

Federal Funding – Agency Responses to Interview Questions

1. *How are topics selected to fund (in the context of both practice and evaluation research)?*

SAMHSA:

- Does not fund grants in practice and evaluation research, but does award grants for implementation and service activities. Topics are selected by a combination of congressional directives and agency priorities (see SAMHSA's Priorities).

NIMH:

- NIMH focuses more on the science than the topic (with some aspect related to health as they are a division of NIH). They require research to be hypothesis-driven and they focus on the connection between the intervention and mechanisms of action. They support pilot work. They have an interest in dissemination and implementation; like to see these aspects built in as soon as possible.
- NIMH likes things that can be done in a real-world setting. They are currently funding some reentry, police and court studies.

NIJ:

- Some director discretion. They also select topics based on areas in which they want to push development – either because they want to continue work in areas they are already funding or they want to leverage funding to push an area forward. NIJ always has topical working groups and personnel from these groups sometimes push for funding in their area. NIJ does not usually fund unsolicited projects. If you have such an idea about a topic, you can talk to a project officer and they can tell you where you might apply.
- You can find the topics of focus on the “topical pages” of the NIJ website (they are not in one location) Current topics include mental health and gun violence and technological developments (e.g. body cameras)

BJA:

- What they funds depends on the federal budget (e.g. Second chance act). They are a line –item in the congressional budget and typically don't have much discretionary money (maybe 10% of the budget – but the budget 1.6 billion!)
- If you want to have an early clue about what might be in the congressional budget, review the President's budget because that is what congress uses to set the budget

2. *What topics are SAMHSA most likely to fund?*

SAMHSA:

- Historically, as a result of our Congressional appropriations, SAMHSA's Criminal Justice portfolio has largely funded adult treatment drug courts. In addition, SAMHSA has also funded other

types of diversion efforts as well as offender reentry grants. SAMHSA does not fund services for individuals incarcerated in jails or prisons.

NIMH:

- NIMH is distinctive because they have lots of interest in CJ/MH issues, but they have a research focus and they are primarily interested in mental health outcomes rather than criminal justice outcomes. They follow a medical model approach; they are interested in finding people in need and getting services to them (adult and juvenile justice-involved individuals included), they are interested not only in treating symptoms but also in improving life-outcomes and general well-being.
- NIMH thinks about adult and juvenile justice issues through the lens of the sequential intercept model. Using the Sequential Intercept model as an orienting theme would be attractive and tying the project into their county plan (e.g. CJAB) would be attractive. There is also a growing interest in suicide prevention and there will be an announcement soon.

NIJ:

- MH and gun violence is a current “hot” topic.

BJA:

- Best thing to do is look at what was funded in the previous 2 years – this is likely what they will find in the coming year.

3. What is the best way to know when RFAs are posted?

SAMHSA:

- Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) are posted on SAMHSA’s website from approximately December to April, depending on the grant program. Interested parties can sign up for email alerts on the website.

NIMH:

- Grants.gov lists current RFAs. New announcements are posted under the agency. NIDA has a bigger criminal justice portfolio than NIMH, so review their list as well.
- NIMH does provide non-clinical trial funding (R34s) – this type of funding is appropriate for hypothesis building /studies in early development. This would be a match for settings that are collecting their own data and developing ways they can do quality improvement.

BJA:

- Check the OJP and BJA websites (OJP is the better option). They typically have new announcements between Dec and Feb – depending on when the budget is approved. BJA begins selecting funding topics and writing RFAs on Oct 1 (beginning of the fiscal year)

4. What is the availability and limitations on “open” solicitations that might support a wide array of topics?

SAMHSA:

- Does not fund open solicitations.

NIJ:

- They do not have unsolicited grant application – applications needs to fit within a written solicitation area. If you aren't sure, call the project officer. Check OJP website and Grants.gov. Can sign up for email alerts from NIJ.
- The list of topics changes year to year. RFAs typically come out in February and are due in April.
- BJA:
Criminal justice-based programs will usually fit somewhere (e.g. SMART policing, SMART supervision).

5. What do reviewers look for in an application and what are tips for constructing a more successful application (e.g. is there one aspect of an application that makes it more exciting and attractive for funding?)?

SAMHSA:

- Direct and comprehensive responses to the evaluation criteria make an application most competitive. SAMHSA appreciates applications that are solutions-focused and innovative and promote transformation in behavioral health services.
- For all grants, SAMHSA has created a transparent evaluation process. In the FOA, the evaluation criteria are listed, along with the number of points awarded for each criterion. Submitted applications are reviewed by a non-federal, external panel of experts to be scored based on an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in meeting the evaluation criteria. Awards are then based on overall scores.
- SAMHSA suggests that all grant applicants **respond directly and comprehensively to each criterion**. Additionally,
 - Headings and subheadings should be utilized.
 - Identify the question and respond with the answer.
 - Respond to all parts of each criterion.
- A rule of thumb is to make a reviewer's evaluation process of your grant as easy as possible.

NIMH:

- Agencies that are connected with an academic setting will do better. Build a record of collaboration – it's helpful if that is in place.
- Other features that reviewers will find attractive include:
 - Tight connection between the hypothesis and activities
 - A plan for rapid dissemination and implementation
 - A connection to real life setting, more immediately useable
 - Interest in getting junior researchers started in their field (but should be connected to a mentor); they want diversity in who they fund
 - Interest in adaption of services for other populations (e.g. minority) only if there is evidence regarding the need to make the adaptation
 - They like interventions that are broadly useable for people in a setting, not too specific to one group

- Be aware that someone who knows the method you are using will be on the review committee and will carefully scrutinize your methodology.

NIJ:

- Partnerships are seen as very attractive.
- Write well and edit it – take the time to do this well. If it isn't written well, it won't do well in the review process.
- Have a clear research question and specify how the activities are linked
- Make sure the topic/question is a good match to what they say in the solicitation
- NIJ applications are reviewed by criminologist-types but this will vary within NIJ (e.g. if a school based program, there will likely be a psychologist on the review team).
- If a MH organization is applying there should be some theory behind what they are doing; the theory can go beyond criminology
- NIJ will occasionally do joint funding with NIH, but it's not common
- Needs to have a research implication with a national focus – can't be just something to help a single location. The application should be clear about how the project improves the general knowledge about an area or provides the type of information that can be used widely to change practice.
- If it is a program evaluation, make the case that the program can be used elsewhere. Cost savings/benefit information is always good to include.

BJA:

- They like academic-practitioner partnerships a lot...they are highly valued. In fact, BJA will soon offer resources to and training to do this. They are planning to launch a new website (should be up by Dec 1, 2015) called "Center for Research Partnerships & Evaluation." They will offer a range of resources (e.g. webinars, data tips) for establishing these partnerships.
- They will do "field initiated solicitations" to encourage innovation...they hope to do it this year
- Be clear about how the application is going to be scored (by reviewing the RFA) and be sure to address each of the areas that are the basis of scoring. This is key- the applicant needs to respond to each requirement listed the scoring section.

6. What are the support resources offered by your agency to assist counties in formulating and submitting a grant (particularly since many counties feel they have no shot at getting federal dollars for their local projects)?

SAMHSA:

- Potential applicants should review the eligibility criteria; many SAMHSA grants are offered to counties. However, if a grant is not open to a county (or other type of jurisdiction), there might be another role the jurisdiction can play in a collaborative grant application.
- Applicants are encouraged to call the program contact to ask questions. The contact information for the point of contact is listed in each FOA.
- Additionally, all programs hold a pre-application webinar. Webinar details will be listed in the FOA.

NIMH:

- Speak to the program officers – they will help you to understand what they are looking for; best to do this early on when you are developing the proposal
- Show collaboration with partners through the entire process, not just when the grant starts
- Contacts: NIMH: Denise Juliano-Bolt, NIDA: Tisha Wiley

NIJ:

- Weak in this area- they really don't have good supports for grantees. Attend conferences/ and listen in on webinars to try to learn what you can.

BJA:

- If the applicant has any questions about the scoring criteria they should call the phone number listed in the proposal (may or may not have a program officer listed)
- Also check the BJA website: Grant writing/management academy

7. What are successful mechanisms or suggestions for sustainability when funding for a project ends?**SAMHSA:**

- Begin thinking about sustainability as soon as you receive an award.
- Build broad community support. The collaborations, coalitions, and relationships that are developed throughout the grant can help support sustainability when funding ends.
- Collect data on outcomes. Funding agencies like to see evidence of effectiveness.
- Consider that some components can be sustained if the whole project cannot. Sustainability is not all or nothing.

NIMH:

- Sustainability is very important.
- Build training into the organizational structure. This will help ensure that the ideas continues beyond the end of any one project.
- Include ideas to maintain fidelity during the study that can be ongoing after the funding ends.
- Strive for interventions that are deliverable in a real-world setting by professionals with organizational supports built in to continue to work with the professionals after funding.

NIJ:

- NIJ has more of a focus on initial funding and less on sustainability- they fund things to generate new idea/knowledge generating. They feel that the local/state funds should pick up the funding for sustainability

BJA:

- Start planning for sustainability when you start the project. Look for community partners (eg. businesses, foundations) to get involved from the beginning of the process, not just at the end
- Consult a report by RAND on sustainability. They focused on 3 specific programs within BJA, but reading the report will give good ideas for sustainability. (This report is called “An Assessment of Program Sustainability in Three BJA Criminal Justice Domains” and is available on the COE website under the tab for Document library/Data systems and grant development.)

8. Any other words of advice for counties?

NIMH:

- Be prepared that the process takes time. It’s about a year between the application-review and start of the grant if funded.
- Rarely are projects funded after the first attempt so be prepared for multiple interactions and attempts to get funding.
- Work with collaborators along the way.

BJA:

- Big proponent of reading other applications to learn what to include/not include and to see examples of good writing. Can read other applications by becoming a grant peer reviewer for BJA. If they are interested in begin a peer reviewer, go to the BJA website -funding/current funding opps and select the option for “how to become a peer reviewer”.