GRANT PARTNER FIELD GUIDE

PETER & ELIZABETH **TOWER FOUNDATION**

THIS GUIDE

Congratulations on your grant award!

We are investing in your project because we believe you play an important role in helping to improve the lives of young people living with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mental illness, or substance use disorders. We look forward to our partnership throughout the duration of your grant -- and beyond.

This piece is designed as a general guide to what you can expect during the life of your grant.

While we hope this will answer questions that you might have about working with us, and be something you can refer to if needed, it is not intended to replace actual interactions, actual conversations. So never hesitate to call or schedule a visit!

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1.0 GETTING STARTED

WHAT TO EXPECT

Shortly after we notify you that your grant has been approved for funding, we will go over some housekeeping and next steps in a grant partner onboarding phone call (or in-person meeting, when we can make it happen).

During this conversation, we will review/establish:

- Who, on the grant partner side, is the key contact for general grant communications going forward? Preferably the person closest to the day-to-day unfolding of the work.
- How the key contact will access our online grant management portal (it is called foundationConnect), if this has not already been set up. Who is your signatory authority? In other words, who will execute our Terms of Grant. It is usually the Executive Director, Chief Executive Officer, or other top administrator.
- What the Terms of Grant is (it is our contract with you) and what we have to do to get it executed (we used a web-enabled tool for this). We cannot issue a grant payment until this is done. First, the Terms of Grant is emailed to your signatory authority. Then, the key contact will be copied with the executed agreement. In some instances, the key contact might have to help expedite this process. It is usually as simple as saying "Hey, boss, read your email."
- Whether you want grant payments as a paper check or direct deposit. Increasingly, we use direct deposit through ACH (Automated Clearing House), but paper checks remain an option. For direct deposit, we will ask for the name and email of the individual authorized to approve financial transactions, and will forward the form we need them to complete. If you choose paper now, you can opt in for direct deposit at any time.
- Also on this call, we will hit some other highlights from this guide: communications, scope or budget changes, grant reports (usually in the form of a conversation, though written remains an option), site visits, and further partnership like promotion/publicity.

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2.0 YOUR PROJECT

YOUR NORTH STAR

When you first submitted your application, we asked for a very brief summary of your ultimate goals, at the organizational or project level. We found your project – or your organization generally – to be fundamentally aligned with the Tower Foundation's own goals. Our Trustees signed on to an investment in your vision and the objectives supported by your evaluation strategy. Think of these high-level objectives as your project or organization's guiding principle, its North Star.

You may have shared a work plan with us too. And while we endorsed the basic strategies and on-the-ground tactical work that make up that plan, some of these are probably going to change during the lifetime of your grant. These changes will affect the scope of your project. They may affect how grant dollars are allocated. We will work through these changes with you, because if something isn't working, we prefer correcting the course to straying down a false path. But please involve the Program Officer when making these changes.

REPORTING

GENERAL

Increasingly, we are moving away from requiring written reports at all (although it remains an option if you prefer them). There are exceptions for financial reporting (see below). Most "reports" now take the form of a conversation between the Program Officer and members of your team. For multi-year grants, these will be annual conversations that take place in the weeks before a grant award payment is due or a month or so after the funded activities of a grant have wrapped up. With new grants we also like to check in at about the six-month mark, whether this is an actual, physical site visit, phone call, or Zoom meeting.

So what do these conversations look like? They tend to run about an hour. Part of them will involve revisiting the performance measures you developed, usually at a workshop we facilitated while you were putting the finishing touches on your proposal. Using the Results Based Accountability (RBA) methodology[1], we framed performance or organizational measures as responses to these three questions:

1. How much did we do?
2. How well did we do it?
3. Is anyone better off?

In combination, these questions get at a lot. They speak to purely quantitative outputs (how many people received certificate-level training?), some quality measures (was the trainer any good?), and whether anything changed for the better (did trainees find they were better at their job afterwards?).

Performance measures are not necessarily the most important part of the conversation. We also use RBA's "five key questions" to ground the conversation (see below). The performance measures tie in pretty clearly to the first question. But the other questions explore important issues like environmental context, partnerships, adjustments to tactics and strategies, corrective actions, and what you are learning about the work, about the field, about the community.

THE FIVE QUESTIONS OF RBA

1. **How are you doing?** (Have community conditions improved? How are your programs and services doing?)
2. **What's the story?** (What factors, both within your organization and outside, help you understand what's going on?; What is the impact on minority populations or otherwise underserved groups like people with disabilities)
3. **Who are your partners in this work?** (What people and organizations have you worked with — or could you work with — to advance your organization's efforts? Have you considered partners predominantly serving communities of color or whose leadership and staff composition reflect the communities they serve?)
4. **What works?** (What parts of your approach have been especially successful? Are there new things you could try? Approaches that cost little or nothing? Can you do more to tap into and lift up community voice in problem-solving?)
5. **What's your action plan?** (What looks the same going forward? What looks different? How do changes affect the resources that are available to you?)

FINANCIAL

Grant finances are a bit harder to completely capture in a conversation, so we do ask that they be submitted "on paper." We will ask you to complete these slightly in advance of our annual grant conversations, when possible.

[1] If you are interested in learning more about RBA, the basic primer for the approach is *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough: How to Produce Measurable Improvements for Customers and Communities* by Mark Friedman. And here is an online resource for more information: https://clearimpact.com/results-based-accountability/

The financial reporting is primarily by spreadsheet, where we ask for three columns: budgeted expenditures, what was actually spent, and the difference (variance) between what was budgeted and what was spent. We also ask you to describe variances of line items that exceed 10% or $1,000, whichever dollar amount is greater. We do ask for back-up to the financial expenditures you report. We don't need invoices that account for every dollar spent. Payroll summaries are fine, we don't need time sheets. General ledger entries for things like equipment purchases, consulting services, refreshments, and supplies are also fine. *If in doubt about any requirements, give us a call. We will try to save you time and effort when possible.*

In many cases, there are some unspent funds. This is your opportunity to make the case for rolling funds over into the next year. Maybe there was a timing issue. What was expected to happen in year one won't actually happen until the first quarter of year two. We are likely to approve a carryover of funds in such cases. Maybe there were simply some program "savings" -- a volume discount on supplies or a training event that was effectively delivered in three days instead of five. If you see an opportunity to reallocate these dollars in ways that benefit the project, describe (briefly!) the opportunity. It is also okay to "leave money on the table." It doesn't go to waste. It gets folded back into the funds available to support other worthy projects. [If a reallocation of funds makes sense during the course of the year, please contact your Program Officer to discuss at that time.]

Finally, we will ask for a "new" budget for the coming year. It may be virtually unchanged from the original, or it may reflect your mid-course adjustments (including any funds you carry over into the next year), large and small.

A final caveat: do not put off important communication about grant changes until a grant conversation comes up on the calendar. Scope and budget change requests should be submitted in writing (email is fine) in advance. We don't want to read or hear about how a project has been taken in a wholly new direction ten months after the fact. We understand that the best laid plans may need to adapt to new challenges; we want to be part of the conversation.

OUR GRANT MANAGEMENT PLATFORM

Several reporting tools and templates live in our grant management system (in the "Grantees Reports" section), the same one your organization used to submit an application. Your Program Officer will go over these tools during the grant onboarding meeting. We won't go into a lot of detail about them here, in part because they are still fairly new and we expect to tweak them a bit from time to time. Anything we told you in this space could be out-of-date pretty quick.

Here is one important tip about the grant management system. If something seems out of whack or broken (and glitches do happen), click on the "Support" icon on the main landing page. Here, you can send a brief description of the problem directly to our tech team. They will get right on it and generally can resolve the problem faster than if you refer it to a Program Officer.

3.0 COMMUNICATIONS

3.1 TOWER FOUNDATION PROGRAM OFFICER

For your grant, the assigned Program Officer is your go-to contact. The Program Officer will take point when you seek approval for program changes (scope or budget), will coordinate possible site visits, and engage with your team in the conversations about your organization and work that are increasingly taking the place of written reports.

On Programs and Services grants, we are open to change requests that are responses to practical implementation realities, provided they don't undermine the original intent of your grant, or require resources (money or otherwise) that are just not available. New strategies are always welcome in service of your original objectives. Your Program Officer will work with you to accommodate work plans that evolve to accommodate real-world conditions.

Here are some things you can expect of your Program Officer.

- Responsiveness. We respond to calls and emails promptly, within a day or two, often sooner.
- Transparency about decision making. Program Officers exercise their own discretion answering many questions or responding to change requests. For some thornier issues, we may defer an answer until we can get our program staff together (including leadership) to deliberate as a team. We will let you know if this is happening. Our goal is to be consistent across Program Officers in the way we address program changes.
- We'd rather be responsive and flexible than formal and rigid. We will generally ask that you summarize a change request (with some justification) in an email. Expect our response by return email.
- We're usually happy to accommodate extensions to the grant period. We do appreciate knowing about significant delays in advance so we can plan ahead when it comes to opportunities to engage with you about the grant.

We welcome conversations about things beyond your current grant, including:

- Other Tower Foundation funding opportunities
- Connections with other staff and Foundation leadership
- The funding/grantmaking landscape in Western NY and Eastern MA
- Contacts with other agencies, communities, government
- Opportunities for field-building and networking (conferences, convenings)
- Referrals of young people with lived expertise in our four areas of focus to our Community Advisory Team

Here are a few things, your Program Officer is not.

- A project manager. We are happy to be a sounding board, but this is your project or program.
- A compliance officer. We don’t follow up with checklists or surprise visits.
- A higher power. Consider your Program Officer a peer and partner.
- A robot. Program Officers, not programmed officers.

3.2 YOUR PROJECT TEAM

We do have a few expectations of you too.

- We do require a consistent and generally accessible key contact. This should be someone familiar with the grant on a day-to-day basis. If this contact changes, for whatever reason, please let us know in a timely manner.
- Err on the side of letting us know about a stalled project, the need to make work plan adjustments, reassess an evaluation strategy, or tweak a budget.
- Don’t think in terms of good news/bad news. We really mean this. Stuff happens to programs. Embrace the learning opportunities that a project affords.
- Help us capture stories about your work. Let us know when there are opportunities to take pictures or video. We are always happy to accept photos that you can share with us. Occasionally we will provide funds to capture stories, whether photo-journalist style or on video.

3.3 PUBLICITY/PROMOTION

We encourage you to promote your work as you see fit. Just a few things we ask you to keep in mind.

- For grant-related publicity (e.g., press release, article), please submit copy to us for review before you go live. If it is time sensitive, let us know and we will fast-track review and approval.
- We don’t require that you reference the Tower Foundation in public-facing documents and materials. But if you’d like to, we can provide high-quality versions of our logo.
- During the course of the grant, we ask that you consider sharing photos or other images with us that will help us to tell the story behind the important work that you do. Whenever we can, we like to promote this work on our website, in our annual reports, through social media, and other communications channels. Examples of images that we are looking for include engaged clients, staff members at work, and client artwork or other creative projects. Please confirm that the subjects of photos have given permission for use of their image.
- There is a convenient way to share stories and supporting materials. *On the home page of the grant management system, click on the “Tell Us Your Story” icon. Here, you can upload text and any supporting pictures, video, etc.*

- We do sometimes feature grant partner projects on our blog. We have also invited grant partners to guest blog about their work. Let us know if this interests you.
- We also post videos related to Tower Foundation grants on our website. If your project has generated video, or you would like to use video to communicate about it, get in touch. In some cases, we have supported the creation of grant partner video content.

3.4 SOCIAL MEDIA

The Tower Foundation is active on social media. Here are several ways you can keep in touch with us:

Twitter: @towerfdn

Facebook: @thetowerfoundation

LinkedIn: Peter & Elizabeth Tower Foundation

Instagram: @thetowerfdn

4.0 SITE VISITS & LEARNING

At roughly the six-month mark of a grant's first year and, for multi-year grants, annually thereafter, we will schedule a site visit. Your Program Officer will conduct this in person whenever possible. We fall back on phone or video conferences if the logistics of a visit don't work (not to mention a global pandemic). We will give you several weeks' notice, and look for mutually convenient dates.

4.1 WHAT IS A SITE VISIT LIKE?

First and foremost, it is not our intent that site visits create a lot of work for you. Our favorite site visits coincide with already scheduled events or training sessions we can actually join in on. When it makes sense, we do enjoy talking to different team members, clients, and other stakeholders – within your organization primarily, but invite others if they help to flesh out a sense of the work. We also value the opportunity to work/play alongside the young people your work supports. We've done yoga and painted playground equipment, so don't hesitate to send us to school or even put us to work.

We largely leave the site visit agenda to you. We don't request that anything be put together in advance, just be prepared to offer general updates (and maybe a story or two). Depending on the project, and your interest, we may take advantage of a site visit (whether in-person or virtual) to revisit the questions that form the basis of our annual check-in conversations. But we expect this to be conversational.

Just a couple of DON'Ts:

- Unless it serves another purpose for you (like the requirements of a federal grant), please don't prepare PowerPoint presentations or lengthy reports for us.
- Please don't feel like you have to feed us, entertain us, etc. If you have only an hour to spare, we will make it work.

Summarizing a few thoughts about site visits:

- If it makes sense to schedule a site visit when there is something particular going on (e.g., open house, community workshop), let us know and we will consider scheduling accordingly. If there is something to sit in on/observe, we welcome it.
- We are not professional photographers or film directors, but if there is an opportunity to visually document the work you are doing or some special event, let us know. If the opportunity warrants, we'd consider bringing back up to help with photography or video.

- When possible, we like to use the opportunity of a site visit to spend time with the young people that you work with. But if this involves intensive planning or elaborate choreography, skip it!
- Sometimes there is not much to see, and that is okay. It really is fine if we sit around a conference table and chat for 40 minutes.

4.2 WHY DO WE DO THEM?

- Site visits make the abstract real for us. Plans on paper are one thing.
- Site visits expose us to your and your colleagues' passion, the very real benefits for the people you serve, and actual environmental factors that affect your work.
  We get to meet and speak with other members of your team.
- They present a chance to give our relationship with you some depth. They reinforce the two-way communication that we hope for.
- Site visits help us capture stories and give us ideas for blog posts and grant partner highlights to share with Trustees.
- They help us uncover other ways we could be collaborating.

4.3 OTHER LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

The Tower Foundation is exploring the ways that our four focus areas intersect with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Equity is an important part of our vision statement: *The Tower Foundation envisions equitable communities where all young people are included, accepted, and valued; and are confident in themselves.* We also call out diverse voices as one of our four organizational values. Our vision statement and values challenge us to integrate diverse, equitable, and inclusive practices throughout our work.

At the same time, we recognize how new this work is to us and just how much we have to learn. We know that many of our grant partners have already begun the journey to make their organizations more just and equitable, some since their inception. Others, like us, are just beginning. As part of our grant partnership, we are eager to share and learn from you about the important work happening in this space.

Participatory Grantmaking

In 2022 we brought together, largely via Zoom, a ten-person advisory team to design and implement a $200,000 grantmaking initiative. Team members had lived expertise in one or more of the Foundation's primary funding areas: intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health, substance use disorders. They also represented a mix of our funding geographies in Western New York and Eastern Massachusetts. Advisors designed a Request for Proposals for this funding opportunity, deemed the "Community Experts Fund," and were responsible for all decision-making. The success of this initiative was in large part due to the partnership that we have with our grant partners as not only good referral sources for our participatory grantmaking initiatives, but also as community members with perspectives we value. If you are interested in learning more or serving as a referral source for future Advisors, please connect with your Program Officer about this.

Storytelling and Testimonials

At any time during your grant, we invite you to share photos or other images that tell your story, whether day-to-day activities or special events. [Again, take advantage of the "Tell Us Your Story" feature in the grant management system.] Photos of staff and clients are always welcome; please confirm that releases have been obtained. Testimonials from individuals and families are always appreciated. We are continuously looking for new material to feature on our website and social media. We welcome guest bloggers to our website. Also, take a look at the Impact Stories on our website. The next feature could highlight your work.

Convenings/Learning Communities

From time to time, we invite grant partners from several organizations to join us on a webinar or a conference. In most cases we will help with registration fees and travel costs. To enrich the experience, we try to build a learning cohort to facilitate collaborative learning and networking. We incorporate opportunities to talk about sessions or workshops, share a meal, and build relationships. If you happen to learn about opportunities for collaborative learning, short or long-term, please bring it to our attention!

5.0 OUR PARTNERSHIP

At the Tower Foundation, we consider grant recipients to be *partners*. More than that, our grant partners are doing the actual work to improve the lives of young people with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mental health challenges, and substance use disorders. We are privileged to support you.

As partners, we value two-way communication and learning. Feedback and communication about how your grant is doing is part of the relationship. But grant partners should feel like they can give us feedback about how we are doing too. Do the Foundation's processes support or impede your efforts? How could we be better partners? What about partnerships is particularly important to you? Are we filling that role? We really aren't kidding about this. In fact, here is a link to Grant Advisor (Yelp for Foundations) where you can actually file a review of your experience with the Tower Foundation: https://grantadvisor.org/

We've touched on some of these already, but here is what we feel we gain as partners:

- Learning from the grant alongside you
- Learning about the challenges you face as an organization
- Learning about the conditions and new forces that most affect your field
- Getting your input on how we can improve our processes and interactions with you
- Crafting an effective and accurate story from your work
- Connecting you to other grant partners or resources that can support what you do
- Translating the lessons learned from your grant's ups and downs into better grantmaking, and better technical assistance for other grant partners
- Connect you to additional funding opportunities at the Tower Foundation
- Amplifying important messages about this grant or other work

Our partnership with you need not end when your grant does. Here are a couple of reasons for not breaking up:

- Consider us a sounding board for projects you are considering.
- We welcome guest bloggers on our website.
- Explore with us the community-building and networking potential of social media.
- Keep current on Tower Foundation funding opportunities.