



Grant Writing **HANDBOOK**

FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

PREPARED BY:



SR PARTNERS

designing community and economic development solutions

Kahua Grants Initiative

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KAHUA GRANTS INITIATIVE

Grants Handbook for Nonprofit Organizations

This handbook provides practical guidance, tools, checklists, and worksheets to support every stage of the grant development process—from planning and identifying funding opportunities to evaluating, reviewing, and making informed decisions about whether to pursue a grant.



Maui United Way
at AAA Corporate Giving Event

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

- Start with your community need, mission alignment, and submission idea before looking for grant money.
- Use the checkboxes to keep your team moving and avoid missing key milestones and decisions.
- Complete the worksheets before committing time to a full grant application.
- Say no to opportunities that do not fit. That is not failure; that is good stewardship.

*Prepared by **Melissa Unemori Hampe**, SR Partners LLC, and informed by a wide range of resources, insights from experienced grant professionals, and extensive expertise in developing and submitting successful grant proposals.*

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1. A BASIC RULE: START WITH THE IDEA, NOT THE MONEY

A strong grant process starts with a real community need and a clear idea. Do not build a project only because a grant is open. That is how organizations receive grant awards they are unable to implement effectively or expend valuable staff time on applications that were never well aligned with their goals and capacity.

PLAIN-LANGUAGE RULE

- Know the need.
- Choose the project.
- Check whether the grant fits.
- Decide whether to apply.

IDEA-FIRST CHECKLIST

- ☐ The idea meets a clear community need.
- ☐ The idea matches our mission and current priorities.
- ☐ The target populations who will benefit are clearly identified.
- ☐ The idea can be explained in a short summary.
- ☐ The idea has staff or partner support.
- ☐ The idea has a rough budget or cost estimate.
- ☐ The idea is realistic for our organization to carry out if funded.

Submission Idea Name:

Lead Person:

2. BUILD YOUR ANNUAL GRANT PLAN

At least once each year, your organization should take a strategic pause to identify the goals and priorities that grant funding will support. Establishing clear funding priorities helps keep your team focused, aligns grant opportunities with organizational objectives, and prevents staff from spending valuable time on funding opportunities that are not the right fit.

ANNUAL PLANNING CHECKLIST

- ☐ List the organization's broad goals for the year.
- ☐ Choose the program or service areas that are most important or most in need of funding.
- ☐ Evaluate project readiness and identify those requiring further refinement before seeking funding.
- ☐ Set rough targets for federal, state, local, and private funding.
- ☐ Decide how many applications you can realistically submit.
- ☐ Review the year: what worked, what did not, and what to improve.
- ☐ Update the plan near the end of the year to start the next year clean.



Maui United Way Staff Training

ACTUAL GRANT PLAN DELIVERABLES

- ☐ One-page list of yearly goals and priority areas.
- ☐ Project priority list: ready now, needs more work, future idea.
- ☐ Simple funding targets by source: federal, state, local, private/foundation.
- ☐ Lookback/lookahead notes for the next year.

3. CHOOSE AND SHAPE PRIORITY SUBMISSION IDEAS

Before searching for grants, sort your ideas and/or projects. Some will be ready now. Some will need partners, matching funds, better cost estimates, community support, or more design work. Put each in the right lane.

LANE	USE THIS LANE WHEN...	NEXT ACTION
Ready Now	The idea is clear, needed, and realistic.	Prepare a summary and begin grant searches.
Needs Work	The idea is good, but pieces are missing.	Build missing pieces before applying.
Future Idea	The idea matters, but it is not ready this year.	Keep it on the list and revisit later.

SORTING CHECKLIST

- ☐ We have identified the need the idea will address.
- ☐ We know where the work will happen or who the work will benefit (target population).
- ☐ We know the main activities the idea will pay for.
- ☐ We know what success would look like.
- ☐ We know what support is still missing.
- ☐ We have classified the idea as ready now, needs work, or future idea.

4. WRITE A SHORT IDEA OR PROJECT SUMMARY BEFORE SEARCHING

A short idea or project summary helps your team search for the right grants and answer early funder questions. Make it clear, not fancy.

IDEA OR PROJECT SUMMARY WORKSHEET

Idea or Project Name:

Community Need:

Who Will Benefit:

Where the Work Will Happen:

Main Activities:

Expected Results:

Estimated Total Cost:

4. WRITE A SHORT IDEA OR PROJECT SUMMARY BEFORE SEARCHING

Possible Partners:

Support Still Needed:

SUMMARY DELIVERABLES

- ☐ Short summary completed.
- ☐ Rough budget or cost estimate completed.
- ☐ Partners and roles listed, if partners are needed.
- ☐ Missing pieces listed for follow-up.



Maui United Way Grantee
Common Ground Collective



Maui United Way Strategic
Planning Session



Kahua Grants Cohort Member:
Boys & Girls Club

5. BUILD THE PROJECT PLAN BEFORE SEARCHING

A logic model is a simple map of how your project is supposed to work. It helps your team explain the idea in a clear order: what you have, what you will do, what you will produce, and what will change. Use it before writing so the application does not become a pile of good intentions with a deadline attached.

GRANT IDEA OR PROJECT FORMULA

- Opportunity + idea/project + effort = resources.
- The work still has to make sense before the opportunity appears.
- Use the logic model to test whether the project idea is strong enough to submit.

LOGIC MODEL WORKSHEET

PART	PLAIN-LANGUAGE QUESTION	WRITE YOUR ANSWER
Inputs	What resources will go into the project? Examples: staff, funding, partners, volunteers, supplies, space, permits, community support.	
Activities	What will your organization do with those resources?	
Outputs	What will you produce or deliver? Examples: people served, sessions held, items distributed, plans completed, facilities improved.	

5. BUILD THE PROJECT PLAN BEFORE SEARCHING

PART	PLAIN-LANGUAGE QUESTION	WRITE YOUR ANSWER
Outcomes	What will change for people, families, neighborhoods, or organizations because of the project?	
Assumptions & Outside Factors	What are you counting on, and what could affect success? Examples: partner follow-through, permits, weather, staffing, transportation, community trust.	

LOGIC MODEL DEVELOPMENT STEPS

- ☐ Write the community need in one or two plain sentences.
- ☐ List the resources you already have and those the grant would fund.
- ☐ List main activities in the order they will happen.
- ☐ Identify the direct deliverables people can measure or observe.
- ☐ Identify the changes you expect after the work is done.
- ☐ List assumptions and outside factors that could affect the work.
- ☐ Check that each activity leads to an output, and each output supports an outcome.
- ☐ Remove activities that do not clearly help create the desired change.

5. BUILD THE PROJECT PLAN BEFORE SEARCHING

LOGIC MODEL EXAMPLE

Example: converting a community center into a resilience hub.

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES
Staff, funding, community support, materials, permits.	Seek community input; design the hub; install solar, battery storage, supplies; tell the community about the hub.	Households are polled and informed; design is completed; conversion is completed.	A more resilient community; a more informed and empowered neighborhood; a model that can be repeated.

LOGIC MODEL DELIVERABLES

- ❑ Completed logic model worksheet.
- ❑ List of assumptions and outside factors.
- ❑ One-sentence explanation of how activities lead to results.
- ❑ Project summary updated so it matches the logic model.



Nohona Health lei-making workshop

6. MAKE GOALS AND DELIVERABLES SMART

Use SMART goals to make grant deliverables solid. A reviewer should be able to tell exactly what you will do, how much you will do, whether it is realistic, why it matters, and when it will happen.

SMART COMPONENT	PLAIN-LANGUAGE TEST
Specific	Does it name the exact result or deliverable?
Measurable	Can the team tell when it is complete?
Achievable	Can your organization realistically do it with the time, staff, and money available?
Relevant	Does it help solve the need and support the long-term goal?
Time-bound	Does it include dates, a time period, or milestones?

SMART GOAL CHECKLIST

- ☐ The goal identifies who or what will be served.
- ☐ The goal includes a number, percent, amount, or completion point.
- ☐ The goal is realistic for our team and partners.
- ☐ The goal matters to the community need we described.
- ☐ The goal has a clear end date or milestone.
- ☐ The goal matches the logic model outcomes.

6. MAKE GOALS AND DELIVERABLES SMART

SMART GOAL WORKSHEET

Draft Goal:

What Makes It Specific:

How We Will Measure It:

Why It Is Achievable:

Why It Is Relevant:

Deadline or Milestone:

Revised SMART Goal:

SMART GOAL DELIVERABLES

- ☐ At least one SMART goal for the project.
- ☐ Measurable deliverables that match the budget and work plan.
- ☐ Timeline or milestones for each major deliverable.

7. TURN THE PROJECT INTO KEYWORDS

Good search words come from the project itself. Pull words from goals, activities, people served, place, costs, and results. Use those words when searching grant databases and funder websites.

QUESTION	WRITE POSSIBLE SEARCH WORDS HERE
What are the project goals?	
What activities will the project carry out?	
Who will benefit?	
Where will the project happen?	
How will the funding be spent?	
What results will the project achieve?	
What type of funder may care about this work?	

SEARCH WORD DELIVERABLE

- ☐ Keyword list for grant searches completed and saved with the project file.

8. SEARCH FOR GRANT OPPORTUNITIES

Use your search words in free grant resources first. Save what you find in a tracker (e.g., a simple spreadsheet), even when the opportunity is only a maybe. A grant not a fit today may be useful later.

SUGGESTED PLACES TO SEARCH

- ☐ Grants.gov.
- ☐ Federal, state, and local government websites.
- ☐ Hawaii Alliance of Nonprofit Organizations grant listings.
- ☐ Hawaii Community Foundation.
- ☐ Foundation and private funder announcements that fit the project.
- ☐ Paid services like Instrumentl.

SEARCH PROCESS CHECKLIST

- ☐ Use the project keyword list.
- ☐ Search at least two free sources.
- ☐ Save the opportunity name, funder, link, deadline, and possible award amount.
- ☐ Note whether the grant looks like a strong fit, possible fit, or poor fit.
- ☐ Add promising opportunities to the grants tracker.

SEARCH DELIVERABLES

- ☐ Completed keyword list.
- ☐ Updated grants tracker.
- ☐ Saved copies or links for relevant funding announcements.

9. DO A QUICK FIRST SCREEN: IGNORE, MONITOR, OR PURSUE

The initial screening should take no more than 15 minutes. Focus only on the most critical eligibility and fit criteria before investing significant time in the application. Many funding opportunities will be screened out—and that is an expected and healthy part of the process.

FIRST SCREEN CHECKLIST

- ☐ **Eligibility:** Our organization meets the eligibility requirements.
- ☐ **Idea alignment:** The grant pays for work already on our priority list.
- ☐ **Award size:** The possible award is worth the effort required.
- ☐ **Deadline:** There is enough time to prepare a strong application.
- ☐ **Capacity:** We can manage the work if we are awarded.

FIRST SCREEN RESULT	WHAT TO DO
Strong match	Move to a full review, reading the funding opportunity cover to cover.
Possible match	Gather more information or monitor. Move to full review only if it becomes likely.
Poor or no match	Stop. Save a short note with your reasoning.
Match for the future	Stop, for now. Set a date for when you will revisit the opportunity.

Grant Opportunity Name:

First Screen Decision:

Reason:

10. COMPLETE A FULL REVIEW BEFORE DECIDING TO APPLY

For strong or possible matches, slow down and read the funding announcement carefully. The goal is to decide whether applying is a smart use of time.

FULL REVIEW CHECKLIST

- ☐ The deadline leaves enough time for a strong application.
- ☐ The grant's purpose matches our goals.
- ☐ The award would support our mission and yearly priorities.
- ☐ The people and place served by the grant match our idea.
- ☐ The grant allows the activities we want to carry out.
- ☐ The grant allows the costs we need to pay for.
- ☐ The match requirement, if any, is realistic.
- ☐ The reporting and management requirements are doable.
- ☐ The team agrees the opportunity is worth pursuing.

ALLOWED COST CHECK

Review the budget guidelines carefully before developing your project budget. Grant programs often specify which expenses are eligible, prohibit certain costs, and may limit funding for specific budget categories, such as administrative or indirect costs.

- ☐ Staff costs, including fringe benefits.
- ☐ Partner or subrecipient costs.
- ☐ Participant support costs, if included.
- ☐ Food, beverages, or event costs.
- ☐ Equipment, supplies, or capital expenses.
- ☐ Overhead, indirect, or administrative costs.
- ☐ Endowments or loan funds.

11. CHECK PROJECT READINESS

A project does not need to be perfect to apply, but it must be ready enough to start after an award. Projects with low readiness rarely succeed in securing major grants.

PROGRAM GRANT READINESS CHECKLIST

- ☐ Staff support identified.
- ☐ Program design is clear.
- ☐ Partners are secured, if needed.
- ☐ Costs are estimated.
- ☐ Match is identified, if required.
- ☐ Community support is secured or being gathered.
- ☐ The organization can manage reporting and grant records.

CAPITAL OR FACILITY GRANT READINESS CHECKLIST

- ☐ Staff or contractor support is secured.
- ☐ Project design is complete enough for the application.
- ☐ Technical reports or planning documents are complete, if needed.
- ☐ Site control is clear, if needed.
- ☐ Environmental review is complete or in progress, if needed.
- ☐ Costs are estimated.
- ☐ Community support is secured.
- ☐ Partners are secured, if needed.



12. MAKE THE FINAL DECISION

Document your decision and the rationale behind it. Whenever possible, allow at least 45 days before the application deadline to develop a competitive proposal. While shorter timelines may be manageable for less complex opportunities, relying on last-minute applications is not a sustainable grant strategy.

FINAL DECISION CHECKLIST

- ☐ We completed the first screen.
- ☐ We completed the full review.
- ☐ We checked readiness.
- ☐ We checked allowable and unallowable expenses.
- ☐ We confirmed who will lead the application.
- ☐ We confirmed whether partners are needed.
- ☐ We recorded the final decision in our grants tracker.

DECISION	MEANING
Pursue	Apply for the grant. Start the work plan.
Monitor	Do not apply now. Watch for a future round.
Decline	Do not apply. Record your reasoning.

Final Decision:

Reason:

Decision Made By:

Date:

13. CRAFT A CLEAR AND COMPELLING GRANT STORY

Grant narrative is not decorative language. It is a clear and direct explanation of why the work matters, who it will serve, what the organization will do, and the outcomes the funding will help achieve. Write with authenticity and purpose, while keeping the content focused, accessible, and useful for reviewers.

STORY RULE

- Begin with the people and the community need.
- Clearly connect the need, the organization's actions, and the expected change and impact.
- Use plain, accessible language. Reviewers should not need to interpret or decode terminology.

GRANT STORY DEVELOPMENT STEPS

- Identify the community, group, or people the project will serve.
- Describe the challenge in concrete terms.
- Explain why this problem matters now.
- Describe what your organization will do about it.
- Use the logic model to connect activities to deliverables and results.
- Include data when you have them, but do not bury the human reason for the work.
- Describe your organization's and partners' readiness to carry out the work, including relevant experience, capacity, and demonstrated ability to implement the proposed activities.
- Conclude by clearly describing the positive change and impact the grant will help make possible.

13. CRAFT A CLEAR AND COMPELLING GRANT STORY

STORY WORKSHEET

Who Will Benefit:

What Challenge(s) Do They Face:

Why It Matters Now:

What We Will Do:

What Will Be Delivered:

What Will Change:

Why Our Organization is the Best Fit to Carry Out This Work:

What the Funding Will Make Possible:

13. CRAFT A CLEAR AND COMPELLING GRANT STORY

COMPELLING WRITING CHECKLIST

- The first paragraph quickly explains the need and proposed solution.
- The story uses plain language and avoids acronyms when possible.
- The application connects the budget to real work and real people.
- The writing is specific: numbers, dates, places, and deliverables are included where helpful.
- The story respects the people served.
- The tone is confident, honest, and community-centered.
- Each section answers the reviewer's basic questions: "So what?" "Why this approach?" "Why you?"
- A reviewer can read it once and explain the purpose and idea clearly.

GRANT STORY DELIVERABLES

- One-paragraph project story.
- Need statement written in plain language.
- Brief explanation of the positive change the project will create.
- Application draft reviewed for clarity and emotional pull, where appropriate.



MUW Grantee Ho'akā Mana
End-of-Year Ceremony



Site Visit With
Nonprofit Partner Ka'ehu

14. DEVELOP YOUR BUDGET

A sound budget aligned with all parts of the application can be key to securing a grant award. Start budget development at the beginning of the application process as reviewers appreciate well-crafted budgets clearly linked to proposed personnel, activities, events, materials, and other parts of the submission.

BEST PRACTICES FOR DESIGNING GRANT BUDGETS

- Check for required or suggested templates provided by the funder.
- Identify all costs early.
- Break costs into direct costs (project-specific including staff time, materials, travel, etc.), indirect costs (overhead such as rent, utilities, administrative support, etc. as allowed), and leveraged funds (cash or in-kind contributions, subsidies, internal funds, etc.).
- Justify every line item in a budget narrative that shows you have thought through each expense.
- Double check the funder's rules on allowable / not allowable costs.
- Build in a buffer or contingency in case needed and allowed.
- Give yourself maximum flexibility by using fewer line items with larger dollar amounts.
- If allowed by the grant, include a fair share of overhead or indirect expenses; present such expenses with descriptive information making it clear that these are necessary, important, and beneficial.
- Ensure your grant budget and accounting systems are set up properly in the event that an audit will be needed.

15. GATHER APPLICATION ATTACHMENTS

Each grant includes different requirements for the attachments that need to be submitted with the written narrative and budget. Make a checklist and gather these items as early as you can, so you are not needing to scramble on submission day.

APPLICATIONS MAY REQUIRE:

Financial Information

- ☐ Budget
- ☐ Budget justification
- ☐ Evidence of cost share or match
- ☐ Audited financial statements - income statements, balance sheets, etc.

Staff Information

- ☐ Organizational chart
- ☐ Resumes or bios

Organizational Information

- ☐ Internal Revenue Service 501(c)(3) determination letter
- ☐ Bylaws
- ☐ Articles of incorporation

Letters

- ☐ Letters of commitment from partners
- ☐ Letters of support
- ☐ A letter from the head of the organization

Build in time to request and obtain letters, as entities may have internal approval and signing processes that can take longer than expected.

16. COMPLETE A FINAL APPLICATION REVIEW, THEN SUBMIT!

Before submitting, ensure the application presents a clear and consistent narrative from beginning to end. The identified need, project design, goals, budget, timeline, partnerships, and funding request should all align to support the same vision and proposed outcomes.

FINAL WRITING REVIEW CHECKLIST

- ☐ The need statement matches the project activities.
- ☐ The logic model matches the work plan.
- ☐ The SMART goals match the deliverables.
- ☐ The budget pays for the activities described in the narrative.
- ☐ The timeline is realistic.
- ☐ The partner roles are clear.
- ☐ The story is strong without overstating what you can accomplish.
- ☐ The application follows the funder's instructions exactly.
- ☐ All required attachments are included.
- ☐ Another reader has checked the application before submission.

FINAL SUBMISSION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Reread the final application required elements and ensure you have all items completed and ready for submission. For example, most grant applications require documents such as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) 501(c)(3) determination letter, total organizational operations budget, Certificate of Vendor Compliance, etc.

16. COMPLETE A FINAL APPLICATION REVIEW, THEN SUBMIT!

FINAL SUBMISSION CHECKLIST (CONT.)

- Double-check the submission instructions. Some may require entering information into a portal. Some may require emailing or even physical delivery.
- Submit and retain proof of submission (confirmation email, screenshot of acknowledgement, etc.).

Kahuna Grants Cohort Member Grow Some Good



MUW staff volunteering at the Maui Fair



Keiki Vendor at Hāna Farmer's Market



Community Members at AAA Bike Giveaway



17. YEAR-END STRATEGIC REVIEW

At the end of each year, evaluate your grant development efforts, identify key lessons learned, and apply those insights to strengthen your process for the year ahead. Continuous improvement is essential to building a successful grant program.

- ☐ List grants submitted.
- ☐ List grants awarded.
- ☐ List grants declined by funders.
- ☐ List opportunities the organization chose not to pursue.
- ☐ Identify what worked well.
- ☐ Identify what slowed the team down.
- ☐ Update project priorities for next year.
- ☐ Update the grant plan for next year.
- ☐ Thank the team and celebrate!

Main Lesson Learned:

Top Grant Priority for Next Year:
