



MEMORANDUM

TO: Community Technology & Telecommunications Commission

FROM: John Speirs, Program Manager
Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs

DATE: September 11, 2020

SUBJECT: Recommendations for 2021 Grant for Technology Opportunities Program

Background

The City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan, as adopted by [Resolution No. 20141120-074](#), includes every Austin resident having an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society, accessing and using digital and communications technology. The Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs (TARA) is the lead office for implementation of this plan. The Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) is a grant administered by the Community Technology (CT) Division of TARA directed at improving the community's ability to fully participate in the digital society to achieve the goals of the Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to review the significant changes coming to the 2021 cycle of the GTOPs. Each year, CT staff performs a review of the prior grant cycle in preparation for the next year of grants. This annual strategic planning and review process considers feedback collected from surveys of applicants and grant reviewers, as well as the observations of staff participating in the grant process and the known structural changes to GTOPs.

Analysis

There are three categories of changes being proposed for the GTOPs 2021 cycle: 1) Adjustments to the application process to ensure a clearer and more direct relationship between the scoring criteria and the application and to better weight Focus Areas; 2) changes to the overall GTOPs structure to provide for efficiency, enhanced support for grantees, and to adjust the GTOPs schedule to accommodate the holiday months; and 3) eases the administrative burden of reporting on contractors. Together, these three changes could greatly improve service delivery and core program capacity to local Austin nonprofit groups.

Adjustments to the Application and Scoring Process

Recommendation: Replace the current “Focus Area” system that guarantees funding based on category with a new system that gives bonus points to organizations that meet the “Focus Area” criteria.

In past GTOPs cycles, organizations that were the highest scoring in a “Focus Area” were guaranteed funding, regardless of any other factor (such as relative rank in scoring to the other applications). Going forward, we propose to move to a bonus point system, where applicant can gain extra points by qualifying for a Focus Area. This will retain an incentive structure that rewards organizations meeting Focus Area criteria while not inordinately weighting doing. The Focus Areas and Point allocations are as proposed in Exhibit A, Recommendation 5.

Recommendation: Better align the GTOPs application with the scoring criteria and to simplify the application language.

One comment that we heard from our survey respondents this year is that applicants wanted to eliminate duplication in the application and make the application simpler while reviewers wanted the scoring criteria to have a more direct relationship to specific parts of the application. To this end, Recommendation 3 of Exhibit A consolidates portions of the GTOPs application with the Work Statement and updates the language for simplicity and alignment with the scoring criteria. Recommendation 4 of Exhibit A likewise updates the language in the scoring criteria, adjusts the categories, and indexes the part of the application that correlates with each criteria.

Adjustments to the Structure of GTOPs

Recommendation: Increase the ceiling of GTOPs applications from \$25,000 to \$35,000 and combine GTOPs Core and Collaborative. Add “Collaborative” as a focus area for GTOPs Core, and incentivize collaboration with bonus points as a GTOPs Focus Area.

The last increase to the award ceiling for GTOPs was in 2012. For the last few years, one of the most common requests was to increase the size of awards. With the increase to total GTOPs funding in 2019, we can now serve more organizations than we did prior to 2019 AND increase the size of awards to each organization.

One of the other changes in 2019 was to create a new GTOPs pathway: GTOPs Collaborative. The pilot year of this new award pathway was very informative. Five organizations submitted applications for Collaborative funding, three of them forgoing submitting applications for Core funding. There was only one funding slot for this pathway. Feedback from applicants indicated that the 1) popularity of Collaborative was likely due to the increased cap (\$50,000 for Collaborative vs. \$25,000 for Core) and that incentivizing Collaboration would likely be possible without creating the administrative complexity of parallel grant pathways. By combining Core and Collaborative, raising the cap GTOPs applicants can request from \$25,000 to \$35,000, and adding “Collaboration” as a GTOPs Focus Area with bonus points assigned, community collaboration can be incentivized without locking applicants into either submitting multiple

applications or only competing for one award or the other. The details of this recommendation can be seen in Recommendation 1 of Exhibit A.

Recommendation: Adjust the GTOPs schedule to accommodate the holiday months.

For at least the past two years, the number one complaint received about GTOPs was the difficulty of utilizing the online grant management system. In coordination with Austin Public Health, GTOPs will fully transition to a new grant management system for the 2020 GTOPs cycle. To support the transition of systems, staff has generated trainings, videos and direct assistance to current grant recipients to utilize the new system. Going forward, this change will eliminate the most common difficulties that applicants experience while decreasing the technological barriers to submitting GTOPs applications.

Recommendation: Create a new grant pathway called “GTOPs Mini”, which will be funded at \$50,000 and will be for awards of \$5,000 to \$10,000. This opportunity will provide a low-barrier-to-entry, service-delivery or project oriented pathway for non-profits.

This new grant pathway would consist of an application larger than GTOPs Capacity, but smaller than GTOPs Core. There would be a contract (unlike GTOPs Capacity), consisting of the boilerplate language and the approved application, but there will be no required insurance (as there is for GTOPs Core). This new opportunity will be assessed by a panel of reviewers consisting of representation from Community Technology staff, the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission, and 1-3 community representatives.

Half of the awarded amount would be paid up front, with the second half of funding being awarded contingent on the organization meeting an agreed-upon milestone by the reporting deadline (mid-contract). Performance evaluation at this mid-term assessment and at the closeout of the process will focus on milestone and deliverable completion.

This recommendation corresponds with Recommendation 7 in Exhibit A.

Ease the Oversight Burden on Awardees

Recommendation: Ease the contract oversight from 4 quarterly performance and demographics reports to two (in the 2nd and 4th quarter), supplemented by site visits as needed.

One of the most common pieces of feedback that GTOPs receives in surveys each year is that it provides too little benefit for too much effort. Along with the other recommendations to raise the cap and simplify the application, this recommendation reduces the oversight burden on GTOPs awardees.

The impact of this change on the ability of staff to perform contract oversight would be minimal. Past oversight experience has shown that data is usually unavailable until Q2 reporting in most cases. In some cases, data is not available till Q3, which is likely too late in the course of a one-year program to make a pivot in any case.

Under this new system, a mid-contract data report would be submitted at the end of the 2nd quarter. This report would be evaluated by staff; should the report not be filed, the report contain no data to analyze, or the reported data show cause for concern, a site visit would be scheduled. Should the site visit or performance report reveal work is not taking place or is not meeting the standard of the contract, a corrective action plan could be implemented or the contract could be terminated. The details of this recommendations can be found in Recommendation 2 of Exhibit A.

Please feel free to contact me at 512.974.7676 if you need additional information.



Jesse Rodriguez, Business Process Specialist

9/9/2020

Date

cc: John Speirs, Program Manager, Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs

Attachments

Attachment A – GTOPs Recommendations

Exhibit A: GTOPs Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Increase the ceiling of GTOPs applications from \$25,000 to \$35,000 and combine GTOPs Core and Collaborative. Add “Collaborative” as a focus area for GTOPs Core, and incentivize collaboration with bonus points as shown in a later recommendation.

Combined, these actions would change the minimum number of grants per year from 13 (12 Core and 1 Collaborative) to 10 (2-3 being Collaborative grants). Compare this to a maximum of 9 organizations funded per year prior to the funding increase.

Reasons for making this change:

- The most common complaint about GTOPs (in this cycle and past cycles) has been that GTOPs provides too little benefit for too much effort.
 - This change will significantly increase the value of GTOPs to selected organizations by increasing the amount of funding each organization is allowed to apply for.
- This change significantly streamlines the GTOPs offerings by combining two current award opportunities, both for the applicants and for staff.
 - The only reason they were split in the first place was largely technical (the inability of the grant management system to have two different maximum request amounts within a single opportunity). By increasing the ceiling for Core and reducing it for Collaborative, there is no longer any reason to have them separate.
 - Separating the two funding pathways caused recusal issues, in that some panelists were also applicants of Collaborative funding. This was properly handled by having those panelists recuse from all Collaborative scoring and discussions, but that depressed the number of reviewers available for Collaborative applications.
- We have the ability to fund more Collaborative applications under this structure.
 - Demand for Collaborative funding was much higher than the funding we allocated to it.
- The maximum amount of support that GTOPs has allowed organizations to apply for has not changed since 2012.

Recommendation 2

Ease the contract oversight from 4 quarterly performance and demographics reports to two (in the 2nd and 4th quarter), supplemented by site visits as needed.

The impact of this change on the ability of staff to perform contract oversight would be minimal. Past oversight experience has shown that data is usually unavailable until Q2 reporting in the majority of cases. In some cases, data is not available till Q3.

Under this new system, a mid-contract data report would be submitted at the end of the 2nd quarter. This report would be evaluated by staff; should the report not be filed, the report contain no data to analyze, or the reported data show cause for concern, a site visit would be scheduled. Should the site visit or performance report reveal work is not taking place or is not meeting the standard of the contract, a corrective action plan could be implemented or the contract could be terminated.

Reasons for making this change:

- The most common complaint about GTOPs (in this cycle and past cycles) has been that GTOPs provides too little benefit for too much effort.
 - This change reduces the amount of effort required to comply with the grant requirements.
- While not the focus of this recommendation, this action will also reduce the oversight burden on staff while having minimal impact on the quality of oversight.

Recommendation 3

Replace the existing Work Statement questions with new, clearer questions. This includes deleting the previous Alignment with GTOPs Goals section of the application in favor of a question in the Work Statement.

Old:

1. What are the goals and objectives of the program?
2. Who does the program serve? Describe your target client population and how the Client Eligibility Requirements will be documented for the target client population.
3. Describe the program strategy/strategies. Include description of program strategy/strategies provided by Program subcontractors. Provide enough detail so that the contract reviewer is able to have a comprehensive understanding of your services and how they are delivered to clients.
4. Describe the system that the agency has in place to collect and report program data.
5. Performance Evaluation – describe how the agency will evaluate the program’s performance in achieving program goals
6. Quality Improvement – describe the process for identifying problems or other issues in service delivery, designing activities to overcome these problems, and following up to ensure corrective actions have been effective.
7. Service Coordination with Other Agencies - How does the agency coordinate with other agencies to refer and receive clients, to provide comprehensive services, minimize duplication, cover gaps in services, etc.? If you are not currently coordinating with other agencies, what is your plan for increasing coordination?
8. Service Collaboration with Other Agencies - If the funded program is a collaborative, describe how the collaborative is structured and how clients will be receiving services from different members of the collaborative.
9. Describe your agency's involvement in community planning activities that are specific to the services provided under this program.

New:

1. Describe the organization implementing this program/proposal, including their general mission, values, goals, and target client population, and offer any context on the organization that is relevant to this program/proposal.
2. Describe the program, including the goals and objectives.
3. Describe how this proposal aligns with the one or more of the GTOPs Goals and how it would contribute to a more digitally inclusive Austin.

4. Describe the client population served by this program and how the program will serve a specific need in this community.
5. Describe how the program will partner and collaborate with other agencies as it relates to this proposal specifically and digital inclusion broadly. How will the applicant ensure that efforts are not being duplicated?
6. Describe how data will be collected and performance tracked in this program. This includes systems, strategies, and processes being used and should NOT simply re-state the performance measures listed elsewhere.
7. Describe how the impacts of this proposal will last beyond the funding of this grant.
8. Enter any other supporting context or detail that is important to understanding your program/proposal.

Comparison view

Old	New	Number (New)
	Describe the organization implementing this program/proposal, including their general mission, values, goals, and target client population, and offer any context on the organization that is relevant to this program/proposal.	1
What are the goals and objectives of the program?	Describe the proposal/program, including the goals, objectives, and strategies.	2
	Describe how this proposal/program aligns with the one or more of the GTOPs Goals and how it would contribute to a more digitally inclusive Austin.	3
Who does the program serve? Describe your target client population and how the Client Eligibility Requirements will be documented for the target client population.	Describe the client population served by this program and how the program will serve a specific need in this community.	4
Describe the program strategy/strategies. Include description of program strategy/strategies provided by Program subcontractors. Provide enough detail so that the contract reviewer is able to have a comprehensive understanding of your services and how they are delivered to clients.		

Describe the system that the agency has in place to collect and report program data.		
Performance Evaluation – describe how the agency will evaluate the program’s performance in achieving program goals	Describe how data will be collected and performance tracked in this program. This includes systems, strategies, and processes being used and should NOT simply re-state the performance measures listed elsewhere.	6
Quality Improvement – describe the process for identifying problems or other issues in service delivery, designing activities to overcome these problems, and following up to ensure corrective actions have been effective.		
Service Coordination with Other Agencies - How does the agency coordinate with other agencies to refer and receive clients, to provide comprehensive services, minimize duplication, cover gaps in services, etc.? If you are not currently coordinating with other agencies, what is your plan for increasing coordination?	Describe how the program will partner and collaborate with other agencies as it relates to this proposal specifically and digital inclusion broadly. How will the applicant ensure that efforts are not being duplicated?	5
Service Collaboration with Other Agencies - If the funded program is a collaborative, describe how the collaborative is structured and how clients will be receiving services from different members of the collaborative.		
Describe your agency's involvement in community planning activities that are specific to the services provided under this program.		
	Describe how the impacts of this proposal will last beyond the funding of this grant.	7
	Enter any other supporting context or detail that is important to understanding your program/proposal.	8

Recommendation 4

Amend the Scoring Criteria to better align with the application information being requested.

Old Criteria	Old Point Allocation	New Criteria	New Point Allocation	Application Document (New)
Alignment with GTOPs Goals		Alignment with GTOPs Goals		
		The objectives and strategy of this proposal are clear.	10	Work Statement – 2
This program plan has demonstrated alignment with the GTOPs Goals	15	This program plan has demonstrated alignment with the GTOPs Goals.	10	Work Statement – 3
Community Impact		Impact		
The program plan and its objectives are well defined and serve a community need.	10	This proposal effectively addresses a community need.	10	Work Statement – 4 Demographics
This program plan demonstrates that if implemented it will have an ongoing/lasting positive impact on the community.	10	The effects of the proposed program will last beyond the end of the grant funding.	10	Work Statement – 7
This program plan has demonstrated that it has collaboration partners w/ in the community we are seeking to serve.	10	This proposal demonstrates collaboration with the community and other agencies	10	Work Statement – 5 Subgrantees
Evaluation of Success		Success / Feasibility		
This program has a clear plan for success. Its goals and objectives are achievable and its work plan is feasible.	10	The work plan is clear, detailed, and reasonable.	10	Work Plan
This program plan demonstrates its ability to evaluate its own success and reviewers agree that its proposed measures for evaluation are viable and appropriate.	10	The proposed measures are clear and appropriate for the work being described.	10	Performance Measures

The organization has provided documentation of demonstrated success as an organization.	10			
Budget and Fiscal Responsibility		Budget and Fiscal Responsibility		
The organization that is executing on the program plan is a fiscally responsible organization that will use City funds and matching criteria of the grant appropriately if awarded this grant.	15	The staffing plan for this project is clear and would be sufficient to meet the project objectives.	10	Staff Positions and Time
This program plan has provided all required documentation, including its budget, which clearly shows its annual revenue and matching dollars (in-kind and/or cash).	10	The application demonstrates sufficient leveraged funding to support the project and meet the 1:1 matching requirement.	10	Leveraged Funding Sources
		The submitted budget is clear and reasonable for the proposed program.	10	Budget

Recommendation 5

Replace the current “Focus Area” system that guarantees funding based on category with a new one that gives bonus points to organizations that meet the “Focus Area” criteria.

Focus Area	Description	Points
Collaboration	If the organization provides a draft MOU with at least one other organization, they will receive additional points.	5
Small Organization	If the applying organization has annual revenues of less than \$500,000, they will receive additional points	5
Medium Organization	If the applying organization has annual revenues between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000, they will receive additional points.	5
GTOPs Focus Area	The top scoring application under each GTOPs Goal Area will receive funding	5

Creative Media Training and Development	Organizations applying for funding under the Creative Media Training and Development focus area must submit projects that serve economically-disadvantaged Austinites working at the intersection of the creative media and technology sectors. This includes projects that provide access to and training in video game design, podcasting, radio/ television/ film, photography, and emergent virtual/augmented reality applications.	5
IT Workforce Skills	Organizations applying for funding under the IT Middle-Skill Career Opportunities focus area must submit projects that provide opportunities for economically-disadvantaged Austinites to develop IT skills valued by the private sector and to obtain valuable IT certifications.	5
Demographic Focus		5

Recommendation 6

Re-organize and compress the GTOPs application schedule to avoid heavy activity in the winter holiday months.

Description	Old Date	New Date
Presentation to the CTTC on the proposed changes to GTOPs 2020	September 11, 2019	September 9, 2020
Letter of Interest submission window	October 1 2019 – October 25, 2019	November 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021
GTOPs 2020 Community Launch Meeting to discuss the GTOPs 2020 goals and process	October 4, 2019	November 3, 2020
Grant Review Committee Applications Due	November 1, 2019	January 3, 2021
Staff review of grant reviewer applications and confirmation of availability and interest	November 1, 2019 – November 12, 2019	January 4, 2021 – January 6, 2021
Staff review of Letters of Interest and communication with interested parties.	October 28, 2019 – November 1, 2019	January 7, 2021 – January 12, 2021
Grant Review Committee selected by the Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission at their November meeting	November 13, 2019	January 13, 2021
Grant application window. Full and completed applications for GTOPs 2020 must be submitted.	November 4, 2019 – November 29, 2019	January 18, 2021 – February 12, 2021
Staff review of applications for completeness.	December 2, 2019 – December 6 2019	February 15, 2021 – February 19, 2021
Grant Reviewer Binders generated	December 9, 2019	February 23, 2021

Grant Review Committee Orientation (Austin Public,1143 Northwestern Ave)	December 12, 2019	February 25, 2021
Update to the Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission on GTOPs applications received	December 11, 2019	March 10, 2021
First Round of Scores Due	January 5, 2020	March 10, 2021
First round scores sent to applicants	January 10, 2020	March 12, 2021
Reviewers notified of next step to generate questions for the organizations moving to Round 2 Scoring		March 12, 2021
Written Questions Due (from Reviewers)	January 19, 2020	March 21, 2021
Written Responses Due (from Applicants)	January 31, 2020	March 30, 2021
Second Round Scoring	February 7, 2020	April 6, 2021
Final Deliberation (DeWitty Center)	February 10, 2020	April 8, 2021
Presentation of GTOPs recommended awards to Austin Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission Regular Meeting.	February 12, 2020	April 14, 2021
Send CTTC GTOPs Recommendations to executives for approval	February 15, 2020	April 16, 2021
Notification to all applicants of the award decisions. This communication includes next steps for contract negotiation for awardees.		April 16, 2021
Deadline for making updates to the initial contract forms based on the award amount. Also the deadline for the submission of Certificates of Insurance Coverage.		April 30, 2021
Deadline for Staff to review contract forms for additional edits and negotiate back to the awardees.		May 7, 2021
Deadline for awardees to submit final contract documents.		May 21, 2021
GTOPs 2020 Contracts Officially Start	July 1, 2020	July 1, 2021

Recommendation 7

Create a new grant pathway called “GTOPs Mini”, which will be funded at \$50,000 and will be for awards of \$5,000 to \$10,000. This opportunity will provide a low-barrier-to-entry, service-delivery or project oriented pathway for non-profits.

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