

To: George Reistad, City of Madison Economic Development Division; Jess Guffey Calkins, UW Extension Dane County; Theola Carter, Dane County Office of Equity and Inclusion; Nick Heckman, Public Health Madison and Dane County
From: Food Access, Research, and Economic Security Workgroup
Re: Recommendations for improvement to SEED and PIE Grants
Date: December 6, 2021

Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 immediately highlighted challenges with the food system. Vulnerable populations saw food insecurity rise, newly unemployed individuals had to navigate social services for the first time to help feed their families, and the general public began to deal with supply chain issues that dramatically impacted buying habits and food.

In response to the pandemic, the Madison Food Policy Council (MFPC) and Dane County Food Council (DCFC) began to meet jointly with the purpose of looking at response and recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 on the food system. One of the workgroups that formed was the Food Access, Resources, and Economic Security (FARES), which intended to focus on improving the ability of members of our community to access food system improvements.

Background

In 2013, the Madison Common Council authorized the Madison Food Policy Council to award annual \$50,000 in small “SEED” grants to community groups and individuals working on projects and innovation within the food system. To date, over \$450,000 has been awarded.

In 2017, the Dane County Food Council, in partnership with the Dane County Office of Equity and Inclusion, implemented a parallel grant program to SEED, the Partners in Equity (PIE) Food Grants. Initially, \$16,000 was allocated for small grants annually that could be targeted to food system projects throughout Dane County. This includes the City of Madison as well as other municipalities and unincorporated areas. Dane County increased the investment in this program to \$20,000 in 2019. To date, nearly \$75,000 in funding has been awarded through the PIE Food Grants.

Both SEED and PIE grants have historically opened an application period in January, with awardees being selected and announced by March. Contracting is finalized and funding is provided to awardees in April and May each year. While many high-quality projects have now been funded, feedback to staff and joint food council members has suggested that the SEED and PIE grants could continue to improve the application process, the grading and review process, and evaluation objectives to ensure that the projects being funded are the ones with the greatest possible impact in the community.

Recommendations

Overall, the FARES Workgroup has developed a set of general recommendations as well as recommendations specific to the application process, the review and grading process, and project evaluation. These recommendations are as follows:

General:

1. **Create a consistent strategic funding philosophy** - An inconsistent approach to understanding which projects are important leads to applicants and reviewers who are

unclear about how to identify impactful applications. To resolve this, the SEED and PIE workgroups or the MFPC and DCFC themselves should, in advance of each annual grant cycle, consider if there are any unique priorities to emphasize for that year's grants. In general, funding should prioritize projects that:

- Meet a currently unmet community need
 - Have leadership from underserved or underrepresented communities
 - Demonstrate innovation and new approaches to address existing challenges
 - Are focused in scope and represent a feasible effort towards impacting the project's goals
 - Explicitly ties the project to that year's funding priorities
2. **Give meaningful amounts of funding rather than trying to fund everyone** – Rather than funding “wide”, these programs should fund “deep”. Fewer projects receiving more funding will have greater long-term impacts in successfully implementing a vision of lasting change. PIE Grants currently have “big” vs “small” categories, and this could be considered for SEED as well, whenever possible, partial funding of projects should be avoided.
 3. **Provide funding guidelines that reflect the goals for the grants.**
 4. **Use process to form meaningful connections between organizations** – Through meetings with applicants, it has become clear that some are forging into these spaces without a lot of connection or support to broader food systems work. Use the application process can also serve to introduce programs to each other, potentially connecting likeminded efforts for continued collaboration far beyond the funding allocated.
 5. **Develop a protocol for repeat applications** – Some agencies apply for funding year after year. Workgroups should consider how frequently an awardee can receive funding and document this policy within the application materials. For example, priority could be given to applicants that have not received funding in more than two consecutive years.
 6. **Prepare an annual calendar for SEED and PIE workgroup deliverables and necessary meetings** – Staff and workgroups should outline the key dates involved in the process and look for opportunities to build in extra time when possible. This includes the first workgroup meetings for the new cycle, the optimal dates for applications to be accepted, reviewed, and contracted, and dates later in the year for checking in with awardees to evaluate their projects. This calendar will also prompt staff to regularly revisit the appropriate timeline for applications and submissions in order to provide realistic timelines for the contracting process.

Application Process:

1. **Develop new application options** – Workgroups should explore the feasibility of non-paper or hybrid formats for application submission. A video submission option may be more feasible for some smaller organizations with language barriers and less grant writing experience or support. Some information would necessarily need to be written down (such as contact information, budget, and fiscal agent information), but limit those requirements where possible.

2. **Reduce subjectivity in the application**– The application should be reviewed with the goal of reducing any vague or subjective language that could lead to broader interpretations of how to answer questions. When necessary, define terms (such as food security, equity, etc). and use yes/no and “checkbox”-type answers. If a project summary is needed, solicit that directly, not through the responses to questions that are scored for other purposes.
3. **Reinforce funding philosophy within the application** – Currently, the application asks whether the project is located in a Food Access Area of Improvement. Other questions could be added which could be used to weight applications or prioritize funding to applicants and applications that are in line with the funding philosophy for the program.
4. **Create realistic expectations for funding** – Staff and councils should understand that small grants are onerous for some organizations to submit and manage. Funding should not be predicated on a long-term vision of sustainability. Rather, short and medium-term impact should be prioritized as well as methods of leveraging SEED/PIE funds for greater opportunities.
5. **Use Equity Analysis tools on grant processes**- The City of Madison RESJI’s Equity Analysis tool and UW Extension’s Food System Equity Analysis tool should be applied to the SEED and PIE grant application, review, and grading processes.

Reviewers and grading

1. **Increase training for reviewers** – The review process provides the largest opportunity for bias to enter the process. If reviewers vary significantly in their scoring, awards may correlate more with the review team’s preferences rather than the overarching funding philosophy. Additional training should focus on how to review applications, what the “baseline” score is, and on the core funding philosophy. Provide examples of graded applications for reviewers to normalize their scoring. Avoid large point categories.
2. **Create a clear equity/values statement** - A clear statement regarding the importance of equitable distribution of resources would serve to help prime reviewers on their own implicit biases when reviewing applications.
3. **Create reviewer position descriptions** – Position descriptions will help with recruitment of review panelists when necessary. What are the expectations and duties? How many applications will a single reviewer manage? The workgroups should talk through these questions.
4. **Include community voices on review panels** – Past grantees, past food council members, or other volunteers could add valuable perspective to review panels so that voices outside of City/County staff are included. Provide honoraria to community members as a reflection of the value of their input and time.

Evaluation

1. **Develop evaluation objectives** – Given the modest amount of funding available for SEED and PIE grants, evaluations should balance requests for meaningful information with reasonable expectations about the time and energy required to re-engage with the funder many months after the funding has been spent. Some questions that should be

considered What did you learn? What significant challenges did you encounter? Did this help build capacity in your community/organization? Alternately, perhaps the evaluation could simply consist of photos or video from the projects.

2. **Provide feedback to unfunded applications** – If requested, provide meaningful feedback regarding why applications did not get funded to the organization. This will improve the ability of community organizations to learn from the process and improve in the future. The workgroup could also actively solicit input from past applicants and awardees.