

The SAMHSA Grant Review Office – Peer Review Process

Purpose of Grant Review

Primary: To provide a sound basis for making funding decisions through fair, competent, and objective assessment of the merit of applications for Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) grant programs.

SAMHSA’s grant review process also produces a document that provides useful feedback to the applicant regarding the strengths and weaknesses of an application, provides useful information to the relevant SAMHSA National Advisory Council (NAC), and aids the project officer (PO) in working with applicants that receive grant funds. The Center’s NAC is the second level of review after review by the Initial Review Group (IRG). NAC review takes place when the award as published in the RFA meets a defined threshold, usually \$150,000 or more.

To meet these purposes, SAMHSA grant review adheres to the following tenets:

- Each application must receive a thorough and impartial review.
- Each application is considered and scored only in accordance with the Request for Applications (RFA) and its published review criteria. An application is to be reviewed solely on its own merit and not in comparison with other applications.
- Only what is actually written in the application is to be considered. Reviewers are not to make assumptions, read “between the lines” or use personal knowledge of the applicant or applicant organization.
- IRG members are chosen for their expertise required for a comprehensive review of each RFA and application.
- Standards to avoid conflict of interest are strictly followed.
- Confidentiality is maintained.
- A “level playing field” is maintained. No application shall receive special consideration, either positive or negative.

Screening

One way that equity of review for all applicants is achieved is in the objective screening for compliance with specific application requirements, including the application due date and format requirements such as page limitations. These requirements are included in every RFA.

Additionally, each application is screened for the following to determine if an application should be further reviewed: eligibility as described in the published RFA; and, compliance with other programmatic requirements published in the RFA.

Review Process

Development of a Reviewer Matrix

Review staff discuss the announcement to be reviewed with the responsible SAMHSA program personnel regarding the areas of expertise and background needed for a competent review of applications submitted in response to a particular RFA. SAMHSA strongly believes that review groups should represent geographic, gender, and ethnic diversity and makes every attempt to develop peer review groups based on such diversity.

Conflicts of Interest

All potential reviewer are questioned about actual or perceived conflict of interest (COI) before they are assigned to a review committee. COI is wide ranging and can include:

- A potential reviewer's (or the relative of a potential reviewer's) present or past employment or any other fiduciary relationship with the applicant agency and/or subcontractors.
- Any other relationship a potential reviewer may have with the applicant agency and or subcontractor and/or the agency's key staff/consultants that could form the basis of a perception of COI e.g., relative, student, teacher, friend, rival, past or present co-worker, etc.

Application Review

- Reviewers assess applications only in accordance with the published review criteria. Reviewers are instructed to consider only what is written in the application. That is, never to make assumptions, "read between the lines," or use personal knowledge about a particular applicant. Items may be credited only if they are addressed in the required section, or if there is a specific reference to exactly where it will be found elsewhere in the application.
- Every application must include a proposed budget, which is reviewed to ensure that all expenditures are adequately justified. Individual salaries are not considered. Unless stated otherwise in the announcement, the budget is not a merit issue and does not have a

part in determining the score of an application.

- Participant Protection/Human Subjects are reviewed for each application in accordance with SAMHSA guidelines. The Reviewers may find the applicant's response acceptable, i.e., consistent with guidelines, or the Reviewers may note a comment or concern. A "comment" is feedback from the Reviewers to program staff that there is a problem(s) with the applicant's response to one or more of the published Participant Protection elements, but that the problem is not sufficiently serious to require special terms and conditions that would prevent full funding and working with clients until the comment is addressed. It is expected however that the comment receives due consideration and necessary action. A "concern" may not prohibit making an award but requires that a special term(s) and condition(s) be added to the Notice of Grant Award that would prevent full funding and working with clients until the concern is resolved.

Scoring

Applications are scored on a scale of 0-100. An individual reviewer's total score is the sum of the scores awarded to each section of the review criteria. The priority score is the mean of the committee members' total scores.

Types of SAMHSA Review

There are three review processes in use: Field Review, Telephone Review, and On-site Review.

Field Review is the method most often used. Applications are assigned to committees of three or more reviewers together with the announcement, instructions and a structured review format that is developed directly from the RFA Review Criteria. The structured format ensures that all required items are assessed. The structured review format requires the reviewer to enter an objective observation of the presence or absence of individual review criteria items and an assessment of the quality of the applicant's response to each of these items. The total score for each application is determined by adding the scores for each section of the application. SAMHSA's Review Administrator (RA) may follow-up by telephone if an individual Reviewer's score(s) are atypically high or low.

Telephone Review: The procedure is the same as that of a Field Review except that the reviewers are brought together in a conference call to discuss their assigned applications.

On-site Review: An On-Site Review Meeting will typically consist of 12-15 Reviewers plus a chairperson. The reviewers use the structured format as a tool for the meeting. The Reviewers are divided into groups of three, called triads. In cases when consensus on a point cannot be reached, the majority view is written into the critique. After the critique development phase, the Review Committee meets as a whole to discuss the applications and any dissenter(s) will bring up his/her view at the full committee meeting. Each committee member individually scores the

presented application after the discussion is complete. Scores are computed in the same way as field and telephone reviews.

The Summary Statement

The summary statement for Field Reviews is developed from the structured review format. For Telephone Reviews, the summary statement is developed from the structured review format as modified by reviewer discussion. For On- Site Review Meetings, the summary statement is the consensus document developed by all reviewers and objectively edited by the RA.

- In addition to the application’s abstract, the Summary Statement includes the reviewers’ assessments of the justification of the budget, overall cultural competency, and participant protection response.
- Summary Statements are distributed to program officers, the National Advisory Council of the funding Center when the award published in the RFA meets a defined threshold (usually \$150,000 or more), and to the person designated by the applicant organization as the Business Official.
- The Summary Statement is a tool for program staff in working with a grantee towards improving the program. The PO may require the grantee to respond in writing to weaknesses.
- The Summary Statement can similarly be useful to the grantee in identifying those areas where improvements may be made toward ensuring a successful program.

Grant Reviewer Opportunities

To learn about SAMHSA requirements for its grant reviewers and for an online application form to be considered as a SAMHSA grant reviewer, visit the SAMHSA internet homepage <http://www.SAMHSA.gov>. Click “Grants” in the top bar and then “Grant Reviewer Opportunities” in the right hand column.