



# Grant Proposal Evaluation Process

## Technical Report

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## Grant Proposal Evaluation Process

One of the responsibilities of the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) is to award competitive grant funds to local partners for projects designed to reduce justice system involvement through intervention, education, and prevention strategies. This report documents the process by which grant proposals are evaluated to ensure the awards are based on the strength of the proposals and the excellence of the proposed projects. The goal in the development of the proposal evaluation process is to provide a reliable, valid, and fair system for ranking proposals according to merit. The ultimate objective of the process is to select proposals that most completely satisfy the criteria established by the legislature, the federal government, and the BSCC Board.

The BSCC Board approved multi-step grant proposal evaluation process is described below. These steps are grouped within their respective phase of the grant process. The four phases of the grant process are:

- development of the grant requirements,
- development and dissemination of the Request for Proposals (RFP),
- evaluation of proposals, and
- funding recommendations.

### Development of the Grant Requirements

#### *1. Analysis of the Funding Legislation to Determine Grant Requirements*

The first step is conducted by BSCC staff who analyze the wording of the legislation or federal requirements to identify criteria that must be reflected in the grant program. These criteria may include: a) the grant time table; b) eligibility requirements; c) program content requirements; d) proposal evaluation criteria; e) process and outcome research requirements; f) data gathering mandates (e.g., collection of common outcome data across projects); and g) priority grantee characteristics (e.g., weighting factors that could include size of agency, size of county, jail population, crime statistics, demonstrated need, and collaborative regional proposals).

#### *2. Establishment of an Executive Steering Committee (ESC)*

The BSCC Board appoints an ESC charged with reviewing, developing and defining proposal-evaluation criteria and recommending the final form of the RFP for the BSCC's review and approval. The RFP document is used by applicants as a guide to develop their proposals. To ensure a fair and equitable process, the RFP must clearly describe what applicants must do to compete effectively for the grant funds, including the evaluation system that will be used to evaluate the proposals and make funding recommendations.

The ESC is empowered by the BSCC to review all proposals and recommend a list of proposed projects for funding to the BSCC. The makeup of the committee is designed to bring a wide range of perspectives to the selection process, including state adult and juvenile corrections and probation; local adult and juvenile corrections and probation; corrections research; urban and rural counties; the private sector; individuals with lived experience; and the general public. In the past, the size of the committee has generally ranged from five to sixteen members.

### 3. *Development of the Proposal Requirements*

The ESC meets shortly after the funds have been appropriated to develop the RFP for grant funds. Staff's review of the legislative requirements forms the basis for the discussion. As a result of the topics discussed by the ESC, the following determinations are made:

- The timetable for the dissemination of the RFP and the deadline for return of proposals.
- Eligibility and project requirements.
- Requirements for proposal layout in terms of the maximum number of pages allowed and the display of the budget (i.e., minimum technical requirements).
- Any funding set asides (i.e., specific pots of money earmarked for certain groups) that may be used to encourage geographical or other considerations in the distribution of available funds (e.g., county size by small, medium, or large population; city and county; small scope and large scope projects).
- The formal *Proposal Evaluation System* that will be used to assess each proposals' worth (described in Step 4); and
- Any other issues that need to be discussed and decided before moving ahead with the proposal generation and evaluation process.

### 4. *Development of the Formal Proposal Evaluation System*

A brief description of the five components of the BSCC's adopted *Proposal Evaluation System* is provided below. The components determined by the ESC include the: a) rating factors and their criteria; b) weights assigned to each rating factor, c) preference points, and d) minimum scoring threshold(s).

#### *Components of the Proposal Evaluation System*

- I. Rating Factors and their Criteria
- II. Rating Factor Weights
- III. Five-Point Rating Scale
- IV. Preference Points
- V. Minimum Scoring Threshold(s)

An ESC's first step in developing the *Proposal Evaluation System* is to identify rating factors and their criteria. The term rating factors refers to the general names provided to label sets of information to be supplied in each proposal (e.g., project need, project description). Each rating factor is comprised of a set of criteria specifying the type of information requested (e.g., describe the proposed program's services and interventions). Combined, these criteria define the rating factor. Staff draft a set of rating factors to serve as a starting point for the ESC's discussion. These rating factors generally include a statement of need; a project description including goals and objectives and an implementation plan; an evaluation or data collection component; and a project budget. However, additional rating factors may be included. The ESC reviews and edits the set of draft rating factors. The final set of rating factors developed by the ESC must be: a) appropriate for assessing the full worth of each proposal; b) mutually exclusive so that a characteristic is only measured once; and c) measurable, in the sense that the ESC members can agree on the definition and objective assessment of each rating factor.

An ESC's second step in developing the *Proposal Evaluation System* is to determine rating factor weights. The weights are used to indicate the relative importance of each rating factor in terms of the percent of the total proposal score. The weights are assigned using a percentage system (e.g., 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent) and the weights assigned across all rating factors must sum to 100 percent. For example, the ESC may conclude that one rating factor is twice as important as another rating factor. Therefore, if the ESC assigned a percentage of 10 percent to the first rating factor, 20 percent would be assigned to the second. The use of weights ensures the relative importance of each rating factor is reflected in proposal scores.

The BSCC's standard five-point rating scale is used across all grants and their *Proposal Evaluation Systems* (see *Figure 1 below*). This scale is a component of the Proposal Evaluation System; however, it is not modified or influenced by each ESC. It was developed in conjunction with feedback from prior ESC members regarding the previous 13-point scale and scholarly research regarding the optimal number of response categories to yield better quality data, increase reliability, and the ease of use for raters. The scale is used by the ESC members to evaluate the narrative responses to the rating factors.

An ESC's third step in developing the *Proposal Evaluation System* is to determine whether to define any preference points and how many. For example, the Legislature or the ESC may decide to give preference to applicants based upon the type of jurisdiction, jail population, size of the funding request, amount of matching funds, or crime rate within a jurisdiction. Preference points shall be assigned for objective criteria that doesn't require the expert judgement of the ESC members. That is, applicants

either receive preference point(s) for demonstrating they meet the stated criteria or they do not (yes/no).

An ESC's fourth step to develop the *Proposal Evaluation System* is to decide if proposals should be required to obtain a minimum score, referred to as a minimum score threshold, to be considered for funding. Minimum score thresholds may be defined for individual rating factors (e.g., score a minimum of 50% for the project need rating factor) and/or the total proposal score (e.g., obtain score of at least 60% of the total proposal score possible). Minimum thresholds prevent underperforming or non-competitive proposals from being awarded funds simply because funding remains. They may be beneficial when ESCs believe that the total request for funding from applicants may be less than the total funding available. However, minimum score thresholds may not result in full dispersal of the available funding.

#### *Integration of the Proposal Evaluation System Components*

Table 1, Table 2, and Figure 1 combined provide a high-level overview of how the components of the *Proposal Evaluation System* work in conjunction with each other.

Table 1 provides a general example of how the rating factors (column 1), labeled #1 through #5 for example only, and their assigned weights (column three) influence the Maximum Rating Factor (RF) Score (column four); the Maximum RF Scores are combined to calculate the Total Proposal Score; the point at which preference points, if used, are added to proposal scores; and the application of minimum score thresholds, if used.

Table 1. Example Proposal Evaluation System

Rating Factor (RF)	Rating Scale Point Range	Weight (Percent of Total Score)	Maximum RF Score
Rating Factor #1	1 - 5	30%	60
Rating Factor #2	1 - 5	35%	70
Rating Factor #3	1 - 5	10%	20
Rating Factor #4	1 - 5	20%	40
Rating Factor #5	1 - 5	5%	10
<b>Total Proposal Score:</b>		100%	<b>200</b>
Preference Points (optional):			2
Maximum Possible Proposal Score with Preference Points (optional):			<b>202</b>

PLEASE NOTE (optional): To be considered for funding, the following threshold scores must be met: (1) a minimum of 50% of the Weighted RF Score for Rating Factor #2 AND (2) a minimum of 50% of the Total Proposal Score.

Table 2 provides an example of a project need rating factor. The example demonstrates two aspects of rating factors, including:

- A label, Project Need, is provided to the set of five criteria that define it.
- Instructions are provided to the applicants that their narrative response:
  - should address each of the criteria.
  - will be evaluated using a five-point scale (see Figure 1).

Table 2. Example Project Need Rating Factor

**1. Project Need** (Percent of Total Value: XX%)

Address the rating factor for Project Need in narrative form as defined below. The response will be evaluated with a single rating based on a scale of 1 – 5.

<p><b>Project Need:</b> The applicant articulated a need that is pertinent to the intent of the grant program. The elements that are to comprise the Project Need are listed below. Addressing each element does not itself merit a high rating; rather, although each element is to be addressed, it is the quality of the response to each that is to be evaluated.</p>	
1.1	Description of the need to be addressed.
1.2	Identified target population (e.g., gender, age, offense history, criminogenic factors). Selection of the target population included, when appropriate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• needs of underserved populations (e.g., disparities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status).</li> <li>• relationship of that population to the purpose of the grant.</li> </ul>
1.3	Identified service gaps that contribute to the need.
1.4	Solicited community input in determining need.
1.5	Provided relevant qualitative and/or quantitative data with citations in support of the need.

Figure 1 provides BSCC’s standard five-point rating scale that is used across all grants and their *Proposal Evaluation Systems*. Each scale point is labeled: 1 for Poor, 2 for Fair, 3 for Satisfactory, 4 for Good and 5 for Excellent. Additionally, beneath each point value and its label is an anchor which further defines each scale point. The ESC members will use this standard rating scale to evaluate a proposal’s response to each rating factor.

Figure 1. BSCC’s Standard Five-Point Rating Scale

Poor 1	Fair 2	Satisfactory 3	Good 4	Excellent 5
The response addresses the criteria in a <b>very inadequate</b> way.	The response addresses the criteria in a <b>non-specific or unsatisfactory</b> way.	The response addresses the criteria in an <b>adequate</b> way.	The response addresses the criteria in a <b>substantial</b> way.	The response addresses the criteria in an <b>outstanding</b> way.



## Development and Dissemination of the RFP

### 5. *Development of the Request for Proposals (RFP)*

When the ESC has completed steps three and four, BSCC staff formalize the ESC's decisions, which include the *Proposal Evaluation System*, in a draft RFP to present to the ESC for review and approval. Based upon input from the ESC, staff make the final changes to the RFP.

### 6. *BSCC Approval of the RFP*

Once the RFP is approved by the ESC, BSCC staff present it to the BSCC Board. The BSCC Board reviews the ESC's recommendations and approves the RFP. Shortly thereafter, the RFP is posted to the BSCC's website for solicitation and actively circulated to stakeholders.

### 7. *Dissemination of the RFP and Technical Assistance*

After the RFP is posted to the BSCC website and during the proposal-writing period, BSCC staff are available to answer technical questions from prospective applicants and provide clarity on RFP instructions. If there is a need and time allows, a bidder's conference is held in various locations around the state and online to: (a) clarify the BSCC's expectations regarding the proposals; (b) answer any questions that jurisdictions might have about the process; and (c) provide technical support regarding various aspects of the proposal writing process. When staff receive questions that may reflect general concerns, those questions and the official written response are posted on the grant page of the BSCC website.

Applicants are typically given between two and four months to respond to the RFP and complete their proposals. While this might seem like a long period of time, writing a high-quality proposal is difficult and time consuming, particularly if the funding requires collaborative planning and implementation. First, data must be collected regarding community needs and values. Once the needs are identified, collaborative working relationships between local organizations must be established. Partners in a collaborative venture may not have a history of working together and must spend time becoming familiar with each other's programs and priorities. Support for the program must be elicited from a variety of stakeholders (e.g., Board of Supervisors, Sheriffs, Probation, citizen groups, community-based organizations). Complicated planning must be done to put together projects that are multi-year, innovative, feasible, cost-effective, and have a reasonable chance of demonstrating significantly more effective outcomes than current practices.

## 8. *BSCC Staff Review of Submitted Proposals*

Once BSCC receives the completed proposals, staff assess whether proposals meet minimum technical requirements for competing in the proposal evaluation process. Applicants are informed of any non-compliance with minimum criteria and under certain circumstances may be given the opportunity to respond to non-substantive deficiencies in their proposals. Only proposals that pass this technical review are provided to the ESC for evaluation.

## Evaluation of Proposals

### 9. *ESC Members Complete Rater Training*

At this stage, the role of the ESC members shifts to that of raters. As a rater, their evaluation of the proposals—accomplished by assigning points to each rating factor—will determine the proposals that are recommended to the Board for funding. BSCC staff prepare and facilitate the ESC’s Rater Training. Rater Training is conducted to ensure that all ESC members have the same understanding of the RFP’s rating factors, rating scale and its anchors, preference points (if applicable), and thresholds (if applicable). The presence of each ESC member at the Rater Training is crucial to developing a shared understanding of the proposal evaluation elements.

The rater training is designed to prepare ESC members for their role as a rater, to help ensure they:

- can provide ratings that are impartial and unbiased.
- can differentiate the quality of the proposals by recognizing their strengths and weaknesses.
- have a shared understanding of the rating factors and their criteria.

Research over the past century has shown where raters can go astray in achieving the goals above and has shown that training can improve the reliability of grant proposal scoring. It is a best practice to provide raters with training that is designed to address and overcome the common ways that ratings can go astray.

### 10. *ESC Members Read and Independently Evaluate Proposals*

After the rater training, ESC members are provided with their assigned proposals and materials necessary to evaluate them. BSCC’s preferred practice is for each ESC member to read and evaluate *each* grant proposal received. However, when BSCC staff determine that the number of proposals received exceeds ESC members’ ability to read and evaluate *all* proposals, a multiple-panel process is used. BSCC’s multiple-panel process assigns subsets of ESC members to different panels. Each panel reads and evaluates a smaller but representative sample of proposals (referred to as panel-specific proposals). In addition, a small subset of proposals is common across all panels

for the purpose of evaluating possible panel differences (referred to as overlapping proposals). Further, standardized scores are used to overcome any possible panel differences.

The multiple-panel process is necessary to ensure that the hours of service required by ESC members is manageable while still providing for fair and equitable consideration of each proposal. This multiple-panel process has been used successfully for many recent grants and has solved the workload issues such that ESC members can successfully read and evaluate their assigned representative sample of proposals.

Typically, ESC members will have approximately three weeks to read and evaluate their assigned proposals. ESC members submit their evaluation of their assigned proposals to BSCC staff by the specified date.

#### *11. BSCC Review of Raters' Evaluations*

Upon receiving the ESC members' evaluations of their assigned proposals, BSCC staff:

1. Compile each ESC members' evaluation (points assigned to each rating factor) into software specifically designed for compiling the evaluations across ESC members and calculating each proposal's total proposal score.
2. Ensure data entry and formulas are accurate, prior to calculating total proposal scores.
3. Assess the interrater reliability and agreement of the ratings.
4. Assess for possible panel differences, if applicable.

A technical issue related to the calculation of proposals' scores is the management of a missing rater. If any raters submit ratings for only a subset of the proposals they were assigned to rate, or if they submit only a portion of the ratings required to fully evaluate entire proposals (e.g., do not submit ratings for one or more rating factors), then they are considered missing raters and *all* of the ratings from those raters are excluded from *all* score calculations. Thus, raters must submit a full set of ratings for all of their assigned proposals in order to have their ratings contribute to the evaluation process.

In the event of missing raters, the number of raters remaining drive decisions regarding the evaluation process.

- If two or more raters remain on the ratings panel-whether it is a single-panel or a multiple-panel process-the ratings of missing raters are excluded from *all* score calculations.
- If one rater remains in a single-panel process, then the ESC needs to be reformed to recruit additional members. Alternatively, a Scoring Committee could be formed.

- If one rater remains in a multiple-panel process, the panel is disbanded. The panel-specific proposals previously assigned to this now disbanded panel are divided among the remaining panels. Depending on when the raters are lost, the remaining rater may or may not have already evaluated the proposals assigned to this disbanded panel. If the remaining rater has evaluated the proposals, the rater is made a member of all panels for the calculation of proposal scores and is not assigned additional proposals to evaluate. If the remaining rater has not evaluated the proposals, the rater is simply assigned to one of the existing panels.

## *12. Development of the Rank Order of Proposals and Funding Recommendation*

After confirming the accuracy of the data entry and proposal score calculations, as well as including preference points, if applicable, BSCC staff generates the table(s) that provides the rank order of the proposals (in descending order). If the ESC had originally agreed on set asides, a table of rank order is developed for each set aside. For example, if there were funds set aside for small, medium, and large counties, three tables are developed, one for each set aside category. Each table identifies the total amount of funds available and then for each proposal listed in descending rank order, lists the applicant, amount of funding requested, the amount to be awarded if funded, the remaining amount of funds, and the cumulative amount of funding requested. The rank list(s) is developed as prescribed in the RFP (e.g., by funding categories or set asides, include any minimum thresholds or other special criteria) and is the ESC's funding recommendation to the Board.

Table 3 provides a sample rank order list of proposals. In the sample provided, \$7 million is available in grant funds. Based on the rank order of proposals and the amount requested by each, funding would be exhausted with the proposal in the 6<sup>th</sup> ranked position, Applicant C. As such, Applicant C could be recommended to receive partial funding and the five proposals preceding it could be recommended to receive full funding. Funding would not be available to recommend for proposals in rank order seven (7) through 13 for funding.

Table 3. Sample Rank Order List of Proposals

XYZ Grant Available Funds: \$7,000,000						
Rank	Applicant	Funds Requested	If Funded		Remaining	Cumulative
1	Applicant D	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000		\$6,000,000	\$1,000,000
2	Applicant A	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000		\$5,000,000	\$2,000,000
3	Applicant H	\$734,217	\$734,217		\$4,265,783	\$2,734,217
4	Applicant J	\$2,997,953	\$2,997,953		\$1,267,830	\$5,732,170
5	Applicant B	\$1,000,000	\$1,000,000		\$267,830	\$6,732,170
6	Applicant C	\$1,000,000	\$267,830		-\$732,170	\$7,732,170
7	Applicant E	\$1,000,000			-\$1,732,170	\$8,732,170
8	Applicant G	\$1,000,000			-\$2,732,170	\$9,732,170
9	Applicant F	\$999,696			-\$3,731,866	\$10,731,866
10	Applicant L	\$1,000,000			-\$4,731,866	\$11,731,866
11	Applicant M	\$1,000,000			-\$5,731,866	\$12,731,866
12	Applicant I	\$1,000,000			-\$6,731,866	\$13,731,866
13	Applicant K	\$999,780			-\$7,731,646	\$14,731,646

When minimum scoring thresholds are used, the table is modified to reflect the impact these may have on funding recommendations.

### Funding Recommendations

#### 13. ESC Review of Funding Recommendation and Feedback to BSCC Staff

Once the rankings are finalized, BSCC staff email the ESC members the table(s) of ranked proposals, the funding recommendation(s) that will be presented to the Board, and a link to an online survey. The survey will be designed to elicit feedback from the ESC members regarding the ESC process, the RFP, and the process for evaluating proposals that can be used to improve or refine future grantmaking efforts.

At the discretion of each ESC, during the rater training session the members may decide upon an additional method to wrap-up the ESC process. While it is up to the ESC to determine the method, one or both of the following may be beneficial:

- Individual interviews in a video or phone conference format with BSCC staff.
- A full ESC meeting either in-person or by videoconference.

If an additional method is selected, regardless of the method selected, the purpose will be for the ESC members to: a) review the ranked proposals, the requested funds and available funds, and the final grant award recommendations to be made to the BSCC

Board; b) reflect on the body of work they completed together as an ESC and discuss lessons learned; and c) provide feedback to staff regarding the ESC process, the RFP, and the process for evaluating proposals. These additional meetings may occur either before or after the presentation of the funding recommendations to the Board (see Step 14) and ESC members are not required to attend.

#### *14. Board Approval of Funding Recommendations*

At the first BSCC Board meeting following the Development of the Rank Order of Proposals and Funding Recommendation (step 12), staff present the ESC's funding recommendation to the Board. It is the responsibility of the BSCC Board to review the evaluation process for fairness and completeness and to make the final funding decisions.

#### *15. Applicant Feedback*

Within a few days of receiving the Board's approval of the funding recommendations, BSCC staff informs the applicants of the results of the competitive process. When requested by an applicant, feedback is provided in the form of a table that displays the applicant's total proposal score, the scores for each rating factor, and their rank relative to those of applicants that were funded.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Developing a process for determining which applicants will receive funds for important programs is a tremendous responsibility. Applicants competing for grant funds not only have critical needs, but they also invest considerable effort and resources in planning for and constructing their proposals. It is essential that the competition for the grant funds be contested on an even playing field, according to clear, standardized and fair rules. It is essential that the individuals granted the responsibility of making funding recommendations make fully informed assessments based upon relevant criteria within a highly structured process.

We hope that the reader of this document concurs that the *BSCC Grant Proposal Evaluation Process* satisfies the above criteria and helps to ensure that the most meritorious grant proposals receive grant funds. Any feedback regarding *BSCC's Grant Proposal Evaluation Process* is appreciated.