Storming the castle:
Strategies for a successful Homeland Security Grant Application

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INTRODUCTION

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Grant Program and related homeland security grants managed by other federal departments and agencies are critical to state and local public safety agencies across the nation.[1] State and local agencies use grant funds to purchase terrorism prevention and emergency response equipment, pay training and exercise costs, fund planning activities, and for limited personnel costs. After the initial tide of money was pushed out to state and locals in 2003, the grant application and implementation process has become increasingly complex and time consuming for busy emergency planners and managers. This article briefly examines the history of the contemporary Homeland Security Grant Program as managed by DHS and highlights the increased importance of strong grant-writing. The authors[2] then provide practical insight and strategies for those in emergency management who find themselves responsible for overseeing or participating in a homeland security grant application.

HISTORY OF THE HOMELAND SECURITY GRANT PROGRAM

The current Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) began as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. State and local public safety agencies played a critical role in responding to that tragedy. The National Strategy for Homeland Security, published in July 2002, recognized that state and local government would be key partners in the response to terrorism.[3] To ensure state and local governments could fulfill this expanding role, Congress appropriated $2.8 billion for the states and territories through several grant programs.[4] In Fiscal Year (FY) 2003 the HSGP included a two-part State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP), a two-part Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI), the UASI Port Security Grant Program, the UASI Transit Security Grant Program, and the Community Emergency Response Grant. The funds were intended to be used for the acquisition of equipment, to provide training, to conduct exercises, and for planning and administration activities. Some of the programs were sector specific; however, all were to support the implementation of the State Homeland Security Strategies.[5]

At the time the National Strategy for Homeland Security was published, DHS did not yet exist.[6] However, by the time the FY 2003 appropriations and grants were announced, DHS took the reigns of the Office of Domestic Preparedness from the US Department of Justice (DOJ).[7] The FY 2003 SHSGP individual awards were allocated on a base percentage of the entire program funds plus an amount determined by population-share.[8] However, the UASI programs, which were intended to address the unique threat characteristics of large urban areas, allocated awards according to a formula using a combination of current threat estimates, critical assets within the urban area, and population density.[9]

After FY 2003, DHS managed a grant program that saw a decrease in funding but an increase in both scope and the requirements that state and local

governments must fulfill to receive a grant award. The HSGP dwindled from approximately $2.8 billion in FY 2003 to $1.8 billion in FY 2008.[10] In 2003, the application process required state governments to provide a simple program narrative that included budget plans for each of the four allowable funding areas—equipment, training, exercises, and planning. The narratives were to be brief outlines of the intended expenditures and how these expenditures would address needs identified in each State's Homeland Security Strategy.[11]

In subsequent years the allocation and application process became more complex. Grant awards are no longer solely determined by a base plus population-share allocation or a threat assessment by DHS. In FY 2006, DHS expanded the allocation-by-risk-plus-need formula policy used in the UASI programs to the SHSGP as well.[12] Risk was defined by the probability and consequences of a terrorist attack. Every state and urban area was assigned a risk index, which included three variables: (1) The consequences of a specified attack to a particular critical infrastructure asset; (2) the vulnerability of that asset to that particular threat; (3) and, threat to that asset, based on credible intelligence gathered by federal, state and local law enforcement.[13] 'Need' was evaluated primarily through the grant application. The applicant states and urban areas were required to demonstrate that the planned expenditures would reduce risk in the state or region. This was called the "effectiveness score."[14] This policy change caused a great deal of controversy among the recipient states and urban areas and their representatives in Congress.[15]

In FY 2007, much of the HSGP became a competitive grant application process where the effectiveness score was one-third of the overall score for an individual grant application. The remaining two-thirds of the score was based on the risk index assigned by DHS.[16] The effectiveness score was, and is for FY 2008, the principal way in which state and local applicants can influence the outcome of the grant award. Therefore, it has become increasingly important for state and local governments to develop goal oriented and articulate homeland security grant applications.

APPROACHING THE APPLICATION

For many in emergency management, grant-writing is far removed from the important services performed day in and day out. While grant-writing can be difficult, tedious, and burdensome, the evolution of the HSGP has increased the need for well-written, concise, and sensible applications. The following recommendations will help make the process a simpler, more streamlined task in reaching your ultimate goal of influencing your effectiveness score and therefore increasing your allocation. These are the important points to have in mind when planning for and drafting your application that will help you avoid stress, meet deadlines, and improve the bottom line.

PLAN AHEAD

Planning is fundamental in preparing a strong grant application. The grant cycle is always moving forward; as soon as one submission deadline passes, new grants will be in the pipeline awaiting your attention. You should prepare for the release of the grant guidance and investment justification template, each of which are discussed in detail below, by setting priorities within a strategic vision, determining who the final decision-makers are, and by working with stakeholders and subject matter experts (SMEs).

Preparing for the grant guidance and investment justification template is very important to ensure the drafters know exactly what information they will need. Generally, while the guidance does vary from year to year, there are core elements that do not change significantly. Drafters must use that knowledge to prepare for the grant process and to maintain a database of useful information, reports, and other documents that have helped grant applicants in the past.

Set priorities

Identifying your state or jurisdiction's priorities is a necessity in the grant writing process. Without understanding what functions or capabilities are important to your organization, it will be difficult to assess projects or allocate money in a cost efficient and coordinated manner. Setting priorities is a policy decision; therefore, senior level policy makers should be a part of this process.

This is also the right time to consider any federal, state or local priorities and how your agency or jurisdiction's strategy will fit and work with the strategies set forth at a higher level. DHS has listed the Eight National Priorities and Target-Capabilities List. That information can provide a platform for developing your own priorities and should be considered while drafting applications.

Cross-referencing priorities vertically across all levels of government will assist in aligning your projects with the priorities highlighted by DHS. For example, if you identify interoperable communications as a priority this will cross-reference with the Federal Priorities of "[s]trengthen interoperable communications capabilities" and "[s]trengthen information sharing and collaboration capabilities." In addition, this will align with Federal target capabilities. Setting priorities and developing a strategy will also help to direct grant dollars to the areas most in need and ensure that there is continuity to spending and developing capabilities from year-to-year.

Convene a working group

Convening a working group with decision-makers and SMEs is an excellent way to set the policies and direct your agency or jurisdiction's strategy. Decision-makers should include people at the executive level with the authority to decide spending priorities. SMEs will provide support and the necessary knowledge for executives to make educated policy choices.

In many instances, this committee may already exist. Utilize the organizational components at your disposal, and if necessary, develop new institutions to address the priorities you have identified. Using the structures already in place will make the grant-writing process more efficient.

Create a timeline

Part of planning ahead is developing and executing according to a timeline. Deadlines will keep you on track and ensure those individuals or groups you need information from get it to you with enough time to include it in your application. In order to provide strong investments you will require the input from

those in the field and from executive level decision-makers. Deadlines will ensure that they provide information in a timely manner.

Start planning now

The HSGP guidance is released in the late fall. Now is when you should begin creating a timeline for that process. Set deadlines for meetings and decisions that you know must be made. This will ensure sufficient time for drafting and review.

INTERPRETING THE GRANT GUIDANCE

Grant guidance is often dense, technically written, and difficult to read. It is very important to know what to look for and how to find it. First, read the guidance from cover to cover, highlighting important sections as you read. This will assist you in locating the most important information during the writing process.

The "Key Changes" section

The 2008 HSGP guidance provides a section on all "Key Changes" from the previous year.[17] This section should help direct your attention to any new requirements or limitations. Those requirements and limitations may restrict what is funded or, as is the case in the 2008 guidance, direct that a certain percentage of funds are allocated to a specific purpose.

The "Authorized Allowable Costs" section

A second key element of the grant guidance package is the "Authorized Allowable Costs"—included in the 2008 HSGP as Appendix B-1.18 This section establishes exactly what can be paid for using grant dollars and provides a reference during the investment development stage.

The investment justification template

The investment justification template is perhaps the most important section of the guidance. This document will form the foundation for your application. In the template, drafters will find the questions necessary to complete the application. For example the 2008 HSGP template has questions such as:

- I.C Baseline - description: Provide a summary description of the current state of this Investment, its objectives, and any outcomes that will be completed prior to the application of FY08 HSGP funds. Include in this description whether this is a new Investment or an Investment in maintenance/sustainment. Describe the capability gap(s) that this Investment is intended to address. (2,500 Char. Max)[19]

Investment justification drafters should read these questions very carefully as they will indicate precisely the information peer reviewers (who will score your application) will look for. In the above example a good answer must contain a summary, objectives, and outcomes for work done prior to 2008 HSGP funding, a specific description of whether this is "New" or "Maintenance/Sustainment," and a description of the capability gap the investment will address. Without each of those elements, any answer to this section will be incomplete.

The Investment Justification Reference Guide

After reading the investment justification template carefully and determining the necessary elements, drafters should then look to the Investment Justification Reference Guide. This guide for 2008 provided the specific scoring and weighting process for each section (see Part I.V. HSGP 2008 Investment Justification Reference Guide).[20] Included in the reference guide are the specific elements graded by the peer reviewers together with the scoring weight for each section in an easy to follow grid format. Investment drafters should use that information to ensure that all elements of the answer are included, and to help focus efforts in a time-constrained situation, on the most heavily weighted sections.

Investment justification drafters should use the information provided by DHS to their advantage. Utilize the specific language included in the questions and scoring criteria to avoid any miscommunication or misunderstanding.

WRITING TECHNIQUE

The following are a few practical tips to keep in mind when writing an investment justification:

Frame your project in a positive light

Writing grants is all about selling your projects to DHS and the peer reviewers. With that in mind, always frame things in the best possible light.

You are going to have questions on grant applications that have no real answers. You should never leave a section blank. Take a look at what you do have and frame it to fill any gaps in your application. For example, a recent grant required evidence of a complete plan and needs assessment. The grant application requested information on the date of the plan and the results. DHS asked for a plan and needs assessment that may or may not exist in your jurisdiction. In cases like this, provide any relevant plans you do have complete as well as related documents showing the gap in this area. This will ensure that the required elements of the application are met without rushing to complete a plan for the application. Use what you have in a light that is favorable to the application and avoid leaving a blank.

Keep it simple and use active words

Most grants have word or character limits and the reviewers ignore any text beyond the limit. Grants are not designed for pleasure reading nor are they an opportunity to sharpen your creative writing skills. The purpose of these grants is to show DHS what you are planning to do with the funds. You want to convince the reviewer your state or local emergency management office has a realistic plan on how to spend the money.

Papers that are easier to read get higher marks both in school and in the grant review process. Repetition, wordiness, and poor grammar are tiring to read and the reviewer will instinctively lower your "grade."

Edit, rewrite, review

A first draft is just a draft. Do not take the sight of red pen marks slashing through your prose personally. If you hand your first draft to an internal reviewer and there are only a few marks on the page, then your reviewer is not doing his or her job.

No matter how many times you rewrite a document, there will always be something to edit and improve. Fresh eyes will always find another error if the reader is paying attention. You should use the rewrite process as an opportunity to improve the document up to the deadline. At the deadline the document may not be perfect, but it will be a significant improvement over the first and second drafts.

One process that can work well is the all-day review marathon. You may need more or less time depending on the size of the grant document and must have a relatively good draft before this review marathon can help. Once your documents have been revised based on one editor's comments, gather a team of writers and reviewers and go through each investment *line by line*. Find a meeting room and spend the day(s) reading each document; you will catch more errors in grammar and content.

This is the time to fine tune the structure and content of your grant and also provides a chance to format the document in a uniform matter. Formatting with bullet points or bolded and italicized text can make reading the application an easier task. The peer reviewers will appreciate the uniformity and clarity the tips above will provide. It will be a long day but your document will benefit from the combined experience and attention span of a team of editors.

STAY WITHIN YOUR UNIVERSE: BE PRACTICAL AND REASONABLE

The grant application is not the time to ask for the moon. You must be both practical and reasonable in the total amount of funding that is requested.

Be realistic

If you are likely to get a small portion of the grant pot, tailor your grant to that reality. If the overall grant is only $5 million and open to all 50 states and territories, don't ask for $1 million when you know you are only going to get $100,000. The reviewers will not take your application as seriously if you are unrealistic. You have worked too hard in drafting your application, so do not set yourself up for failure by being overly greedy. One way to address this issue for grant funding is to take the amount you were awarded last year and add 5 to 10 percent to the total. DHS has suggested using a number twice what was received the year prior as a working number. However, taking a more conservative approach given the history of the grants program and the dwindling dollars may be the more prudent decision. Working with that figure as the total you are requesting will help the reviewers take your application more seriously.

You should ask for more than you expect to receive. This is a sensible course of action considering you will most likely still have significant need after this round of funding. However, requesting a stratospheric number will only hurt you in the end.

Manage expectations

In addition to making your application realistic, you will be managing the expectations of those around you. It will be frustrating for the drafter and the organization if you request $2 million, and end up with only $300,000 to divide among all involved parties. Avoid this mistake by being upfront with those involved in the process and by outlining the reasonable outcome. If there is a base award amount include that in the outline and explain how risk and other variables of your jurisdiction are factors in how much you will likely receive.

Managing expectations may be more or less difficult depending on the method of allocation. Some jurisdictions utilize a formula-based system. While a formula will provide equity across disparate grantees it may not be the best method for reigning in expectations as each individual subgrantee will request exactly what they want. They may ask for the Corvette when the Cavalier would suffice. Avoid this pitfall by providing dollar amount limits. This will keep subgrantees within reason and should help ensure they focus on their most pressing needs.

Another allocation method is to fund projects based on a merit-system. Here, the grantee solicits projects from the field and then requests funding for projects based on a set of criteria. This method is more difficult to administer because it requires significant preplanning and effort, but can provide the grantee with more control over direction and priorities. In

addition, under a merit-based system, managing the expectations of all those involved in the process is far easier. The decision-making body has the ability to choose projects based on merit and may consider the dollar amount request in that process therefore limiting the overall request to a reasonable number.

Regional collaboration

As you know "expanding regional collaboration" is a National priority.[21] Many grants give extra points for projects that involve regional collaboration. These extra points may equal additional grant funding. Don't wait until the last moment to incorporate regional projects into your application. These projects need to be as well developed and realistic as the rest of your projects in order to add to your application and will require coordination between organizations that may not have coordinating structures in place. In order to qualify for the extra points in the review process the investment must be a collaboration between regional jurisdictional partners and each participant in the investment must provide some funding.[22]

It is not worth making such an easily avoidable mistake. If you stay within your universe, and maybe reach just slightly beyond, your application will be taken as seriously as you intend it to be.

USE THIS YEAR'S PROCESS
TO NAVIGATE THE NEXT GRANT CYCLE

The grant-writing process is cyclical and does not have a definite start and finish. Once you have completed the grant writing, submitted the grant for review, and are awaiting the grant decision, it is important to begin planning for next years cycle.

Debrief the process

Set time aside in the week following your submission to debrief and review the process. The grant-writing team should identify strengths and weaknesses in the process and use them to improve your application for the next cycle. Capture your thoughts on the process while they are still fresh in your mind. Outline what needs to be completed prior to the next grant cycle so that you are not always playing catch up. Set a timeline to completing those action items

and stick with it. You may not get everything done before the next grant cycle, but at least you will be in better shape then you were for the last one.

Create a grants workbook, file or database

Save the information gathered during this year's cycle which you might need for a future application. Creating a grants workbook from your application the previous year will help you immensely. Take all the information you gather, summarize it and keep it in a central location. When something comes across your desk you think might be useful, put it in the folder with everything else.

If you were to organize all of this based on the priorities you identified above, the writers of next year's application will have all the necessary information at their fingertips. Priorities should carry through from year to year and the information gathered for the investments in the current application, which should align with priorities, will provide a background on the history and status of your agency or jurisdiction's efforts.

In addition, this information may be useful outside the grants process for updating executives on the status of identified priorities and to identify on-going projects. The grant-writing process can be useful for more than simply acquiring grant funds because the process requires the coordination of planning, finance, and policy. That combination of public safety and emergency management planning, finance, and policy may not often come together in such a convenient package. Use the opportunity to plan for the future now while important decision makers from various perspectives are at the table.

Participate in the peer-review process

The HSGP effectiveness portion is graded using a peer-review process. Experts from emergency management and public safety from all levels of government and from across the country are invited participate in the scoring process. These peer reviewers are broken up into teams and use the scoring rubric mentioned above to assign grades to individual applications.

Participation by a member of your group can be an enormous benefit to your organization. While the actual deliberations are confidential, simply being a

part of this process will give you perspective on what other jurisdictions do right and wrong and should help to frame the strengths and weaknesses of your process and application. Bringing that perspective to the drafting process for the next year will provide an important point-of-view to the process.

CONCLUSION

The history of the HSGP is informative, but there is no doubt change will continue with the applications becoming more important pieces of the funding picture. No application can ever be perfect. However, by understanding the history of the grant and its evolution, and utilizing the guidance, application template, and your own writing talents it is possible to improve your grants from year to year. The tips above can serve as a guide for crafting well-written and coherent applications which will improve your organization's bottom line, but there is no guarantee that funding will increase.

Remember, the grants process is cyclical and the next grant application is right around the corner. Keep these tips in mind, read everything, and be sure to answer every question the best you can and you will be well on the road to improving your application.

Good luck!

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