As CSBG entities consider upgrading or overhauling their Information Technology (IT) systems to meet new reporting requirements, many will utilize a “Request for Proposal” (hereafter referred to as RFP) to solicit potential vendors. This guide is intended to walk organizations through key stages of the RFP process, including:

* Getting Started (before you develop an RFP)
* Developing the RFP
* Reviewing and Scoring RFP responses

This guide will also feature promising practices and common pitfalls associated with Information Technology related RFP’s, as well as highlight additional resources available to entities as they move through the process.

***It is important to note that this guide is not intended to supersede procurement policies and procedures already in place within your organization or department.***However, it can be used alongside your existing procedures to assure you are getting the best results possible.

# What is an RFP?

**RFI, RFQ, or RFP?**

***Which is right for me?***

There are multiple ways to solicit Information Technology vendors and/or services.

For example, let’s say an organization wants to upgrade their system so that clients can submit applications online.

* A **Request for Information (RFI)** would identify a pool of companies who are qualified to design and implement online applications.
* A **Request for Quote (RFQ)** would ask potential vendors to simply provide a cost estimate (price quote) for designing and implementing an online application.
* A **Request for Proposal (RFP)** would require potential vendors to provide a price quote, action plan, deliverables, and timelines associated with developing an online application. Additionally, an RFP allows the organization to ask specific questions of potential vendors to assure they are the best fit for the project.

When an organization needs to find a vendor or service, they will often issue a Request for Proposals (RFP). At minimum, an RFP outlines the specific project or service needed, as well as a budget. Potential vendors must then submit bids to compete for the project.

A well-constructed RFP will yield the following:

* An action plan (specific steps the vendor would take to complete the project)
* Deliverables and/or benchmarks with a timeline (what you can expect and when you can expect it)
* How much the vendor believes the project will cost
* Any other background information you might request (e.g., experience working on similar projects, how the vendor would overcome particular challenges, etc)

There is no one “right” template for an RFP (or the process one uses to develop it!) However, most experts agree that the more specific an organization can be in terms of outlining their project scope, the better results they will get.

# Getting Started (Before you Develop your RFP)

One important benefit of the RFP process is transparency. CSBG entities do not work in a vacuum—therefore it is important for partners to get involved in developing the RFP (particularly for IT projects that could impact their day-to-day activities!) Before engaging others, it is important to nail down a basic road map for the work ahead. This includes determining high level parameters, identifying key partners and experts, as well as pinpointing RFP process leaders.

## Step One: Determining High Level Parameters for the RFP

As you move through the RFP process, it will be necessary to get input from partners and experts along the way. However, laying out non-negotiable parameters before you get started will be important in terms of managing expectations and keeping everyone on the same page (think “outer bounds”). Examples include, but are not limited to:

### Primary Objectives

#### This is ultimately the reason you are initiating the RFP process. ***What task or project must be accomplished at the end of the day?*** For example, if an organization is looking to come into compliance with new CSBG reporting guidelines, then the non-negotiable objective of the project would be to produce system reports that meet CSBG reporting requirements.

* **Deadlines**

While there may be some flexibility in terms of milestones or benchmarks throughout the project—there are often concrete deadlines an organization is aiming to meet when they issue an RFP. For example, an organization may have a goal to comply with some or all of the new CSBG reporting requirements by a particular fiscal year.

Once an overarching deadline is determined, you may want work backwards to set target dates for the RFP process itself. For example, an organization hoping to submit a complete report within two years probably has a little more time to issue an RFP than an organization trying to complete the same project in 9 months. The timeline you set for issuing and scoring the RFP will likely shape the extent to which you involve others in the process.

* **Approved Budget**

Your organization likely has a budget limit in mind to achieve the primary objective. It is important to establish this at the top of the process, and to make sure everyone contributing to the RFP development process is aware of funding constraints.

### Applicable agency, state, and federal procurement requirements

There are likely procurement requirements you must adhere to when developing an RFP, and knowing these up front will save you from having to “go back to the drawing board” later in the process. For example:

* Does your organization require an RFI before an RFP can be issued?
* Does initiating an RFP process require approval from leadership or external partners?
* Does your organization require (or limit) partner involvement in development of the RFP?
* Does your organization require (or prohibit) particular components to be included in the RFP language or scoring criteria?

Procurement requirements, including guidelines specific to RFP’s, will vary based on where your organization is in the state CSBG landscape. Therefore, it is critical to clarify limitations and requirements from both within your organization, as well as externally (see inset box on page 3).

## Step Two: Plan for Engaging Key Partners and Experts

**The CSBG Landscape**

***Where Am I At?***

Where you sit in your state CSBG landscape, as well as your current IT infrastructure, will have an impact on every step of the RFP process.

For example

* A **CSBG State Grantee with a statewide database)** will need to consider the impacts of IT updates or changes on local intake workers, program managers, and IT staff.
* A **local CSBG Entity who periodically provides data/reports to state office** will need to be sure that they are following state procurement policies, as well as adhering to the system and reporting requirements outlined in state policy manuals and subgrantee agreements. It may prove helpful for local agencies to include a state CSBG staff member in the development and/or review of the RFP.

After laying out the basics, it is time to determine a plan for engaging key partners and experts.

### Who Needs to be Engaged?

Identifying the partners and advisors (experts) you’d like to engage in the RFP process will depend on your organization’s procurement requirements, project scope, as well as where your organization sits in the CSBG landscape. For example, if you are a CSBG state grantee considering an overhaul to your intake and reporting system—it will be critical to get input from the subgrantees who use the system to do their day-to-day work (e.g., local intake workers, program managers, IT staff).

Conversely, if you are a local entity required to periodically report data from your system to the state CSBG office, it may prove valuable to involve someone from the state to assure compliance with reporting requirements.

### How Will We Engage Partners and Experts?

There is no one approach to collaborating with partners and experts on the development of an RFP. However, there are factors that may influence the strategy you select. For example, if your timeline is flexible, you may wish to have a committee of partners and experts engaged at every step of the process.

A tight timeline may require an organization to consult and/or interview partners and experts as needed along the way.

A hybrid approach can also be taken—perhaps getting input as needed to develop the RFP, then extensively involving a team of partners and experts in scoring the submittals.

As noted above, the RFP process provides organizations with an opportunity to be transparent and collaborative. This should be considered carefully when determining who and how partners will be engaged.

## Step Three: Identify RFP Project Leader(s)

#### The process of developing and scoring an RFP includes exchanges with multiple, diverse partners, experts, procurement specialists, organizational leadership, and potential bidders. Having one (or more) “gatekeepers” is essential for clear communication between all parties involved.

#### When selecting a gatekeeper or leader to oversee the RFP process (or parts of the process), it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

##### Based on the primary objective of the project, does the leader need to have subject matter expertise, or just good project management and communication skills?

##### If developing the RFP requires extensive communication with external stakeholders--should the project manager be someone who stakeholders trust or are willing to talk with?

##### Does your organization or department require that incoming proposals be handled and/or scored by a particular procurement officer or team?

## Getting Started Checklist (Example)

Below is an example checklist an organization might walk through (potentially with their procurement staff) as they are beginning an RFP process. A blank version of this checklist is available at the end of the guide.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What is the primary objective of the project or task?** | To develop a statewide data warehouse capable of generating CSBG required reports. |
| **What is the deadline for our primary objective?** | The state would like to generate a fully compliant report from the data warehouse for FY 2020. |
| * **By what date do we need to select a vendor?** | November 30. 2018 |
| * **By what date do we need to have submittals for scoring?** | November 7, 2018  *As per procurement specialist, it typically takes approximately 2-3 weeks for scoring and scoring verification.* |
| * **By what date do we need to issue RFP?** | By October 1, 2018  *This gives potential bidders a little over a month to submit.* |
| **What is our maximum budget for this project?** | $125,000 |
| **Are there specific procurement requirements we need to keep in mind as the RFP is drafted?** | * Preference is given to Women Owned Small Businesses * RFP must ask bidders to explain how they will comply with state administrative rules/statute related to system security and management of sensitive data (PII). * Partners or experts engaged in development of RFP are not allowed to submit proposal. * Procurement officer is the only person allowed to be in contact with potential bidders. She must serve as “gatekeeper”—and will route any questions as appropriate. |
| **What partners need to be involved in RFP process?** | * IT staff from local agencies * IT staff from state * Program Managers who will use data warehouse for reporting   *(Since this project will not impact current local systems or data collection, intake workers are not necessary to engage at this time)* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **What experts need to be involved in RFP process?** | * IT staff from local agencies * IT staff from state * State Data Server representative * Other state CSBG coordinators who have already gone through similar project. |
| **How will we engage partners and experts?** | * State IT office will conduct interview with each subgrantee IT specialist to identify existing local system specs, and to determine local preferences/needs for uploading data to state data warehouse. * Based on 1:1 interviews, state IT staff will draft initial RFP language. This will be reviewed by local IT staff. * State CSBG coordinator will use the fall training to present the draft RFP to program managers. This will allow program managers to express concerns, ask questions, as well as identify what specific reports they’d like to generate through the data warehouse. Requests regarding additional features or customized reports will be incorporated into draft RFP where feasible—otherwise, will be tracked for inclusion in future contract amendments, etc. * A handful of local IT staff will be selected to assist state IT staff, state CSBG program manager, and state procurement staff in scoring of submittals. |
| **Overall lead** | State CSBG Program Manager |
| * **Drafting RFP** | State CSBG IT Specialist |
| * **Issuing and Distributing RFP** | State Procurement officer |
| * **Answering questions from potential bidders** | State Procurement Officer |
| * **Drafting Scoring Criteria** | State CSBG IT Specialist |
| * **Scoring Submissions** | State CSBG IT Specialist /  CSBG Program Manager |
| * **Final Selection of Vendor** | State CSBG IT Specialist /  CSBG Program Manager |

# Developing the RFP

Once you have determined your basic parameters for the RFP process, it is time to develop the RFP. This guide walks through three major steps: engaging partners and experts to define project needs, drafting the RFP language, as well as publishing/circulating the RFP.

## Step One: Engage partners and experts to define and/or refine project work scope

In a way, this step could be considered a “needs assessment” of your current IT infrastructure. While you may already have a primary project objective laid out, this step is intended to hammer out all of the specific details you want to include in the RFP project scope of work.

### Affirm, clarify, and refine primary project objective(s)

Initial conversation with partners and experts involved in the RFP process should start with review of the primary project objective. This provides partners with an opportunity to ask questions and/or highlight parts of the objective that need clarification. More importantly, it assures that everyone is on the same page moving forward.

### Identify who will (or should) benefit from the project

This topic will become its own section in the RFP draft. However, outlining “who benefits” can also serve as a litmus test when plotting out project scope. For example, if a new system is intended to help local program managers use data for performance management—then a key aspect of the scope should include reporting features accessible to local users.

### Pinpoint system tools or features that are required to achieve primary objective

When developing RFP’s that involve information technology, it is important to get feedback from both end users, as well as system (IT) experts.

* **Users** will be able to quickly tell you about shortcomings associated with aspects of their current systems, as well as tools or features that are absolutely critical for doing their job. Sorting through both shortcomings and “must haves” to find common themes will provide a basis for project requirements in the RFP draft.
* **System (IT) experts** will be able to outline the technical requirements associated with your project objectives. This includes, but is not limited to, integration and/or compatibility with various systems, preferred software or hardware, as well as required security architecture.

In most cases, it is helpful to engage users first to identify what tools or features are considered “must have,” then ask system experts to chime in regarding what technical requirements are necessary to generate those tools and features.

### Identify system tools or features that are desired (but not necessarily required)

As partners and experts provide input regarding the project scope, asking them to classify their ideas as “must have” or “would be nice to have” will make it much easier to produce a project scope in your RFP. As noted above, by engaging users first, system experts can then tell you whether some of the “nice to have” features are feasible to include in the current RFP (given budget limits).

## Step Two: Draft the RFP Language

This section outlines some of the basic components included in most RFP’s, and provides example language for each.

### Project Description

### Developing a proposal takes a lot of time. A brief (one to two sentence) description of the project at the top of your RFP will give potential bidders an opportunity to decide whether it is worth their time to keep reading.

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Organizational Background

##### Some IT contractors prefer to work with particular sectors (e.g., non-profit, government, corporate). Providing some background about your organization and the work you do will be another important factor in whether a potential bidder develops a proposal or not.

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Project Objectives

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Budget

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Project Scope (including Benchmarks, Deliverables, Deadlines)

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Other Required Information/questions to be answered

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

### Contact and Deadline

**Example 1**

**Example 2**

## Step Three: Publish and Circulate the RFP

After review and approval of draft:

### Internal, state, and federal procurement policies regarding distribution and circulation

### Using multiple avenues for circulation (examples)

# REVIEWING AND SCORING RFP RESPONSES

Text here about necessity of clear, transparent scoring criteria.

## Step One: Develop scoring criteria

### Using RFP language to develop scorecard

* Text here re: advantage of developing scoring criteria alongside RFP. If not, important to use RFP language within the scoring criteria.

### Incorporate internal, state, and federal procurement policies regarding scoring

* Examples here including preference for WOSB, EDWOSB, or other designations.
* Example here of capacity to comply with state/federal system, sensitive data requirements (e.g., PII, HIPAA)

### Example scoring criteria/score cards

## Step Two: Review and score responses

### Internal, state, and federal procurement policy considerations

* Example here of suspension and disbarment
* Examples here of other criteria that may disqualify or prioritize particular proposals

### Stakeholder and expert engagement

##### Track record of bidder (e.g., have partners had good experiences with vendor in the past?)

##### Expert opinion on proposed technologies or ideas (e.g., what does it mean? Could it really work?)

# PROMISING PRACTICES, COMMON PITFALLS

### Lessons learned from the field

### Example: Change order requests (with sample language)

* Example: User testing (with sample language)
* Example: System/workflow integration (with sample language)
* Other Examples

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE

### CSBG Specific

#### Data definitions (to be used for consistent language in RFP and/or to be attached to RFP)

#### Other CSBG specific resources

### RFP Tools, Templates, and Guidance (not CSBG specific)

#### Links and descriptions