurity in your target area or population; you will want to also discuss the rationale for the particular project that will address it. What led to the strategies proposed; why will they be the appropriate response? Did the target community and other partners contribute to a strategic planning process that suggested this was a good approach? Is there prior evidence of effectiveness of the types of activities being proposed? This is the place to describe how collaborative or community-based needs assessments or other planning took place that developed the justification and support for this initiative. New text in the RFA this year says, “beyond a recitation of statistics, applications should describe local capabilities of low-income communities in the context of project activities and operations” (page 17).

## **5. The Organizations Involved in the Project**

You will need to list all participating organizations and a short description of their roles. Reviewers will be assessing the overall relationship—past and current—between the partners, and the degree to which each will be involved in the initiative. Although participation by several organizations is expected, it is not the number that counts as much as the role(s) each will play. If there is a collaborative context (i.e., an alliance, coalition, council, or other group that will sponsor and/or manage the project), then you need to describe this body and list its participants.

In addition, the partners need to be qualified / appropriate to the project. Do they have the requisite experience, resources, and relationship to the project that makes participation logical and attractive? Does your project include key players in your area (usually familiar to at least some reviewers)?

To save space, avoid lengthy details here—less than a page total is about the most space to allot for this information. The secret to this strategy is to rely on letters of commitment from each organization or key player to provide specific details about the roles of the parties involved. Similarly, the Descriptions of Key Personnel section is another place to provide information about organizations that are providing such personnel to the project.

## **6. Project Goals and Purposes**

Be concise. Understand that reviewers are looking more for "objectives" here than "goals" in the traditional sense. In other words, list definable objectives that translate directly to activities and expected outcomes, rather than broad underlying visions, values, mission statements, or similar descriptions.

In addition, be specific. Quantitative information is valuable here and in your descriptions of activities and their relationships to program outcomes. USDA and reviewers want to know how many constituents will participate; how much land you will develop or what quantities of food

you expect to produce, distribute or process; how many people will benefit from the project; or other "hard" estimates of outcomes relevant to your proposed activities.

New text this year emphasizes the importance of involving low-income communities in program planning, not just as beneficiaries. The RFA states that, "low-income residents should be actively engaged in planning project goals, objectives, and outcomes. Insights from low-income residents gained through active participation on boards, advisory panels, focus groups, etc., should be incorporated into the project" (page 17).

## **7. Activities to Achieve the Goals**

There are many ways to describe what you will be doing, as long as you do just that! In other words, the reviewers expect sufficient detail about how you will carry out your program to judge whether it is well-planned, systematic, practical, and achievable with the proposed budget, staff, and partner organizations. So be as specific and organized as you can within the space constraints.

## **8. Timeline**

There are different ways to provide a clear timeline. Some proposals provide a grid or similar chart that outlines major activities or milestones and indicates the months or quarters in which each will be accomplished. Alternatively, you can combine timeline with activities into a set of categories or milestones, and briefly indicate the timeline needed to accomplish each set of related activities per milestone. This can allow more room in the narrative to give an overall description of the project, while encapsulating the specifics in a table.

## **6. Relationship to Program Objectives**

The CFP program has multiple objectives, as listed on page five and other places in the RFA. How you will meet some of these objectives should be clear to reviewers in the ways your program is laid out. As such, your narrative will be easier to prepare and probably will be more coherent if you integrate discussion on meeting these multiple objectives, rather than address each one separately.

## **7. Evaluation**

(Note: See pages 27-29 of the RFA and section I of this guide for additional evaluation guidance). Your description of the evaluation should include a summary of your evaluation objectives and strategies, including what information you will collect and how. If none of the project participants has true evaluation skills, it can be very valuable to find an outside specialist to assist this effort. CFSC provides an evaluation training workshop, handbook, and specific evaluation tools to help grantees conduct effective evaluations (funded by a CFP grant).

The RFA encourages applicants to seek expert assistance with "evaluation design and implementation, as appropriate and available." Academic institutions may collaborate for free or at a fairly low cost, out of interest in the project. Otherwise, independent consultants can also provide such assistance, though probably at a much higher cost. Ask around (particularly to similar organizations) for such a specialist. If using an outside evaluator, a letter of commitment

from this provider can be a useful place to expand on approaches to be used for your evaluation. The RFA states that “applicants are expected to set aside between five and ten percent of the total project budget for evaluation.” (The total budget includes both cash and in-kind expenses.) (See Section I below for information on evaluation criteria.)

## **8. Self-Sustainability**

Because Community Food Projects awards are intended as one-time funding, USDA is interested in how you will continue the project or sustain its outcomes after the CFP grant ends.

\* In all instances, address the role of partners and the community in providing ongoing assistance and support to keep activities going or sustain the outcomes.

\* If the project will always depend on outside funds, articulate where you expect that to come from (i.e., what funders and revenue sources). For example, you may propose a demonstration training program for a specific number of residents during the project, and to extend this to more participants in future years. If so, you will need to indicate where these future training funds will come from.

\* If parts of or all of the project will be self-sufficient after CFP funding ends, explain that. For example, an urban garden or farmers' market is often self-sufficient after a start-up period. Or a training program is completed, and perhaps permanent jobs result, requiring no more support.

\* If your project is entrepreneurial, and you propose to generate income through business activities such as the sales of products or services, then details are expected. Wishful projections without clear backing by a business plan can create skepticism. Reviewers may wonder if you are working with economic development specialists or if the business will be a spin off.

## **H. PROJECT RATING OR EVALUATION CRITERIA**

Community Food Projects application guidelines list the criteria that the review panels and USDA will use to rate the quality of your application. While these evaluation criteria don't perfectly match the content outlined for the narrative, they are fairly similar and you should consider these as key guideposts when preparing your proposal. Note that the criteria are listed in order of priority, it will help you decide what to emphasize in the proposal. Below we have outlined these rating criteria and some factors to consider for each. The evaluation criteria for T&TA proposals are somewhat different, and are listed on page 28 of the RFA.

**1. How well the proposed project addresses the three statutory CFPCGP objectives of: (i) Meeting the food needs of low-income people; (ii) increasing the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs; and (iii) promoting comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues.**

The RFA provides considerable guidance to help you interpret these objectives, especially in Part I. It is important to note that, although this evaluation criterion mentions only three objectives, the emphasis of the RFA is clearly to encourage projects that address not only these initial three objectives, but also the additional three areas of emphasis as listed on page 5 and in other sections. Reviewers will consider all these objectives when reviewing grant requests.

The RFA makes it clear that single-focus projects are discouraged. Although efforts such as community gardening, farmers' markets, CSAs, and food recovery may address community food security, these are well-established strategies that by themselves do not adequately fulfill broad CFS goals.

The RFA describes how integrating economic, social, and environmental objectives will enhance projects through building more comprehensive approaches to community food problems. It also emphasizes efforts to address the larger food needs of communities, to engage the participation of the community, and to address the local food system where possible:

Overall, the program is seeking projects that will increase a community's capacity to purchase, barter, or produce food for its residents while reducing its reliance on charitable distributions. Community food security strongly supports a local or regional food systems approach as a key strategy to fulfill such objectives, and many successful CFP projects include community-based food production, processing, and/or distribution.

Communities can increase access to high quality foods in many ways, such as by promoting food assistance programs or by starting a farmers' market. But these activities alone will not substantially help targeted participants to become more self-reliant or food secure over the long term. Many winning proposals incorporate education, training, and/or entrepreneurial activities to enhance these basic programs, to provide opportunities for participants that increase skills, incomes, and/or employment.

Community Food Projects proposals are not limited to activities that produce and market locally-grown foods and you need not limit your focus to "alternative" food system strategies. Consider ways to incorporate wholesalers, retailers, and others in the "mainstream" food sector that likely provides most of your community's food supply. Increasing access to quality foods may include several approaches—attracting a supermarket back to the inner city or developing a food cooperative, for example.

However, these should also incorporate activities that can provide other economic and social benefits to targeted residents. For example, a retail food operation that trains and employs local residents, that buys from local farms, that provides more culturally-appropriate food selections, and/or targets vulnerable groups through its location or by offering home delivery or other services are types of initiative that will better address CFP objectives.

**2. How significant are the low-income food security issues that will be addressed by the proposed project, and is there an informative description of the community, its characteristic, assets, and needs.**

**(a) Targeting low-income communities:** The Community Food Projects legislation and RFA target low-income people and communities, but it does not specifically define the geographic scope of a "community" nor the criteria for "low-income." We encourage applicants to target communities or groups within communities that are largely low-income and/or food insecure, as this is clearly the focus of the CFP Program. Additions to the RFA this year underscore the importance of focusing on low-income communities, and emphasize that low-income people should not only benefit from the program, but also should be substantially involved in the program planning and implementation.

**(b) Community connections:** An important consideration in selecting the community your project will serve is pulling together partners who can work together. Focusing on close-knit communities can better assure an inclusive community process in which project participants are familiar with food and nutrition resources and problems, and can work together to address issues and needs.

**(c) Multiple communities:** Selecting a defined geographic community can help to keep a project manageable. Note, however, that many past Community Food Projects awards have gone to projects that have a broader reach (even regional in scope), and that reach a number of low-income communities or constituencies. If your project covers a wider area such as a metropolitan area or a broader region, the targets should still be identifiable lower-income communities and food-insecure residents within that area. You should also provide evidence that the partners have worked together successfully in the past, or will do so in the proposed endeavor in a way that works logistically and programmatically.

**(d) Constituencies:** Who is food insecure? Most definitions of food security focus on people who lack access to affordable, high quality, culturally appropriate foods through non-emergency sources such as retail food stores. These are typically low-income households who may receive food assistance; many experience hunger at least some of the time. And while most CFS advocates focus on meeting the needs of food insecure groups, many also emphasize that the food security is an issue that is relevant for the general population.

Often, CFS advocates respond to the problems of conventional food systems by promoting "community food system" alternatives—sustainable agriculture, small-scale food ventures, community gardens, farmers' markets, and similar programs. But these local food systems don't necessarily serve only low-income people. Many Community Food Projects proposals resolve this dichotomy by promoting local food systems initiatives that primarily target low-income residents. Examples are CSAs, farmers' markets, training programs, and micro-enterprises that are located in poorer neighborhoods or that target low-income people. These can still serve a broader constituency—such as when a farmers' market is set up and anyone can shop there. Some project participants may not be low-income (such as farmers and food retailers), but they also benefit. Still, it is important to ensure that the primary participants / beneficiaries of the project are lower-income households.

**3. The appropriateness of the goals and purposes of the project and how these goals will be achieved to invest in building the capacity of the applicant and its partners to effectively engage low-income residents in food security efforts and policies. Proposed project activities should be designed to address one or more of the following goals, which will be given equal weight: (i) Developing linkages between two or more sectors of the food system; (ii) supporting the development of entrepreneurial activities; (iii) developing innovative linkages between the for-profit and nonprofit food sectors; and (iv) encouraging long-term planning activities and multi-system, interagency approaches.**

**(i): Developing linkages between two or more sectors of the food system:**

Community food security is as much about relationships and community process as it is about food per se. A proposal that reflects community-based planning, that generates coordinated

action by multiple partners, and that links the resources of different sectors of the food system reflects a community food security approach. This is different from projects in which groups are simply engaged to provide specific services for a program directed and funded mostly by a single entity. Reviewers will look for partners to be participating in the planning and implementation phases, sharing resources, and coordinating activities. The above language about “building the capacity of the applicant... to effectively engage low-income residents” is new this year, and part of an increasing emphasis on involving low-income communities in project planning and implementation.

**(ii): Supporting the development of entrepreneurial projects:**

**(a) Entrepreneurship and CFPs:** The CFP program encourages entrepreneurial approaches as one means to build program self-reliance. This usually involves business enterprise or related income-generating activities incorporated into Community Food Projects. Entrepreneurship can also be a key element of community economic development to address marketplace gaps, such as a lack of retail food outlets in inner-city areas, and to help non-profits make connections with new business development, encourage skills training and job development, and promote other forms of community revitalization that address environmental, public health, and social goals. Thus, micro-enterprise (small-scale business development) is an emerging focus for some community organizations.

**(b) Entrepreneurship planning:** Despite their potential, developing enterprise activities can be the most challenging type of funding strategy for a non-profit to develop and sustain. Businesses are by definition risky, they can be capital intensive, and they require time and other resources to set up and operate. Most non-profits have little preparation for small business development. The planning phase is a critical time to consider this approach, because projects that seek to incorporate enterprise activity need to address critical issues in advance. These include:

1. whether the activity is consistent with current organizational objectives and mission;
2. how the enterprise addresses community food security priorities; and
3. organizational capacity or potential to operate a business.

Enterprise development demands skills, capital, space and other resources that are not usually within the scope of the applicant organization. Where non-profits are not suited to undertake a particular venture, it might be more effective to partner with another entity that has these resources, and to seek funding from a source other than CFP (which requires that the lead applicant be a private non-profit).

**(c) Business plans:** If you propose an enterprise approach, reviewers will look for evidence of prior planning and other indications that this will be a viable undertaking, such as a market analysis or outline of a business plan. A business plan should be a basic planning tool to prepare for and to organize an enterprise. It is developed to address all the fundamental aspects of business development, such as personnel involved; funding and funding sources; revenue projections; operating costs and projected changes over a specified time period; products, markets and sales strategies; promotional methods, growth opportunities; competition and other challenges.

**(d) Entrepreneurship resources:** Outside assistance should be sought for developing business strategies, including development of business plans. Sources of information for enterprise planning include college/university business or management programs, Small Business Administration, libraries and bookstores, and consulting firms. Also consider asking for help from existing businesses (food sector, other manufacturing and retail, advertising, law firms), especially if they are represented on your board.

**(iii): Developing innovative linkages between the for-profit and nonprofit food sectors:**

Many community partnerships are weak when it comes to collaborations with for-profit enterprises. But some projects do effectively involve businesses:

- \* as sponsors or partners in an entrepreneurial venture;
- \* to provide a specific service, such as marketing, or technical help such as legal or business advice;
- \* as part of a economic development or related community-oriented planning process;
- \* as project funders or as donors of certain goods or services.

One good place to look for initial for-profit partners is the boards of participating organizations (including past members).

**(iv): Encouraging long-term planning activities and multi-system, interagency approaches:**

**(a) Reasons to incorporate multi-sector strategies as part of long-term planning:**

- \* They can help broaden the scope of projects from a narrower organizational focus to the greater food security needs of the community.
- \* They can attract a wider and deeper inventory of talent, know-how, and connections.\* They integrate multiple perspectives and can generate more innovative approaches.
- \* They can contribute to more sustainable projects by leveraging resources and broadening commitments from diverse interests.

**(b) Long-range planning:** Most projects are designed to endure beyond the short-term CSREES/CFP funding period, and are also expected to be part of a more comprehensive approach to overall community food security. Long-range planning, particularly within a collaborative framework, can lead to a more comprehensive and effective approach to addressing CFS issues.

Some benefits of long-range planning:

- \* It helps practitioners develop a vision of a sustainable food system for their community as a context for shorter-term activities.
- \* It can foster innovative strategies that integrate multiple elements of CFS.
- \* It can help address structural barriers that are not amenable to quick and easy solutions.
- \* It identifies resources and support mechanisms that are critical to program survival after short-term resources run out.

**(c) Community input:** It is important to get input from community members and professionals with a wide diversity of knowledge, perspectives, and areas of expertise. That is best achieved

through community-based planning via networks or coalitions as part of the initial planning process and throughout the project. The RFA states that “Proposals should ... show evidence of information sharing, coalition building, and substantial outreach and linkages to the community” (page 7).

Sectors that can participate in developing long-range community food strategies include:

- \* non-profits in other fields: housing and urban development, environment, health and human services, etc.;
- \* community institutions: includes schools and colleges, health clinics and hospitals, and religious and charitable organizations.
- \* businesses: not only the food industry, but also other businesses, service industries (e.g. financial institutions, law firms, insurance companies), and communications/media;
- \* public sector: government agencies; legislators and other policy makers.

**4. The relevance of the experience of the organizations that are involved in the proposed project, including the applicant entity, and the type and extent of support that other organizations will be providing. Applicant organizations should demonstrate a history of commitment to and direct involvement in food security projects in low-income communities...**(see page 28 of the RFA for the complete description.)

**(a) Role of the community:** What often distinguishes winning Community Food Projects proposals are the collaborative and participatory features. A project proposal needs to clearly demonstrate community support and input to the proposal and involvement in the project itself. Community involvement comes not only by having other organizational partners, but through participation of residents, particularly targeted constituencies. Multiple changes in the RFA this year emphasize the importance of involving low-income people in project planning and implementation, not merely as beneficiaries of project activities.

Many CFP applicants do not devote enough attention to the importance of showing community involvement and buy-in to their projects. It is not sufficient to have a good idea and to propose to develop it for the good of your community. Reviewers are looking to see whether the participants and beneficiaries have been consulted and whether they endorse the proposed project's design, how it will be implemented, and whom it will serve. They will also look to see if targeted constituents and other stakeholders have been brought into the planning process to play a role in shaping the project, and if they will continue to participate in its implementation.

The needs section and the rest of the proposal should clearly spell out answers to the following questions: Why should your project go forward? What is the need? Do residents or targeted participants clearly want it? How can you demonstrate this? The planning process for any project is the place where stakeholder involvement begins. But participants can play key roles in the delivery of the project, in its evaluation, and in other capacities.

**(b) Organizations involved in the project:** The RFA asks you to list the organizations to be involved in carrying out the proposed project and a description of the relevant experience of each group. Reviewers will be judging the overall relationship—past and current—between the partners, and the degree to which each will be involved in the initiative. Although participation by several organizations is expected, it is not the number that counts as much as the role each will play.

**(c) Collaboration:** Some proposals are engineered by an applicant who engages the cooperation of other groups but clearly owns the project. A stronger project is one where many organizations play a significant role in the planning process and the resulting activities, even when one agency plays a strong leading role in the project. This is different from patching together a number of community food activities that suit the various partners but do not represent a coherent strategy towards a coherent set of objectives. When true collaboration evolves, the partners can share responsibilities and work together to develop a long-term sustainable initiative.

**(d) Alliances and coalitions:** To promote collaboration, we encourage you to develop coalitions or other types of community-based networks. These alliances may include not just the groups traditionally participating in community food activities, but also organizations increasingly interested in food issues, such as city planning offices, health agencies, community development corporations, for-profit food businesses, and educational institutions.

A "consortium" approach represents a less-formal network—one that may have come together to work on a specific initiative. This can also work well because it provides evidence of community linkages, and because multiple partners can more easily leverage the required matching resources. It also makes it easier for you to justify a larger award level, although, of course, the funding will likely be shared among the various collaborators.

Good indicators of project collaboration:

- \* the players have cooperated in planning the project;
- \* project coordination and key decision-making are carried out through a process involving multiple partner groups and constituent representatives;
- \* prospective CFP funding will be shared among several organizations;
- \* substantial in-kind resources or matching funds are provided by partners;
- \* the project benefits the constituencies of several partner organizations;
- \* a cooperative approach towards longer-term sustainability is established;
- \* there are strong, detailed letters of support that clearly document the partners' interest and roles in the project.

**5. The viability of plans for realistically achieving self-sufficiency with a one-time infusion of Federal funds. Entrepreneurial projects should provide evidence (e.g., a market analysis or the outline of a business plan) to demonstrate that it is likely to become self-sustaining. Other projects should identify actual or potential funding sources for continuation of the project after Federal funding has ended.**

See Self-Sustainability (Section G.8 above) for information on addressing this point. Also see 3.(ii) in this section above for additional information on this topic.

**6. The strength of the proposed project's evaluation component and how it will contribute to the evaluation of the CFPCGP on a national basis, including sharing project results in a "best practices" format.**

CFP applicants are encouraged to build in a strong evaluation component to their proposal. Program evaluation has received increasing emphasis within the CFP Program and the RFA in

recent years. The RFA states that applicants should set aside between five and ten percent of the total project budget for evaluation, and encourages them to seek expert assistance where appropriate (page 17).

CFSC provides resources and support to assist CFP grantees with designing and conducting effective program evaluations that meet CFP Program guidelines. These resources were developed through a grant provided by CFP and with extensive input from grantees. A *Community Food Project Evaluation Handbook and Toolkit* is provided free of charge to all new CFP grantees. CFSC also organizes an annual evaluation training specifically developed for CFP grantees. The CFP Program staff will invite successful grantees to attend this training.

In 2004, USDA added a requirement to use a new Common Output Tracking Form (COTF) in annual reporting. (Outputs are a program's services, e.g. pounds of food produced, number of people trained, amount of garden space created.) This form was created especially for CFP grantees, to help them compile information on the results of their activities, as well as to facilitate data collection across projects. Grantees have been offered training and materials to help them use this form effectively.

However, references to the Common Output Tracking Form have been removed from the RFA this year. CFP cannot add reporting requirements without approval by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which literally takes years. Still, CFP staff will continue to strongly encourage grantees to complete the form annually to help provide information on the collective performance and the impact of the program.

**(a) Why evaluate?** Evaluations are important to help you understand what is and isn't working and to improve your program's effectiveness. A strong evaluation also will substantially help USDA, researchers, and your fellow practitioners understand what makes projects succeed (or fail), particularly where model initiatives are involved. Evaluation is a valuable but often underused tool to provide feedback to project staff, sponsors and participants, to other members of the community, and to policy makers both during a project and after it has ended.

**(b) Types of evaluation expected:** The RFA asks applicants to incorporate "both process evaluations (developing and monitoring indicators of progress towards the objectives) and outcome evaluations (to determine whether the objectives were met)" (page 17). It also encourages use of "innovative evaluation strategies," and states that evaluations should focus on logic models. (Logic models create a picture of what the project hopes to achieve and how, which then provides a basis for the evaluation.)

**(c) Process evaluations** are a means to review operational or implementation aspects of your program. These may include:

- \* the efficacy of specific practices or procedures,
- \* adequacy of space, personnel, and other resources;
- \* degree of participation and collaboration;
- \* program costs and cost-effectiveness;
- \* appropriateness of schedules and other program logistics

Regularly reviewing your program throughout the life of the project can be extremely useful, by helping you to identify problems and make ongoing changes / improvements as needed. And for long-term planning and sustainability, this process evaluation can help you address questions such as:

- \* What has worked well?
- \* What hasn't worked well, and what might improve these aspects?
- \* What is the cost-effectiveness of alternative strategies?
- \* What are the stages of program development and steps needed to bring each program component to a mature and sustainable stage?

**(d) Outcome evaluations** measure the extent to which a project produces the desired set of changes or results described in the objectives and activities portions of your proposal. In other words, what are the achievements of the project, quantitatively and qualitatively? Did your project accomplish what it said it would, and how well? What targets were not met, and which were exceeded?

**Note:** Impact evaluations are a type of outcome evaluation—they are designed to assess the more substantive effects or benefits of these outcomes for organization(s), participants, and the larger community. Examples include the impact of your program on participants' overall diets or health status, or its economic impact on a community. CSREES does not expect you to assess large-scale or longer-term impacts, which are costly and difficult to obtain. However, you can determine more short-term benefits (and problems) by collecting and analyzing data before and after implementation of a project, for example the reported number of servings of fresh produce that participants eat per day.

**(f) Monitoring and documentation:** Community Food Projects legislation encourages information-sharing concerning CFS projects and issues with researchers, practitioners and other interested parties. An ongoing monitoring process can be facilitated by keeping a written record of the project's progress from the planning stages onward. In addition, if your project records notes at meetings, and documents what decisions were made, how issues were resolved, and how planning in general proceeded, this will provide an invaluable record for staff, evaluators, and funders. Every project is potentially a model that others may want to adapt or replicate, and sharing information about what has been learned can help others to avoid re-inventing the wheel.

**(g) Empowerment evaluation approaches:** Empowerment evaluation strives to engage the full participation of all project stakeholders in the project, and is based on the values of these stakeholders—staff, collaborators, participants, and others involved from the affected community.

With an empowerment evaluation approach, criteria for program effectiveness reflect the goals, aspirations, and concepts of success of these stakeholders. This strategy builds their capacity to identify and utilize their assets to conduct programs to attain goals they value. It makes evaluation a key activity itself, by building stakeholders' capacities to envision, enact, and sustain effective programs in their community.

Empowerment evaluation requires careful consideration about how to collect and interpret information and how to use findings to improve the program. You may not be collecting

conventional information or focusing on traditional evaluation priorities. For example, the participants may care less about the projects' administrative efficiencies or how your organization benefits; and more about how it affected participants and their community.

**(h) Planning your evaluation:** Your evaluation objectives should be identified in advance in order to help you determine your project's design, identify evaluation costs and resource needs, and shape data collection from the onset. Initial steps can include:

- \* deciding at least in general terms what to evaluate and what process to use (e.g., empowerment strategies);
- \* determining who will oversee or coordinate evaluation activities;
- \* identifying participants—whom your evaluation will focus on and who will participate in its design and implementation;
- \* identifying baseline data that is available.
- \* estimating costs and the need for outside expertise at the onset of the project;

In deciding how to implement the evaluation process, many steps can be considered, such as:

- \* how to involve stakeholders to provide insights and identify priorities for evaluation;
- \* selecting practical indicators and associated measurement tools such as surveys to gather information and track developments;
- \* how to interpret the information you derive and;
- \* steps to refine evaluation procedures on an ongoing basis;
- \* ongoing record-keeping, data collection, and monitoring steps.

**(i) Addressing CSREES objectives in your evaluation:** The RFA states that, "evaluations should focus on the measurement of success in meeting the legislative goals and objectives of the CFPCGP." This is intended to include not only the three original legislative objectives, but also additional objectives as outlined on page five and other places in the RFA.

In practical terms, USDA is interested not only in whether your project meets its stated objectives, but exactly what these are, in quantifiable terms wherever possible. And with respect to Community Food Projects program objectives, it is helpful to collect basic data such as amounts/types of land put into production or foods produced or distributed; numbers of people trained or jobs created; changes in seasonal eating practices; or other practical measures of outcome. The Common Output Tracking Form described in section 6 above was created to help grantees do this.

## **7. The timeline for accomplishing project goals and objectives is realistic and achievable.**

In as precise a way as possible, your task here is to show reviewers and USDA that your proposal can be carried out during the funding period you propose. In particular, the project should not seem overly ambitious in scope or scheduling, particularly where you propose to set up training programs, small enterprise, or similar complex activities. In addition, the timeline should reflect activities that provide measurable benchmarks of progress along the way. So it is important to organize the schedule and order of activities in ways that can be tracked. (Also see Section H.5 above).

We hope this document has been helpful to you in your proposal planning, and wish you all the best in your important work!

