

Building Evidence to Promote Equitable Access to Funding

How the Administration for Native Americans worked with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation to improve Notice of Funding Opportunities

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The federal government is an important source of financial assistance for starting, implementing, and sustaining community programs and initiatives. To obtain grant funds, organizations that manage these programs and initiatives must respond to a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Depending on the complexity of a NOFO and the information requested, organizations may vary in their capacity to successfully compete for funding because of the extensive requirements associated with NOFOs. As a result, it can be helpful for government agencies to seek feedback from organizations about the structure and content of NOFOs, with the goal of removing unnecessary barriers to funding and increasing equitable access to federal support.

This spotlight describes how ACF's Administration for Native Americans (ANA) partnered with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) to gather evidence to improve ANA's NOFOs and make them more equitable, given the varying capacity of organizations that apply for ANA funding. To complete this work, ANA and OPRE partnered with the ACF [Evidence Capacity Support Project](#), led by Mathematica and its partner Child Trends.

The challenge: Promoting more equitable access to funding opportunities

ANA currently publishes five annual NOFOs focused on different priorities and programs for the agency. These documents are typically at least 75 pages long and require applicants to provide complex information about their proposed projects or initiatives.

The Administration for Native Americans supports and promotes self-sufficiency among Native Americans by providing grant funding for community-based projects to Tribes and Native organizations. These groups include federally recognized Tribes; American Indian and Alaska Native organizations; Native Hawaiian organizations; and Indigenous populations in American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands.

About this spotlight series

Building and using evidence can require federal agencies to develop solutions for novel and complex challenges. Evidence describes the knowledge gained from systematic efforts to understand the effectiveness or efficiency of an organization's work, or to understand the context or communities in which an organization conducts its work. This series highlights aspects of work conducted by OPRE to extend and deepen evidence capacity among program offices at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The ACF Evidence Capacity Support project, led by Mathematica and partner Child Trends, supports this work by helping offices develop evidence-building plans, conducting needs assessments, and analyzing administrative data, among other tasks.

In the past few years, ANA has seen a decline in the number of applications and received feedback from past applicants that NOFOs were complicated and burdensome due to their length, level of detail, scope of required information, technical language, and redundancy. ANA learned that these challenges deterred some potential applicants from applying for ANA funding, especially because they have varied levels of expertise and capacity to navigate a complex application process. Differences in capacity might relate to:

- **Staff support** and human capital to engage in what is often a collaborative and intensive process
- **Grant-writing expertise** and knowledge of government funding processes, which can influence how people interpret and respond to the complex language in NOFOs
- **Time and resources** available to thoroughly read and comprehend the NOFOs

These differences might influence applicants' ability to respond effectively to complex NOFOs and successfully compete for funding.

The activities: Developing and implementing a partnership-based, evidence-building effort

ANA designed and implemented a qualitative research project to amplify the perspectives of community members and improve ANA's NOFO process. The goal of the project was to streamline the agency's NOFOs and make them more understandable and equitable. ANA relied on community members' feedback to achieve this goal. These community members included individuals who have engaged, or would be eligible to engage, in the NOFO application process on behalf of their organizations.

To complete the project, ANA partnered with OPRE and three consultants identified by ANA's training and technical assistance (TA) centers. ANA specifically wanted to leverage (1) OPRE's expertise in research design and analysis and (2) the consultants' knowledge of and connections with the regions ANA serves. The research effort had three components:

- 1. Planning and preparation.** ANA clarified its research goals, determined how it wanted to collect data through focus groups, and identified Native people with experience engaging with ANA NOFOs that could be participants. ANA prioritized direct feedback from community members as the primary data source, choosing focus groups over surveys or broader listening sessions because they are a more meaningful and intimate way to elevate community voices. OPRE and the consultants helped ANA develop and refine questions for the focus groups.
- 2. Data collection.** ANA engaged the consultants to facilitate six virtual focus groups with policy-relevant community members, such as people who applied for but did not receive ANA funding and people who received back-to-back ANA grants. ANA also identified other participants, including (1) a group of ANA grant recipients who received other federal grants; (2) organizations interested in ANA but who had not applied for funding; (3) first-time ANA grant recipients; (4) individuals who recently reviewed ANA grant applications; and (5) chairpersons who served on grant application panel reviews.
- 3. Analysis and interpretation.** OPRE helped ANA code and analyze the data, including summarizing themes in recommendations and highlighting community-driven suggestions that ANA could prioritize.

The solutions: Addressing community members' priorities for improving NOFOs

ANA has synthesized the focus group data and OPRE's recommendations, as well as community members' suggestions for improving ANA's NOFOs. Their collective responses highlighted the following issues:

- **Integrate Indigenous principles and framing into NOFOs.** For example, ANA could adopt strengths-based approaches and language in the NOFO process, elevate considerations around Tribal sovereignty and nation-to-nation relationships, and provide more opportunities for applicants to use storytelling approaches in their applications.

- **Simplify the content and structure of NOFOs.** Focus group participants repeatedly suggested that NOFOs could be shorter, include plainer language, and have less strict formatting requirements. ANA is considering engaging a copy editor to address this recommendation.
- **Extend the timeline for updating NOFOs and soliciting applications.** Respondents perceived that ANA's timeline to update NOFOs is compressed, and they said organizations currently feel rushed to respond to NOFOs. They think more time could help the process feel less overwhelming for everyone involved.
- **Maintain existing TA resources and establish new support structures for applicants.** Focus group participants who were awarded grants strongly valued the TA they received during the application process. Additional supports, such as peer sharing and mentoring, could allow prospective, current, and former applicants to help one another.

How this work enhanced evidence capacity at ANA

Evidence capacity is the range of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to make decisions and inform its work. These attributes can be organized into five dimensions: evidence culture, leadership, evidence infrastructure, human capital, and engagement.

This partnership focused on the *evidence culture* domain. ANA's commitment to learning and growth motivated the agency to clarify tension points around NOFOs and examine how to make them more accessible, particularly for organizations with fewer resources or less capacity. ANA aligned its learning methods with this goal; the agency leveraged equity and inclusion principles to build its evidence base. For example, ANA used focus groups to allow community members to offer detailed and extensive feedback. In addition, ANA's engagement involved others in the research effort, with consultants and OPRE contributing expertise related to research planning, data collection, and analysis. ANA's learning approach and commitment to equity will inform its NOFO revisions in fiscal year 2024 and provide meaningful information about grant assessment.



For more information about the key dimensions of evidence capacity, see [Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Literature-Informed Framework](#), published by OPRE.

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