Innovations and Collaborations

The following is some additional information about the criteria for Innovations and Collaborations grants that may be useful for grant applicants. Applicants should meet most, if not all, of the following standards. We have defined each criterion and given an example of an actual grantee that exemplifies that criterion from the last five years of grantmaking.

• **Addressing root causes of issues or problems in Vermont**

Projects should identify and address the fundamental reason(s) for the occurrence of a problem (the root cause). For example, the Nulhegan Abenaki people determined that many challenges affecting the Abenaki community were related to structural and institutional barriers around lack of self-governance and forced assimilation, including eugenics programs imposed on the Abenaki in the 1930s, and the loss of tribal land. This resulted in a lack of community cohesion and loss of traditional cultural practices and traditions. Having identified these barriers as the root causes of community problems, they worked with the Vermont Land Trust and the Nature Conservancy to create the Abenaki Tribal Forest. It is a community forest that provides multiple opportunities to bring indigenous youth and adults together to build social capital, provide economic opportunities through forestry and sugaring, and celebrate Abenaki community traditions.

• **Collaborating with other organizations across issues, sectors, or regions**

In the context of the Innovations and Collaborations grant program, collaborations are more than just networks or coalitions of like-minded organizations; they are active learning partnerships in which each stakeholder brings knowledge and learning to the table that the other organizations would not otherwise possess. For example, the Vermont Natural Resources Council, Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Chittenden County Regional Planning Commission have different missions: to protect the environment, end poverty, and build livable communities. Yet their joint project to encourage climate-friendly, affordable housing provided a unique opportunity to learn and work together across sectors and through multiple lenses – an example of intersectional work where multiple challenges are addressed through a single project.

• **Working in ways that are new and original for participating organization(s)**

In this grant program, successful applicants move beyond “the way we’ve always done it” to look at problems in new ways and to address them with creative solutions that leverage partner resources. Here’s a great example: the Flynn Center, Vermont Youth Orchestra, Vermont Symphony, Lane Series, and others were tired of competing for an ever-smaller core audience of older Vermonters, so they developed a two-year collaborative marketing experiment to target young adults in ways that expanded audiences for all and created stronger ties between the participating groups. The “six-pack” season ticket, marketed towards younger patrons, sold inexpensive season passes that encouraged ticket buyers to attend performances presented by six different arts organizations.

• **Engaging constituents in leadership and decision-making**

Organizations should include their constituents in direct and meaningful leadership and decision-making roles, including on staff and through service on governing boards. Ideally, this level of inclusion is built into the applicants’ structures and is not added later. This is particularly important for work intended to
support traditionally marginalized or underserved populations, like people with developmental disabilities. For example, the Green Mountain Self-Advocates VerMENTORS, a program where peers are matched to support each other, has Vermonters with developmental challenges truly leading at both the board and staff level. Mentoring pairs work together to develop advocacy skills to work within a system that often seems hostile to people with developmental disabilities. As traditional social services agencies struggle to survive, self-advocacy and leadership from those affected will become vitally important to maintaining quality of life for people with disabilities and their families.

• Holding themselves accountable to their stakeholders

Applicants should listen deeply to those they intend to serve with their programming, ensuring that the voices of those served or affected by a project have the opportunity to provide feedback and analysis to program staff and that staff have the active listening skills to incorporate feedback in an ongoing way. Project Vision, a community response to the opioid epidemic in Rutland, is a great example of a project that builds that kind of accountability into the fiber of their work. A collaboration of more than a dozen local groups, Project Vision works deeply and directly with the neighborhoods struggling with addiction. By creating feedback loops among and between the collaborators and the neighbors, they help ensure a respectful and joyful sense of empowering change for Rutland.

• Embracing risk while stretching for higher impact

As a learning organization, The Vermont Community Foundation believes that success often means embracing risk, learning from mistakes, and employing course-correcting strategies on a continual basis. Child Care Resource, working with the Association of Africans Living in Vermont and Opportunities Credit Union, started with the idea that they would train refugee women to start in-home child care businesses. Along the way, they encountered many barriers, from recalcitrant landlords to the need to translate child care business regulations into non-written languages, but also found additional and unexpected ways to help these women become more economically independent and provide culturally-competent child care services. The partners learned a tremendous amount about state regulations, landlord/tenant relations, and translation requirements on this journey.

• Learning together in a self-reflective and flexible style

Successful applicants will reflect on their work, share learning across and between the collaborating organizations, and adjust their tactics and strategies going forward based on that learning. Grantees seeking continuing funding for their projects after the first year should be able to demonstrate, using specific examples, how they are putting self-reflective assessment and evaluation tools into place to strengthen their partnerships and the work of the project. One example: the Northeast Kingdom Area Agency on Aging and the Pride Center of Vermont chose to use the Training Contract System - which builds in reflection and evaluation over time – to support senior centers and nursing homes in the Kingdom that wanted to develop LGBTQ-friendly policies. A more-typical approach utilizes drop-in trainings, which don’t provide the ongoing, long-term support of the Training Contract System.

To learn more about applying to Innovations and Collaborations, including deadlines and eligibility requirements, please visit our website: www.vermontcf.org/NonprofitsGrants/AvailableGrants/InnovationsandCollaborations.aspx

2-3-17