

Proposal Reviewer's Handbook

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Contents

Overview	1
Total RFP Applicants Overview	1
Grant Review Committee.....	1
Overall Expectations of Grant Reviewers	2
Grant Proposal Data.....	3
Reviewing Proposals	3
Scoring Proposals	4
What to Expect on the Day of the Review	5
Workbook & Scoresheet Information.....	5
Reviewer Workbook & Scoresheet Logistics.....	6

Thank you for volunteering to review applications for the Minnesota Office of Justice Programs (OJP). Information about the statutes authorizing specific funds can be found in the associated Request for Proposals (RFP). Your service to our office and the State of Minnesota is so appreciated.

This handbook was created to help provide guidance to grant reviewers in preparation for reviewing and scoring grant applications for a variety of programs. More detailed information about specific programs can be found in the associated RFP.

Grant Program Overview

Refer to the Grant RFP for more information about:

- Project requirements
- Grant eligibility
- Funding details

Total RFP Applicants Overview

Information about total applicants for an RFP will become available as applications are processed.

Grant Review Committee

Why use Reviewers? The Office of Justice Programs requests community members, subject experts, advocates, and other stakeholders to assist in the competitive grant-making process by reviewing and scoring grant applications. We do this to gain a variety of perspectives and experiences that can inform the grant-making process and make the process transparent, fair, and as free from influence and bias as possible.

By acting as a reviewer, we hope that you gain a better understanding of both state and federal programs/services and have an overall voice in the funding process.

Overall Expectations of Grant Reviewers

Report any conflict of interest to OJP. OJP will also send out a Conflict-of-Interest Disclosure Form with the proposals to reviewers. If there is a stated conflict of interest in reviewing one or multiple proposals, we will ask that you document the conflict. We will not ask you to score proposals in which there is a stated conflict of interest.

Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a relationship between a proposal reviewer and another party that could affect or appear to affect the reviewer's ability to impartially assess grant proposals.

Prior to reading your assigned proposals, review the list of proposals that you will review and ensure that you do not have a conflict of interest. A reviewer has a conflict of interest when:

- The reviewer has agreed to serve as an employee or consultant on a project for which funding is being sought in a proposal under review, or has been offered the opportunity to do so and has not yet accepted or declined, based on whether a grant is awarded;
- The reviewer's personal financial interests will be affected by the outcome of the competition;
- The reviewer helped prepare a proposal in the competition, *even if the reviewer has no financial interest in the outcome of the process*; or
- The reviewer has a relationship with an entity or individual that has a financial interest in the outcome of the competition.

Thoroughly understand the information requested in the Request for Proposal (RFP). Once the information is understood, we expect reviewers to assess each proposal's strengths and weaknesses. If there are any questions involving the RFP or the evaluation criteria, please contact OJP staff for clarification.

Read and rate proposals prior to the grant review. Start early – it may take longer than you anticipate.

Keep proposals and scores confidential. All pre-work and in-person discussions must remain confidential until the grants are awarded. For more information, see **Section 4. Grant Evaluation Data**.

Show up to the proposal review meeting. In order to thoroughly score grant applications fairly, we need all reviewers to participate in the proposal review meeting and stay for the entire review. If you absolutely cannot make it to the review, let OJP staff know as soon as possible so that accommodations can be made.

Note: While we want our reviewers to be as objective as possible when scoring, we also want the committee to come to the table with their own experiences, understandings, and contexts which are unique to each individual. We expect reviewers to engage with the criteria and within the discussion as their full selves, with the knowledge and gifts that they bring. We also expect reviewers to be able to make unbiased decisions based on the information submitted by the applicants.

Grant Proposal Data

Applicants submit their proposals to the Office of Justice Programs with the assurance that the information provided is available only to the individuals involved in the proposal review process. In order to assure that a review has been carried out fairly, any materials you use, or information you obtain, must be kept secure.

This section addresses the most common issues and questions that reviewers have regarding grant evaluation data.

During the review

- You can discuss proposals with OJP staff at any time during the review process and with fellow reviewers during the proposal review meeting;
- You may not discuss scores, written comments, or the grant proposals with anyone else *before or after* the review meeting;
- You may not contact applicants during the review process under any circumstances; and
- You may not divulge the names of the other reviewers, the names of applicants, the number of proposals received, or the reviewer scores outside of the review meeting.

After the review

- You must destroy any notes that were taken during the review of the proposals;
- You must destroy any copied or printed documents from the proposals;
- You must delete all electronic files that were created and are associated with the review process; and
- You must not discuss any details relating to any of the proposals you reviewed.

Data Practices Act

Applicants and the public may request individual reviewer comments under Minnesota Statutes section 13.03 of the Minnesota Data Practices Act. Therefore, as you enter comments electronically, be aware that the Proposal Review Forms could be sent to the applicants. Reviewer names are not included on the forms. It's important that written feedback:

- Is clear, legible, and well justified.
- Reflects a thorough review of the entire application based on the selection criteria governing this program.

Reviewing Proposals

A proposal review meeting will be held for consensus development of funding recommendations. Prior to this meeting, you must independently read and score the application against the selection criteria and submit scores and recommendations to OJP program staff.

There are four steps to reviewing proposals:

Step 1: Understand the Process

- Review the How to Review a Proposal PowerPoint on OJP's website

- ❑ Read OJP’s Request for Proposal.
- ❑ Become familiar with the goals of the RFP, the requirements of the proposals, and the scoring criteria/point allocations.
- ❑ Read and understand the Group # Workbook & Scoresheets (Xcel document)

Make sure you set aside enough time to review each of the proposals thoroughly.

Step 2: Initial Proposal Read-through

- ❑ Complete initial read-through of each applicant’s proposal. Do not score them during the initial read-through.
- ❑ Use the initial read-through of the proposals to get a sense of what the proposals are about and how they are organized.

Step 3: Scoring

- ❑ Re-read each proposal and begin scoring.
- ❑ Record scores and the proposal strengths and weaknesses on the Group # Workbook & Scoresheets (Xcel document).
- ❑ Provide helpful strengths and notes for the grantees.

Step 4: Submit Documentation

- ❑ Submit your scores by submitting the completed Proposal Group Review Workbook file to the specified OJP Grant Manager for your review group via e-mail after the review meeting.
- ❑ Before the review meeting submit your Conflict-of-Interest Disclosure Form to the specified OJP Grant Manager for your review group via e-mail
- ❑ Attend the proposal review Zoom meeting.
 - Login to the meeting on time and be ready to discuss the proposals.
 - Make sure your Group # Workbook & Scoresheets (Xcel document) are complete and legible.
 - This grant review is anticipated to last 2-3 hours – plan to stay until the end.

Scoring Proposals

Tips for Scoring

- Everyone scores differently—try to be consistent in your scores.
- Only score a proposal based on the information provided—do not assume anything or add information that you may know.
- Since applicants were not given a maximum request amount, any amount requested is allowable.
- Consider the feasibility and the impact of the proposal, final award decisions and amounts will be made in second level review.
- Proposals should make a strong case for funding and show compelling need.
- Score proposals against the criteria in the RFP—not against other proposals.
- No fractions or decimals; use whole number scores only.
- Make sure all information required in the RFP is contained in the proposal.
- You can deduct points for a disorganized proposal, but make sure your score is primarily based on the quality and clarity of the responses.

Range of Scores

A perfect score should be rare—this means that there were no weaknesses in the proposal. When scoring proposals, it can be helpful to start at the “middle” and add or subtract points depending on the quality of the response. No matter what overall score you choose, be prepared to justify that score during the meeting.

Reviewer Feedback

- The numerical scores assigned to a proposal’s response to the selection criteria must be consistent with reviewer written feedback. Therefore, if a proposal has almost a perfect score, it should have substantially more strengths than weaknesses.
 - If the proposal is poorly written or organized, it should be noted in the Overall Notes; but, if the relevant information is found *anywhere* in the proposal, it should be considered in the score.
 - Indicate the page number (when referring to a specific part of the proposal).
 - Electronically enter written feedback that is clear, legible, and well justified.
 - Provide feedback that reflects a thorough review of the entire proposal.
 - Use complete sentences and thoughts.
 - Clearly state “No strengths” or “No weaknesses” when applicable.
 - The written feedback should evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, not just simply rehash the information contained in the submitted document.

What to Expect on the Day of the Review

- Email your Conflict-of-Interest form to the specified OJP Grant Manager for your review group.
- There will be separate grant review meetings with reviewers who reviewed the same proposals. Each grant review meeting will be two to three hours.
- There will be 4-5 grant reviewers, a facilitator and a note taker participating in each grant review meeting.
- Facilitators participating in each grant review meeting will facilitate the review discussion and gather consensus on a total score for each proposal from reviewers.
- Reviewers must come to the review meeting prepared to share proposal scores, notes, and discussion points explaining their scores.
- Reviewers must email proposal workbook after the review discussion.

Workbook & Scoresheet Information

Applications have several sections, and each section has specific statements that you will rate on a scale. The description of those ratings and scores are below.

Rating and Score Guide	Description
Excellent	Outstanding level of quality; exceeds all aspects of the minimum requirements; no significant weaknesses.
Very Strong	Strong, could have written more detail but meets requirements well.

Good	Good response, meets requirements; some weaknesses, but correctable.
Weak	Lack of essential information, low probability for success; significant weaknesses.
Unsatisfactory	Fails to meet minimum requirements, needs major revision to make it acceptable.
Missing Information	Missing information or didn't answer the question(s).

Reviewer Workbook & Scoresheet Logistics

- You will receive an Excel workbook that includes a summary of the proposals and a review worksheet for each proposal.
- Each tab has the name of the applicant to be reviewed.
- Enter your scores and comments into the white boxes.
- All calculations are **automatically done for you**.
- The total scores from each worksheet will be automatically populated into the “Final Score” column in the Group Summary list for each proposal.
- Make sure to save each time you are using your workbook.