

Coalitions and Mini-Grant Programs

by Tom Wolff



Coalition
Building
Tips

Mini-grants - What Are They?

Mini-grants are small, one-time only, cash awards given to community groups and others for short-term community projects. More and more coalitions are using mini-grants to stimulate community action and increase the coalition's visibility, while broadening the audience for the coalition's work. Mini-grants are potentially powerful interventions that, when used effectively, engage citizens in coalition and community betterment efforts, and generate accomplishments citizens can take pride in.

Why Use Mini-grants?

Proper use of mini-grants has multiple community advantages;

1. They inspire innovative thinking. If necessity is the mother of invention, then small amounts of funding are the sister of creativity.
2. They are an excellent way to reach people we often call "the hard to reach" or "yet to be reached." Mini-grants are often awarded to groups (like parent-teacher associations, scouts, neighborhood organizations) that have access to many more citizens than traditional health and human service organizations.
3. They build political and community support, and bring new partners into the coalition's efforts. When money goes directly to the grassroots groups that people connect with regularly, coalitions sponsoring mini-grants become more visible as a positive force that really meets local needs.
4. The small amounts of money (\$400 to \$2,000 per mini-grant is a general range) tend to discourage large agencies from applying, while encouraging smaller, innovative groups who might not otherwise respond.
5. Mini-grant monies tend to buy products, not staff. In-kind contributions of staff time increase with mini-grant use. Having to make the money go a long way forces people to bring other resources into play, and increases the amount of matching and volunteer support projects receive.
6. Mini-grant projects are more easily sustained. Experience has shown that when it comes to mini-grants, people tend to think of durable and replicable projects. Puppet show scripts, demonstrations, conference materials, and curriculum kits have all been developed with mini-grant money.

Steps in Making Mini-grants Work

•Goal Setting

Once the coalition or community group allocates money (a good range is \$4,000 to \$20,000) to be distributed as mini-grants, it must set goals for the mini-grant program. The goals can be specific or general. For example, a traffic safety program wanted to increase seat belt use; it set seat belt promotion as the goal of its mini-grant program. In another case, a coalition, thinking more generally, set increasing community leadership as its mini-grant goal.

•The Application

Once goals are set, application guidelines and forms are issued. The application guidelines should describe the goals, the amounts available, the application procedures, the review criteria, any limitations on how the money can be spent

(for example, most federal dollars can't pay for advertising), and a description of the mini-grant program's sponsoring coalition or group. It should also give examples of mini-grant activities to get people thinking.

The application form should be no more than 1-2 pages, and should have three sections. In the first section, ask for such items as the applicant's name, address and organizational affiliation (if any). In the second section, ask for details about the project they are proposing for funding — who will be reached (target audience), what will be done and (brief project description); when, where, and why will the project be done. The final section should include a simple budget form for applicants to fill out. The overall application should use clear, easy-to-understand language (no "jargon") and be user-friendly. Hand-written applications should be acceptable.

•Outreach

Members and staff of the sponsoring coalition or community group should also be prepared to devote serious time to outreach, both in distributing and publicizing the application and in helping groups fill it out. Distribution to the grassroots community can include posting on bulletin boards, newsletters, newspapers and word of mouth. All announcements, fliers, and posters should make clear that the mini-grant program is for small grassroots groups like scout troops, theater groups, and block associations. To facilitate this process, staff should also be available to assist groups in developing ideas and filling out the form — getting ideas translated into an application. For example, a group of young people seeking funding for an after-school basketball league might need some help figuring out a budget.

•Making Awards

A committee should be established to review submitted applications. To insure impartiality, committee members must not be applicants for the mini-grants. The committee should review all applications with regard to a preset criteria, rank applications and suggest award amounts. To increase the number of projects funded, negotiating with applicants for reduced awards is often effective. Certain projects may also be combined in ways that maximize the available funds.

•Agreements

A short agreement between the awarding organization and the group receiving the mini-grant needs to be created and signed by both parties. It should delineate the responsibilities of both parties, including completion date and reporting requirements. As in the application, the language should be straightforward.

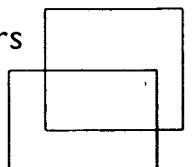
•Monitoring, Evaluation, and Technical Assistance

Most groups awarded mini-grants complete successful projects without much monitoring. It is, however, a good idea to "check in" every now and again with recipients. Brief status reports are beneficial because they do not create a heavy paperwork burden for citizen groups, but still keep everyone aware of progress toward the project's completion. These reports, along with a final report once the project is completed, also serve as an evaluation tool. Reports and a memorandum of understanding go a long way in keeping each party accountable and on track. Technical assistance provided by the awarding group or coalition can also help groups get started and stay on target with their projects, find resources, and assist if a group gets "stuck."

□Additional Resources

- The Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America Strategizer Series, "Coalition Mini-Grant Programs" is a brief "how-to" on mini-grant programs with additional details. Write to: CADCA, 701 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, (1-800-54CADCA)
- "Putting It Together: The Safe Roads Success Story," a sampler of mini-grant programs related to safety belt education, can be obtained by writing: Robin Riessman, Safe Roads, 99 Main Street, Northampton, MA 01060. Ms. Riessman also contributed to this Tip Sheet.

AHEC/Community Partners
24 South Prospect Street
Amherst, MA 01002



One in a series of tips on building coalitions.