

Quick Guide: What Funders Look for in Potential CVI Grantees and Proposals

ARCvi Domain: [Finding and Sustaining Funding](#)

This ARCvi Quick Guide outlines the common qualities funders look for in potential CVI grantees and in strong grant proposals. Although each RFP or solicitation has its own criteria, funders generally want to understand who you are, what your program does, why it matters, and whether your organization has the trust, clarity, and capacity to deliver on what it proposes.

There is no single formula for what all funders want. Different grant programs, solicitations, and request for proposals (RFPs) emphasize different things depending on the funder, the amount of funding, the population of interest, and the type of work being supported. Still, across many funding opportunities, there are common signals of organizational readiness and proposal quality that can help CVI programs strengthen an application before it is submitted.

In general, funders look for alignment, clarity, credibility, and feasibility. They want to see that your organization is rooted in the community, understands the problem it is trying to address, has a clear and realistic approach, and can responsibly manage the funds requested. This quick guide offers general guidance on what funders often look for, while recognizing that every grant opportunity has its own specific criteria and review standards.

Digital Presence

Before they ever meet you, many funders will look at your website, social media, and other public-facing materials to form an initial impression of your organization. Those materials should make it easy to understand who you are, what you do, who you serve, and why your work matters.

Your social media and website should clearly tell the funders about your mission, your programs and impact, and your community. Key tips:

- Show real work, events, faces, community moments, and impact stories.
- Be real and consistent. There is no need to be fancy.
- Ask a friend who doesn't know your work to read your website and tell you what they understand.

The Free Library BRIC and The Nonprofit Center at La Salle offer free support for organizations wanting to improve their digital presence and grant-readiness. Also see our resources listing with links to organizations and more in ARCvi's [Finding and Sustaining Funding](#) section.

Organizational Values & Mission Clarity

Strong proposals usually communicate more than a list of activities. They show how an organization's mission, values, and approach fit the community it serves and the goals of the funder. For CVI programs, this often means demonstrating

community trust, lived experience in leadership, and a clear connection between your work and the realities participants face.

Funders want to know what your organizational aims and values are and if they align with theirs.

Organizational missions and values should be expressed with clear and honest storytelling about your community and your work.

Key tips:

- Show your track record, even with formal and informal evidence of outcomes, participation, and the trust built.
- Demonstrate with evidence that you are embedded in and trusted by the community, and that people with lived experience are in leadership and not just on paper.

Have a Clear Theory of Change

Funders do not need academic language, but they do need to understand your logic. A strong proposal makes clear what activities you provide, who receives them, why they matter in your setting, and what changes you expect to result. A clear theory of change helps reviewers see that your request is grounded in a practical strategy rather than a loose list of services.

Use plain language to say: 'When we do [this activity], with [these people], in [this way], because [of this community reality], it leads to [this change].' It is grounded in your community's reality and your organization's approach. Funders want to understand your logic, not test your academic vocabulary. See our [Theory of Change](#) section under ARCvi's subdomain "Using Data that Matters" for more details on what it is and how to construct one specific for your organization and community.

Understanding the Grant Eligibility Criteria

Even strong programs can waste time on grants that are not a good fit. Funders often want to see that applicants have read the solicitation carefully, understand the eligibility rules, and can connect the request to the specific purpose of the funding opportunity. This includes understanding whether the grant supports direct services, infrastructure, evaluation, partnerships, or a particular target population.

Funders look to see if you understand the eligibility criteria of the grant. Every grant has eligibility criteria, therefore, read them carefully before spending time on an application. See our key points on grant eligibility criteria, and grant ranges and budget sizes in our Quick Guide: [How to Tell if a Grant Is Worth Pursuing](#). Key tips include:

- Have a realistic, thoughtful budget that shows you understand the different related costs for your organization.
- Demonstrate that your organization's mission and work are genuinely aligned with what the funder is trying to support.

These are general guideposts, not universal rules. Always return to the specific solicitation: some funders will weigh readiness, partnerships, evidence, evaluation, or geographic fit more heavily than others. The strongest proposals stay true to the organization's mission while clearly responding to the opportunity in front of them.