Guidance for Preparing

Community Food Projects

Fiscal Year 2011 Applications

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Based on a document developed by Hugh Joseph

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A.   INTRODUCTION

This guide was prepared by the Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) to assist prospective applicants for the fiscal year 2011 Community Food Projects (CFP) funding cycle. The announcement for these funds is titled Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program: Fiscal Year 2011 Request for Applications (RFA). It is available at:
http://www.nifa.usda.gov/fo/communityfoodprojects.cfm

This guide is designed as a companion document to the RFA, to help potential applicants:

- Determine eligibility to apply for CFP funds;
- Understand and incorporate program concepts and terminology;
- Plan projects that promote food security in and help meet the food needs of low-income communities; and
- Develop a competitive application for CFP funds.

This document is based on an earlier edition written by Hugh Joseph, but has been reorganized and greatly condensed. It still contains all the essential points, and the guidance has changed very little. However, it contains significantly less detail on some topics (especially application evaluation criteria and writing outcome-focused proposals). So, CFSC is keeping the spring 2009 version of this guide posted for those who may want this additional information:
http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html#cfp_guide

CFSC has also developed two brief guidance documents covering the electronic submissions process and Planning Projects. These guides are posted separately on the CFSC website at:
http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html .

Disclaimer:

Applicants must carefully review the RFA themselves for guidance in preparing an application. This guide is not a substitute for the RFA nor does it discuss all the requirements of the RFA. The authors of this guide are familiar with the CFP, have reviewed the 2011 RFA, and have done their best to assure the accuracy of the information provided, but neither they nor the CFSC are responsible for errors or omissions in the enclosed guidance. Applicants should always rely on the RFA for final language regarding the preparation of proposals. Finally, the recommendations in this guide do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) or the Department's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

B.   CFP PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Community Food Projects program supports projects that will meet the food needs of low-income individuals, increase the self-reliance of communities to meet their own food needs, promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm, and nutrition issues, and address specific state, local, and neighborhood food needs. Projects are geared toward increasing a low-income community's capacity to produce, process, and/or market food for its residents.

Improved access to high quality foods may be accomplished in many ways, such as by promoting food

assistance programs or by starting a farmers' market. But these activities alone will not substantially help targeted participants become more self-reliant or food secure over the long term. Most winning proposals are multi-faceted and incorporate education, training, and/or entrepreneurial activities to enhance basic programs and provide opportunities for participants that increase skills, incomes, and/or employment.

C.   KEY CHANGES IN RFA FOR 2011

The CFP Request for Applications (RFA) for 2011 is very similar to that for 2010.   There are three key changes. First, the agency within USDA that administers the CFP has been re-named. The Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) is now the National Institute on Food and Agriculture (NIFA). References have been changed throughout the RFA to reflect this new name.

Second, the emphasis on the participation of low-income residents in both regular CFP projects and Planning Projects has been reinforced in the Program Area Descriptions on pages 7-9. Not only should low-income people be "actively engaged in the planning, direction, implementation, and evaluation of the proposed" project, but the application should demonstrate that project staff "dedicate their work to helping build capacity among low-income beneficiaries."

Finally, program reporting requirements are also being revised. It is noted on page 28 of the RFA that, "NIFA is incrementally transitioning from its existing reporting system, Current Research Information System (CRIS), to a new reporting system, REEport, during FYs 2010 and 2011." Initial reporting for grants awarded in fiscal year 2011 will be submitted through CRIS, though annual and final reports will be done under REEport.

D.   ELIGIBILITY TO APPLY

1.   Who is eligible to apply for Community Food Projects grants?

Eligible applicants are private non-profit entities with experience in community food work, job training, business development, or similar activities. Examples include anti-hunger organizations, farm groups, community development corporations, neighborhood alliances, and others. Eligibility information may be found in the RFA on page 11.

An applicant need not have federal tax-exempt status under Section 501 (c) 3 of the Internal Revenue Code, but should be able to demonstrate the necessary organizational capacity and administrative experience detailed in the RFA. An applicant organization serving as a conduit for a collaborative group should not only document fiscal competency and experience in managing such a project, but also describe its direct role in and contributions to the project activities.

Academic institutions and institutions of higher education, if they are non-profit or have a non-profit arm, are also eligible to apply, but will need to be rooted in the local community to submit a competitive application for the CFP. The CFP program particularly focuses on the development of applications from community-based organizations, though educational institutions and other eligible entities are strongly encouraged to collaborate in the planning and implementation of Community Food Projects.

Historically, over the life of the CFP, grants have been made to a diverse range of community-based

organizations, including food banks, local food system projects, Community Development Corporations (CDCs), faith groups, anti-poverty programs, educational organizations, youth projects, farmers' markets, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) sponsors, among others. Projects vary greatly and integrate a number of different components, but tend to emphasize local food production, value-added processing, food service entrepreneurship and skills training, marketing, and/or food and nutrition education.

2.   Partners and subcontracts

The CFP emphasizes partnership and collaboration, and applicants may subcontract with one or more partners to carry out part of the work; this may in fact strengthen the proposal. Although only the applicant must meet the eligibility requirements, other entities may be involved in a proposed project, and applicants are encouraged to work closely with other community organizations and neighborhood groups to plan and implement CFP projects.

Potential partners and collaborators may be found throughout all sectors of the food system, including public entities, such as schools, hospitals, and parks departments, for profit operations like restaurants and grocery stores, and other non-profits working on relevant issues. The only program limitation in this area is that no more than one-third of the CFP budget may be sub-awarded to for-profit organizations.

E.   FUNDING LEVELS AND MATCHING FUNDS

1.   Size of grant requests

About $5 million is available for all projects funded this year and the RFA states that approximately five percent ($250,000) may be awarded for Planning Projects. The maximum allowable grant for a regular CFP is $300,000 over the lifetime of the project and $125,000 in any single year. The maximum grant for Planning Projects is $25,000 over the lifetime of the project.

2.   Matching funds requirements

Community Food Projects legislation requires that the federal funds awarded be matched dollar-for-dollar by non-federal resources. Specifically, this can be achieved through "cash and/or in-kind contributions, including third-party in-kind contributions, fairly evaluated" (pages 18-19 of the RFA). Third party in-kind contributions means non-cash contributions of property or services including real property, equipment, or supplies, provided by non-Federal third parties and directly benefiting and specifically identifiable to the project. More information on meeting and documenting matching funds may be found in section G.4. below.

F.   ASSESSING READINESS TO APPLY

The Community Food Projects (CFP) grant process is very competitive. In recent years, about one in six applications submitted has been funded. So applicants, whether considering a community food assessment to identify needs, bolstering an existing project to have greater impact, or proposing a new and untested project, must have all resources lined up and be sure their project reflects CFP guidelines.

Prospective applicants must review the RFA and decide if their proposed project is appropriate. But

even if the project appears to fit many of the guidelines, applicants must assess whether their organization and collaborators are ready to apply this round. They should consider whether they have a solid project plan and strong partnerships, strong community support and involvement, the required match, and the ability to develop a complex proposal before the deadline. If not, applicants may want to consider implementing additional planning, organizing, or assessment work and applying the following year. Another option is to submit a Planning Project grant, especially if the project is still in the relatively early stages of planning and development. (See separate guide to developing Planning Project grants, available on the CFSC website at: http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html.

The application instructions allow applicants to indicate whether a proposal is a "New Application" or a "Resubmission." In practical terms, the difference is negligible as reviewers approach both types of applications in the same way. Resubmitted applications give the applicant an opportunity to respond to reviewer comments from the previous year and show where improvements have been made to address reviewer concerns. The program does not perceive resubmission as a negative; indeed, many grantees apply several times before finding a winning approach that earns CFP funding. Further guidance may be found in summaries of successful applications and past grants available on the USDA website at: http://www.nifa.usda.gov/nea/food/sri/hunger_sri_awards.html and in the Food Security Learning Center database of CFP projects at: http://www.whyhunger.org/programs/fslc.html. The summaries provided give an overall sense of the types of activities that get funded as well as the amounts awarded. Further examples of highly rated CFP proposals and case studies of CFP-funded projects are available on the CFSC website at: http://www.foodsecurity.org/funding.html#samples.

G.   ELEMENTS OF A COMPETITIVE APPLICATION

CFP proposals are not easy to prepare. Applicants should allow sufficient time to plan the project, coordinate with partners and clarify their roles, write a good narrative, get all necessary letters of commitment, and complete all other requirements. Waiting until a week or two before the application deadline likely will result in weak or incomplete proposals. Moreover, the electronic submission process requires additional steps that make it even more important to start early. See CFSC's updated Electronic Submissions Advisory at http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html for more information.

Successful CFP applications have some, if not all, of the following elements:

- The project is exciting and innovative for the community, offering a creative strategy to address local food system issues that affect low-income residents.

- The initiative incorporates CFP objectives in a well-organized manner and both the project and the application clearly address program priorities.

- The project shows substantial planning and understanding of the food needs in the communities it will serve.

- The effort exhibits strong partnerships and collaborations with other entities in the community.

- Activities are reflective of and responsive to the needs of the community, with local citizens involved in developing and implementing them.

The CFP application should be an original document. The RFA requests specific information based on expressly stated legislative objectives – collaboration, community linkages, entrepreneurship, etc. Many of these topics are not typically emphasized in other program grant application requirements. It is usually obvious to reviewers when CFP applications are cut and pasted from other proposals.

Competitive applications are well written and well organized. The limited page length for the CFP narrative demands that an applicant be concise and to the point. Applications do not need to be expertly crafted by professional consultants, but need to be understandable and cogent while reflecting local enthusiasm for the project. The expert reviewers are sensitive to the limited resources and experience many non-profit groups have when it comes to fundraising. Strong applications may come from programs in which the English literacy skills of those involved is limited. Reviewers will make allowances for this, though written applications should have correct spelling and punctuation and a reasonable sentence structure, so reviewers can follow the flow of the project.

Applicants must insure that their proposal is complete in order to compete for funding. Incomplete applications may be disqualified and not reviewed. Specific instruction is included in this guide for the project narrative, budget narrative, letters of commitment and support, and addressing the application evaluation criteria. But applicants should also consult and use the Application Submission Checklist found on pages 35 and 36 of the RFA to insure they have met all CFP requirements.

Although ultimately, funding decisions are made by USDA, the Department relies heavily on the opinion of "expert reviewers," peers from the community food security movement who read and evaluate the applications and make funding recommendations. The importance of these expert reviewers in the CFP funding process cannot be overstated.

Reviewers are involved in and knowledgeable about community food work and seek to fund the best projects rather than the best-written proposals.

Reviewers first rate every application on its merits, without any consideration of the amount requested or detailed budgets. Only after the proposals are ranked are budget details a factor. Budgets should be appropriate and activities commensurate with the funds requested.

1.   Project Summary

The 250-word project summary is one of the last documents an applicant should prepare, but it is the first page read by the reviewers. It sets the tone for the entire proposal. Therefore, it is very important to craft a well-written, comprehensive, and compelling summary statement that intrigues reviewers and "sells" the proposed project. The Project Summary should be self-contained, assuming that the reader gets no additional information and that this short description stands alone.

2.   Project Narrative

The project narrative is the heart of the application, laying the groundwork for project need, detailing actions that will be taken by the community and collaborators to address those needs, and describing outcomes that will change the community in self-sustaining ways. But with only 10 pages allowed to answer many complex questions in the narrative, it must be carefully constructed. (Applicants should keep in mind that up to five additional pages of precious narrative space may be gained by adding

information – food insecurity and/or census demographics, detailed project activities or timelines – in charts and tables.) Applicants should be succinct, yet complete, avoid redundant information, and provide an overall description that makes sense to outsiders who may know little about the local area, the organizations involved in the project, and the background leading up to it.

The following portion of the guide discusses key points to address under each component of the required narrative.

a.   The Community to Be Served and the Needs to Be Addressed

This section should outline why the applicant and its partners selected the activities proposed in the application, the main targets or beneficiaries of the project, and the community needs and opportunities being addressed. The needs addressed should directly relate to project goals and objectives described. This section offers an opportunity to frame the overall project and to tell the story of why the project should be funded.

Information provided should touch on community conditions (including socio-economic conditions, food insecurity, and/or environmental and food system problems), the context and history for the project, and the beneficiaries targeted. Extensive general community and resident information is not necessary; instead emphasize those conditions being addressed by the proposed project that make the effort compelling. The CFP is intended to primarily serve low-income constituents and communities. Evidence of this is important, but may be provided in summary form.

USDA expects CFP projects to be community-based. This suggests "of the community" or "by the community" rather than "for the community" or "to the community." Reviewers are looking for more of a bottom-up versus a top-down planning and implementation approach, in which priorities are driven by residents or stakeholders rather than just by the applicant organization and its partners. This is the place to describe how collaborative efforts – meetings, interviews, community-based needs assessments, and/or other input strategies – were used in planning the initiative.

b.   The Organizations Involved in the Project

In this section, applicants should list all key participating organizations and give a short description of their roles in the project. Reviewers will be assessing the overall relationship – past and current – between the partners, and the degree to which each will be involved in the initiative. Although participation by several organizations is expected, it is not the number that counts as much as the role(s) each will play. If a collaboration (e.g., a network, alliance, coalition, or council) is formed to sponsor and/or manage the project, then describe this entity, its role, and the participants involved.

Applicants need to show that partners are qualified and appropriate and possess the appropriate experience, resources, and relationship to make the project successful. To save space, avoid lengthy descriptions here; less than a page or so total should be enough to provide the summary information for this point. A helpful strategy is to rely on letters of commitment from each organization or key player to provide specific details about their roles. Letters from the key organizations involved in the project, acknowledging their support and providing specific information about their contribution to the project, must be provided in an appendix to the application. Similarly, a letter of commitment from the applicant itself is a means to provide information about the organization and any key personnel to be involved

with the project. (see section G.4. on commitment letters below).

c. Project Goals and Intended Outcomes

List the goals and intended outcomes of the project. Outcomes should describe specific changes or results that will occur as a consequence of the project and that will constitute "success" for the initiative. These may include benefits resulting from program activities such as changes in participants' skills, behaviors, or quality of life, and positive changes in conditions in the community served or reductions in negative conditions. "Outcomes should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely; describe what will be accomplished, and who and how many people, e.g., residents, participants, will benefit" (page 14 of the RFA). (For guidance on writing outcome-focused proposals, see pages 37-41 in the spring 2009 version of this guide on the CFSC website: http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html#cfp_guide)

Goals and objectives are often written in very general terms. Goals reflect the overall vision or long-term impacts that are hoped for and sometimes specify the overall results desired. Objectives describe more specific steps to get to the goals. Goals and objectives can convey similar information as outcomes. However, outcomes are constructed in more succinct, specific, and quantifiable language that is meant to carefully define the results of the initiative. Outcomes measure changes that occur as a result of the project.

d. Activities to Achieve the Goals

USDA looks for specific details about how the project objectives or milestones will be implemented. Do not assume that reviewers understand the steps that will be taken to achieve each component. An appropriate level of detail helps clarify that the applicant and its partners have thought out what it will take to accomplish their proposed objectives or milestones.

Applicants should provide a general description of the implementation for each objective or milestone, summarizing and emphasizing critical elements for success, along with characteristics that make it clear why they are important. Then, outline specific steps that will be taken for each objective, including numbers of expected participants in each activity and a timeline for completion of each step. (Again, this may be included as a separate chart or table to save space in the narrative.)

e. Relationship to Program Objectives

The CFP program has multiple objectives, as listed on page 6 of the RFA. How the project will meet some of these objectives should be clearly described. Emphasize how project outcomes relate to the CFP priorities. This explanation does not need to be exclusively about changes in respect to individuals, but can also address broader changes to the community, the environment, the food system, or to related policies that will influence or benefit the targeted constituencies. A concise, flowing explanation of why this is a good project from a CFP perspective is more valuable than providing lots of technical explanations.

f. Evaluation

CFP proposals should contain a strong evaluation component. Innovative evaluation strategies are

especially encouraged. Evaluations should focus on "logic models" and the measurement of success in meeting the legislative goals and objectives of the CFP. The CFP encourages both process evaluations (developing and monitoring indicators of progress towards the objectives) and outcome evaluations (to determine whether the objectives were met).

Once outcome statements, such as performance targets and milestones, have been established, it is much easier to set up a Logic Model or similar evaluation. To proceed, consider how the project will verify that proposed changes have taken place by measuring comparative data from the start of the project and as the project comes to an end. Establish benchmarks that represent indicators of progress. Verifying these changes may mean conducting follow-up with beneficiaries by conducting surveys, phone interviews, or by using some other mechanism to assure that the planned benefit has been achieved.

Advance planning of a project's evaluation component can help determine the design, cost, and resources needed to implement the evaluation. The application should describe, at least in general terms, what will be evaluated and how it will be done, who will oversee and coordinate evaluation activities, how low-income participants and other community members will be involved in the evaluation, and what baseline data will be used for comparative purposes.

In developing an evaluation plan, applicants should:

- decide at least in general terms what to evaluate and what process to use;
- determine who will oversee or coordinate evaluation activities;
- identify participants – who the evaluation will focus on and who will participate in its design and implementation;
- identify baseline data that is available; and
- estimate costs and the need for outside expertise at the onset of the project.

Consider also:

- how to involve stakeholders to provide insights and identify priorities for evaluation;
- how to select practical indicators and associated measurement tools such as surveys to gather information and track developments;
- how to interpret the information you derive;
- what steps are needed to refine evaluation procedures on an ongoing basis; and
- what steps will ensure ongoing record-keeping, data collection, and monitoring.

The CFSC provides evaluation training workshops, handbooks, and specific evaluation tools to help CFP grantees conduct effective evaluations. (See Evaluation Program webpage for more information: http://www.foodsecurity.org/evaluation.html) The RFA encourages applicants to seek expert assistance with evaluation design and implementation, as appropriate and available. Academic institutions may collaborate for free or at a fairly low cost, out of interest in the project. Otherwise, independent consultants can also provide such assistance, though probably at a much higher cost. (Note: See the CFP RFA and CFSC's Evaluation Handbook and Toolkit for additional guidance on evaluation and logic models: http://www.foodsecurity.org/evaluation_pg2.html).

g.   Self-Sustainability

Because Community Food Projects awards are intended as one-time funding, USDA is interested in how the project will continue or be sustained after the CFP grant ends. Sustainability should make sense in terms of project priorities and strategies. Unless there is a strong entrepreneurial component, project activities are not expected to generate an on-going revenue stream.

Viable sustainability strategies may include: continued support provided by the grantee, in-kind and institutionalized support from a project partner who takes an activity under its wing, continued grants or other fund-raising, and project revenues and income generated by project entrepreneurship.

3.   Budget Narrative and Justification

The application requires a budget narrative to explain how CFP funds will be used. Reviewers judge an application mainly by what it proposes to achieve and how it will accomplish its objectives. But the budget needs to be appropriate for the project and make sense. Because the USDA budget forms combine many line item categories, explaining the details can make the difference as to whether or not a proposal gets funded.

The budget justification should explain every budget line item, and break down large categories into specific expenditures. This is the place to explain any unusual expenditures – particularly if they are relatively large and not clearly detailed in the narrative section. Reviewers and USDA will look at these details to make sure they are consistent with the proposed activities, and also will consider whether there is sufficient funding to accomplish the activities being proposed. Give particular attention to the budget justification section; it should be neat and avoid redundancy. Splitting out costs for each year of the project is helpful, but it is not necessary to repeat lengthy information for every year; just break out the items that change, such as new supplies and equipment, salary increases, and the like.

The sources and amounts of all matching support should be summarized on a separate page and added as an attachment as part of the Budget Justification, with letters of commitment and other documentation of match details also included as attachments.

4.   Letters of Matching Commitment

As noted earlier, federal CFP funds requested must be matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Matching resources may be either cash and/or in-kind, but must be non-federal in origin. They can come from a state or local government agency, or private sources such as businesses, foundations or charities, or from other non-profit entities. In-kind resources may include the value of office space used exclusively for the funded project, or the value, fairly assessed, of transportation, photocopying, postage or other costs covered by the applicant organization or by a project partner.

Matching resources must be detailed, explained, and firmly committed in a letter from project partners to the applicant or in a letter to USDA from the applicant. USDA requires that all matching resources for the life of the project be identified and committed "up front" before the project is initiated. Reviewers read these and other collaborator letters carefully to assess the degree of commitment and involvement of each organization. Form letters or letters that simply state the project is important and that the organization will endorse it signal to reviewers that the group has not been very involved in the

planning of the project.

On the other hand, a unique, individualized letter that details the specific role of the organization, its past contributions, and its proposed activities in the planning and implementation of the project will be much more compelling. If a project is a true collaboration, this will show in the level of enthusiasm, substantive information, and consistency provided in these letters. Letters of commitment should document contributions of cash or in-kind support. Similarly, if a collaborator or consultant will be paid for work on the project, the nature of the work, hourly rate, and number of hours need to be documented in their letter.

The legislation does not require that an applicant contribute matching resources beyond the one-to-one requirement. However, evidence of additional funding can increase the project's self-reliance and make it more self-sustaining. On the other hand, if the project has such extensive funding that CFP support will not represent a major or critical component, the application may not fit the intent of this program to "support the development of Community Food Projects with a one-time infusion of federal dollars to make such projects self-sustaining." CFP is not looking to be a small part of a big, long-term program; the program wants to play a significant role in funding specific initiatives that might otherwise not take place. For example, CFP funds would not be appropriate to support or expand the regular activities of a food bank. But they could assist the food bank in setting up a culinary skills training program, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm or distribution initiative, or other such activities.

a. Verification of matching resources

Collaborators will need guidance on what to include in their letters of commitment regarding documentation of matching funds or in-kind. Partners should share the specific guidance for match contained in the RFA. Some types of match may be considered ineligible, because they are an intended outcome or integral part of a project. Examples include: food donations (e.g., the value of foods gleaned and donated to a food bank); food production (e.g., the value of food grown and marketed as part of the project); project income (e.g. from potential farmers' market sales); and volunteer time that is already integral to a project (e.g., as a requirement for participation in a food coop).

Applications should include written commitments for both cash and in-kind contributions to verify matching support. Separate letters may be needed for each resource contributed to the project. Pages 18 and 19 of the RFA are very specific as to what should be included in letters from the applicant and its partners verifying the matching commitment. Written verification also means sufficient documentation to allow USDA to assess the value of the contribution, and providing evidence that a person with the appropriate level of authority has made this commitment; i.e., the commitment letter should be on letterhead and signed by the authorized organizational representative. The RFA states directly and unequivocally on page 18 that "Awards will not be issued until all matching has been verified."

For matching funds (cash), verification of the source of the funds must be provided. But, if applicants already have funds on hand, potential complications in the grants management process may be avoided by simply stating the amount of cash available, rather than linking it to a specific grant commitment. If documentation of another grant received by the applicant is provided, it should include a copy of the award letter stating the purpose(s) for which the funding was provided and a statement as to when the funds are available.

The RFA on pages 18-19 states that for any third party cash contributions (i.e., by a partner in the project), a separate pledge agreement is required for each donation, signed by the authorized organizational representatives of the donor organization and the applicant organization. Such contributions must include a good faith estimate of the current fair market value of the contribution and other details specified in the RFA. The RFA (page 19) states that the value of applicant contributions to the project shall be established in accordance with applicable cost principles. Again, clear details are needed for each item or type of in-kind provided. In addition, the applicant organization should demonstrate that it is willing and able to receive the items contributed and apply them toward the project.

5. Letters of Support

In addition to letters of matching commitment, applications may include general support letters from project collaborators. A limited number of such support letters – such as those from farmers or schools, where appropriate – are encouraged to provide evidence of broad community involvement in both past planning, project operations, and future decision-making. Avoid using form letters for this purpose; an individualized letter that speaks to the role of the organization in the project, and importance of the project and its planned outcomes, is much more persuasive and helpful.

H. APPLICATION EVALUATION CRITERIA

The Community Food Projects RFA (on pages 22-23) lists the criteria that reviewers and USDA will use to rate the quality and merits of the application. While these evaluation criteria do not perfectly mirror the content required in the narrative, they are similar and should be considered as key guideposts when preparing an application. Though there are no points or percentages noted, the criteria are listed in order of priority, and applicants should use them to emphasize certain aspects of their proposal. There are seven evaluation criteria for regular CFPs and five for Planning Projects.

With these criteria, reviewers will assess: how well the project meets CFP goals; whether the issues affecting the target community are significantly addressed; if the planned actions and outcomes are appropriate; the relevant experience of the applicant and its partners; the viability of plans for project self-sustainability; the strength of the evaluation component; and whether the timeline is realistic.

Although efforts such as community gardening, farmers' markets, CSAs, and food recovery may address a community's food security, these are well-established strategies that by themselves will not adequately fulfill broad community food security goals. The RFA (pages 7-8 and 14-15) describes how integrating economic, social, and environmental objectives will enhance projects through building more comprehensive approaches to community food problems. It also emphasizes efforts to address the larger food needs of communities, to engage the participation of the community, and to address the local food system where possible.

Overall, the program supports projects that will increase a community's capacity to produce, process, or market food for its residents. Improved access to high quality foods may be accomplished in many ways, such as starting a community garden or a community kitchen to process garden produce. But these activities alone will not substantially help targeted participants become more self-reliant or food secure over the long term. Most winning proposals are multi-faceted and incorporate education, training, and/or entrepreneurial activities to enhance basic programs and provide opportunities for participants that increase skills, incomes, and/or employment.

Community Food Projects proposals are not limited to activities that produce and market locally-grown foods and a project need not be limited by "alternative" food system strategies. Applicants should consider ways to incorporate wholesalers, retailers, and others in the "mainstream" or for-profit food sector that likely provides most of the community's food supply. Increasing access to quality foods may also include several approaches – such as attracting a supermarket to an underserved area or developing a food cooperative, for example.

The CFP program encourages projects that connect two or more sectors of the food system – public, private non-profit, and for profit. Entrepreneurship and the development of entrepreneurial projects is also a key element of the CFP. Activities that reflect these purposes should be highlighted in the application.

(For additional information on application evaluation criteria, see pages 27-36 in the spring 2009 version of this guide on the CFSC website: http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html#cfp_guide)

I.   APPLICATION PITFALLS

When constructing a CFP project proposal, applicants should keep in mind the following pitfalls that have led to weaknesses in past applications:

1.   Not allowing sufficient time for to develop the project and partnerships.

The project planning and solid and coordinated relationships that make a CFP project strong do not develop overnight. In many cases, partners have been working together for years, perhaps informally. Solidifying the effort into a funded project takes time, especially in establishing collaborations that share resources and require written agreements to do so.

2.   Failure to allow sufficient time for electronic submission.

All CFP applications must be submitted to USDA through the government-wide electronic site Grants.gov. Completion of the preliminary and registration requirements of Grants.gov can take as long as two months and may delay applicant composition and submission of the application. Many applicants wait to submit their proposal until the deadline date and then find that heavy Internet traffic or computer problems prevent a timely submission. To learn more about the electronic submission process, see the CFSC advisory at: http://www.foodsecurity.org/cfp_help.html.

3.   Failure to address the full scope of the CFP in the application

The CFP program is broad in its intent and supports projects that have a unique set of priorities. The RFA emphasizes the need for integrating multiple objectives that include linkages among food sectors; comprehensive planning, multi-agency approaches, and building long-term solutions to problems. In other words, CFP wants its grantees to be catalysts in developing more comprehensive planning, fostering multi-agency approaches; and building long-term solutions to problems.

4.   Submitting an application with an unbalanced narrative

With only 10 pages of narrative space available (plus charts and tables), well-written applications are

succinct and focus only on what is clearly important to reviewers. Spending three or four pages discussing an area's needs may not leave adequate room to describe project activities in sufficient detail. The RFA now includes guidance (on pages 14-16) on the recommended length of each component to help applicants target their word count.

5.   Proposing inappropriate activities

Some activities, in themselves worthwhile, do not fit well within the scope of the CFP. Single- or limited-purpose projects, such as expanding existing emergency feeding programs, distributing vegetable seeds, and setting up SHARE programs do not reflect program priorities. Such activities, particularly if they are stand-alone, do not reflect the innovative and comprehensive nature of the program.

6.   Failing to have adequate community input

The CFP strongly emphasizes projects that are devised and generated by community members, not top-down approaches endorsed by outside organizations. Projects should be "community based" not "community placed," and the RFA notes that project staff should "dedicate their work to helping build capacity among low-income beneficiaries."   There should be significant grassroots involvement in both the planning and implementation of the project.