# COOK COUNTY
## STARTING BLOCK GRANTS
### Building Capacity, Supporting Growth

# Questions and Answers

This resource has been prepared by the Cook County Justice Advisory Council (JAC) as program lead and administrator of the 2023 Cook County Starting Block Grant opportunity. Questions received about this funding opportunity have been consolidated, adapted for clarity and answered for the benefit of all prospective applicant organizations. Please note that questions pertaining to specific organizations or projects are not included.

Questions and answers will be made available to the public on the JAC grants website [CookCountyIL.gov/JACGrants] on August 23, 2023. Updates to this document may be made but are not guaranteed.

Other informational resources and recordings from the funding opportunity Information Session and Pre-Submittal Conference are available on the JAC grants website. If you have a question not covered by the grant application or this document, you may email JAC.Info@cookcountyIL.gov. Please note the JAC may be unable to answer agency or project-specific questions.

Questions are grouped under the following categories:

- Applications & the Application Process
- Eligibility
- Capacity Building Support/ What is Covered by the Grant
- Budgets and Funding
- Grant Administration/Post-Award
- Reporting & Compliance
- Equity & Accessibility

## Applications & Application Process

**Q: How should the excel budget narrative form be completed? Some cells do not allow edits.**

Fill in your year 1 and 2 budget items on the "year 1" and "year 2"tabs. The locked cells in the "total summary budget" tab will auto populate with totals based on the content you enter. Applicants are not able to edit locked cells in the budget template.

# Questions and Answers

**Q: In the online application form, I am getting an error message that my response is too large. How should I proceed?**

It is recommended to check that your responses to the questions do not exceed 500 words AND to reduce the file size of the attachments uploaded via the form. File size limits are set at 10 GB for each document upload.

**Q: The online application form skipped a section of questions. Is it functioning and will my application be complete?**

The online application is functioning and you may proceed with your application when you are prepared to submit.

The application form will skip some designated sections based on the applicant's response to a question. For example, if you answer yes to the question relating to being the recipient of other Cook County grants or funding in section 1, you will be prompted to answer additional questions in the next section. If you answer no, the application will skip section 2 relating to other Cook County grants and proceed to the next section.

**Q: What time on 9/8/23 must the application be submitted?**

Applications must be submitted by the end of the day on September 8, 2023. While a submission at 11:55pm on September 8 would be allowable, early submission is strongly recommended to leave time to navigate any issues. Please note the JAC offices will close at 5:00pm and staff will not be available to provide assistance after hours.

**Q: Can an organization submit more than one application?**

Each organization is limited to one application for a 2023 Cook County Starting Block Grant.

**Q: Can an organization be on two different applications (Ex. one application as the lead, solo applicant and one application as a partner with another organization?)**

Fiscal sponsorship is not allowable for this grant opportunity and organizations may submit only one application for a capacity building project. Applicants may have sub-contractors on their application to advance the specific capacity building project proposed by the applicant organization.

**Q: How do we submit the application and application documents?**

# Questions and Answers

1. Download the grant application PDF and Microsoft excel budget from on [CookCountyIL.gov/JACGrants](CookCountyIL.gov/JACGrants).

2. Compile all required documents including financial qualification documents and other supporting documents (see checklist in the grant application) and draft responses to all questions in the grant application.

3. Return to [CookCountyIL.gov/JACGrants](CookCountyIL.gov/JACGrants). Applicants will submit all application components via an online form that will open on August 23, 2023. The form will prompt you to answer the application questions and upload the required documents detailed in the grant application.

The application deadline for 2023 funding is Friday, September 8, 2023. All application submissions are final.

**Q: For this grant opportunity, will awardees be selected via a lottery or point system?**

Applications will be scored via a standardized point system. The evaluation categories and point value system that will be used to score applications are explained in the grant application.

**Q: Do certain application criteria weigh more in scoring than others? (Ex. does the demonstration of need criteria impact application score more than budget?)**

Yes. Certain categories such as demonstration of need and community presence have higher assigned point values. The evaluation categories and point value system that will be used to score applications are explained in the grant application.

**Q: Who will be reviewing applications and making decisions as to which organizations receive grants?**

The JAC will be leading the grant application review process with staff from a variety of other Cook County departments participating and informing the decision-making process. All Cook County staff participating in the grant application review process will receive training to ensure consistency and shared understanding of the criteria used to score and evaluate applications.

**Q: Will funding for organizations outside of Chicago be prioritized over organizations inside Chicago?**

The applications of organizations serving residents of any municipality of Cook County, including Chicago, will be given equal consideration.

**Q: Can an application be saved within the grant application system?**

# Questions and Answers

No, this grant application will be submitted via an online form. Applicants will not be able to save their work and return to the grant application form. It is recommended to draft responses to application questions in a separate document and compile all required application materials before submitting via the online application form as all application submissions are final.

The application form will be live on [CookCountyIL.gov/JACgrants](CookCountyIL.gov/JACgrants) on August 23, 2023. The application deadline is September 8, 2023 to be considered for 2023 funding.

**Q: Will there be an opportunity to provide supplemental material in the online form?**

Applicants will not be able to upload any additional attachments beyond the ones required and listed in the grant application. At the end of the online application form, applicants will be able to provide up to 500 words to share any supplemental information about the organization, project or application materials to be considered during application review.

**Q: Do applicants submit the application and Excel budget workbook as separate files, or are they combined?**

Applications will be completed via a Google Form, which will require the organization to answer all questions and submit all required attachments. As a part of the Google Form submission, applicants will upload the budget form as an Excel workbook file when prompted.

**Q: Should the Budget Narrative be added to the Budget Form or submitted as a separate document?**

Applicants should include budget narrative in the same document as the budget form, in the spaces indicated.

**Q: Where do we obtain a 'certificate of good standing'?**

A certificate of good standing can be obtained through the Illinois Secretary of State Office at [Business Search / Certificate of Good Standing (ilsos.gov)](Business Search / Certificate of Good Standing (ilsos.gov))

**Q: When is the audited financial statement required and not required?**

Applicants should submit an audited financial statement along with their application; however, if an audited financial statement is not available, applicants should submit a statement signed by the Chair of the organization's Board of Directors indicating the organization's actual revenues and expenses, and a statement of financial position for the most recently completed fiscal year.

**Q: If we are too small to have audited books, can we provide Quickbooks?**

# Questions and Answers

If an organization does not have an audited financial statement, then the organization may submit a statement signed by the Chair of the organization's Board of Directors indicating the organization's actual revenues and expenses, and a statement of financial position for the most recently completed fiscal year.

**Q: Can a board chair financial statement be accepted if the board chair is the same person as the Executive Director?**

Yes.

**Q: What are you looking for in terms of 'Demonstration of Community Presence'?**

Applicants should demonstrate the organization's experience in addressing the needs of residents in historically disinvested communities, including how they work with community residents, marginalized or impacted individuals, stakeholders and/or other community-based peer organizations.

**Q: In section 4, what type of program outcomes/impact metrics are you looking for?**

The applicant should provide metrics that will show how you would track and demonstrate the success of the capacity building project you propose.

**Q: In Section 5, 'Narrative and Demonstration of Need', should the Demonstration of Need pertain to the population served AND the capacity building needs?**

Both. In this section, the applicant will demonstrate the organization's experience in working with the population it serves, as well as the organization's capacity building needs.

**Q: Is a screenshot of the organization's page on the Secretary of State website showing current good standing permitted – rather than requiring the certificate itself?**

Yes, as long as it is clear and legible.

**Q: Is it useful to collect letters of support from local elected officials, community leaders?**

No. Letters of support and recommendations will not count towards the evaluation of the application.

**Q: When applying for funding for staff training and/or certifications, must we provide the specific programs, certifications, trainings staff will be enrolled in?**

Applicants should be as detailed as possible in reflecting how the trainings will help to build the organization's capacity.

**Q: Can we apply after September 8th, for consideration for next year's funding?**

# Questions and Answers

Yes, applications will be accepted on a rolling basis and applications submitted after the September 8th deadline will be considered for the next round of funding, based on the availability of funds. Currently, the next round of funding is anticipated in the Spring of 2024.

If you wish to apply for future funding, you may also join the JAC mailing list to stay informed about all future funding opportunities administered by the Cook County Justice Advisory Council.

**Q: Where and when will the answers to these questions be available?**

The formal Frequently Asked Questions document for the grant opportunity will be posted on the Cook County Justice Advisory Council's grant website, CookCountyIL.gov/JACgrants, on August 23, 2023

## Eligibility

**Q: Are organizations that are less than 3 years old eligible for the grant?**

Organizations do not need to be a 501(c)(3) for the full 3 years to apply, but they should have been doing work in the communities they serve for at least 3 years.

**Q: How much work must an agency demonstrate to meet the requirement of working at the local level for 3 years?**

Applicants must demonstrate at least three years of experience of working at the local level to improve the lives of residents in historically disinvested and vulnerable communities through the provision of services and/or by addressing the many societal challenges that impact those communities.

**Q: Does the work experience of leaders/ key staff contribute to the 3 year requirement?**

Yes. The experience of key staff and leaders of the organization can demonstrate the organization's experience of working in the community.

**Q: Are faith-based organizations or churches eligible to apply?**

Yes, if the faith-based organization meets all eligibility criteria outlined in the grant application, they are eligible to apply.

**Q: Are fiscally-sponsored non-profits eligible to apply?**

No.

# Questions and Answers

**Q: Can applicant organizations use a fiscal agent for this grant opportunity? (Are fiscally sponsored organizations working towards 501(c)(3) eligible?)**

No, organizations currently operating with a fiscal agent are not eligible for this grant opportunity. Organizations working toward 501(c)(3) non-profit status may be eligible for other opportunities or can apply for a Starting Block Grant in the future if they meet the eligibility criteria, pending availability of funds.

**Q: What counts as a "small" organization?**

This grant opportunity is open to recognized 501 (c)(3) nonprofits with an annual operating budget at or under $1 million.

**Q: Is there a strict rule of eligibility for organizations with budgets at or under $1 million only?**

Yes, all eligibility criteria is strictly required.

**Q: Please explain the $1 million budget threshold. Is it based on revenue or expenses, or do both need to be under $1 million?**

An applicant organization's annual operating budget of both revenue and expenses should be at or under $1 million to be eligible to apply for funding under this initiative.

The annual operating budget an applicant organization submits should be balanced.

**Q: Is the $1 million budget threshold based on the current year operating budget, or the most recent tax filing?**

Fiscal eligibility is based on the organization's annual operating budget.

**Q: If a board approved budget is slightly over $1 million, but the projection for expenses is under $1 million, can the organization apply?**

The organization's operating budget must be at or under $1 million. If the budget is slightly over $1 million, the applicant is not eligible for this initiative.

**Q: Is there a <u>minimum</u> annual budget amount for organizations to be eligible?**

There is no minimum annual budget requirement.

**Q: Does the date of incorporation of an agency have bearing on the application? (Ex. do newer older/newer organizations have any priority?)**

# Questions and Answers

The date of incorporation of an agency does not have any bearing on the application, however, the applicant does need to demonstrate 3 years of experience in working in the community to be eligible to receive funding under this initiative.

**Q: Is this opportunity limited to certain types of non-profit organizations? (Ex. is it primarily for violence prevention agencies?)**

No, this opportunity is open to 501c3 organizations from diverse sectors including arts and culture, health, housing and community and economic development and more. See the grant application for more information.

**Q: Can organization currently receiving funding from JAC apply for this grant?**

Yes, if an organization funded by the JAC or other entity meets the eligibility criteria for this opportunity, they may apply for a Starting Block Grant.

**Q: Would a legal aid nonprofit be eligible?**

If the organization meets the eligibility criteria outlined in the grant application, yes.

**Q: Would an urban farm be eligible?**

If the organization meets the eligibility criteria outlined in the grant application, yes.

**Q: What types of 'art and culture' organizations are eligible?**

This grant opportunity is for non-profit organizations in a wide variety of sectors that support residents and ultimately helps to build strong, safe, healthy communities. Arts and culture organizations that engage, educate or celebrate residents and communities could be a good fit if they meet all other eligibility criteria.

**Q: Do organizations need to have an office location in Cook County to apply?**

Yes, this grant opportunity for organizations headquartered and working in Cook County.

**Q: Does the organization's location need to be in the community/neighborhood where the majority of clients are served?**

While proximity and accessibility to clients/residents you serve is important, this grant opportunity does not have geographic requirements other than that the organization must be headquartered and working in Cook County.

## Capacity Building Support/ What is Covered by the Grant

# Questions and Answers

**Q: What does this funding support? Specifically, what types of capacity building support are eligible for funding?**

Starting Block Grants are for capacity building projects that strengthen and improve the health of organizations so that they can be more effective, sustainable and poised to grow. Grants are for building capacity in the areas of the organization's adaptive capacities, leadership, management, and technical capacity. Applicant organizations are encouraged to think creatively and strategically about what would help them grow and thrive in the short and long term.

The grants <u>do not</u> fund direct services to clients, programs, materials associated with programs or salaries to develop or deliver programming. Capacity building projects should focus on developing infrastructure and not the deliverables themselves. For example, flyers and marketing materials <u>would not</u> be covered but a marketing and communications training for key staff, a marketing consultant or marketing staff member <u>would</u> be allowable.

Please see the application materials for more information and examples of capacity building projects what types of supports are eligible.

**Q: Can you apply for funding to support multiple capacity building activities? (i.e. hiring a CFO AND building out technology needs)?**

Yes.

**Q: Are rent, utilities, and similar costs related to operations covered by this grant?**

No.

**Q: Can a payment gateway such as Square or Stripe to charge for goods and services be purchased under the grant?**

No.

**Q: Are subscriptions to development sites such as a foundation directory or purchase of lists to assist in development allowed?**

No.

**Q: Is improving cyber security allowable under this grant?**

Yes, capacity building projects focused technology improvement are allowable.

**Q: Can a consultant to work on database clean up/conversion to make our software a more usable/strategic tool be paid for through the grant?**

# Questions and Answers

This would be allowable, but the applicant would need to demonstrate how the work would build the capacity of the organization.

**Q: Can the funding be used for staff when they are working on strategic planning etc. or just to contract for strategic planning support?**

Yes, staff compensation for strategic planning is allowed.

**Q: What types of staff/personnel are allowed to be supported by this grant? (Ex. office secretary, bookkeeper, program director, executive director)**

The applicant would need to demonstrate how the staff would build the organization's capacity. In addition, program related positions, I.e. Program Director would not be allowable given that direct service provision is not allowable under this initiative.

**Q: Can this funding be used to pay a volunteer who has been supporting the organization?**

It would depend on how the volunteer has been supporting the organization, and how paying the volunteer would support building the organization's capacity.

**Q: Can this funding be used to add hours for part time-staff/make part-time staff full time?**

It depends. Funds may be requested for the expansion of infrastructure personnel, (ex: to increase a part-time CFO to full time or hire a data analyst) but cannot be requested for staff to deliver programs or services.

**Q: Can funding be used for a development position?**

Yes, however the application will need to demonstrate how the position will help the organization build capacity.

**Q: Can funds be used to hire independent contractors, consultant and W2 employees? What are the limitations for paying individuals under this grant?**

It would depend on the roles and responsibilities of the independent contractors, consultants, and W2 employees, and how their role would help to build the capacity of the organization.

**Q: Are health benefits and other fringe benefits for staff allowed or required**

Yes, both are allowed but not required under this grant opportunity.

**Q: How is expansion of staff different from provision of direct service?**

# Questions and Answers

Funds may be requested for the expansion of infrastructure personnel (ex. request to increase part-time CFO to full time, or hire a data analyst). Infrastructure personnel are focused on the overall operations, health and growth of the organization and should not provide direct services under the grant.

**Q: Are grants expected to fund a particular project?**

Grant funds must be used for the proposed plans and projects that are designed to build the capacity of the organization.

**Q: What type of marketing and communications support qualifies as capacity building under this grant?**

Strategic efforts related to marketing and communications would. For example, planning for marketing and communications campaigns that support awareness and long term growth of the organization would qualify while physical materials would not.

## Funding & Budgets

**Q: Should the required two-year budget be the organization's budget (comprehensive of all expenses including direct service)? Or is it a project budget with just the expenses to be covered under the grant?**

Applicants will need to submit the organization's total operating budget (at or under $1,000,000) and will also need to submit a 2 year project budget not to exceed $100,000.

**Q: Is there a minimum and maximum for funding requests? / Is there a floor or a ceiling for the award amounts?**

While there is no minimum that can be requested, the maximum funding request is $100,000 for the 2 year period.

**Q: Will awarded organizations receive $100,000 total over both years or 100,000 each year?**

Awarded organizations would receive up to $100,000 total over the 2 year grant term.

**Q: Does "*organizations will receive up to $100,000*" mean organizations will receive less than this amount?**

Organizations can request less than $100,000 however, requests cannot exceed $100,000.

**Q: Is it possible to request less than $100,000 for the 2 year term?**

# Questions and Answers

Yes.

**Q: If we have a specific capacity building in partner who we want to engage with using these funds, do we need to submit a proposal with pricing from the partner?**

> **(Ex. for training, should we have a specific quote from vendors or can we estimate the total costs of training?)**

The pricing proposal is not required at this time; however, it is recommended that applicants be able to provide reasonable estimated costs in their budget requests.

**Q: For small organizations that operate on donations and member contributions, what financials should be provided?**

To be eligible for this grant, organizations are required to submit an annual operating budget at or under $1,000,000.

**Q: For an organization that budgets one year at a time/ does have not have a finalized budget for next year, can we provide and estimate our 2024/2025 budget?**

Applicants should submit the current operating budget for the current fiscal year.

**Q: If the fiscal year of an organization starts in the fall and we do not have updated financials, can we apply?**

Yes. Applicants should submit the current operating budget for the current fiscal year.

## Grant Administration/Post-Award

**What is the term of this grant? When will the funded projects begin?**

The 2023 Starting Block Grant term is November 1, 2023 – October 31, 2025.

The project(s)/work proposed in the grant application should begin November 2023.

**Q: How will the grants be disbursed? Will funding be advanced or paid via reimbursement?**

Funds will be advanced to awarded organizations not all at once, but in portions. At the beginning of the project, awarded organizations can be advanced up to 25% of their first year budget.

**Q: How often will grant award funding be paid out over the grant term?**

# Questions and Answers

Grant award payments are anticipated to be made at regular intervals (ex. quarterly), but they depend on the organization's budget and expenditure rate. Advances are only provided once grant funds are expended.

**Q: Will technical assistance (TA) be provided to awarded organizations as a component of the grant?**

All awarded organizations will receive an initial orientation and ongoing support relating to grant reporting and compliance from an assigned JAC grant monitor.

Additional support and technical assistance from an outside provider may be provided but is <u>not</u> guaranteed. The organization should consider their specific needs when designing their proposed capacity building project under this grant.

**Q: Will there be any training agencies that are recommended in various areas (tech, DEI, leadership training, etc.)?**

No, at this time the JAC is not recommending specific partners, consultants or training for applicants. Applicant organizations are encouraged to seek trainings or technical assistance providers based on their specific needs and goals.

**Q: How many grants will be awarded?**

Up to 50 grant awards will be made in the 2023 funding cycle.

**Q: If you are awarded this capacity building grant, can you apply for additional grant opportunities to fund your programming?**

Yes. While Starting Block Grants focus on capacity building for the organization not programs or services, you may also seek funding for programming through other sources. You may even focus on building capacity through this grant initiative so that you can more effectively secure and manage future grants for your programs and services.

**Q: Are/will there be any similar grant opportunities for organizations with budgets over $1 Million?**

This initiative is designed to fund promising small community-based organizations that most need capacity building support. Currently, there are not opportunities for organizations with budgets over $1 million but the budget threshold may be reevaluated in the future and additional opportunities may be announced. To remain informed about upcoming grant opportunities, please subscribe for updates from the Justice Advisory Council.

# Questions and Answers

**Q: If our organization is not awarded this funding cycle, can our application roll over for 2024 funding, or do we have to apply again?**

No, organizations applying in this funding cycle [by September 8, 2023] will be considered only for this cycle of grant awards. Organizations that are not awarded in 2023 may apply again to be considered future funding.

## Reporting & Compliance

**Q: What are the reporting and administrative requirements of this grant?**

There will fiscal and progress reporting required under the grant, but reporting will not be extensive.

**Q: How often will awarded organizations have to provide progress reports during the grant period?**

There will be fiscal and progress reporting that can range from monthly to semi-annual reporting. The specific reporting requirements and cadence are still being determined.

## Equity & Accessibility

**Q: Will this grant opportunity offer support to organizations such as navigators to assist applicants with the application process?**

Individualized application assistance is not provided as part of this grant opportunity.

The Cook County Starting Block Grant application and application requirements were designed to be accessible for smaller organizations that may not have significant grant writing experience. Applicants with questions are encouraged to view the recorded information session or Pre-Submittal Conference on held on August 16th. Applicants may also email JAC.info@cookcountyil.gov with questions.

There are also some resources on the JAC Grants website for community organizations seeking grants including a recoded Grant Applications Workshop: View the workshop slides & workshop recording.

**Q: Public grants can have onerous reporting requirements. Will Cook County adjust the reporting requirements associated with this grant opportunity to be more accessible?**

# Questions and Answers

Yes, this grant initiative is being designed with regard to the specific needs of smaller community-based organizations. The reporting requirements will be minimal/manageable.

**Q: If we do not apply during this application period due to limited capacity, will this or similar opportunities be offered again?**

Based on availability of funds, Cook County plans to offer a second round of Starting Block Grants in 2024. To stay informed about this and other funding opportunities, please subscribe for email updates from the Justice Advisory Council.