

# Your Next DHS/FEMA Grant Application

*by Roger Lunt*

The 2009 season for Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) fire department grant support is upon us. A quick review of application statistics on the Web reveals that many fire departments have taken advantage of these opportunities for financial support, but it is rare to attend a mutual-aid association meeting and find that most fire departments attending have been successful with their application attempts. In fact, a large number of fire departments probably have yet to pursue this fiscal opportunity.

This article is based on personal experience and observation that encompasses active participation with the grant application process since 2001. I hope it provides support and productive thought for departments that have yet to complete a DHS/FEMA application or have failed in their previous attempts.

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Does your fire department have a budget to provide the equipment needed to serve your community?
2. Is your fire department budget able to keep your active firefighters in National Fire Protection Association-compliant turnout gear?
3. Is your fire department able to provide all of the training that your firefighters need and want?
4. Is your fire department roster full? Do you have difficulty keeping it that way?
5. Is your fire department budget able to support a variety of interesting community safety programs?
6. Have you ever applied for a FEMA grant?

If you answered "no" to the first three questions, do you know that the primary goal of the Assistance to Firefighter Grants (AFG) program is to meet the firefighting and emergency response needs of fire departments and nonaffiliated emergency medical services organizations? During a five-fiscal year period spanning 2003 through 2007, \$2,693,842,758 was issued to support fire departments with this primary goal. The 2008 AFG program offered \$560 million in grant project support.

If you answered "no" to question 4, do you know that the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant was created to provide funding directly to fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations to help them increase the number of trained "front-line" firefighters available in their communities?

In 2007, there were 1,503 applications for grant support. The odds improved to 1,314 to 1 in the 2008 grant application period--the 2008 SAFER Grant offered \$190 million in grant project support.

If you answered "no" to question 5, do you know that the Fire Prevention and Safety Grants (FP&S) are part of the AFGs? The primary goal of this grant program is to target high-risk populations and mitigate high incidences of death and injury. Examples of the types of projects the FP&S supports include fire prevention and public safety education campaigns, juvenile firesetter interventions, media campaigns, and arson prevention and awareness programs. The 2008 FP&S Grants offered \$28 million in grant project support.

If you answered "no" to question number 6, remember: If you do not apply, you are guaranteed *not* to receive grant support.

I have been lucky to be a part of a process that resulted in the support of the purchase and development of a training facility, turnout gear, staffing, a communication system, public education program materials, a robotic prop, and more. Since the first application in 2001, my fire departments have shared more than \$600,000 in grant support. These departments range in size and characteristics from 21 paid personnel,

to a paid volunteer combination (a 14:27 ratio), to an all-volunteer department of 20 personnel. The support from eight successful applications has clearly enhanced community service and, more importantly, firefighter safety.

Throughout the year, I have opportunities to review and discuss applications that have had disappointing results. Over the years, this informal exposure to successful and not-so-successful grant applications has given me the chance to ponder the negative impressions I get from reading or discussing various applications and the reasons for those impressions. These impressions inspired the following list.

## **The Grant Review Impressions *To Avoid* List**

### **Impression # 1. Did Not Follow the Grant Rules**

**Root of Impression:** Applications that gave me this impression seemed to be asking for support of a project that is not within the identified grant goals. This includes asking for items that are not approved under grant guidelines, writing a narrative in a format that is foreign to the format suggested by the grant guidelines, and the application's not looking like nearly all other applications.

Once again, anyone who has written several successful applications or has been a part of reviewing successful applications has a solid awareness that the grant guidelines are to be followed. When an application does not follow those rules, it stands out like a large, ugly, festering sore thumb. This is one time when it literally pays to do as you are told.

### **Impression # 2: Display Greed**

**Root of Impression:** Applications that fall under this category have a want list that rambles with very little correlation to what the department can provide as a service. For example, if your project list is so long that you have to add one or two trailers at the end of the list, and you justify the trailers because of your project list, you may want to ask yourself: Do I appear greedy?

### **Impression # 3: Arrogant**

**Root of Impression:** The narrative in this type of application seems to say, "We need it. We want it. You have not given it to us yet. It is our turn now."

### **Impression # 4: Trying to Trick the Evaluator**

**Root of Impression:** Applications like these contain too many references to saving lives and property and NFPA standards. Every application should be written with the expectation that more than one peer review specialist will study it. Expect these review specialists to be just as smart as you are. They understand the relevance to saving lives and property if you present a project that will help you do so.

### **Impression # 5: Hiding Something/Not Truthful**

**Root of Impression:** These applications express the need for funding but do not show what the department is doing with its budget. In these cases, explanations of department funding and expenditures are vague, whereas the project needing grant support takes the entire stage.

### **Impression # 6: Too Wordy**

**Root of Impression:** Some applications contain too much community history and fluff. Although it can be beneficial to discuss your community, strive to draw this picture in as few of words as possible. Any

additional information should focus on the elements and the goals of the project for which support is being requested.

## **Impression # 7: Narrative Is Difficult To Follow**

**Root of Impression:** In these types of applications, paragraphs run together and evaluative points are scattered throughout the text, forcing the peer review specialist to search for them. Also, capitalizing every letter does not make the narrative easier or clearer to read. If you converse with a grant writer, you will hear at least one or two grant-writing suggestions; a successful grant writer will offer more than just a couple. The following is a list I have accumulated through personal experience and gleaned from conversations with others.

## **Grant Writing Suggestions**

### **1. Start now. Plan based on your strategic needs and resource assessments.**

It is never too early to get a jump on the process. Review other successful and unsuccessful grants. Discuss the previous application processes with others who have experienced it. Your needs and resources on hand are not likely to change between now and the opening of the application period. It may be too early to narrow in on a narrative, but the time is right to begin gathering your thoughts on anticipated projects and establishing a plan for gathering the necessary records to support your project-support argument.

### **2. Read and study the grant program guidelines.**

Read the entire guideline packet at least once; twice is better. Be aware of how your department's characteristics and service demands can benefit from the AFG goals expressed in the guidelines. I prefer to study the grant program guidelines a week or two prior to beginning the application. During the time between reading the guidelines and beginning the application, I give hours of thought to exactly how I want to approach the heart of the application, the narrative.

### **3. Conduct a risk-rewards assessment, not a want assessment.**

I support any effort to conduct risk assessments throughout the year to determine your department's service, needs, and limits. However, with regard to the AFG, only the risk-assessment relative to the goals of the grant is relevant. For me, this risk assessment is typically conducted after I have taken the time to study and thoroughly understand the grant guidelines.

Do not become focused on what you think your department should have. It is a waste of time to develop a well-prepared grant, only to have it declined because it asked for something the department thought was important but did not fit the priorities of the grant guidelines.

When doing this assessment, attempt to address the following questions: Can firefighters respond safely to risks you have identified? Where and when are your firefighters and citizens vulnerable to risks? What weaknesses exist within your department that places your firefighters at risk? Such risk assessments will differ greatly from "want assessments," which often turn into misguided "need assessments."

### **4. Have a goal-oriented budget.**

As you develop the cost of your proposed project, develop a clear, itemized budget that will support clear, measurable goals. Just saying you need something and it will cost a certain amount is not good enough. If your friend asked you for \$1,000, wouldn't you want to know what plans he had for it? I suspect you

would prefer a degree of detail over some generalized rhetoric about what your friend intends to do with the support.

#### **5. Format your narrative as suggested by the application.**

Every year, the grant program guideline and the narrative section of the application dictate specific categories to be covered by your narrative. The list of these categories also identifies the order in which you should address each. Remember, the peer review specialists scoring your application will review as many applications as possible in a one-week period. Don't make their job more difficult than it has to be.

#### **6. Write your application to the priorities of the grant program.**

The priorities of your project should satisfy the priorities of the grant program. They may vary to some degree every year. You will only understand what these are through the study of the guidelines. A well-written application that is out of step with the priorities of the grant program is not likely to receive support. This point is clearly stated numerous times throughout the guidelines.

#### **7. You don't get extra points for rhetoric volume.**

Just because space is allotted for you to write a five-page narrative doesn't mean you have to use it. Of course, when the space is needed, use it, but do not expect extra points simply because you are able to fill all five pages. There have been many successful applications with a narrative fewer than two pages.

#### **8. Make your project challenge clear for the reviewer.**

Your peers will study your grant packet, and they will see more than just the narrative. Therefore, your project must correlate with other areas within the application, i.e., number of runs, types of runs, community characteristics, budget, and so forth.

Make your project's goals and challenges clear to the peer review specialist. This can be done in part when you highlight local conditions and statistics that differ from the national level. This will provide information that the peer review specialist may not have known about.

#### **9. Remember to discuss the training status of your department.**

In 2008, DHS/FEMA established a much stronger emphasis on the connection between training and the project reflected in the application. It is fair to say that every peer review specialist takes the project-training relationship very seriously. Do not take this correlation lightly.

#### **10. Share your near-final draft of the application with at least two sets of cynical eyes.**

One set of these eyes should have a fire service background, and the other should not. At this point, you believe you have a pretty good project and a good supportive application. If that is the case, it is time to show your hard work to the critics. You are not looking for praise--you must encourage these personal reviewers to find fault in your application. They should note if it does not flow smoothly, if it is confusing, if it contains grammatical and spelling errors, and so forth. You may want to refer them to the "Grant Review Impressions *To Avoid* List" above and ask if your draft application stirred any of these impressions.

#### **11. Write your narrative so the peer review specialist feels your challenge to serve while protecting your firefighters.**

Strive to demonstrate your commitment to serving, and, although your challenge may be similar to thousands of others, make it seem uniquely overwhelming for your department. One of my goals is to write a narrative that vividly projects the feeling of an admirable struggle to serve, even if it causes the reader to forget some project details.

#### **12. Request only what you need and what is authorized by the grant.**

This is not an opportunity to purchase things that your department doesn't have any history of needing and likely cannot support in the future. If you mix unnecessary items in with your department's legitimate needs, you can jeopardize your grant score.

Remember, just because your project represents a service found in other fire departments does not mean that project is one your department can support or maintain as a service in years to come. For example; I would not recommend requesting support for a vertical rescue team or a Level A hazmat team when your run volume and history reflect zero need of these services. Another consideration is whether your roster could support such services. Again, not all departments provide all services.

Just because it is grant money does not mean you have to ask for a large amount. Many departments would be better off requesting support for a \$5,000 project at a 95 percent to 5 percent match, and get it, than submitting a support request that, in addition to this project, asked for another \$50,000.00 of unjustified funding. If you need three helmets to bring your active firefighters to NFPA compliance for head protection, just write a project for three. Unfortunately, applications are often written asking for the replacement of every helmet in the department, plus a few extra for storage. This is very poor judgment on behalf of the applicant. It is a waste of federal and local funds and rightfully risks a denial of project support.

#### **13. Attend AFG workshops and network with other departments.**

It is a mistake to look at the application process as a competition with your neighboring department. A very beneficial approach is to compare notes and even mutually evaluate applications among departments.

#### **14. Check the Web for support.**

There are countless sources to assist you in writing a successful grant. A simple search of the Internet will likely produce examples of successful narratives. *Never use someone else's narrative.* However, the more examples of other applications you see, the greater a creative range you will have for developing your project. Web site examples I have used are at [www.firegrantsupport.com](http://www.firegrantsupport.com), [www.action-training.com](http://www.action-training.com), [www.usfa.dhs.gov](http://www.usfa.dhs.gov)

#### **15. Don't expect anyone to have the same level of passion for the support you need.**

I do not have an issue with paid grant writers, but I do take issue with grant writers who do not make themselves aware of grant rules. If you are paying a grant writer, you also bear this responsibility. Departments should not leave the full responsibility of writing the grant to the paid writer. Be sure the passion you and your department have for the grant project is evident in your application. If you have not taken a personal, active interest in the writing of your application, consider yourself very lucky to get more than you have given.

#### **16. Group versus one-person approach.**

I suspect far too many applications were not properly completed because too many people had their hands in the final draft. It is important to encourage ideas early on in the "risk-assessment" process, but

just as the focus of the ideas must narrow, so should the number of people involved in the writing of the application. Solicit ideas from a group, but hold only one person responsible for writing the application.

**17. Templates from the Web may not help your cause as much as you think.**

Although they are well-written, easy to obtain, and speed up the development of your application, templates risk making your narrative look too much like hundreds of others. When this happens, your entire application may be discredited. The passion expressed in suggestion 14 is lost. You risk damaging your application score.

I am looking forward to the 2009 Assistance to Firefighters Grants application process and expect the 2009 Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response and the Fire Prevention and Safety Grants application opportunities to follow.

Whether or not I am involved in writing and receiving a grant for my department, just knowing that yet another opportunity has presented itself for the fire service to improve its capabilities is something to look forward to.

I hope you pursue support for a worthy department project through all of these opportunities. Do not be one of those departments that finds more time to come up with excuses for not writing an application than looking for ways to increase community service and enhance the safety of their firefighters.

*Roger Lunt is a former fire chief with 30 years of experience in the fire service. He has been a University of Illinois Fire Service Institute Field Instructor for 26 years, and served four times as a peer review specialist for DHS/FEMA grants.*

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