



THRIVING COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

Part 1: Starting Your Grant Application Journey

Every journey begins with a single step, but with so many funding opportunities available, it can be overwhelming to know where to start. Here are **five steps** to help you craft a compelling grant application. Then, review our Part 2 Writing a Compelling Grant Application guide for the next step of writing the grant application.

1. Begin with your story

Create a **powerful narrative** that explains why your community is uniquely suited for the grant opportunity.

- **Find your why:** If your community could receive a grant for any project, what would it be? How would it transform life in your community? What would be improved?
- Reflect on the **key challenges** your community is facing, such as flooding, aging infrastructure, coal plant closure, rising energy costs, or declining populations
 - Engage a diverse group of community members to better understand needs, concerns, and opportunities.
- Revisit existing plans, projects, and initiatives. Are there projects in need of expansion? How would this new project align with existing plans?

2. Register for SAM.gov

Registering for a [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov) account is the first step. It can take up to **two weeks** and requires documentation.

- Review this [needed documentation guide](#) and a step-by-step [video about SAM registration](#).
- Registration must be updated and renewed at least every **12 months**.
- After you are registered with SAM.gov, complete your grants.gov registration.

Federal and state agencies may use **additional platforms** that require registration. For Illinois grants, **register on the GATA portal**. Review the [Illinois State Grantee Portal New User Guide](#) from Illinois.gov to understand the process.

3. Assess relevant grant opportunities

Search for **open and closed** grant opportunities. Grants typically accept applications for 30-60 days. Many grants have yearly cycles, start preparing for those **now**.

- Filter for **forecasted grants** on [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov). It is a good idea to prepare for an upcoming grant before it opens so you have a team and goals established and can pull materials together in time to submit.
- Websites to get started:
 - [TCTAC database](#): Curated list of grant opportunities.
 - [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov): Searchable database of all federal grants.
 - [Illinois Environmental Protection Agency](#): Grants related to green infrastructure, energy efficiency, brownfields, stormwater, and more.
 - [Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity](#): Grants related to the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, clean energy, and economic development.

4. Assemble the grant team

Identify core roles: Project manager, grant writer, finance manager, and implementation team. Assign roles in [grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov). Collect resumes and headshots for applications.

- Explore **potential partners early**, especially first-time applicants. Stakeholder mapping is a useful tool. Review this guide [Identifying and Analyzing Stakeholders and Their Interests](#).

5. Review the Notice of Funding Opportunity closely

The Notice of Funding Opportunity is the guide for creating your application; read carefully.

- **Typical sections:** program description, funding information, eligibility, application and submission info, application review info, and award administration information.
- Most have a program contact for questions.
- Watch this Writing a Grant Application training from the [Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity](#) for a detailed overview of the NOFO sections.
- Take note of required documentation, as **some may need signatures**.

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