

The Grant Lifecycle: From Application to Sustainability



Credit: NADTC



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The National Aging & Disability Transportation Center monitors several FTA discretionary grantees who were awarded Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) and/or Mobility for All (M4A) grants. This includes tracking and reporting on performance measures and outcomes. This toolbox is designed to help potential grantees: 1) find grant opportunities; 2) be prepared to apply for discretionary and other Federal, state, and local grants; 3) manage grants once received; and 4) sustain a project after the grant is complete.

I. Locating Grants

Grant opportunities for innovative transportation projects are often sporadic, one-time, and have short turnarounds for applying. While there are annual formula grant cycles for transportation grants through State Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA), US Department of Transportation (USDOT) discretionary grant programs often provide an opportunity to expand or augment services or start an innovative new service. The Coronavirus aid packages in 2020 and 2021 and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 have significant funding for public transportation. As a result, we anticipate additional new funds to be available for transit programs through FTA and other sources. Your transportation system and community will benefit if you are prepared for these opportunities as they become available.

Searching for Grant Opportunities

- FTA [formula and discretionary grant opportunities](#) can be found in the linked table.
- Be alerted to new opportunities by signing up for [updates and releases of Notice of Funding Opportunities \(NOFO\)](#)
- The Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success or R.O.U.T.E.S. initiative is designed to help rural areas use discretionary grants programs. R.O.U.T.E.S. has a [Discretionary Grant Funding Matrix](#) which broadly lists programs by applicant type and project activity. This can be a start of your search for funding across USDOT programs.
- Federal Technical assistance centers list grant opportunities including their own funding programs.
 - [National Aging & Disability Transportation Center](#), Grants & Funding
 - [National Center for Mobility Management](#), Grants & Opportunities

A **discretionary grant** is a competitive grant where applications are reviewed directly by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). FTA selects the awardee based on eligibility, evaluation criteria and Department or program priorities. Funds are typically one-time and address a specific program purpose or replicable innovation in a focus area.

Formula grants are awarded to recipients based on formulas set by Congress. USDOT distributes funds to States, federally recognized tribal recipients, and transit agencies. Funds can be further allocated to subrecipients. Funding is typically recurring and can provide capital, planning and/or operating assistance.

You may find grant programs that can fund your project outside of traditional FTA programs. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) or Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) may have funds that could be applicable to your project. Outside USDOT, the Health Resources Services Administration (HRSA), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Administration for Community Living (ACL), or National Institutes of Health (NIH) may have grants that can include transportation.

The Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) released a [CCAM Program Inventory](#) in 2019 which identifies 130 Federal programs that are able to provide funding for human services transportation for people with disabilities, older adults, and individuals of low income. This resource describes other federal sources for potential funding and collaborations for your project, including the Administration for Community Living and Employment and Training Administration programs as examples.

II. Considerations Before Applying for a Grant

Sustaining your agency's operations requires planning for improved, innovative, and possibly expanded services. Developing new or expanded services should be part of a **strategic planning** process, within the context of the agency's business plan. Some FTA grantees noted that, before applying for their current grants, they referred to their agency strategic plan for guidance. The strategic plan is built upon the agency mission and vision, setting overall goals, objectives, and strategies to achieve objectives. Does the grant opportunity you are considering fit within your agency mission, vision, and strategic plan? Will the grant enable your agency to begin the grant-supported service in line with your mission? The strategic plan provides guidance in determining appropriate grant opportunities for an agency.

An agency's strategic plan can have the following components that help define the direction for an organization.

- Goals (what will support the agency's vision)
- Objectives (what the agency wants to do to achieve goals)
- Strategies (how the agency will accomplish the objectives)
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) (how to show success of each strategy)
- Targets (how to show the intended measure for each KPI within a specified timeline)

Similarly, a **business plan** should show the strategy to match service offerings, operational and capital capacity, and potential funding. This goes beyond expenditures and revenues.

A business plan should create effective strategies for program growth, determine financial needs, and make the case for additional funding. The business plan needs to show how the budget will remain balanced and the additional capital and operating costs required for expanded or innovative services. This entails an operational concept for executing the grant that can address questions including the

following: If new rides are to be provided, where do current and potential customers live and what are their most frequent destinations? Are there unmet needs that the new rides will address? When do they most often use transportation? Can rides be grouped to reduce the cost per ride? Does the agency have enough vehicles, staff, maintenance, and parking capacity?

The financial section of the business plan will first address how the grant, local match and other sources will cover operating costs and purchase capital equipment including technology. The second analysis concerns how your agency will financially sustain the new service after the grant period. The business plan is also an important tool for developing the service scope for a grant application.

If the project in the grant application conforms with the agency's strategic and business plans, consult agency stakeholders, including both partners and participants (riders and potential riders). Foster relationships with stakeholders. Share your interest and vision and build trust in your program so when grant opportunities surface, your program will be top of mind. Your agency may not be an eligible applicant for a grant; however, you can be a ready partner if one of your stakeholders is eligible and applies.

FTA competitive grants may require evidence that input was solicited from stakeholders during the planning process. Stakeholders, including riders, may have suggestions to improve the draft grant application. Ask for stakeholder support in the form of letters of support. If any of your partners will provide in-kind or financial support for the proposed project, those contributions should be documented as local match.

Application Tips and Resources

Once you have completed your grant search and determined which one is a good fit for your project and agency mission, below are tips for writing your grant proposal.

Stakeholders to consult:

- Staff including drivers and dispatchers
- Public officials, both elected and those appointed to relevant commissions and committees
- Partnering human service agencies that may subsidize rides
- Partnering non-profits, such as the United Way, that may assist with grant local match
- Community-based or Local chapters of organizations advocating for older adults, people with disabilities, veterans, and low-income residents
- Suppliers

R.O.U.T.E.S. [Applicant Toolkit for Competitive Funding Programs at USDOT](#)

is designed to support potential applicants in identifying and navigating USDOT discretionary grant funding opportunities for rural projects. The toolkit provides information and resources about funding for USDOT's programs including aviation, rails, roads, as well as public transportation.

The toolkit explains the USDOT discretionary grant process from legislation to post-award. It also provides tips for maximizing award success.

- Ensure your project meets the grant criteria. The Notice of Funding Opportunity, NOFO will provide the application review process, and this should be reviewed when writing your grant.
- Align the project impact with any national priorities or USDOT strategic goals that are described in the NOFO. Follow the NOFO instructions and check the evaluation criteria as to how the application will be scored
- Develop relationships with your State DOT or designated recipient as well as the relevant planning authority in your area. Participate directly in the planning process in your metropolitan or rural area when plans are being developed. You will need to ensure your project is in the appropriate plan document (see text box for more information about transportation plans) before Federal funding can be obligated. You will also want to be clear who is the responsible entity for reporting and invoicing in systems such as TrAMS and Delphi or ECHO before applying.
- Use the technical assistance provided by FTA as well as the FTA-funded Technical Assistance Centers. Attend webinars about funding opportunities, read the Frequently Asked Questions documents, review previous awarded projects, and contact the grant Point of Contact with specific questions not answered in the information provided on the grant webpage.

[Transportation planning](#) is a collaborative process for statewide, regional, and community-level transportation-related agencies. It is designed to foster involvement by businesses, stakeholder groups and the general public through a public participation process. Plans must include how Federal funding will be used. Planning can be conducted by Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), State Department of Transportation and transit providers and results in the development of Transportation Improvement Plans (TIP) by an MPO or Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP) by the state DOT. Another plan to consider when determining which plan your project needs to be added to is the Coordinated Human Service Transportation Plan which is a locally developed, coordinated transportation plan for nonmetropolitan planning agencies.

III. Managing a Grant

When managing a grant, consider crucial aspects of the administrative and operations processes. Critical components include staff allocation; time management; utilizing external support and oversight mechanisms; and developing and tracking performance metrics.

Staff Allocation

No matter the size of your staff, grants can be effectively managed if roles are clearly defined. Plan for sufficient staffing to handle all aspects of the grant lifecycle. Regardless of the size of your staff, designate who will be responsible for each aspect of the project from identifying funding sources through grant execution to final reporting.

How you assign grant management roles and responsibilities will be based on your staff size and capacity. These roles should be assigned before submitting the application. Waiting until after the grant is awarded to assign tasks risks failure to complete the work on-time.

Once awarded, designate a project lead to handle day to day management of the grant activities and reporting. Assign due dates to begin and complete each task. Having a project leader assign tasks to individuals and track their progress has major benefits: 1) Project reports are more likely to be submitted on time; and 2) Targets are more likely to be achieved on time and within budget.

The unique requirements and regulations associated with multiple grants has to be tracked. This is challenging, especially with a smaller staff. A well-organized and maintained Excel database or other tracking mechanism helps keep task leaders on schedule.

Time Management

Consider the time required to apply for and manage grant(s). The grant process consists of a variety of tasks, some of which can be time consuming. Agencies should consider staff size, their workload, and ability to fulfill current duties as well as new tasks. Grant management tasks include:

- Planning and identifying projects for funding
- Identifying a funding opportunity that addresses strategic planning or business plan priorities
- Developing and completing the grant application
- Providing supplementary information requested by the funding agency
- Revising processes and procedures as needed in preparation for commencing work on the grant
- Executing all planned grant activities
- Reporting financial and programmatic data as required by the funder

If your agency is new to federal (and especially FTA) grant management, be aware of their required processes. Understanding how to use FTA's grant Transit Award Management System (TrAMS) will take extra staff time. Agencies should also allocate time to stay on top of changing grantor regulations and requirements.

You also want to compare the timeframe of your grant with the anticipated timeframe to complete your project. You do not want to exceed available funding before the project goals and objectives are achieved.

External Support and Oversight

Request and use **external support and oversight** available from technical assistance sources. Grantees can often receive assistance from state DOT staff on administrative and reporting requirements. Grantees in metropolitan areas should expect to work with a staffer at the local designated recipient for FTA formula

grants, typically, either the local transit system or the metropolitan planning organization (MPO). The state DOT or designated recipient may decide not to manage some discretionary grants. In that event, reporting (i.e., TrAMS) will be the responsibility of the grantee.

FTA discretionary grant oversight is assigned to an [FTA regional office](#). Establish a relationship between you and your regional office. Regional offices will be the first point of contact when any issues arise concerning your grant. [An individual from that office](#) will be assigned to support the development and management of each grant.

FTA may assign an FTA Technical Assistance Center (TAC) to work with grantees. NADTC is an FTA TAC assigned by FTA to support the Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) and Mobility for All (M4A) grantees. The TAC is expected to:

- 1) Ensure performance measures written in the applications align with the actual work being done in the project
- 2) Provide consultative technical assistance
- 3) Collect and track data on performance measures

A TAC will suggest strategies to troubleshoot challenges or obstacles. TACs also provide opportunities for peer-sharing and information gathering.

Additionally, agencies should continue to look to external partners, previous grantees and stakeholders for assistance and guidance.

Performance Measures

Performance measures and performance targets are essential in managing grants and projects. Performance measures are used to show whether the desired results are being achieved. According to the 2011 GAO report "[Performance Measurement and Evaluation – Definitions and Relationships](#)," performance measurement is:

"the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly progress toward pre-established goals."

Performance measures prove program progress and success. The funding agency uses the performance measures to assess and report on grantees' work. Performance measures should be:

- Meaningful
- Tangible
- Measurable

- Easy to understand
- Clearly achievable within the timeframe of the grant project

When writing performance measures, it is important to align goals with objectives. Performance measures should describe outputs and outcomes. Outputs represent the products and services delivered or activities conducted. Outcomes represent the specific results your grant project is intended to achieve and should address the project's impact to the community. External stakeholders, both partners and riders, should be involved in developing the project scope and the performance measures. A motto used by disability communities is instructive: "Nothing for Us Without Us". Stakeholder inclusion in the planning process supports equity in decision-making, project outputs and outcomes.

Performance measures can also be used in a [Performance-Based Planning and Programming](#) process. The [FTA website](#) defines Performance Management as "a strategic approach that uses performance data to inform decision-making and outcomes. When implemented effectively, performance management can improve project and program delivery, inform investment decisions, focus staff on leadership priorities, and provide greater transparency and accountability." This optional process allows adjustment of task assignments and schedules if necessary. Changes would be based on progress towards each performance measure target.

IV. Final Reporting

Grant closeout is a critical piece in the grant life cycle. Closeout is a process that takes place following the expiration or termination of the project period for a discretionary grant or cooperative agreement. A step in the closeout of a grant is the submission of a final report to the awarding agency. This report includes a detailed description of the activities carried out in these programs as well as an evaluation of the performance measures. Final reporting requirements can differ for state, local, and even between formula and discretionary federal grants.

As an example, [Section 3006\(b\) of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation \(FAST\) Act](#) requires FTA to produce an annual Report to Congress for discretionary funding sources. Each year, this Annual Report to Congress is developed from final reports submitted by grantees who have completed their discretionary grant project. Grant final reports are due to FTA within 90 days of the project closeout – after the end of the "period of performance" of the grant. The final report should be as unique as your project, while providing information that can be used to develop FTA's required report to Congress.

Final Report Requirements for FTA grantees who receive discretionary funding include:

- **Cover Page**
- **Table of Contents**
- **List of Tables (if applicable)**
- **List of Figures (if applicable)**

- **Executive Summary** – should summarize the key points of the report
 - Restate the purpose
 - Highlight the major points of the report
 - Describe any results, conclusions, and recommendations from the report
- **Introduction** – introduce the problem and describe why the project was needed in your area
- **Project Description** – information detailing your project and its goals
- **Key Partnerships** – partners involved in the life of the project
- **Implementation** – description of how the project was implemented and any adjustments made throughout the project
- **Performance Measures** – summary of performance measures and data collected
- **Outcomes** – describe project outcomes and whether you met your goals
- **Sustainability** – describe the plan to sustain the project beyond the initial project period
- **Lessons Learned** throughout the project
- **Appendices** (if applicable)

A Final Report example is the [Blythe Wellness Express Final Report](#), prepared for FTA’s Rides to Wellness Program.

V. Sustainability

Planning for sustainability is an important step to continue the project beyond the grant end date and should start at the beginning of your project. Sustainability requires stakeholder buy-in, financial support and in-kind support. A few key areas to consider in planning for sustainability include:

- Programs benefit from engaging older adults and people with disabilities in the planning process. Perspectives of older adults and people with disabilities can provide input on how to improve services to meet their needs and challenges. Advocacy is an important strategy in planning for sustainability. Older adults and people with disabilities often make the best advocates.
- Fostering partnerships can expand the reach of your program. Partners can provide financial and in-kind support. Partners can champion your program and increase local recognition in the community by championing your program.
- Seeking [financial opportunities](#) is critical to sustaining your program. This is an ongoing activity which should begin early in the project.
- Collecting and analyzing data is necessary to sell your organization’s project to funders, riders, and the community. Performance measures demonstrate the success of your project and can serve as marketing or outreach tools that can lead to continued and additional funding.

NADTC’s [Planning for Sustainability](#) outlines a checklist of sustainability planning considerations.

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The National Aging & Disability Transportation Center monitors FTA discretionary grantees who were awarded Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) and/or Mobility for All (M4A) grants. NADTC convenes grantees in group learning collaboratives to create opportunities to build and exchange knowledge on pilot program implementation, performance measures reporting processes, to facilitate collaborations to disseminate information gained through project execution, to provide a forum to share successes and challenges to build capacity and sustainability, and to ensure the successes and lessons learned from ICAM and Mobility for All grantees and captured for national best practices dissemination.

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NADTC's Mission is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

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