



Request for Proposal Best Practices

At Tides, our vision is clear: We believe that a just and equitable future can exist only when communities who have been historically denied power have the social, political, and economic power they need to create it.

Our mission is to turn this vision into reality by working in deep partnership with doers and donors to center the leadership of changemakers from these communities, connecting them to services, capacity building, and resources to amplify their impact.

How Do We Do This?

Stated simply: by centering and trusting remarkable grantees representing communities who have been historically denied power.

How You Can Do This.

We encourage you to view the request for proposal (RFP) process as an expression of your values and a tool for change. Considering RFPs usually require significant time and bandwidth for nonprofits, the Tides team has compiled best practices around how to shape, analyze, and publish RFPs to your desired doers and proximate leaders.

In this guide, we provide actionable insights to root your work in grantee-centered practices. We encourage you to explore and experiment with community-led approaches, and weave participatory grantmaking practices into fund structures. Our goal is to strengthen your engagement and connections with communities and leaders that are problem-solving and advancing transformative justice in ways that resonate with your philanthropic mission.

Tides' 11 Best Practices for a Successful & Equitable RFP Process

- 1 • Consider whether an RFP is truly needed.** Start by asking yourself: What is the impact you seek? What do you hope to accomplish/learn/glean from an RFP process that cannot be achieved with your own research, conversations with community leaders, or support from an advisor?

Completing an RFP is an arduous task for community leaders and grassroots nonprofits. Only ask potential grantees to go through it when it's absolutely necessary for your decision-making. Remember: If people are spending time filling out your application, they're losing time to focus on other things.

To help determine if an RFP is the best way to accomplish your goal, ask yourself — what information do I need to identify the partners who can achieve the impact? This can help reveal whether an RFP is the right tool for the job.
- 2 • Develop your review criteria in tandem with your RFP.** Only request information that will be used in your funding decision making. Don't request documents or data that you won't review or that won't influence funding decisions. Verify that each section in your RFP directly relates to your review criteria.

Consider the amount of effort you're asking for, relative to the total amount of funding available. Is it proportional? If not, tailor the application until it is. To this end, consider whether a multi-step process could work, in which you accept a simpler, briefer application up front and follow up with finalists to request more detailed information.

Additionally, if applicants can provide the information you need by sharing existing materials they've developed for other proposals, consider accepting those. Allowing prior materials submissions drastically cuts back on the amount of labor grantees face.

Asking for only the necessary information results in better applications. Applicants can focus on explaining what matters instead of spending time on details that may not contribute to your final decision.
- 3 • Be clear in your instructions.** Offer suggested word counts or other guidance on how long each response should be. If it's possible to do so, consider supplying templates for requested attachments, such as project budgets. If you've decided to accept prior



CLEO Institute, a Tides Foundation WE LEAD grantee partner, works to build climate literacy and mobilize climate action for a just, resilient future.

materials, remind prospective grantees they can submit pre-existing annual reports or other proposals. It's also a good idea to include the estimated time it will take an applicant to complete the RFP. This allows prospective grantees to properly plan ahead and submit applications on time. Finally, try filling out the RFP yourself as if you were a prospective grantee, and look out for any issues or confusion that could come up.

4 • Ask for feedback while drafting your RFP. As you shape your RFP and the selection criteria, share both with community leaders and/or peer funders, and ask for honest feedback — including criticism that tests your assumptions. This can help you identify any unconscious bias or areas of weakness within your application. Consider bringing proximate community leaders into your RFP design from the very beginning of the process and be sure to compensate them appropriately for their time and expertise.

5 • Encourage a multi-stakeholder group that includes leaders and members of local communities to review and select proposals to fund. Remember that community leaders should be compensated for their time. Ensure all reviewers have a shared understanding of the impact aims, conduct trainings and develop guidance if needed. If you're using a rubric, make sure it's used to support review and discussion, but scores should not be the decision-making factors. Discussion allows for different perspectives and insights to be shared to better identify the top proposals for the impact sought.

6 • Be transparent about the parameters and process of your RFP, forthcoming awards, and any reporting expectations or requirements.

- Is the RFP open or invitation only?
- Is there a deadline or are proposals reviewed on a rolling basis?
- What are the key milestones/decision-making timeline?
- How many organizations will receive funding? How much total funding is available?
- Consider sharing your selection criteria, or even your actual rubric if you're using one.
- Share the makeup or background of the group that will be making the final decisions, and when those decisions will be communicated.
- Disclose whether individual applicant feedback will be offered, and if so, how and when.
- If there is a deviation from the parameters that have been communicated (ex. A personnel shift makes the review process take longer than expected), communicate the change promptly and clearly.



Nevadans for Reproductive Freedom, a Tides Foundation Healthy Democracy Fund grantee partner, is a group of progressive organizations and citizens who are working toward cementing the right to abortion into the state's constitution.



7 • Consider accessibility in your RFP process. Every part of the RFP process is a chance to dismantle existing power imbalances between funder and grantee. What steps can you take to make sure your RFP process is accessible to prospective grantees?

- Consider accepting proposals in less traditional formats, such as videos, voice recordings, handwritten proposals, or in other languages other than English.
- Offer spaces for prospective grantees to ask questions. Host an informational webinar session where prospective grantees can learn more and ask clarifying questions, or provide an email address for questions.
- Prepare an FAQ document for prospective grantees that addresses common questions, and regularly update it as new information comes in.

8 • Choose the right tool for the right job. What platform or survey tool is best fitted for your RFP? A philanthropic advisor can recommend some common application platforms and give you insights into the cost benefit analysis of each.

9 • Launch your RFP to the appropriate audience. Whether your RFP is open or closed, make sure that it encompasses a diverse and inclusive ecosystem with a range of audiences such as nonprofit networks, grassroots community leaders, and intermediaries.

This is a critical step in building an equitable process, particularly if you are seeking to fund smaller organizations that might not be well connected to formal or national networks where RFPs are often shared.

10 • Plan for the selection process and RFP closure. Accepted proposals should be chosen based on the selection committee and process decided prior to the RFP launch. In the timeframe outlined in the launch, the accepted notifications should include any additional details or next steps. Rejection notifications should also be timely, respectful, and, if possible, offer other resources they might leverage. Feedback is encouraged — however, if individual feedback is not being shared, consider sharing what elevated the successful proposals.

More Tips

- Consider accepting grantees' existing information/proposals to reduce time spent by the applicant.
- Talk to an advisor to explore the pros and cons of an open vs invitation only RFP process — Invitation-only RFPs are shared with a select group of grantees, while open RFPs are competitive and widely distributed.
- When building out your questions, take into account multiple choice/pre-filled vs. open-ended questions for ease/speed of filling out an RFP and for future data analysis.
- Time yourself completing the application to estimate how long the application will take.

- 77 • Plan for time to debrief following the process.** Set aside time to reflect on the RFP process, FAQs, and feedback. To help you debrief effectively, consider asking for anonymous feedback directly in the RFP decision notification emails. An example: “We value your input. Please share your thoughts about our process, and especially any constructive feedback. Responses will not impact future funding decisions.” Continue to reflect on which information in the RFP process was critical to decision making and understanding impact to help make your future RFP process more efficient and less burdensome for applicants.

Go Deeper With Your Grantmaking

Who we support can only get us so far. **How** we provide funding and support grantee partners is just as important in shifting power to marginalized groups and creating a more just and equitable future for all of us.

Join us. Reach out to philanthropy@tides.org to learn more.



BeLoved Asheville hurricane relief and recovery (www.belovedasheville.com). BeLoved Asheville, a Tides Foundation Crisis Response Fund grantee partner, is committed to improving the wellbeing and quality of life for individuals, families, and communities through their focus areas of home, health, equity, and opportunity.