

SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

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FROM POLICY TO POSSIBILITY: Southern Lessons from the Community Change Grant

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The Opportunity

The passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) unlocked billions of federal dollars toward climate action and resiliency. Coupled with the Biden administration's Justice40 initiative to see 40% of the IRA's benefits reach disadvantaged communities, communities stood on the precipice of a historic transition to a more just economy powered by clean energy. And yet, like so many federal government programs of the past, the path to an equitable implementation of IRA funding was, and remains, a complex maze of actors and technical capacity. In the South, this pathway presented its own set of unique and deep-rooted barriers and roadblocks.

Since 2020, SEAP's work has focused heavily on an equitable recovery across the South. When the American Rescue Plan (ARP) was signed into law in March 2021, we received requests from local governments, grassroots organizations, and federal agencies for data and knowledge sharing. In response, SEAP created an ARP Toolkit that enhanced state and local organizations' capacity to engage with ARP implementation through data and region-wide research on best practices in equity and engagement. Our broad approach focused on the development of materials, education and awareness presentations, research and data collection, and federal agency engagement.

The passing of the IRA inspired SEAP to meet the new moment in a different way. We sought to refine our approach by going more deeply into select communities to support organizations working on projects, programs, advocacy campaigns, and other initiatives that were empowering Southern communities to take ownership of public dollars.

The Intermediary Model: SEAP's Our Dollars, Our Dreams Initiative

In January of 2024, the Southern Economic Advancement Project launched the "Our Dollars, Our Dreams" Initiative to help level the playing field for Southern communities. We work with Southern-based community organizations, local governments, labor organizations, and educational institutions to secure federal dollars by providing added organizational capacity and technical assistance at no cost to the organizations. Through grant writing, network building, partnership development, data, and policy research, we work alongside Southern communities to address the roadblocks of federal policy implementation.

In its first year, Our Dollars, Our Dreams provided grant writing and other technical assistance to 13 communities applying for \$120 million in public funding, advised and provided feedback for an additional 12 applications, and responded to over 30 requests for technical assistance. Through in-person engagement, office hours, webinars, publications, and tools, we connected with over 600 Southern leaders.

Why the Community Change Grant?

The Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Community Change Grants Program (CCGP) is a \$2 billion initiative established under the IRA that supports environmental and climate justice community-driven projects in disadvantaged communities. The program aims to reduce pollution, enhance climate resilience, and build community capacity to tackle multi-faceted environmental justice concerns.

The sticker price alone was enough to capture any group's attention. However, it was the grant program's design elements that really captured the imagination of nearly 2,700 applicants. A few ways the CCGP program is different:

1. **Focus on Disadvantaged Communities & Environmental Justice.** The CCGP exceeded Justice40 by statutorily requiring 100% of projects to be implemented in EPA-identified disadvantaged communities based on a history of environmental and economic justice challenges.
2. **Large-Scale & Flexible Funding.** At \$2 billion, the funding pool is significantly larger than most community-based federal grant programs. A Track I project was eligible to receive funding between \$10-\$20 million and Track II projects between \$1 - \$3 million. The application categories were kept broad to address a wide variety of environmental and climate justice challenges, from clean transportation, solid waste management, resilience hubs, workforce development for clean jobs, and community participation in climate and environmental planning.
3. **Broader Eligibility & Partnership Requirements.** The requirement for applicants to apply in a partnership, with at least one of those partners being a community-based organization (CBO), encouraged and prioritized community representation in grant design and implementation. It also afforded an opportunity for CBOs who had never received federal funding before to apply with higher-capacity institutional partners.
4. **Longer Application & Grant Performance Periods.** The CCGP's Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) was open for 12 months, allowing meaningful community participation and application partnerships to mature before submitting an application. The 3-year grant performance period also allowed applicants to tackle multi-faceted programs, initiatives, and capital projects to address longstanding environmental and climate challenges.
5. **Robust Technical Assistance.** The CCGP included \$200 million for an EPA-selected technical assistance provider. Endyna, the EPA's technical assistance contractor, built out and provided a technical assistance program not typically afforded to other federal grant programs.
6. **Long-Term Community Capacity Building.** The CCGP prioritized community capacity by asking applicants to explain how their proposal would advance long-term economic benefits and community-led decision-making after the grant performance period. In particular, Track II applications had a focus on governance and community participation in policymaking - a rare grant program feature in federal funding.

These differences made the EPA CCGP one of the most flexible and community-driven federal funding programs ever, particularly for grassroots organizations working on environmental, climate, economic, and racial justice. Its unique program design features created a historic opportunity for Southern communities, and so the Community Change Grant became the priority grant program for the inaugural year of the Our Dollars, Our Dreams initiative at SEAP.

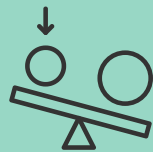
Why We Wrote This Report

SEAP's guiding principle is to be a partner and resource. We continuously seek out feedback in order to learn and adapt to meet the needs of our partners in nonprofits, government, labor, education, philanthropy, and other resource and research organizations. Drawing on insights from more than 50 stakeholders across the Southeast, this report identifies key insights and lessons learned on technical assistance and federal funding implementation.

It also offers recommendations to foster more meaningful interactions and outcomes between nonprofits, various levels of government, higher education, technical assistance providers, philanthropy, and policymakers. Our intention is to help strengthen this field of work and improve outcomes to support our goal of broadening economic power across the South.

In recent months, we have closely monitored the status of the EPA Community Change Grants program. Despite a competitive selection process and negotiated federal contracts, most, if not all, of awarded grants have been terminated due to shifts in the current administration's policies. This reversal of federal commitment is a significant setback for frontline communities poised to launch transformative community-led climate and environmental justice initiatives. We hope the lessons and insights shared in this report will benefit future administrations that believe in investing in community-led climate and environmental justice programs that deliver equitable benefits and prosperity, and for philanthropy today as they mobilize and respond to the considerable long-term implications of this backsliding of federal investment.

Key Insights on Federal Grants:



Community AND Institutional Power Should be Leveraged



Co-Governance and Coalition Building are Transformative



Champions are Essential

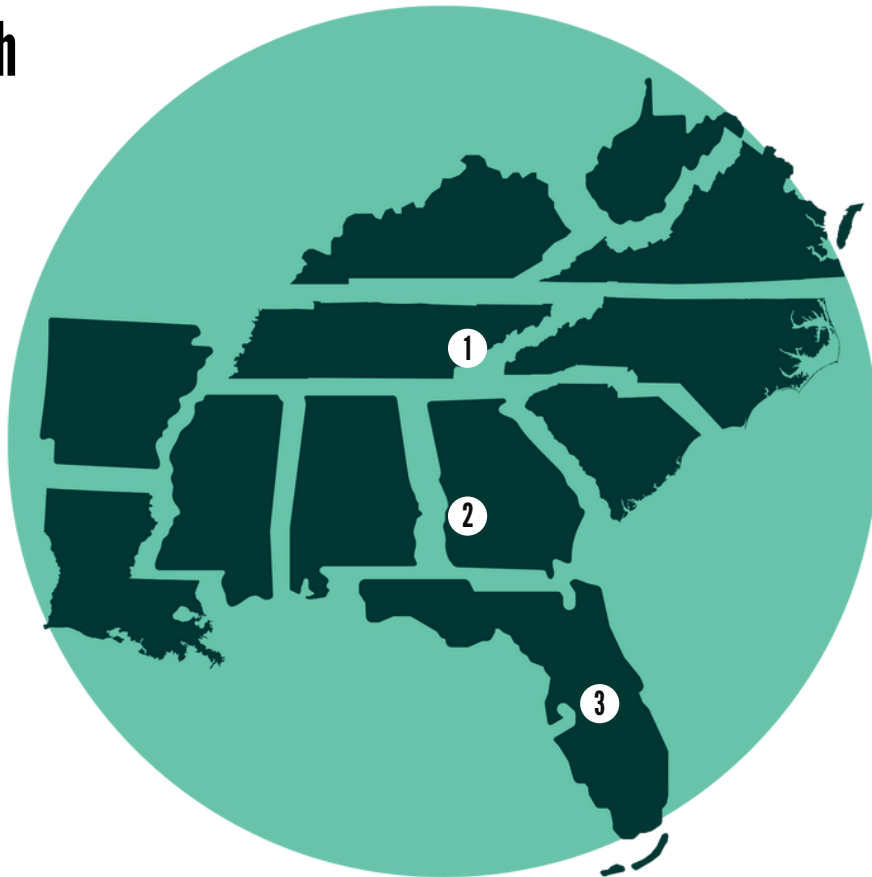


Intermediaries Bridge Capacity Gaps

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Sample Projects in the South

The Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Environmental Justice and Civil Rights received an extraordinary 2,700 applications for the Community Change Grant from across states, territories, and Tribal nations. The proposals reflected the depth and diversity of local priorities: from solar microgrids and clean transit systems to stormwater upgrades, mold and lead remediation, and indoor air quality improvements. In this section, we highlight a sample of these projects in the South where place-based knowledge and a shared commitment to community brought forth bold and novel climate and environmental solutions.



1: Co-Governance and Coalition Building in Tennessee

Lead Applicant: University

Statutory Partner: Community-Based Organization

Collaborating Entities: Labor Union, Community-Based Organizations (3)

Project Areas: Workforce development, pollution reduction, and energy efficiency

Background: In East Tennessee, a diverse group of allies organized a multi-entity coalition to apply for the Community Change grant. The coalition included three community-based organizations, a labor organization, a university, and a social impact consulting firm. From inception to application submission, this coalition of community advocates worked together for 10 months on their application. The application centered on a robust workforce development strategy to increase economic mobility and diversify labor unions by recruiting women and people of color into pre-apprenticeships and other full-time positions in the clean energy and pollution reduction sectors. A multi-faceted and interwoven proposal, the coalition developed a Collaborative Governance Structure to oversee coordination, communication, and power sharing in decision-making. The Executive Council would include one voting member of each organization on the application and two representatives of a larger Community Advisory Council that would independently convene and monitor the project's progress.

SEAP supported this coalition's work by providing grant writing and strategic direction.

2: Green Transition in Georgia

Lead Applicant: Community-Based Organization

Statutory Partner: HBCU

Collaborating Entities: K-12 School District, Workforce Training Provider, Community-Based Organization

Project Areas: Resilience hub, green technology in agriculture, workforce development, energy efficiency, and community engagement

Background: In Southwest Georgia, a proposed innovation center will implement a multifaceted strategy to advance climate action, pollution reduction, and community resilience, with a strong focus on serving disadvantaged communities. The project brought together two community-based organizations, a local Historically Black College or University (HBCU), a local K-12 school district, and a workforce training provider. The partners together will provide a comprehensive and integrated approach to clean job training while providing advanced technologies, research, and educational resources to farmers and community resilience benefits to residents.

SEAP supported this coalition's work by providing grant writing and budget support, project development, bringing on external technical expertise, meeting with institutional partners, and strategic direction.

3: Community Engagement in Florida

Lead Applicant: University

Statutory Partner: Community-Based Organization

Collaborating Entities: Community-Based Organizations (5)

Project Areas: Community engagement in policy-making, climate resilience, and preparedness

Background: A pilot initiative in Central Florida was developed to cultivate neighborhood-level leaders who promote equitable resilience in underserved communities vulnerable to climate-related flooding disasters. The project first emerged from a community collaborative effort involving residents, homeowners' associations, disaster response organizations, academia, businesses, nonprofits, and local government programs. The application was spearheaded by a partnership between two project leads, a university and a partner community organization, who sought to further the project's mission to build bridges between communities and decision-makers and foster a neighbors-helping-neighbors ethos through local leadership. Using a community-supplied resiliency information system, neighborhood leaders help to communicate hidden community needs to decision-makers and serve as communicators and navigators before, during, and after disaster strikes. Both neighborhood residents and leaders receive specialized training in disaster preparation and response to strengthen equitable resilience and recovery.

SEAP supported this coalition's work by providing grant writing and budget support, leading partner engagement, and strategic direction.

Insights from SEAP and The Coalitions We Supported

SEAP supported six Community Change Grant applications throughout 2024. After submitting the applications (and taking a long nap), SEAP conducted follow-up interviews with project leads to better understand their experience developing the application, fostering and managing partnerships, and working with an intermediary providing strategic advice and grant writing. This section reports on their insights, as well as our own observations as an intermediary assisting organizations with partner and application development.

Community and Institutional Power Should be Leveraged

Strong federal, or other public, grant applications are built when coalitions value and integrate both community leadership and institutional resources. Institutions with power and capacity (e.g. local governments, universities) should be active partners—not to drive the agenda, but to support and facilitate community-led ideas. Respecting the expertise of grassroots organizations while leveraging institutional strengths creates more competitive proposals and builds the kind of authentic collaboration that grant reviewers increasingly expect. Institutional partners should actively seek out these partnerships in advance of, but also in response to, grant announcements. Technical assistance providers and philanthropic funders should encourage this.

Considerations and Challenges:

- Most groups had prior relationships with their co-applicants if they were a local partner. Those in search of new partners were introduced to new partners through referrals, tapping their existing network for introductions.
- Many institutional partners, particularly universities, had not necessarily partnered with community organizations in this way before, and so new complexities had to be thoughtfully navigated. This lengthened the timeline to complete applications.
- Local government engagement was trickier. While some took a back seat to let community organizations take the lead, others wanted to pursue their own priorities instead or signed onto multiple applications within the same Congressional district.

Labor Union Participation Grows

The applications created a historic opportunity for labor and community organizations to partner. The growing participation and involvement of labor groups in public funding pursuits across the South is noticeable and noteworthy.

Co-Governance and Coalition Building are Arduous and Deeply Transformative

Developing a strong grant application through coalition building demands time, coordination, and negotiation. However, in its best form, coalition-building also produces new innovations, a significant increase in shared knowledge and capacities, and durable relationships that leave communities better positioned for future funding opportunities and broader systems change. Community-based organizations need increased operational funding and involvement from technical assistance providers to help sustain this work.

Champions are Essential

A core working group of champions who understand community priorities and can provide technical expertise is crucial for driving a community-changing grant or funding proposal. Regular collaboration among these champions, ideally in person, ensures that the work stays focused, responsive, and balanced between community and technical needs.

Intermediaries Bridge Capacity Gaps Between Community Organizations and Large Institutions

Intermediaries help partners navigate the technical demands of proposal development without slowing down progress. SEAP worked independently with community organizations outside of regular coalition or grant writing meetings to allow organizations the time and flexibility to workshop and formalize their proposals and budgets. This helped to keep the larger coalition on schedule and reduced the need to double back. For community organizations, it ensured their contributions could be integrated confidently and equitably into the full grant application. In some instances, it felt as though SEAP was the community organization's representative or agent.

Additionally, federal grants are full of technical jargon and directions that are not intuitive. Grant development is a marketable skill individuals develop throughout their careers. Large institutions with substantial resources dedicated to navigating the jargon can at times have trouble communicating with external stakeholders, particularly those without federal grant development experience.

Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) Still Have Room for Improvement

The Community Change Grant Applications took considerable time to develop due to the required partnership and intricacy of the NOFO. Applicants with a head start on partnership development and community engagement were more likely to take 3-6 months to complete their application. Applicants with more groundwork to do or coalitions built around the grant opportunity, range from 7 months to a full year to complete the application.

Applications were received and reviewed on a rolling basis throughout the 12 month window. While helpful to some, the rolling basis also made some applicants question the utility of a 12 month window. If all of the funding could be awarded before the final deadline how helpful was the longer application window? Further, the rolling basis fueled a continuous stream of rumors on the status of awards causing undue stress on applicants.

Coalitions mostly understood the need for the lengthy application given the high dollar award amount. However, the NOFO also felt disorganized and bewildering; duplicative in some sections and then contradictory in others. One applicant described it as “the beast.” Another applicant characterized it as more difficult than a National Science Foundation grant they had recently completed, which required a full economic study.

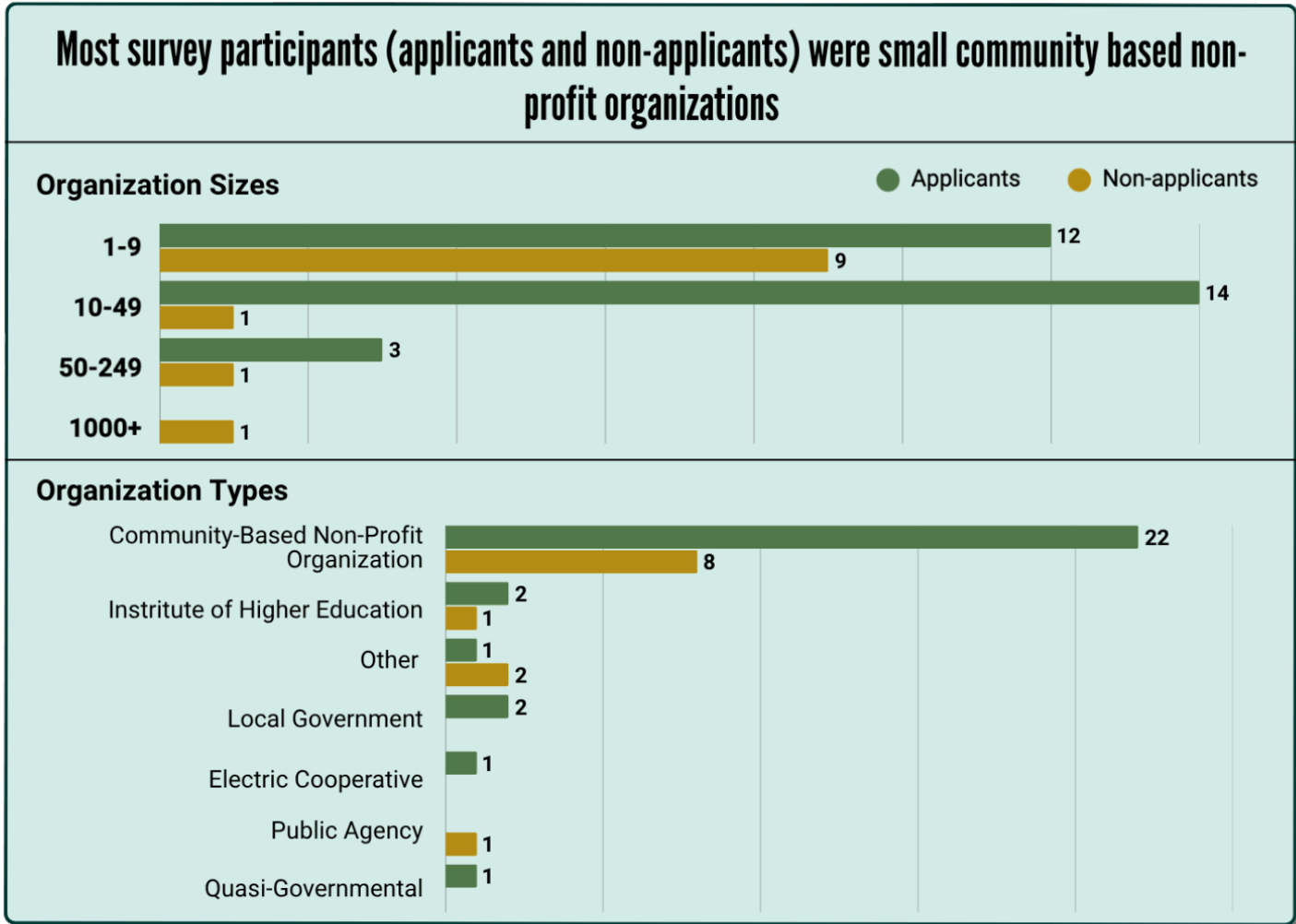
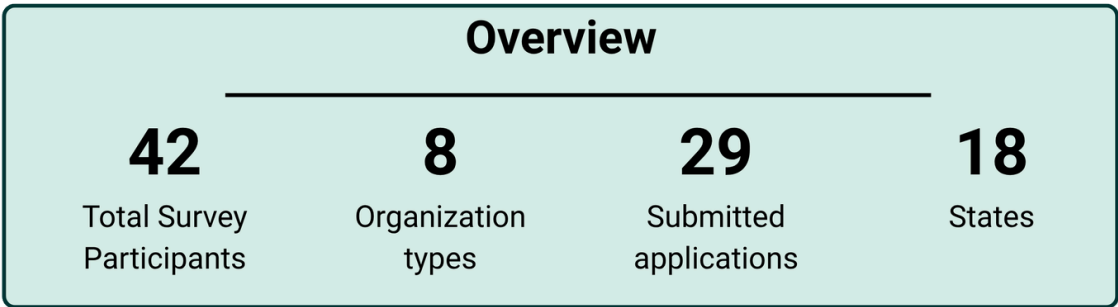
Feedback on EPA-Provided Technical Assistance

Technical Assistance from Endyna, the EPA’s contractor, was extremely helpful to applicants of all experience levels, although not as much in the early months of 2024 when they were not yet fully operational. Many applicants appreciated their website with posted webinars, presentations, and application workbooks.

Applicants felt Endyna was most helpful as an accountability partner to keep applicants on track, but less effective in responding to nuanced questions. An example of this is a lack of knowledge and clarity of federal procurement guidelines and indirect cost rates, two guidelines community-based organizations have less familiarity with. Significant confusion persisted throughout the application window as organizations received conflicting answers based on the individual they spoke to.

Insights from the Broader Field

SEAP launched a Community Change Grant survey in November 2024 to hear from applicants and would-be applicants of the EPA’s Community Change Grant. Our goal was to better understand the experience of those applying for this grant: their successes and failures, challenges and triumphs, wins, losses, and frustrations.



Depth of relationships and existing relationships were most valuable in partnership formation.

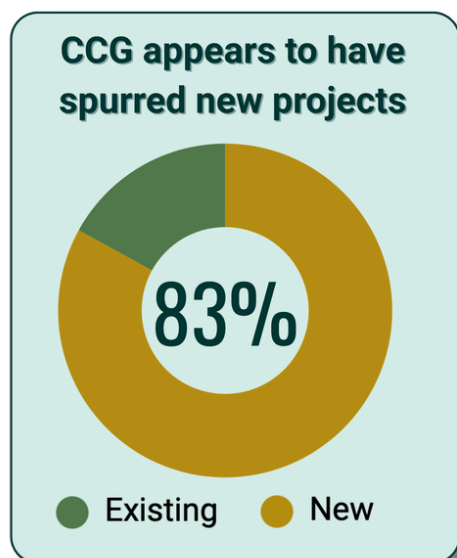
The CCG required applicants to apply as a joint partnership, with one entity of the partnership required to be a nonprofit organization.

In seeking a partner, respondents ranked these reasons from most to least important:

1. Depth of existing relationship with potential partners.
2. Partner's history and standing in the community.
3. Partner's technical expertise to perform grant activities.
4. Capacity and resources related to grant and financial management.
5. Partner's federal grant experience.

- **82.6% of respondents already had a strong relationship with their partners**
- **17.39% were familiar with one another, but this was their first time collaborating**
- **None reported that they were unaware of the organization prior to working on the application together.**

Community-based organizations partner with each other first and local governments second, but teams typically include a range of entities.



More than half of all survey respondents reported having a partner team that included multiple types of entities. Most commonly, teams consisted of two CBOs plus an institution of higher education, a local government, a labor organization, a school district, or another public agency (such as a transit or housing authority).

In addition to new relationships, the CCG opportunity helped to spur new projects across the South.

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The most common partner relationships were between 2 community-based non-profit organizations

		Partner 1			
Partner 2		Community-based non-profit organization	Institute of Higher Education	Local Government	Quasi-Governmental
	Community-based non-profit organization	48%	10%	19%	
	Institute of Higher Education	10%			
	Electric Cooperative	5%			
	Local Government	5%			5%

Local governments were invited into the process by CBOs and then served as Lead Applicants—perhaps due to more experience/comfort with federal grants.

It was uncommon for local governments or institutions of higher education to be a Statutory Partner and were more likely to fill the Lead Applicant role (which enters into the grant agreement with the EPA).

Of the Local Governments that responded to our survey, 100% were asked by other organizations to join an application.

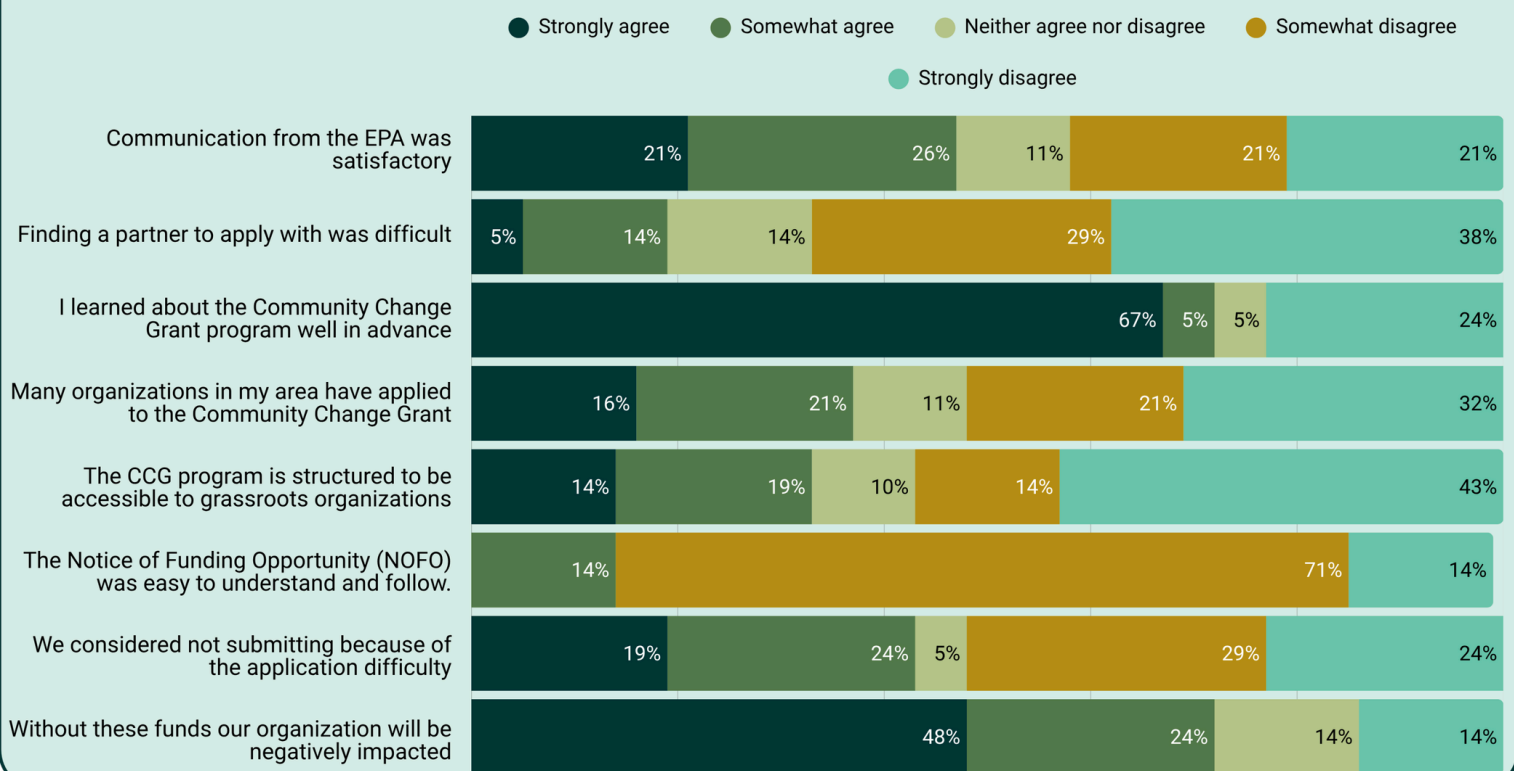
Most respondents felt the application time frame was sufficient, yet also felt the application could have been more accessible for grassroots organizations.

59% of the respondents spent 3-6 months on their application, 22% less than 3 months, and 18% between 6-9 months. The top three aspects applicants felt were most difficult were:

- Grant writing
- Budget development
- Understanding the NOFO

Most respondents felt they had sufficient time to complete the application. However, most respondents disagreed that the grant program was structured to be accessible to grassroots organizations. Most somewhat disagreed that the NOFO was easy to understand and follow.

Opinions on the application process, accessibility, and impact vary



For those respondents who ultimately decided not to submit their application, they most often cited capacity issues.

Respondents were asked about their decision not to apply. Their reasons are ranked from most to least important.

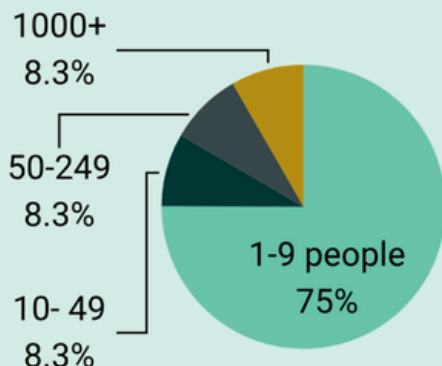
Non-Applicants ranked 8 potential reasons why they did not submit their application

(1 indicates more significance and 8 indicates less)

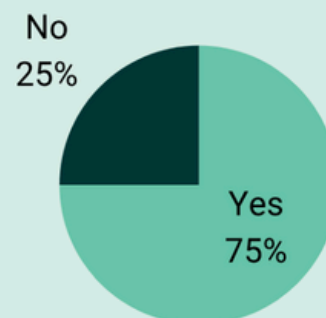
	Average	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Application too burdensome	2.64	4		4	2	1			
No Internal Bandwidth†	2.82	6	1			3			1
Program too competitive	3.27		5	3	1		1	1	
Was unable to receive technical assistance	4.55			2	5	1	2	1	
Insufficient time to complete the application	4.91	1	3	1	1				5
Did not seem a good use of our organization's time	5.27		2		1	4	1		3
Organization has little to no experience with objectives of the grant program	6.45					1	5	4	1
Unsure how to connect our current work to the objectives of the grant program	6.09			1	1	1	2	5	1

Our results indicate that non-applicants had prior experience with federal grants, suggesting their decision not to apply was due to grant-specific capacity constraints rather than inexperience.

Organization Size (personnel count)



Experience applying for federal grants?



Recommendations

Community-Based Organizations

- **Develop Long-Term Technical Assistance Partnerships** – Rather than using technical assistance providers for one-off projects, consider ongoing advisory relationships that build familiarity and institutional knowledge.
- **Communicate Resources Needed** – Let providers or networks know what grant templates, compliance guides, and funding alerts would be most helpful to you.
- **Advocate for General Operating Support** – Advocate for funders to provide unrestricted funding that allows investment in organizational growth.

Institutional Partners (e.g. Local Government, Universities, Quasi-Governmental, etc.)

- **Join the Conversation but Don't Set the Agenda** – Hold listening sessions, create a point-person within institutions who communities can reach out to with project or partnership ideas, show up to community meetings and events, and be accessible without dominating the room.

Philanthropy

- **The Opportunity to Learn is a Key Component of Capacity Building** – Organizations need the opportunity and breathing room to learn, to try and possibly fail, then try again. Bolstering organizational capacity and infrastructure requires multi-year funding for professional development and learning.
- **Place-Based Technical Assistance** – Investments that would allow technical assistance providers and/or consultants to visit communities and project sites are incredibly important and impactful.

Intermediaries, Consultants, and other Technical Assistance Providers

- **Tiered Support Models** – Provide a mix of free resources, training, and paid consulting services to accommodate different budget levels.
- **Build Trust Through Community-Centered Approaches** – Engage deeply with nonprofits to understand their on-the-ground challenges and avoid a top-down consulting model.

Recommendations for All Stakeholders

1. **Keep Investing in Capacity Building** – Strengthening nonprofit infrastructure through technical assistance, leadership development, and operational support leads to greater long-term impact.
2. **Foster Collaboration** – Stronger partnerships between nonprofits, consultants, funders, and government agencies ensure resources are used efficiently and effectively. Work on forming connections early and often.
3. **Simplify Access to Resources** – Centralized knowledge hubs, toolkits, and shared learning spaces reduce barriers to funding and compliance.
4. **Prioritize Equity** – Ensure that smaller and grassroots organizations have equitable access to funding, training, and consulting support.
5. **Measure Impact Beyond Funding** – Look beyond grant disbursement to evaluate how investments in technical assistance, policy engagement, and capacity building translate into sustained community impact.