COMMUNITY FUNDING ACCELERATOR

GRANT READINESS TOOLKIT

STEP 03 · PREPARE

Post-Submission Strategy Guide

Preparing Between Submission & Award

communityfundingaccelerator.org

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SECTION I.

Introduction

The Community Funding Accelerator (CFA) supports communities in securing and deploying public funding to strengthen cradle-to-career education and workforce pathways. We help organizations assess, pursue, and implement funding opportunities that align with their goals, capacity, and long-term strategy.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is complemented by the Pre-Application Readiness Guide (assessing the opportunity) and the Grant Writing Guide (developing competitive, well-organized proposals).

Use this guide to prepare for the period between proposal submission and award notification — Step 3 of the Grant Readiness Cycle. It can help your organization maintain momentum, strengthen readiness, plan for different funding outcomes, and position itself for successful implementation.

THE GRANT READINESS CYCLE

01 Assess
Pre-Application Readiness Guide
Guided self-assessment for organizational readiness to pursue opportunities

02 Develop
Grant Writing Guide
Steps for developing and submitting successful grant proposals

03 Prepare
Post-Submission Strategy Guide
Practical framework for organizing post-submission resources and logistics

↑ You are here

Don't miss our interactive tool!

The Post-Submission Strategy Tool generates a tailored readiness checklist based on where you are in the process — whether you're awaiting notification, have been selected, or were not funded this cycle.

Find out more (Page 21)

SECTION II.

Assessing Post-Submission Readiness

The period between proposal submission and award notification can involve a range of activities, depending on the funding opportunity and outcome. Use the checklist below as an initial self-assessment to identify areas that may require additional planning, coordination, or preparation.

The remainder of this guide explores each checkpoint in greater detail and provides practical tools, frameworks, and recommended practices to help your organization strengthen post-submission readiness.

TOOL

Post-Submission Readiness Checklist

CHECKPOINT	STATUS
BEFORE AWARD NOTIFICATION	
Partner communication structure established	☐
Staffing readiness reviewed	☐
Reduced-budget scenario modeled	☐
Financial systems assessed	☐
Interview/site visit preparation completed	☐
Leadership decision-making process clarified	☐
IF SELECTED	
Award terms reviewed	☐
Budget feasibility validated	☐
Compliance requirements reviewed	☐
Startup governance activated	☐
Hiring and onboarding initiated	☐
Partner agreements updated	☐
IF NOT SELECTED	
Partners notified	☐
Reviewer feedback requested	☐
Internal debrief conducted	☐
Strategic options assessed	☐
Proposal assets archived for reuse	☐

Not every checkpoint will apply to every funding opportunity. However, organizations that address these areas proactively are often better positioned to respond to funding decisions, prepare for implementation, and make effective use of lessons learned if funding is not awarded.

The sections that follow provide guidance on how to assess and strengthen each area of readiness.

SECTION III.

What Happens After Submission

Typical Post-Submission Risks

While many factors are outside your control during the review period, there are several common risks organizations can prepare for in advance.

RISK	COMMON IMPACT
Delayed internal planning	Slow implementation startup
Partner disengagement	Reduced coalition stability
Unrealistic staffing assumptions	Hiring delays
Failure to model reduced awards	Operational instability
Weak interview preparation	Reduced reviewer confidence

KEY INSIGHT

Strong post-submission preparation supports implementation credibility. Funders are often evaluating whether the organization appears capable of executing the proposed work — not simply whether the proposed ideas are strong.

SECTION IV.

Maintaining Partner and Staff Alignment

Long review periods can weaken momentum if organizations do not maintain communication and role clarity. The objective during this phase is not constant activity. It is maintaining enough coordination so the project can activate quickly if funded.

Recommended Post-Submission Coordination

COORDINATION PRACTICE	PURPOSE
Monthly partner check-ins	Maintain alignment and visibility
Quarterly leadership updates	Keep executive sponsors informed of potential award scenarios, risks, and readiness needs
Documentation of key decisions and assumptions	Preserve clarity and accountability if staffing or partner changes occur
Pre-award staffing and onboarding planning	Reduce hiring and startup delays if funding is awarded
Defined funder communication responsibilities and approval processes	Ensure consistent external messaging and timely responses to funder requests

EXAMPLE — PARTNER CHECK-IN ROUTINE

A monthly 30-minute standing call with each core partner during the review period. Keep a standing agenda: (1) confirm the expected award timeline and any funder updates, (2) surface staffing or capacity changes, (3) review decisions that are needed and who owns them, and (4) capture action items with dates. Send a short written recap to all partners within 24 hours so anyone who missed the call stays aligned.

Roles to Confirm Before Award Notification

Before award decisions are announced, confirm who will lead key functions if funding is awarded.

ROLE	WHY IT MATTERS
Executive Sponsor	Provides organizational authority
Project Director	Oversees implementation
Finance Lead	Manages budget activation and reporting
Evaluation/Data Lead	Oversees performance tracking
Partner Coordination Lead	Maintains coalition communication
Funder Communication Lead	Ensures consistent external messaging

For each role, confirm:

- responsible individual or hiring plan
- reporting structure
- startup responsibilities
- decision authority

TOOL

Pre-Award Staffing Preparation Checklist

You do not need every position filled before award notification. Use the checklist below to prepare for staffing and operational needs that may arise if funding is awarded.

- [ ] Draft job descriptions and salary ranges
- [ ] Develop scopes of work for anticipated contractors or consultants
- [ ] Confirm hiring and onboarding timelines
- [ ] Clarify purchasing and procurement procedures
- [ ] Confirm anticipated staffing commitments with partners

Common Staffing Risks

RISK	POTENTIAL IMPACT
Delayed hiring approvals	Startup delays
Unclear supervision structure	Operational confusion
Partner staffing turnover	Implementation disruption
Overreliance on future hires	Reduced reviewer confidence

Staffing gaps are among the most common reasons a funded project starts slowly. Funders generally look for evidence that an organization is operationally ready — not that every position is already filled — so the goal during the review period is to surface and plan for the risks below while they are still inexpensive to address.

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SECTION V.

Preparing Systems for Implementation

Organizations do not need fully activated compliance systems during the review period. However, they should confirm that core operational infrastructure can support the proposed work.

Operational Readiness Areas

The review period is a good time to assess whether existing systems can support implementation if funding is awarded.

SYSTEM AREA	READINESS QUESTIONS
Financial Systems	Can expenditures be tracked separately?
Data Systems	Can required metrics be collected and reported?
Procurement	Are purchasing processes established?
Document Management	Can records be organized and retained properly?
Partner Oversight	Are communication and reporting expectations clear?

Note: Refer to the **Code of Federal Regulations Part 200** for the full set of grant guidelines and award management requirements. While this guide provides key considerations to prepare your organization for project implementation if you are awarded a federal grant, consider retaining counsel, accounting, and auditing services for specific compliance needs.

Practical Startup Preparations

Small investments in preparation now can save significant time during implementation.

ACTION	BENEFIT
Create shared folders and document structures	Reduces startup confusion
Draft financial and data reporting templates	Accelerates reporting readiness
Prepare procurement materials and purchasing procedures	Reduces purchasing delays
Develop data-sharing templates and assign data ownership	Supports partner coordination and reporting
Establish separate grant accounting structures	Reduces reporting and audit risk
Document partner reporting expectations	Improves compliance consistency
Define startup governance and decision-making processes	Accelerates implementation decisions
Identify likely compliance questions	Improves early funder communication

Organizations that address these areas before award notification are often better positioned to launch implementation quickly and avoid common startup challenges.

> **EXAMPLE — SEPARATING GRANT FUNDS BEFORE AWARD**
>
> Set up a dedicated fund code or cost center in your accounting system so grant expenditures are recorded separately from operating funds. Map each budget line to a tracking category, decide who codes and who approves expenses, and plan a monthly reconciliation against the approved budget. Doing this before funds arrive makes required financial reporting straightforward and reduces audit risk. Confirm the specific setup with your finance lead or fiscal agent, since requirements vary by funder and organization.

The same logic applies to every system on the list above: the value comes from setting it up before it is urgent.

> **KEY INSIGHT**
>
> *Organizations rarely fail because every system is not fully developed before award. Problems usually emerge because operational gaps were not identified early enough to address before launch.*

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SECTION VI.

Preparing for Interviews and Site Visits

Some funders use interviews, presentations, or site visits to evaluate organizational readiness before final award decisions. These interactions often significantly influence funding decisions.

What Funders Are Evaluating

Interviews and site visits are often used to evaluate an organization's preparedness to deliver the proposed work, demonstrate leadership effectiveness, and build confidence in its ability to execute successfully.

REVIEW AREA	WHAT FUNDERS LOOK FOR
Leadership	Credibility and decision-making capacity
Alignment	Consistent messaging across stakeholders
Feasibility	Realistic staffing, timelines, and scope
Governance	Clear accountability and partner coordination
Responsiveness	Thoughtful, direct communication

TOOL

Interview and Site Visit Readiness Checklist

Preparing in advance can help your team communicate more clearly and consistently. Use this checklist to assess your team's readiness before an interview, presentation, or site visit.

READINESS AREA	QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER	STATUS
Messaging	Can team members clearly explain the project, goals, and expected outcomes?	☐
Roles	Does everyone understand their speaking responsibilities aligned with their areas of expertise?	☐
Documentation	Have key materials, data points, and supporting documents been prepared and reviewed?	☐
Practice	Has the team conducted a mock interview, presentation, or walkthrough?	☐
Logistics	Have technology, attendance, agenda, and meeting details been confirmed?	☐

Common Interview Themes

While questions vary by funder, the following themes are commonly discussed during interviews and site visits.

TOPIC	REPRESENTATIVE QUESTIONS
Project Design	How does this project differ from existing efforts?
Partnerships	How are decisions made across partners?
Staffing	Who is responsible for day-to-day implementation?
Evaluation	How will outcomes be measured?
Budget	How were costs and staffing assumptions determined?
Sustainability	What happens after funding ends?
Risk Identification	What are the greatest risks to successful implementation, and how will they be monitored and addressed?
Risk Management	What processes are in place to monitor, mitigate, and respond to risks as they emerge?

Strong Interview Practices

Strong interviews are clear, realistic, and implementation-focused. Use concise answers, maintain message consistency across participants, provide concrete examples, and be honest about uncertainties or challenges. The goal is not a polished performance but a credible one — reviewers are trying to judge whether the team can actually deliver the work, so clarity and candor matter more than a flawless presentation.

> **EXAMPLE — PREPARING FOR A FUNDER INTERVIEW**
>
> About a week before the scheduled date, run a 45-minute mock interview. Assign each speaker the themes they will own (for example, the Program Lead takes project design and staffing; the Finance Lead takes budget assumptions). Draft two- or three-sentence answers to the most likely questions, pairing each with one clear data point or example, and practice handing off cleanly between speakers. Close by listing any questions the team could not answer confidently and assigning someone to prepare them.

Site visits reward preparation. The checklist below covers the full arc — before, during, and after the visit — so nothing slips in the moment or gets forgotten afterward.

TOOL

Site Visit Logistics Checklist

BEFORE THE VISIT

- [ ] Confirm the agenda, schedule, and participants
- [ ] Review participant roles and speaking responsibilities
- [ ] Test technology, presentation materials, and internet connectivity
- [ ] Prepare key documents, data, and supporting materials
- [ ] Confirm meeting location, logistics, and accessibility needs
- [ ] Brief participating staff on goals, messaging, and expectations

DURING THE VISIT

- [ ] Follow agreed-upon speaking roles
- [ ] Use clear examples, data, and implementation details
- [ ] Keep messaging consistent across participants
- [ ] Capture funder questions and requested follow-up items
- [ ] Acknowledge uncertainties or missing information honestly
- [ ] Note key observations and feedback in real time

AFTER THE VISIT

- [ ] Send a follow-up thank-you communication within 24 hours
- [ ] Respond to outstanding requests or questions promptly
- [ ] Share key takeaways with leadership and partners
- [ ] Conduct an internal debrief to capture lessons learned
- [ ] Document action items and assign next steps

SECTION VII.

VII Planning for Different Award Scenarios

It is common for final awards to differ from the original proposal. Taking time to plan for multiple scenarios can help your organization respond more quickly and strategically to funding decisions, revised award terms, and implementation changes. Common adjustments include:

- reduced funding
- delayed start dates
- revised deliverables
- modified timelines
- narrowed target populations

One of the most common mistakes organizations make is planning for only one outcome — the award amount requested in the proposal. In practice, awards are frequently reduced, delayed, or modified. Thinking through these scenarios in advance can help your organization make faster and more strategic decisions if funding is awarded.

Prioritizing Activities Before Award Decisions

Before negotiations begin, identify which elements of the project are essential and which can be adjusted if needed.

CATEGORY	DEFINITION
Non-Negotiable	Essential for compliance or core outcomes
Flexible	Can be delayed, reduced, or phased
Optional	Valuable but not critical

Award Scenario Planning Questions

Consider the following questions as you assess how your project would respond to funding changes.

- Which staff positions are essential?
- Which activities can be phased?
- Which outcomes must be preserved?
- What costs are fixed versus scalable?
- How will partner roles change under reductions?

Common Award Adjustments

Awards rarely arrive exactly as proposed. Funders often negotiate scope, budget, or timing before finalizing an agreement, and the organizations that handle those conversations well are usually the ones that saw them coming. The adjustments below are the most common.

COMMON ADJUSTMENT	POSSIBLE RESPONSE
10–25% budget reduction	Phase activities or reduce nonessential costs
Delayed start date	Adjust hiring and procurement timelines
Reduced participant targets	Narrow service scope
Removed line items	Re-sequence implementation activities
Partner capacity changes	Reallocate responsibilities

Knowing the likely adjustment is only half the work. The harder question is how your plan absorbs it while protecting core capacity — which is easier to answer if you have already mapped it out.

EXAMPLE — REDUCED-AWARD PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

The example below illustrates how organizations may adjust implementation plans under a reduced funding scenario.

BUDGET AREA	FULL AWARD APPROACH	REDUCED AWARD APPROACH
Core Leadership	Maintain full staffing	Preserve leadership capacity
Program Staffing	Full implementation	Phase positions over time
Evaluation	Comprehensive evaluation	Narrow evaluation scope
Technical Assistance	Immediate support	Delay nonessential services
Travel	Full participation	Prioritize essential convenings

Modeling these scenarios before award notification is what makes the difference: organizations that plan reduced-budget options in advance tend to negotiate more strategically and avoid the operational instability that follows a rushed, reactive cut. To pressure-test your own scenarios, use the builder below to compare essential and flexible activities side by side. Consider preparing at least one reduced-budget scenario before award notification.

TOOL

Award Scenario & Negotiation Strategy Builder

Use the linked **Award Scenario & Negotiation Strategy Builder** to:

- identify essential versus flexible activities
- model reduced funding scenarios
- prepare negotiation strategies
- assess implementation feasibility
- align leadership decision-making

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SECTION VIII.

If You Are Selected

Receiving an award is only the beginning. Before launching implementation, take time to confirm that staffing, partnerships, reporting expectations, and award requirements are realistic and in place.

Immediate Priorities After Award Notification

If your application is selected, early preparation can help your organization launch more quickly, reduce compliance delays, strengthen funder relationships, and avoid unnecessary implementation challenges.

PRIORITY AREA	INITIAL ACTIONS
Leadership Alignment	Confirm acceptance decision and implementation authority
Budget Activation	Finalize budget setup and tracking structures
Partner Coordination	Communicate revised expectations and timelines
Staffing	Launch hiring and onboarding processes
Compliance	Review reporting, procurement, and award conditions
Communications	Coordinate internal and external messaging

Award Negotiation Practices

Award terms often change before final execution. Preparing for negotiation can help your organization maintain feasibility while meeting funder expectations. Common negotiation areas include:

- revised budgets
- reduced scopes
- adjusted timelines
- modified performance measures
- staffing changes

Effective Negotiation Practices

A handful of practices separate negotiations that protect the project from those that quietly erode it. The most useful ones are below.

PRACTICE	BENEFIT
Designate a single negotiation lead	Prevents inconsistent communication
Present structured options	Improves problem-solving with funder
Tie changes to deliverables	Maintains implementation clarity
Document all revisions and approvals	Reduces future disputes
Validate feasibility internally before agreeing	Prevents overcommitment

Questions to Resolve Before Acceptance

Before accepting an award, confirm that the revised scope, budget, and expectations remain realistic.

QUESTION	WHY IT MATTERS
Can the revised scope realistically be implemented?	Prevents operational strain
Are staffing assumptions still feasible?	Supports successful launch
Are match or cost-share requirements achievable?	Reduces compliance risk
Are reporting expectations manageable?	Prevents future performance issues
Are partners aligned to revised expectations?	Maintains coalition stability

KEY INSIGHT

Organizations sometimes accept awards that no longer align with operational reality after revisions or reductions. Strong organizations validate feasibility before accepting final terms.

First 30–60 Day Activation Priorities

The first month after award notification often sets the tone for implementation. Prioritize the activities below to support a smooth launch. This 30–60 day window is a general ballpark — some activities (such as hiring and onboarding, purchasing, and finalizing MOUs or subawards) can be staggered across it. Sequence them according to your implementation plan and what you committed to in the application.

ACTIVATION AREA	EARLY PRIORITIES
Governance	Confirm leadership and decision structures
Finance	Activate grant accounting and tracking
Staffing	Begin onboarding and role assignments
Procurement	Launch purchasing and contracting processes
Partner Agreements	Finalize MOUs or subawards
Reporting Systems	Establish tracking and documentation workflows

The transition from award notification to implementation often involves multiple teams, timelines, and compliance requirements. The Notice of Award Activation Roadmap can help organize responsibilities and sequence critical startup activities.

TOOL

Notice of Award Activation Roadmap

Use the linked **Notice of Award Activation Roadmap** to:

- coordinate startup responsibilities
- organize compliance activation
- sequence operational tasks
- align finance, program, and leadership teams
- reduce implementation delays

This roadmap is a starting point for organizing your activation planning. Once you've mapped the key activities, transfer them into a shared Google Sheets or Excel tracker so your team can assign owners, set target dates, and monitor progress in real time as implementation ramps up.

★ **Best Practice:** Complete activation planning before the official award start date whenever possible.

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SECTION IX.

If You Are Not Selected

Non-selection is common in competitive funding environments. Many strong proposals are not funded because of:

- geographic distribution priorities
- scoring margins
- competition volume

While disappointing, non-selection does not necessarily mean the proposal was weak. Funding decisions are often influenced by factors beyond proposal quality, including available funding, geographic priorities, and competition volume. The strongest organizations treat non-selection as an opportunity to learn, strengthen future applications, and reassess strategic priorities.

Immediate Response Priorities

In the first days after a non-selection notice, a few actions do most of the work. Notify partners promptly and brief internal leadership so messaging and next steps stay aligned and no one is left guessing. Clarify what the decision does and does not mean for the initiative, which heads off confusion before it spreads. And before attention moves on, preserve the proposal's work products and request reviewer feedback — both are inexpensive now and valuable to the next application.

KEY INSIGHT

How organizations handle non-selection often has a significant impact on future coalition stability and partnership credibility.

Communication Practices that Preserve Relationships

Thoughtful communication can help preserve trust and maintain momentum. How the news is delivered matters as much as the news itself. Reach out to key partners directly and first, before they hear it elsewhere — it preserves credibility. Acknowledge what each partner contributed, which keeps goodwill intact for the next opportunity. Separate the funding outcome from the value of the work itself so momentum does not collapse with the decision, and share your thinking on next steps clearly so everyone stays aligned on what comes next.

Using Reviewer Feedback Strategically

If reviewer feedback is available, use it as a learning opportunity rather than a simple scorecard. When feedback is available:

- identify recurring themes
- distinguish technical issues from structural weaknesses
- evaluate whether concerns are realistically fixable
- prioritize improvements that affect competitiveness most directly

When reviewer feedback is available, it tends to cluster around a handful of recurring areas:

Common Reviewer Feedback Themes

FEEDBACK AREA	TYPICAL CONCERNS
Project Design	Weak alignment or unclear strategy
Metrics	Insufficient evaluation detail
Budget	Unrealistic assumptions
Partnerships	Weak governance clarity
Sustainability	Limited continuation planning
Capacity	Insufficient implementation readiness

TOOL

Post-Decision Planning Worksheet

Use the questions below to determine the most appropriate next step following a non-selection decision.

QUESTION	YES	NO
Is reviewer feedback actionable and realistically addressable?	☐	☐
Does leadership remain committed to the initiative?	☐	☐
Are key partners willing to continue participating?	☐	☐
Is the opportunity expected to reopen in the future?	☐	☐
Does the project remain aligned with organizational priorities?	☐	☐

Your answers point toward one of a few paths. The table below matches common situations to the step that usually fits.

Choosing a Next Step

POTENTIAL NEXT STEP	WHEN IT MAKES SENSE
Reapply	Feedback is actionable and leadership remains committed
Pursue Alternative Funding	Another funding opportunity may be a better fit
Scale Down	Resources are limited but momentum remains
Pause	Significant capacity or alignment concerns remain
Repurpose	Project assets can support other initiatives

Preserving Proposal Assets

Even when funding is not awarded, proposal development often produces resources that can be used in future opportunities. Whichever path you choose, little of the work is wasted. The needs-assessment data, logic models, metrics, budgets, and staffing plans developed for this proposal all carry directly into future applications and planning — and the partnership structures built along the way remain an asset for coalition-building and program development well beyond this opportunity.

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SECTION X.

Next Steps

The work you've done to maintain alignment, strengthen readiness, plan for different funding scenarios, and prepare for implementation can help your organization respond more effectively to funding decisions. Organizations that use this period strategically are better positioned to launch quickly when awarded funding and to learn from opportunities that are not selected.

Whether an application is funded or not, the lessons, relationships, and assets developed throughout the process can strengthen future funding pursuits and implementation efforts.

How CFA Can Help

The Community Funding Accelerator (CFA) works with organizations, coalitions, and public agencies across the grant lifecycle, from early opportunity assessment through implementation readiness. We offer strategic guidance, structured tools, and, for a select set of opportunities, hands-on technical assistance.

communityfundingaccelerator.org

INTERACTIVE TOOL

Post-Submission Strategy Tool

Check out this tool — tell it where you are in the process (awaiting notification, selected, or not funded) and it builds a tailored readiness plan: prioritized actions, key risks, interview and systems preparation, and scenario-specific guidance ready to work through with your team.

Open the interactive tool

COMMUNITY FUNDING ACCELERATOR

GRANT READINESS TOOLKIT

Supporting communities across the full grant lifecycle — from opportunity assessment through implementation readiness.

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