The Corporation for National and Community Service Competitive Grant Application Review Process

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INTRODUCTION

This document describes the competitive grant application review and selection process of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). This document was prepared to promote increased transparency with stakeholders and help applicants and potential applicants to CNCS better understand the agency's grant-making process. [1]

CNCS is the federal agency created to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement through service and volunteering. CNCS engages more than five million Americans who volunteer to meet local needs and improve communities through a wide array of service opportunities.

CNCS fulfills its mission by providing financial assistance through its many programs that support national and local initiatives. These programs include AmeriCorps, Senior Corps Learn and Serve America, and several new programs authorized by the 2009 Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act - the Social Innovation Fund, Volunteer Generation Fund, and Nonprofit Capacity Building program. Through these programs, CNCS awards grants to eligible public and nonprofit entities for the purpose of creating community service opportunities for tens of thousands of adults, youth, and students. For more information, visit www.NationalService.gov.

In line with objectives and strategies included in the CNCS 2011-2015 Strategic Plan, CNCS applies the following underlying principles to all grant-making activities:

- Quality: CNCS is committed to funding the best programs that meet CNCS's selection criteria and priorities. CNCS is committed to maintaining a comprehensive review and approval system to ensure that the most suitable applicants are selected.
- Accessibility and Transparency: CNCS is committed to making the application process clear and easily accessible; widely distributing *Notices*; and openly sharing grant-making information with all stakeholders.
- Fairness and Equality: CNCS is committed to being fair to all applicants and potential applicants by remaining unbiased while supporting, reviewing, and making funding decisions.

In addition, CNCS continues to improve and enhance its review process for effectiveness, streamlining, and increased transparency.

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[1] *The information in this document reflects a summary of the current CNCS review and selection process. Official statutes, CNCS policies and regulations, or specific instructions contained in official Notices of Funding Opportunity shall take precedence over any conflicting information contained in this document. Please note that this document is subject to change and non-binding to CNCS.*

THE CORPORATION GRANT MAKING PROCESS

CNCS has established a multi-step grant-making process from the appropriation of funds and awarding grants, through monitoring activities, to close-out. A summary of this process is depicted below.

Figure 1. The Life Cycle of Competitive Grants

- **Congress Appropriates Funding:** Each fiscal year, Congress appropriates funding to CNCS as part of the Federal budget process.
- **CNCS Board Approves Program Annual Plan:** CNCS develops an annual plan and budget for each grant competition, which are reviewed and approved by the CNCS' Board of Directors.
- **Plan for Grant Competitions**: The planning process includes developing documents, such as an agency-wide Grant Application Review Calendar, the Notice of Federal Funding Availability or Opportunity (*Notice*), Application Instructions, and grant application review protocols.
- **Solicit Applicants & External Peer Reviewers**: For each competitive grant program, CNCS publishes a *Notice* that describes the eligibility criteria, funding priorities, program requirements and responsibilities of the applicant. CNCS also conducts activities to recruit external peer reviewers to assess grant applications.
- **Receive Applications**: Each application received by CNCS is reviewed for compliance with the published eligibility requirements. Eligible applications are sorted and assigned to review panels for assessment.
- **Assess Applications**: CNCS utilizes a multistage review process to assess applications, which includes the involvement of external peer reviewers and CNCS staff.
- **CNCS Award Decision**: After the staff review, the Chief Executive Officer makes award decisions.
- **Notification of Awards**: Congress and applicants are notified of the award decision. The public is informed through a press release.
- **Award Grants**: Based on the approved funding decision, federal funds are obligated and awarded for each application approved for funding.
- **Monitor & Administer Grants**: The grantee implements the program and fulfills the reporting and other requirements. CNCS provides training and technical assistance for the grantee, and conducts audits and program reviews.
- **Closeout**: At the end of the grant life cycle, any remaining grant funds are de-obligated and any property or equipment is disposed of per 45 CFR 2541.500 and 2543.71.

BASIS FOR THE GRANT APPLICATION REVIEW

What governs the grant application review process?

The grant application review process is governed by statutory and regulatory requirements, established CNCS policies and procedures, and available appropriated funds.

What are the goals of the review and selection process?

CNCS's review and selection process is designed to ensure that grant applications submitted to CNCS for funding are evaluated based on a fair, equitable, transparent, free of bias, and timely process. This process assures that awards made are aligned with the Selection Criteria stated in the *Notice*, CNCS strategic goals and objectives, and represent a well-balanced portfolio of programs.

What is CNCS grant competition calendar?

At the beginning of each fiscal year, CNCS creates a grant competition calendar that includes critical dates from the production of *Notices* to application deadlines and announcements of grant awards. Dates may change in response to circumstances that may arise.

Many factors are considered in determining the key dates, including:
- Needs communicated by each program.
- Priorities identified by the Chief Executive Officer, the Chief Operating Officer, and the Chief of Program Operations in consultation with their senior management teams.
- Anticipated number of applications.
- Complexities of the program requirements and application review process.
- Program funding cycle.
- Application review model.
- Amount of time needed to develop and publish particular *Notices*.
- CNCS resources needed and available to undertake and support the grant making processes.
- Specific directions and priorities included in the agency's annual appropriations bill.

What are the roles of CNCS offices in the grant application review process?

The Program Office is the owner of the grant competition and participates in every step of the review, recommendation, and decision-making process. The Office of Grant Policy and Operations oversees and facilitates the process; ensures CNCS policies and procedures are followed (or differences appropriately justified); and provides business intelligence, administrative, and logistical support. The Office of Grants Management and the Field Financial Management Center provide budget and financial reviews of grant applications and carry out the awarding process. The Office of General Counsel provides legal counsel. The Office of Government Relations handles congressional notifications. The Office of the Chief Executive Officer provides strategic direction and makes final funding decisions.

How does CNCS develop *Notices*?

The Program Office develops the *Notices* for each grant competition, following the Policy Directive by the Office of Management and Budget, Office of Federal Financial Management. *Notices* are aligned with the CNCS Board-approved annual plan, CNCS Strategic Plan, and CNCS's final appropriations bill. Each *Notice* goes through an internal review and approval process. Application Instructions are developed by each Program Office and cleared by the Office

of Management and Budget, Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, to comply with the Paperwork Reduction Act.

How is information about funding availability or opportunity distributed by CNCS?

The Notices are distributed via channels, including, but not limited to:
- CNCS web site and electronic mailing lists.
- Grants.gov.
- E-mail to state offices and state commissions.
- Press Release.
- Regular mail to applicant upon request.
- Internal distribution to involved CNCS offices.
- Social Media.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

How does CNCS make the application process accessible?

All applicants must have access to the same information. This is accomplished by making all information publicly available. The following actions support applicants from the time the *Notice* is posted until the application submission deadline:

- Technical Assistance is provided to all potential applicants with publicly announced technical assistance conference calls. Playback recordings of technical assistance conference calls are made available until the application deadline.
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) are posted on CNCS web site, and updated as appropriate.
- Publicly announced e-mail addresses and voice mailboxes are set up and made available to potential applicants to submit inquires and receive responses.
- Every *Notice* provides a number for TTY inquires to accommodate people with special needs.
- eGrants is opened to the public for electronic application submission.
- National Service Hotline contact information and hours of business are shared with applicants. Staff is available to answer applicant questions.
- The *Notices* and Application Instructions are reviewed each year for clarity and potential further streamlining.

What documents guide the application preparation?

The application preparation and the review process are guided by several key documents: the *Notice*, the Application Instructions, statutes and regulations, and Technical Assistance documents. For each grant competition, these documents are available on the CNCS website.

How are applications submitted?

CNCS requires electronic submission of applications through the CNCS web-based application system, eGrants. In the event of technical difficulties with making a submission in eGrants, the *Notice* includes specific instructions on how to proceed. In some special circumstances identified by CNCS, application submissions may be accepted through other means (e.g., via email, Grants.gov, or other submission methods).

What is the deadline for the submission of grant applications?

Grant applications must arrive at CNCS by 5:00 pm Eastern Time on the application submission date published in the *Notice* for each grant competition. Grant applications must be received by the established date and time in order to be considered.

STEPS IN THE GRANT APPLICATION REVIEW PROCESS

Compliance Review

What is the compliance check?

All applications submitted to CNCS are initially reviewed for compliance with eligibility, basic program requirements, completeness, submission time, and other requirements published in the *Notice* and Application Instructions. The Office of Grants Policy and Operations manages the compliance review process in close collaboration with the Program Office, the Office of the General Counsel, and the Office of Grants Management or the Field Financial Management Center.

A Compliance Review Committee is established for each grant competition. The role of the Committee is to discuss applications with potential compliance issues identified, and decide if an application has met the established compliance requirements, published in the *Notice*, to advance in the review process. Applicants determined non-compliant receive a notification from CNCS.

How is compliance handled for applications received after the application deadline?

Processing of late applications is governed by CNCS Policy on Grant Application Deadline and Late Application Submission. This policy identifies circumstances in which CNCS may consider applications submitted after the deadline, and outlines the applicant notification and appeal processes. Each *Notice* includes specific instructions regarding how applicants should contact CNCS in the case of extenuating circumstances leading to a late submission. Late applications are evaluated on a case-by-case basis by the Compliance Committee for each competition.

External Review

What governs the use of external reviewers to assess applications for funding?

The use of external peer reviewers in evaluating grant applications submitted to CNCS for funding is established in CNCS statute and regulations. The Serve America Act of 2009 amended Sec 193 A of the National and Community Service Act to give the Chief Executive Officer authority to use peer reviewers for any grant competition. Specifically, Section 193 A (C)(10) states that the CEO may "obtain the opinion of peer reviewers in evaluating applications to CNCS for assistance under this title."

The purpose of external peer review is to identify the highest-quality applications based on Selection Criteria established in the *Notice*, and CNCS regulations and applicable statutes. External peer review also serves to inform staff review, identify applications viable for full external peer review or for staff review, and provide feedback to applicants. CNCS staff work directly with external peer reviewers by convening them to serve on external peer review panels that read and determine the quality of grant applications. Reviewers do not make judgments or determinations

on whether applications should be funded, but provide an assessment of the quality of particular aspects of the applications. Except for competitions in which applications are only staff reviewed, funding decisions consider external peer review results as input to those decisions.

How does CNCS establish fair and unbiased reviews?

CNCS is committed to fair and unbiased reviews. Procedures to ensure fair and equitable reviews include screening reviewers for conflict of interest, training reviewers and facilitators on recognizing and avoiding bias during the review of applications, paneling applications using common characteristics, reviewing applications according to the published Selection Criteria, and conducting quality control reviews.

Conflict of Interest

A Conflict of Interest (COI) occurs when a conflict exists between a reviewer's private interest and official responsibilities. Prior to reviewing grant applications, reviewers must inform CNCS immediately of any possible conflict of interest or appearances thereof. Each potential reviewer is required to participate in an initial orientation session that includes information on Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality before he/she is confirmed to participate in a review. Both topics are also addressed in Reviewer's Handbook and additional training sessions before the review begins.

CNCS determines the potential for both actual and perceived conflicts of interest through consideration of direct and indirect conflicts as defined below:

■ A direct conflict of interest – the reviewer has been personally involved in the submission of an application to CNCS.
■ An indirect conflict of interest – might exist based on various forms of affiliation with an applicant institution.

Reviewers are required to sign and return a Conflict of Interest and Confidentiality Statement after receiving their panel assignment and applications. When a perceived or actual COI is identified, CNCS staff review the situation on a case-by-case basis and make final determinations. If there is a perceived or actual conflict, the reviewer is recused from the review of the application in question, removed from the panel, assigned to another panel, or removed from the review as a whole. The application may be moved to another panel.

Confidentiality of Information

Reviewers have access to information not generally available to the public and so have special professional and ethical responsibilities. Review participants are given access to information about applicants only for their use during the evaluation process and for discussion with fellow review participants and CNCS personnel.

After the announcement of awards, CNCS may disclose certain information that has been provided to reviewers or produced by reviewers. Absent any such disclosure, reviewers must maintain the confidentiality of any information they obtained or produced as a review participant. Further, reviewers may not use that information for any unauthorized purpose, including for their personal benefit or making information available for the benefit of any other individual or organization.

After reviewers complete their review, and consistent with their normal practices, reviewers are required to protect the information in a manner consistent with the confidentiality obligations stated in their signed Conflict of Interest and Confidentially Statement.

Reviewers' comments may be requested by applicants from CNCS. However, when such information is given to the applicant or made public, the reviewers' names are deleted and protected to the extent provided by law. As a review participant, reviewers may not discuss names of reviewers with applicants or with other individuals. The names of all external review participants may be made public following the review, but will not be linked to individual applications.

Establishing Review Panels

Whenever possible, similar applications are assigned to panels based on common criteria. This provides panels with the opportunity to gain experience with and a deeper understanding of the programs that are similar and eliminates or reduces confusion. Characteristics to consider for paneling include but are not limited to CNCS Focus Areas, program models, program focus, issue areas, service categories, target service audience, and organization type. Once applications have been paneled, reviewers are assigned to panels of applications based on their expertise and skill set.

Selection Criteria

The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act (Serve America Act) place a clear emphasis on measuring the impact of service and focusing on a core set of issues areas. This landmark law is the foundation of the agency's five-year Strategic Plan, which lays out an ambitious, wide-ranging set of objectives that support our four strategic goals. These strategic goals- as well as consideration of measurability, achievability, usefulness, demonstrated effectiveness, previous investments and the need to tell a compelling story of national service- guided the determination of agency-wide Priority Measures. Thus, in evaluating and selecting proposals, CNCS takes into consideration how the activities proposed will contribute to the agency-wide Priority Measures and advance the broader goals and objectives stated in the Strategic Plan.

Proposals submitted to CNCS are evaluated through the use of Selection Criteria established by CNCS statutes and regulations, and published in the *Notice.* The Selection Criteria include Program Design, Organizational Capacity, and Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy. For AmeriCorps, the weight of each Selection Criteria is defined by Regulation. For the rest of the programs, the weight may vary with each competition allowing programs to address specific goals. Details on the Selection Criteria and weights are always stated in the *Notice.* Additional considerations and funding priorities are also described in each *Notice.*

External peer reviewers evaluate grant applications solely on how responses address the published Selection Criteria.

Quality Control

Quality control is designed to promote fairness and consistency in the review process by ensuring that every eligible application receives full and fair consideration. Several quality control strategies are used to validate the results of external peer review or address potential panel activities that may have impacted the panel review of an application. After external reviewers complete their assessment, CNCS staff review the results for fairness and consistency. Some applications may be selected for a quality control review based on, but not limited to, the following reasons:

- Identified discrepancies on the results from external peer review.
- Identified anomalies in a review panel.
- Low rating in external peer review, but address underrepresented or not represented priorities identified in the *Notice.*
- Diversity of priorities and program models.

- Discrepancies between external peer review and staff knowledge of performance by existing grantees.

Some of the quality control strategies include but are not limited to having a second panel review the application, having a CNCS staff member read the application, and sending the application directly to staff review.

How does CNCS select external reviewers?

CNCS carefully chooses reviewers for their expertise and ability to assess the quality of proposed projects. Reviewers read applications and provide an analysis and rating of the quality of each application based upon published Selection Criteria. CNCS strives to recruit and select reviewers who have:
- Knowledge and expertise relevant to CNCS Focus Areas.
- Specific expertise relevant to particular grant competitions.
- Diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

An individual who wishes to be considered as a peer reviewer must complete and submit to CNCS a peer reviewer application in eGrants available at NationalService.gov following the eGrants link or by accessing the following link: eGrants Log In Page.

How are external reviewers trained?

Reviewers must complete several training sessions and become familiar with key background material including the *Notice* and the program regulations that govern the competition. Reviewer's comprehensive understanding of these documents is critical to a fair, successful and objective review.

Who plays key roles during the review?

Each review panel consists of Reviewers, a Panel Coordinator, a Program Officer Liaison, and a Grant Application Review Process (GARP) Liaison. Their roles and responsibilities are as follows:

- **Reviewer**. Reviewers evaluate applications according to the published Selection Criteria. Primary responsibilities include: assessing assigned applications, completing high quality review forms, and participating in panel discussions. Up to five reviewers are assigned to each panel.

- **Panel Coordinator**. Each panel will have a Panel Coordinator whose primary responsibilities are to guide, support, and monitor the work of the reviewers; manage panel logistics; provide feedback to reviewers on their forms; and facilitate the panel discussions.

- **Program Officer Liaison**. Each panel is assigned a Program Officer Liaison from CNCS whose main responsibility is to provide programmatic expertise and guidance to the panel.

- **Grant Application Review Process (GARP) Liaison**. Each panel is assigned a GARP Liaison who answers all process-related questions, and provides all administrative and logistic support to the panel. After the Panel Coordinator, the GARP Liaison is the point of contact for any immediate needs regarding review materials or any barriers to completing the review process.

What is the review process?

CNCS has developed a process for conducting the external review of grant applications, which is depicted in Figure 2, The External Peer Review Process.

Figure 2. The External Peer Review Process
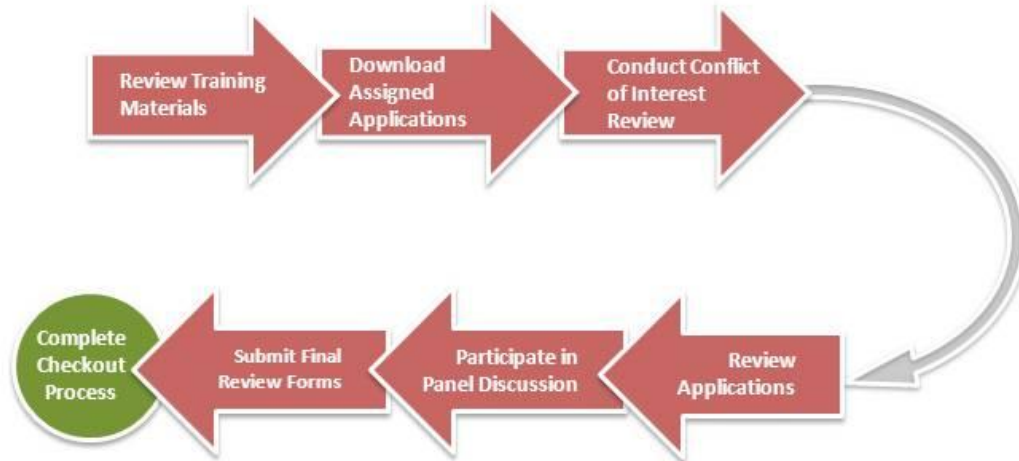
What are the review models?

CNCS uses several review models. In selecting a review model, programs take into consideration the volume of applications, the range of necessary expertise needed, available human and financial resources, and the complexity of the competition.

Review models used by CNCS to engage external peer reviewers include, but are not limited to the following examples: Preliminary Review, External Review, Blended Review, and Issue Expert Review. Depending on the review model, the review may include one or more review stages. A non-consensus approach is used on all external peer review models. Reviewers are not required to achieve consensus or come to the same conclusion.

Most CNCS peer reviews are conducted virtually. On-site reviews are conducted on a limited basis. During virtual reviews, reviewers utilize web-based and other tools to participate in the review. Each panelist reads, rates and scores, and prepares comments independently for all assigned applications. Panelists then participate in teleconference calls with their fellow panelists to discuss applications.

Preliminary Review

Panels of at least two reviewers review each application against program eligibility and Selection Criteria published in the *Notice*. The Blended Review model detailed below may be used for this review model.

External Peer Review

Panels of three to five external peer reviewers assess the quality of each assigned application against the Selection Criteria published in the *Notice*. Reviewers individually assess each application, focusing on the quality of the applicant's response in each section of the application. Reviewers assign a rating and score to each category, and/or the entire application as appropriate. After individual reviews have been completed, the panels convene by teleconference to discuss each application. The purpose of the discussions is to ensure a common understanding of the application and discuss significant strengths and weakness of the applications, as well as points of agreement and disagreement. The Panel Coordinator assigned to each panel guides the discussions regarding each application. After panel discussions, reviewers submit their individual final results.

Blended Review

This is a variation of the External Peer Review model, which includes CNCS staff on the panel. Using a combination of Corporation staff, other federal agency staff, and expert external peer reviewers, panels of three to five reviewers assess applications submitted for funding.

Issue Expert Review

External peer reviewers with expertise on specific subject areas assess the merits of applications relative to the Selection Criteria with focus on a sub-set of the criteria or specific subject area requirements outlined in the *Notice*.

What rating system is used by external peer reviewers?

The rating system is based on rating descriptions and a rubric provided to reviewers by CNCS. It contains a description for each rating and scores. A reviewer's ratings and scores must be supported on review forms by the significant strengths and weaknesses of the application. In addition to ratings for each criterion, reviewers select an overall rating that best captures the quality of the application as a whole, taking into account the different weights assigned to each of the categories of the Selection Criteria.

The rating system for most programs includes four rating categories: Excellent, Good, Acceptable, and Not Acceptable. Below are descriptions for these Rating categories used in CNCS FY 2011 reviews, accompanied by characteristics of an application that would fall within that particular Rating. Reviewers decide which rating descriptions they believe is the **best overall fit** in characterizing how the application addresses the criteria being assessed.

Excellent — Many major and minor strengths identified. Only minor weaknesses identified, if any. Highest probability and confidence that the requirements will be met and exceeded.
- Goes beyond what was requested, showing that the applicant has anticipated issues that may arise.
- Provides a thorough, detailed response to all of the information requested.
- Provides a clear and highly compelling description of how the proposed activities will achieve the anticipated results.
- Supports ideas and objectives with comprehensive plans explaining and connecting ideas to objectives.

Good — Several major and minor strengths. No more than a few minor weaknesses and no major weaknesses identified. High probability and confidence that the requirements will be met, and with some exceeded.
- Provides a response to all of the information requested.

- Provides a realistic description of how the proposed activities will achieve the anticipated results.
- Explains most assumptions and reasons.
- Supports ideas with plans, examples, or outlines.

Acceptable — Few if any major strengths. A few minor strengths, no more than a couple minor weaknesses and no major weaknesses identified. Acceptable probability that the requirements will be met.

- Covers most of the information requested, with a few exceptions.
- Is sometimes unclear how the proposed activities will achieve the anticipated results.
- Makes some assumptions and leaves some reasons unexplained.

Not Acceptable — Few or No strengths but many mayor and minor weaknesses identified.

Extremely low probability that any of the requirements will be met.

- Gives an unclear description of how the proposed activities will achieve the anticipated results.
- Tends to "parrot" back the question, rather than answer and explain it
- Does not address or respond to the requirements/conditions of the NOFO.
- Proposes activities that are not consistent with the NOFO and Application Instructions.
- Does not provide one or more key pieces of requested information.

Staff Review

What criteria are considered to determine which applications advance from peer to staff review?

As part of planning for staff review, each Program develops a set of criteria used to determine which applications advance from peer to staff review. These criteria are based on priorities and considerations articulated in the *Notice* for each competition including but not limited to:

- Priorities identified in the agency's Strategic Plan (e.g. Focus Areas, Priority Measures, Pilot Measures).
- Additional priorities based on administration interests, congressional appropriation language, or a specific interest of the Board of Directors stated in the Annual Program Plan.
- Balancing portfolio characteristics (e.g., Geographic and Focus Area representation).
- Statutory and regulatory considerations CNCS is required by law to consider when selecting a portfolio of programs.

Results from external review (which focuses on the quality of applications relative to the Selection Criteria), as well as the priorities and considerations published in the *Notice*, are applied to select the portfolio of applications that advance to staff review. The level of funding available for a particular competition is also considered in making these determinations.

As much as possible, and depending on data available, characteristics desired in a well-balanced portfolio are considered to ensure adequate representation in the pool of applicants selected to advance to staff review. In certain circumstances, a lower scoring application in peer review may advance to staff review over a higher scoring application including the following:

- The application meets a statutory priority or CNCS priority that is under-represented to balance the overall portfolio.
- The application was misjudged by the review panel based on evidence gathered following the External Review.

How are staff reviewers assigned and trained?

Staff review assignments are made by the Program Office, the Office of Grants Management, and the Field Financial Management Center, for their respective staff. Staff reviewers may also include staff from other departments who have the required knowledge and expertise and are trained to participate in a specific review. The training is conducted by the Program and the Grants Management Office's senior staff.

Does conflict of interest apply to CNCS staff reviewing applications?

CNCS employees must comply with standards for conflict of interest in grant reviews. 5 C.F.R. Part 2635 "Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch" is used to evaluate the conflict of interest that applies to employees. Each employee is expected to respect and adhere to the principles of ethical conduct and the implementing standards contained in this regulation. In addition to the standards of ethical conduct set forth in this regulation, there are conflict of interest statutes that prohibit certain conduct. Criminal conflict of interest statutes of general applicability to all employees, 18 U.S.C. 201, 203, 205, 208, and 209, must be taken into consideration in determining whether conduct is proper.

It is a fundamental responsibility of each staff reviewer to inform the Review Coordinator of any actual or perceived potential for a COI associated with serving as a staff reviewer for a grant competition.   Each employee acknowledges their lack of a conflict of interest by signing a conflict of interest agreement at the beginning of each review. If a conflict is identified, the Office of General Counsel is consulted. Depending on the circumstance, the employee could be removed from the review.

What factors are considered during the staff review process?

Staff reviewers assess each application against the Selection Criteria with emphasis on Organizational Capability, Cost-Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy. In addition, staff determines how well the applications relate to statutory and regulatory considerations, CNCS priorities, portfolio diversity, and other factors published in the *Notice.* Other considerations include: past grantee performance, progress to date on the program design and use of the funds, and results from the assessment applicants' fiscal capacity and administrative compliance.

What is the outcome of staff review?

Based on the results from staff review and portfolio analysis, the Program Office, led by the Program Director, develops a preliminary portfolio of programs for funding consideration by the Chief Executive Officer and other CNCS leadership. The program takes into account external review results, adherence to the funding priorities outlined in the *Notice*, staff analysis, portfolio diversity, funding availability, and other factors in building the preliminary portfolio of recommended programs. The CEO carefully considers the program's preliminary recommendations, provides strategic direction as needed, and agrees on a preliminary funding recommendation portfolio, which includes applications for clarification.

What is applicant clarification?

The purpose of applicant clarification is to request clarification from the applicants on certain aspects of the application (programmatic and budgetary) in order to assist CNCS in making final

funding decisions. At the point of applicant clarification, CNCS has not made any final funding decisions and this request for additional information and clarification does not mean an application selected for clarification is approved for funding. Rather, it is an opportunity for the applicant to clarify questions and issues identified during the review. This process takes one to five weeks depending on the number of applications being considered, and the complexity of items for clarification.

SELECTION, NOTIFICATIONS, AND FEEDBACK

How are final funding decisions made?

Once the applicant clarification process is completed, the Program Director and other program staff analyze the results, and prepare and submit to the CEO and other CNCS leadership a draft funding recommendation package. A decision meeting is conducted with the CEO and other CNCS leadership to discuss the Program recommendation and make final funding decisions. The CEO approves the funding recommendation package, after careful consideration of the recommendations, and if necessary, additional direction and revisions. The package is certified following CNCS Funding Approval Procedures policy.

What is the process of notifications of award decisions?

The Board of Directors is notified once the funding decision is final. Government Relations notifies the Congressional Appropriation Committee, followed by notifications to Congressional representatives from the grantees' districts. Applicants are then notified by the Program staff. Applicants approved for funding generally receive a phone call from their Program Officer, as well as a formal notification letter from the Program Director.

Formal notifications of state commission competitive decisions are sent to the commission for distribution to their sub-applicants. Applicants that are not approved for funding receive a notification letter. Concurrent with applicant notifications, External Affairs makes the information available to the public by distributing a press release with the list of selected applicants. Once notifications have occurred, the Office of Grants Management or the Field Financial Management Center processes the grant award in eGrants.

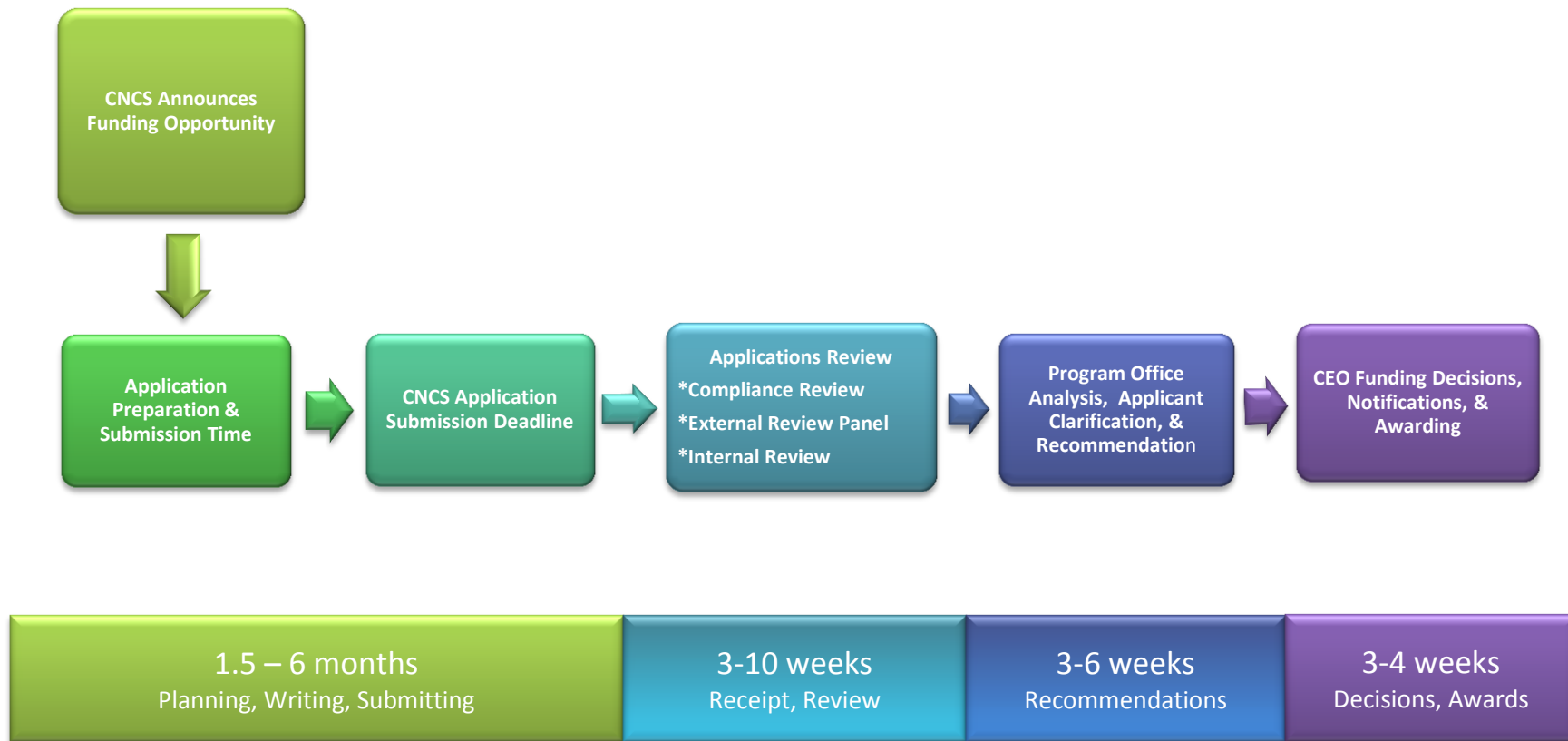## What is the process for feedback to applicants?

To the extent possible, CNCS makes feedback from the grant review available to all applicants. The purpose of the feedback to applicants is to improve future applications. Feedback includes the context for decisions, and may be conducted via conference call with all applicants, individual calls to applicants, or in memo format.

OVERALL TIMEFRAME

How long does the grant application review and awarding process take?

Depending on the complexity of each grant competition, the review model, and the number of applications, the grant application review and awarding process can take approximately up to five months from the application submission deadline to funding. Figure 3 - CNCS Application Submission, Review and Awarding Timeline - illustrates the grant application review and selection process flow and timeframe.

Figure 3. CNCS Application Submission, Review and Awarding Timeline


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CNCS Announces
Funding Opportunity
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        ▼
Application          CNCS Application      Applications Review      Program Office         CEO Funding Decisions,
Preparation &   →    Submission Deadline → *Compliance Review   →   Analysis, Applicant →  Notifications, &
Submission Time                            *External Review Panel   Clarification, &       Awarding
                                           *Internal Review         Recommendation
```

1.5 – 6 months	3-10 weeks	3-6 weeks	3-4 weeks
Planning, Writing, Submitting	Receipt, Review	Recommendations	Decisions, Awards

OPEN GOVERNMENT POLICY IN THE COMPETITIVE GRANT PROCESS

How is CNCS commitment to open government translated into the competitive grant process?

CNCS's policy on Transparency in Grant Application Reviews establishes the documents related to the grant application reviews that will be made available to the public for all grant competitions that result in new or recompeting grant awards including cooperative agreements. It outlines the procedures, roles and responsibilities of Corporation offices in the implementation of the policy, and the timing for publishing the material. What information is made public and when is presented below:

Figure 4. What information is made public and when?

WHAT	WHEN/WHERE
Annual calendar of grant competitions - List of anticipated review and selection dates for all CNCS competitions for each fiscal year. Continuing resolutions and availability of funds may affect actual dates.	**Via e-mail memo, listserv, and web posting; annually.**
Agency-wide description of review and selection process - Overview of the review and selection process.	**In the Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity or Availability (Notice).**
Selection criteria, funding priorities and considerations, and selection factors used for portfolio balancing - The criteria against which internal and/or external reviewers will assess applications.	**In the *Notice***
Blank external review templates when applicable - Worksheets used to assess applications.	**Via web posting; as soon as practicable but no later than 90 business days after all grants are awarded.**
List of compliant applications submitted - Names of organizations submitting applications, including sub-applicants (if applicable) and program names.	
Executive summaries of all compliant applications - Executive summary sub mitted by applicant as part of the application.	
Names of external peer reviewers who completed the review process.	
Copies of successful applications - Copies of the SF424 Facesheet and program narrative submitted by applicants.	
Results of review for successful applicants - Summary external reviewer comments when applicable.	

Notices are posted on the Corporation's website:
http://www.nationalservice.gov/for_organizations/funding/nofa.asp
Specific grant competition review material is published on the CNCS Open Government page
http://nationalservice.gov/about/open/grants.asp and linked to the appropriate program web page.