

FIELD GUIDE · VERSION 2.1

The Verified Grant Pipeline

Find real grants. Score the fit. Write applications that win.

A field guide for nonprofits who cannot afford wasted weeks

From the Nonprofit Grant Finder methodology
Intake · Research · Prioritize · Draft

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The Promise

Why this playbook exists

Turn a nonprofit profile into a verified, prioritized pipeline of fundable grant opportunities - and draft the applications that win them.

The hard constraint

Funders, deadlines, and eligibility rules change constantly. A fabricated grant or a stale deadline can waste weeks of scarce staff time. This playbook optimizes for trustworthy, verifiable output over volume. When in doubt, under-claim and cite.

Most grant lists fail quietly: they look complete, sound plausible, and send a development director chasing a program that never opened, already closed, or was never real. The failure mode is not returning too few grants. It is returning one bad grant that destroys trust in the whole list.

- Quality over volume: eight real, verified matches beat twenty padded guesses.
- Every prospect needs a working link to the funder's own page or official RFP.
- Search broadly, then verify narrowly against the primary source.
- Fit and winnability are different axes - score both, then decide where to spend time.

CHAPTER 02

Four Phases

The operating system

Move through these phases in order, but stay pragmatic. If you already have a profile or a named funder, skip ahead - do not re-interrogate yourself.

01 Intake

Build the organizational profile - the funder-matching key. Lead every deliverable with a short profile recap the team can correct.

02 Research

Search real sources across federal, state/local, private, community, and corporate categories. Capture the citation the moment you find each grant.

03 Prioritize

Score, tier, and present a verified prospect list so the team knows what to do - not merely what exists.

04 Draft & track

Write Letters of Intent and full narratives on request, then export a pipeline tracker that survives the next board meeting.

Intake

The matching key

Every downstream match depends on the profile. Gather it efficiently, with minimal friction. If a website URL is available, fetch it first and pre-fill mission, programs, location, budget hints, leadership, and 501(c)(3) status before asking a human anything.

Non-negotiable minimum before you search

- Mission area
- Geographic focus
- Population served
- Specific funding need
- Target award size

Everything else sharpens matching but is not blocking: EIN, funding mix, staff size, prior awards, elevator pitch, and outcomes language.

Web pre-fill sources

- About / Mission - statement, history, founding year, values
- Programs - active services, population, geography
- Financials / 990 / annual report - budget size and major funders
- Team / Board - capacity and governance signals
- Footer - EIN, 501(c)(3) statement, physical address

Hard gate: profile recap

Never output a grant list without a compact profile block above it. A five-line recap the user can approve beats a perfect profile extracted across twenty questions.

PROFILE

```
Org: [name] ([city, state]) | [founding year] | 501(c)(3): [yes/no]
Mission: [one line]
Serves: [population], ~[N]/year
Budget: ~$[amount] | Funding mix: [brief]
Need: [specific need] | Target: $[amount] | Type: [grant type]
Timeline: [start]-[end]
Priority outcomes: [1-3 measurable results]
Geography constraint: [local/state/national]
```

Research

Breadth, then proof

A nonprofit's best odds often sit with a regional or niche funder that a single keyword search never surfaces. Cover funder types, not just keywords. Names below are starting points - always land on the funder's own page and verify before listing.

Cover these categories

- Federal - Grants.gov, NEA/NEH/IMLS, Education, HHS, AmeriCorps, USDA Rural
- State & local - arts boards, humanities councils, city/county programs
- Private foundations - national (often invite-only) and regional
- Community foundations - usually better odds for smaller orgs
- Corporate giving - local employers and community grant portals
- Aggregators - use to discover, then confirm on the funder's page

Query patterns that actually work

- grants for [mission area] nonprofits in [state] [current year]
- [cause area] foundation grants [state or metro]
- [city] community foundation grants [mission area]
- federal grants [program type] nonprofits [current year] grants.gov
- corporate giving [major local employer] community grants application
- [specific funder] grant guidelines eligibility deadline

Capture the citation immediately

Every prospect must carry a working link to the funder's own grant page or official RFP. No link -> no listing. A real URL wrapped around an invented program name or deadline is the most damaging failure mode because it looks trustworthy.

Federal grants are competitive, paperwork-heavy, and slow. Great for established organizations; usually not the first stop for a young or small nonprofit. Steer newer teams toward community foundations, state/local government, and regional funders where odds are genuinely better.

Score & Tier

Decision-ready, not just listed

Scoring is not false precision. It is a consistent, explainable way to put the best-fit, most-winnable grants at the top so scarce staff time goes somewhere useful.

Weighted model (0-100)

Dimension	Weight	A 5 looks like
Mission fit	30	Funds this cause + population + geography
Eligibility	25	Org meets every hard requirement
Award-size match	15	Typical award ~ target ask
Deadline feasibility	15	Enough runway for a strong app
Winnability	15	Fits regional/niche pattern, not invite-only lottery

total = sum (dimension_score / 5 x weight). Show Fit, not the raw number, in the table: Strong 75-100 | Moderate 50-74 | Stretch below 50.

Hard overrides

- Ineligible = off the list (or noted separately with the reason).
- Unverified deadline/status = Tier 3 at most, clearly flagged - never Tier 1.

Action tiers

01 Tier 1 - Apply now

Strong fit + deadline reachable with a quality application. This is where energy goes this cycle.

02 Tier 2 - Build the relationship

Strong fit, but the deadline is distant or the funder prefers a prior touch: call the program officer, attend an info session.

03 Tier 3 - Monitor

Moderate fit, or strong fit with an unconfirmed detail. Revisit next cycle or once verified.

Close with judgment

After the tables, write a short honest assessment: where the strongest odds are, what is a genuine long shot, the single first action this week, and any category gaps. The value is judgment about scarce time.

Write to Win

Craft principles

Boilerplate is obvious to reviewers and it costs the organization the grant. Start from the templates in this book, then tailor every section to the specific funder.

01 Lead with the community's need

Funders fund impact on a problem, not organizational survival. "1 in 4 youth in our county lack access to..." beats "Our program needs funding to continue."

02 Mirror the funder's language

Pull priority words from their guidelines and use them honestly. If they say "youth development," do not say "kids' programming."

03 Ground every claim in evidence

Census data, local statistics, and the organization's own outcomes. Specific numbers build credibility; adjectives do not.

04 Show outcomes, not activities

Not "we will hold 30 workshops" but "30 workshops so that 120 youth improve X, measured by Y."

05 Write for a skimming reader

Short paragraphs, strong topic sentences. A tired reviewer at grant #40 should get the gist from the first sentence of each paragraph.

06 One reader, one story

Every section reinforces the same throughline: this need -> this response -> this measurable result -> this org can deliver it.

CHAPTER 07

Letter of Intent

Open the door

A concise pitch - typically 1-2 pages / 500-1,000 words unless the funder specifies otherwise - whose only job is to earn an invitation to submit a full proposal. Keep it tight.

Structure

- Opening - org, specific grant/amount, why this funder
- Organizational background - two to four credibility sentences
- Statement of need - the heart; data-backed
- Project description - what, how, when, who
- Outcomes - measurable results and how you will know
- Budget overview - total cost, ask, other support
- Close - partnership invitation + contact info

Ready-to-adapt template

[Date]

[Program Officer Name], [Title]

[Funder Name]

[Address]

Re: Letter of Intent - [Project/Program Name] | Request: \$[Amount]

Dear [Program Officer Name / Grants Committee],

[Organization Name] respectfully submits this Letter of Intent requesting \$[amount] to support [project/program name]. [One sentence on why this funder specifically - connect to their stated priority.]

About [Organization Name]

Founded in [year], [Organization Name] is a 501(c)(3) that [mission in plain language]. We serve [population] across [geography], reaching approximately [N] people annually through [core programs].

The Need

[Data-backed statement of the community need - cite a local statistic and its source.] [One or two sentences on the human stakes.]

Our Response

[Project/Program Name] will [what you will do] over [timeframe], serving [N] [population] by [core activities]. [One sentence on why this approach works - evidence base or track record.]

Expected Outcomes

We expect [specific measurable outcome], measured by [method].

Budget Overview

The total project cost is \$[total]. We request \$[amount] from [Funder Name]; [note other committed or pending support].

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this project and to submit a full proposal. Please contact [Name] at [email] or [phone].

With appreciation,

[Name]

[Title], [Organization Name]

[Email] | [Phone] | [Website]

Full Narrative

The complete case

Adapt section order and headings to the funder's exact prompts and limits. Delete guidance notes before submitting. Every section should reinforce one throughline: this need -> this response -> this measurable result -> this org can deliver it.

01 Executive summary

One paragraph, written last, standing alone: who, need, project, ask, impact.

02 Organizational background

Track record, relevant outcomes, staff/board strength, partnerships.

03 Statement of need

Local and specific beats national and abstract. Two to three cited data points.

04 Goals and objectives

SMART. Separate the broad goal from concrete, measurable objectives.

05 Project design

Activities, timeline, staffing, and why this approach is evidence-based or proven.

06 Evaluation plan

Metrics, data collection, and what success looks like. Funders increasingly weight this heavily.

07 Sustainability plan

How the work continues after this grant ends - answers the fear of becoming a permanent crutch.

08 Budget narrative

The budget in prose; must reconcile exactly with the table and form.

Executive summary skeleton

[Organization Name] requests \$[amount] from [Funder Name] to [project in one line]. [The need in one sentence, with a number.] Over [timeframe], we will [core activity] serving [N] [population], achieving [headline outcome].

Implementation + evaluation grids

Phase	Timeframe	Key activities	Lead
[Phase 1]	[dates]	[activities]	[role]
[Phase 2]	[dates]	[activities]	[role]

Objective	Metric	Data source / method	Target
[Obj 1]	[metric]	[how measured]	[target]
[Obj 2]	[metric]	[how measured]	[target]

Budget & Checklist

Numbers that match the story

The budget is a proposal in numbers. It must match the narrative exactly.

- Justify every significant line - tie each cost to a project activity.
- Show other support - committed and pending - to demonstrate diversification.
- Get indirect/admin right - use the funder's allowed rate; do not hide or exceed.
- Make totals reconcile across narrative, table, and application form.
- Personnel: roles, FTE/time allocation, and rationale - usually most scrutinized.

Budget Narrative

- Personnel: [roles, FTE/time allocation, rationale]
- Direct program costs: [line items tied to activities]
- Other: [travel, materials, evaluation, etc.]
- Indirect/admin: [at the funder's allowed rate]
- Other support: [committed and pending]

Total project cost: \$[total] | Amount requested: \$[amount]

Pre-submission checklist

- ☐ Every funder question is answered, in their order, within their limits.
- ☐ Funder's priority language appears naturally throughout.
- ☐ Need is data-backed with cited, current sources.
- ☐ Goals are SMART; outcomes match an evaluation method.
- ☐ Budget totals reconcile across narrative, table, and form.
- ☐ Sustainability and evaluation sections are present.
- ☐ No unsupported superlatives; claims trace to evidence.
- ☐ Required attachments noted (990, board list, audited financials, IRS letter).
- ☐ Human review: the organization owns the truth of every claim and number.

Trust Layer

Compliance that protects the work

Anti-fabrication rule

Never invent a grant, funder, deadline, award amount, eligibility rule, or link. If a grant did not come from a real search result you can cite, it does not go on the list. A short, real list is a success. A padded list with one hallucinated entry is a failure.

Verification checklist (funder's own page)

- ☐ The program exists and is currently offered.
- ☐ It is open or has a known upcoming cycle.
- ☐ Deadline is a specific date or explicit rolling/annual cadence.
- ☐ Eligibility allows this org (type, geography, budget, tax status).
- ☐ Award range is realistic (guidelines or 990 giving history).
- ☐ Working link to the grant page or official RFP.

When you cannot fully confirm

- Mark the unverified field explicitly (e.g., Deadline: unverified - confirm on funder site).
- Cap it at Tier 3 and tell the user exactly what to check.
- Never let an unverified detail sit in Tier 1.

Be candid that federal grants and marquee national foundations are competitive and slow, especially for first-time or small applicants. If a Strong-fit grant is nonetheless a long shot, say so in Notes. Fit and winnability are different axes.

Scope boundary: this playbook serves nonprofits and mission-driven organizations seeking grants - not for-profit fundraising, venture capital, personal crowdfunding, or individual scholarships. The funder's official page is always the source of truth.

Put it to work

Use this playbook as an operating system, not a one-time read.

Run intake -> research -> score -> draft for each funding cycle. Keep a living tracker. Prefer a short verified list and a clear first action over a long menu of maybes.

If you sell grant support as a service, this is your packaged methodology: the profile gate, the verification protocol, the scoring tiers, and the writing templates clients can actually use.

Start with the profile. Verify every link. Write one throughline.