2026 IMLS Library Convening 250

WINNING GRANTS FOR RURAL LIBRARIES

Practical Strategies and Responsible AI Use

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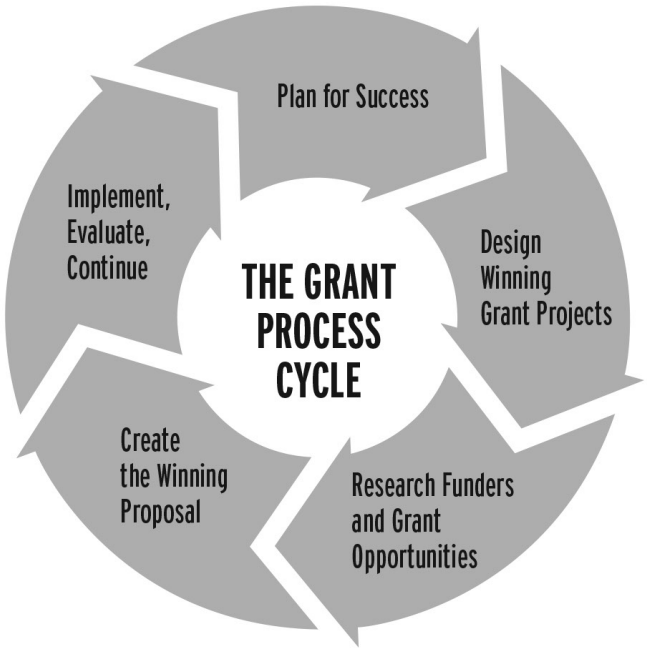
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Workshop Roadmap

Winning Grants for Rural Libraries

Strong grants start with real community needs. Focus on people.

Grant work is about meeting the needs of the community served.



Today we will focus on:

- Understanding the Grant Process
- Identifying Community Needs
- Designing Grant Projects with Impact
- Keeping Evaluation Realistic
- Finding Funders that Fit
- Using Best Practices and AI Tools

The most important thing to remember is to focus on people.

What I want to leave with today

One idea, one funder to research, one person to contact, or one next step

Plan for Success

Strong grants start with real community needs. Focus on people.

Use what you already have: strategic plans, community feedback, local data, community partners, and the people who know your community well.

Success happens when preparation meets opportunity. Use what is available to plan ahead. Strategic plans are a grant writing time saver and a key to success! The main components for proposals and the inspiration for grant projects are easily found in a well-developed plan.

Plans, data, needs assessments I can use

People who can help with grant work

3-5 community needs *Focus on people, not things: what problem, challenge, or gap do they face?*

Needs statement *Who is affected + the need + why it matters*

Design Winning Grant Projects

Strong grants start with real community needs. Focus on people.

A strong grant project is the library's response to a compelling community need. The project should clearly help the people named in the need statement.

Primary audience *Who is most affected? Who is not being served well enough?*

Possible partners *Who shares the goal, reaches the audience, or adds needed skills/resources?*

Project idea *What will our library do to respond to the need?*

Goals, objectives, and outcomes

Goals *(the broad direction of the project)*

Objectives *(specific, measurable targets)*

Outcomes *(improvements in skills, confidence, access, attitude, or behavior)*

Show Impact with PIE

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Practical Impact Evaluation
Keep evaluation simple and useful. What will you do, what will change, and how will you show it? The goal is to show real impact clearly and credibly.

The PIE Model

Show the impact.

DO	CHANGE	SHOW
• Activities • Services • Programs • Target audience	• Skills gained • Behaviors changed • Access improved • Confidence increased	• Simple measures • Surveys • Outputs + outcomes • Stories + data

DO *What are 2-4 things we will do or track?*

CHANGE *What will improve or be different?*

SHOW *What simple evidence can we collect?*

Is this realistic with current library staff and resources? Can this be collected easily? Does this clearly show impact?

Research Funders and Use AI Wisely

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Funder fit check

- ☐ Mission match
- ☐ Geographic match
- ☐ Eligible applicant
- ☐ Right grant size
- ☐ Right project type
- ☐ Deadline is realistic

AI reminders

- Do not include confidential or identifying patron data.
- Use public or summarized information.
- Review outputs. Verify everything.
- AI can suggest. You decide.
- AI cannot replace local knowledge or relationships.

Funders or websites to explore

AI prompts or tools I want to try *Keep prompts safe, public, and non-confidential.*

Create the Winning Proposal

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Every proposal must answer:

1. What need is being met?

Show the community problem or gap.

2. Who will be helped or changed?

Name the audience and benefit.

3. How will you do it?

Describe the project clearly.

4. Why should this be funded?

Make the case for fit and impact.

Proposal summary *Need + audience + project + hoped-for results*

Notes for creating the winning proposal *Clarity beats complexity. People matter most.*

Grant Project Plan

Strong grants start with real community needs. Focus on people.

Turn one idea into a simple early grant concept.

Community need *Community issue or gap*

Primary audience *Who is most affected?*

Project idea *What will the library do?*

Outcomes *What will improve?*

Main activities *Action steps, services, events, or activities*

Evidence *Justify the importance*

Budget size *Key expenses & estimated total*

Two-sentence summary

Our library wants to ___ for ___ because ___. We will do this by ___ so that ___.

Implement and Continue

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Whether funded or not funded

A grant decision is feedback, not the end of the process. Celebrate, learn, revise, and keep building relationships.

If funded, first steps:

If not funded, next steps:

My next 3 actions *Specific, realistic baby steps:*

Timeline *What I will do in the next 7 days / 30 days / 90 days:*

Notes

Strong grants start with real community needs. Focus on people.

I got this!

I will focus on people, design a clear project, choose a funder that fits, and show the impact in a way my library can manage.

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Winning Grants: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians
(ALA Editions)