Section 6.2.3: Peer Reviews

Peer review is a process of using in-house, other agency, and/or independent evaluators to assess the merits of an application for funding. Arizona Revised Statute (ARS) 41-2702 requires applications to be evaluated by at least three evaluators who are peers or other qualified individuals. The peer review process applies to grant program applications or concept papers that have met the basic minimum requirements listed in Section 6.2.1. The Office of Grants and Federal Resources (GFR) strongly recommends that grantors use the eCivis Subrecipient Manager (SRM) for managing the grant lifecycle, from the notice of available funding (NOFA) to grant closeout. The eCivis SRM allows for standardized, automated peer reviews of submitted applications and includes Arizona standard review form fields.

PURPOSE AND POLICY

Many grantor agencies use peer reviews to assist in evaluating applications. The objectives of the peer review are 1) to provide a means for objective, independent review of the applications; and 2) to use subject matter experts (SMEs) to identify the strengths and weaknesses of applications, rate applications, and provide recommendations as to whether or not the applications should be considered for funding.

Peer review recommendations are advisory in nature. In special circumstances, a grant application may require or recommend a second or supplemental review. When a second review is being considered, the grant program manager, in consultation with a supervisor, determines whether the second review panel will be composed of new reviewers, the original reviewers, or a combination of both. Circumstances that might necessitate a second review include: 1) incorrect information provided by the applicant 2) procedural errors made in the review process (e.g., conflict of interest) that was inconsistent with the program announcement or specific instructions to the applicant.

Peer reviewers and grantor agency staff must treat as absolutely confidential all application materials, reviewer identities, comments, deliberations, and recommendation of the peer review panel. Panelists are prohibited from providing any information before, during, and after the review regarding their deliberations or recommendations to anyone outside the peer review process. Should a peer review panel member receive a request for application materials or information about panel discussions or recommendations, the reviewer must notify the grant program manager immediately. Any persons requesting information about the review process or about a specific application should be referred to the grant program manager.

PROCEDURE

The peer review process consists of five phases: plan peer review, manage peer review panel information, conduct peer review, conduct recommendations review, and finalize peer review. The peer review process is utilized by grantor agencies to make informed decisions related to the selection and funding of various grant programs. Generally, peer review consists of objective, independent experts, qualified by education, training, and/or experience in related fields, reviewing the technical and

programmatic (and in some cases, budgetary) aspects of each grant application and providing comments and ratings to help grantor agencies make funding decisions.

Various program office roles interject expertise at different stages of the peer review process. For example, the grant program managers or designated peer review managers are responsible for administering and overseeing the peer review. The grant program and/or peer review managers should provide input, oversight, and evaluation of peer reviewers, and should make themselves present and available for the entire time over which the peer review panel is being conducted. Each grant program should maintain a centralized database of qualified peer reviewers. The grant program and/or peer review managers perform various support functions throughout the peer review process such as identifying and contacting approved peer reviewers to serve on peer review panels, panel management, providing overall facilitation of the peer review sessions, ensuring rules are being followed, evaluating peer reviewer performance, as well as other activities. Each peer review phase and associated procedure is detailed below.

1. **Plan the Peer Review**

    The peer review planning process should begin with fiscal year grant program forecasting, specifically how any peer review timelines will affect expected award dates.

    Planning peer review panels involves engaging the peer review manager (if used) and selecting peer reviewers based on the requirements of the solicitation and the qualifications of the peer reviewers. Peer reviewers are identified, approved, and confirmed. The peer review manager must confirm no conflict of interest exists with any of the peer reviewers. If necessary, please follow any internal approval processes for this part. Peer review panel details and logistics are also determined (i.e., written, in-person, teleconference panel format, number of panels) in this step. A grantor management tool such as the eCivis Subrecipient Manager (SRM) system automates this process via a web-based portal.

    The type of peer review is designated (internal, external or a combination) and the format is determined (in-person, teleconference, webcast, written-only, automated via online SRM tool), and the number of panels needed is estimated. An in-person peer review panel format is considered an exception to other formats and should be used on a limited basis.

    Situations may arise when solicitations for grant applications are not released on the planned release date in the grant forecasting timeline. Possible reasons for this may be that funding for the grant program has been delayed or that the pre-release solicitation review was delayed (see Section 4.2). Since the final date by which funds must be awarded is generally not changeable, the dates for other activities related to the application review and award processes may be compressed. In order to ensure that the quality of the peer reviews is not compromised by reducing the time spent on the review, grantor agencies may make changes in the beginning and end dates of peer review in the grant forecasting timeline.

2. **Manage Peer Review Panel Information**

Managing peer review panel information requires estimating the number of expected applications to determine the number of reviewers and panel size. Panels are created and peer reviewers are assigned and confirmed for panels, with leadership confirmation as necessary. Applications are received, screened, and assigned to peer reviewers on the panels. Peer reviewers receive panel guidelines and instructions concerning their participation in the peer review.

   a. The grant program manager performs a programmatic screening against the standard solicitation criteria when the application has met the basic minimum requirements screening. This serves as a second check and validation that the application should move to peer review. Upon review, the application is selected for peer review.

   b. Concurrently, the grant program manager works with the peer review manager (if used) to select, assign, and confirm peer reviewers for panels for a given solicitation.

   c. Applications are assigned to peer review panels and peer reviewers.

   d. Using a standard template, peer review guidelines and instructions are created for the reviewers to follow, including what areas of an application to give special attention to, the scoring criteria and guidelines, general expectations, conflict of interest, confidentiality and peer review system instructions. The eCivis SRM has a standardized user guide for reviewers; GFR encourages grantor agencies to utilize this tool.

3. **Conduct Peer Review**

Conducting a peer review consists of peer reviewers receiving peer review packages, accepting the terms and conditions of the peer review process, assessing applications, and submitting initial comments and scores. This process should be completed using an automated grant management tool, such as the eCivis SRM.

A panel discussion may be conducted. After the panel discussion, the peer reviewers submit their final comments and scores, and the scores are then compiled by the peer review manager. If the peer review is written, a panel is not convened and only one set of comments per reviewer may be needed. In those cases where the peer review is written-only, the grant program and/or peer review manager will review the comments submitted.

   a. Preferably using the eCivis SRM, the peer reviewers access the applications, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest and performs an assessment of the applications. (For agencies not using an automated system, this process will need to be completed manually).

   b. Applications are rated on the extent to which they meet the selection criteria established in the solicitation.

   c. The peer reviewer submits the initial comments and scores for a given application prior to the peer review panel being conducted.

d. The grant program manager, supported by the peer review manager (if used), compiles a report of all the initial comments and scores submitted by the peer reviewers (by application and review panel for the solicitation).

e. The peer reviewers convene as a group (e.g., teleconference) to discuss their scores and comments. Reviewers may change their scores or comments based on feedback they receive from the group. While reviewers may come to a consensus during this meeting, consensus is not required.

f. The peer reviewer enters the final assessment (comments and scores) into the grantor management tool (system, spreadsheet, or other source) after the panel is conducted (not all grantors require this activity).

g. Final comments and scores for a given solicitation by application are compiled.

4. **Conduct Recommendations Review**

Once the peer review panel has been conducted and final scores and comments are entered where required, the grant program manager reviews the comments and scores. The grant program manager and any other required personnel then collaborate to recommend and approve applications for funding. The peer review manager may be involved in this phase.

5. **Finalize Peer Review**

Finalizing the peer review includes evaluating peer reviewer performance and providing feedback to applicants concerning the results of the peer review.

a. Evaluating Peer Reviewers:

   i. Individual peer reviewer performance in the peer review process must be evaluated after the conclusion of all peer review panels for a given solicitation. Evaluating and monitoring peer reviewer performance ensures the integrity of the peer review process is maintained and funding is awarded fairly by identifying issues with peer reviewers that may hinder the completion of a successful review or compromise the quality of a review. Grantors also benefits by being able to identify and retain those peer reviewers that consistently exhibit exceptional performance.

   ii. Peer reviewers should be informed of the evaluation criteria as part of the instruction material they receive prior to the peer review session and at the beginning of each peer review session when the panel facilitator (if used, peer review manager) discusses the instructions and rules for participating in a panel.

   iii. The grant program and peer review managers each contribute to a peer reviewer's evaluation.

   iv. The peer reviewers should be evaluated using standardized criteria and evaluation form and should be submitted as part of the peer reviewer record. This record will assist in the peer reviewer selection process for future peer reviews.

b. Once applicants have been formally notified that their projects have been funded, the grant program manager should send a letter containing a narrative with edited final peer

reviewer or consensus comments to those organizations whose applications were not funded.

c. Rejection letters are covered in Section 6.3.1. For those applicants that are approved, the grant program manager is responsible for moving applications forward in the process.