

# First Things First

Request for Grant Applications  
Process Review  
*Findings and Recommendations*

## Executive Summary

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Report of Findings and Recommendations regarding the First Things First Request for Grant Applications (RFGA) process addresses the themes, issues and opportunities identified through a review of the current written documentation and input from multiple stakeholders.

The purpose of the Request for Grant Application Review was to assess the current process and develop recommendations for methods to:

- Streamline the process and/or timeline.
- Increase the number of qualified bidders.
- Increase the solicitor and bidder satisfaction.
- Continue to ensure awards are made to qualified bidders.
- Create potential for services to be delivered in underserved areas.

Finally, all recommendations must ensure that the process will continue to be considered fair and competitive.

The review yielded many observations, experiences, and ideas for improvement in the RFGA process; however, the significant progress of First Things First in building infrastructure and awarding funding that has positively impacted the lives of thousands of children was consistently acknowledged.

## ***Findings***

Many of the developmental aspects of the RFGA process such as standards of practice, logic models, reporting requirements, and completion of the first Regional Funding Plans are foundational activities that either do not have to be completed in future RFGA cycles and/or need only to be updated as appropriate. Much of the complexity and rigorous timelines described by stakeholders through this review can be specifically attributed to the need to complete these foundational steps (sometimes simultaneously) within a limited time frame. In an effort to assure the best possible result for these developmental activities, input from multiple FTF sources as well as community stakeholders was sought and incorporated into the final products.

The findings represent the results of all information gathering processes; i.e. document review, initial staff input, surveys, and focus group discussions.

1. *Stakeholder satisfaction with the current First Things First Request for Grant Application System is generally low among RPC Members (56% satisfied) and among providers (49.1% satisfied).*
2. *FTF Staff and Regional Partnership Council Members have differing perceptions of the role and priorities of the Regional Partnership Council Members.*
3. *The development and processing of RFGAs involves many organizational units and individuals within FTF and the role and responsibility of each person it is not always clear.*

4. *The ability to share information pre-RFGA with Council members is unclear and as a result processes are inconsistently implemented across Regions.*
5. *The perceived or real conflict of interest requirements are impacting the ability of the Regional Partnership Councils to conduct its statutory responsibilities regarding planning and funding of early childhood development and health.*
6. *The RFGA document is viewed as complicated, redundant and confusing - difficult for the applicant to really know what information is being requested.*
7. *Regional Coordinators play a crucial role in the RFGA process from inception to conclusion; however, the expectation that Coordinators bear the responsibility for relaying technical information from FTF administration (Policy and Finance) to the Regions is problematic.*
8. *Applicants are responding to RFGA's in multiple Regions, an average of 3.47 Regions per provider responding to the survey.*
9. *The response to applicant questions regarding the RFGAs and the issuance of amendments were viewed as effective although 40% of staff believe there was not adequate time to prepare responses.*
10. *A majority of applicants responding to the survey felt that the pre-application conferences were effective (64%), were held in adequate time to incorporate information into the application preparation process (63%) and were held at convenient times and locations (63%).*
11. *The process for review of Grant Applications is generally considered to be effective.*
12. *There are inconsistencies in the procedures used for application review including how Policy and Finance staff comments are incorporated, the level of subjective discussion allowed, and the process used for recommended allocation of funding when multiple eligible applicants respond.*
13. *Regional Partnership Councils typically accept the recommendations from the Application Review Committees.*
14. *There were not enough quality responses to some RFGAs.*

### **Recommendations**

The First Things First RFGA process review has identified significant strengths in the current process that can be viewed as stepping stones to the refinement of the system envisioned by the recommendations presented. Many core elements of the process have been developed and implemented successfully. The experience of the past 18 months provides guide posts for the next steps in creating a process that maximizes staff, Regional Partnership Council member, and applicant time and resources and enhances overall satisfaction and a continued fair and competitive process.

### ***Related Practice and Policy***

Recommendation 1: Stagger the overall schedule of due dates for Funding Plans so that all Councils do not have to complete their Funding Plans at the same time which would allow for staged timing of RFGA development and award processes.

Recommendation 2: Develop policy and strategies with regard to evidence-based practice in the context of system building; i.e. define how funding will be intentionally directed to current evidence-based practice, to proven practice that may not yet have a research base and to new innovative programs.

Recommendation 3: Create incentives for Regional Partnership Councils to collaborate on elements of their Funding Plans and implementation strategies.

Recommendation 4: Develop and provide easily accessible training and education opportunities for staff, Council Members and community stakeholders about best practice models, standards of practice and logic models.

Recommendation 5: Clear and consistent information about conflict of interest and the practical application of the requirements in the context of managing Regional Partnership Council meetings is needed.

Recommendation 6: To allow for the maximum input from Council members with expertise, and the least disruption to the Council meeting process, structure the agendas and meeting schedules to clearly separate those items where Council members may have a conflict.

Recommendation 7: Explore additional options to obtain the expertise that is lost when Council members must recuse themselves.

### ***Developing the RFGA Document***

Recommendation 8: Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all FTF staff involved in the RFGA process specifically delineating lead responsibility and expected results.

Recommendation 9: Regional Coordinators and Regional Partnership Council members be provided a specific opportunity to review the scope of work and incorporate Region specific intent.

Recommendation 10: The development of standards of practice and logic models should, in part, define the First Things First continuum of services as well as inform the scope of work in the RFGA documents.

Recommendation 11: The RFGA document needs to be streamlined, unduplicated and presented in a logical manner that is user friendly and facilitates responsiveness to the scope of work by applicants and to the evaluation criteria used to assess the quality of the application.

Recommendation 12: At the earliest possible date, allow submittal of applications to be electronic, use an electronic template, and create an electronic vendor of background documentation.

Recommendation 13: Establish a qualified vendor list / file of vendors that have applied for and received funding for a specific program/service. With future RFGA's for the same service, do not require the qualified vendors to resubmit all the detail backup documentation. Require qualified vendors to submit only the response to the specific scope of work sections relative to the Region requesting the service, to the budget aspects of the RFGA and to any other unique requirements.

Recommendation 14: Develop policy and specific plans for evaluation of programs (as opposed to data reporting requirements) and make that information available to current and potential applicants.

Recommendation 15: Explore the possibility of implementing a tiered process for Requests for Grant Applications that would require a more limited amount of documentation for grants under a specific dollar threshold.

### ***The Application Review Process and Award***

Recommendation 16: Application Review Committees would be strengthened with representation of people with specific knowledge of the community they are reviewing and parents of young children.

Recommendation 17: A written detailed procedure is needed for the review process to eliminate inconsistencies in the application review procedures and to ensure clear, consistent recommendations to and from the Regional Partnership Councils.

Recommendation 18: Conduct two-tiered review – technical (administrative and programmatic) of applications to 1) determine responsiveness to the RFGA and 2) provide additional input to the Application Review Committee.

Recommendation 19: Consider delegation of award approvals by the Board of Directors to the Executive Director for awards for less than a designated dollar threshold.

### ***Promoting Grant Opportunities / Building the System***

Recommendation 20: Implement a system of capacity building including mini- grants to assist agencies in building their own capacity, technical assistance, training and mentoring.

Recommendation 21: Ensure that potential applicants are aware of the grant opportunities through use of multiple methods of announcing grant opportunities and technical assistance and training.

Recommendation 22: A community education, public relations campaign about First Things First is needed to better engage community stakeholders in both the planning and the delivery of services.

## Conclusion

The recommendations in this report are the result of the thoughtful participation of stakeholders throughout the State that have been and remain dedicated to positively impacting outcomes for Arizona's young children and their families. Tremendous strides have been made in initiating the early steps of building a system of early childhood development and health in Arizona. The experience and expertise of these stakeholders and the willingness of all to focus on the next best steps was apparent throughout the review process.

### ■ The First Things First System of Accountability

Through this review there was virtually no discussion of the accountability framework already in place for ensuring a fair and competitive RFGA process. Identify or create opportunities to highlight the checks and balances and the accountability built into the RFGA process, such as, the required linkage between community needs and funding plans, the objective process of evaluating and awarding funding and the final review and approval by Regional Partnership Councils of funding recommendations and approval by the Board of Directors.

### ■ First Things First System Building

Next to the presence and commitment of Regional Partnership Councils, the FTF Board of Directors, providers of service, community stakeholders and FTF staff, the RFGA process represents one of the strongest tools FTF has for system building. In defining policy, practice and RFGA documents, the vision of building a strong, statewide system must be paramount. That vision is beginning to be realized through the Regional Funding Plans and initial awards. The strength of the RFGA process in providing direction for that system building should not be lost in the detail of creating supporting documents.

### ■ Next Steps

The single most important set of recommendations that will improve the satisfaction with and responsiveness to the RFGA process are those related to the Development of the RFGA. Streamlining this part of the process and the document itself based on the lessons learned impacts all of the objectives of this review.

While many of the recommendations will require significant time and resources to implement, early attention to the RFGA document and clear delineation of roles and responsibilities can be immediate steps.

Secondly, First Things First has a positive story to tell and the telling of that story not only builds broad community support but also engages communities and specifically providers of service in these initial steps of building a system.