

CONNECT News

Community Support, Networking, and Assistance for Environmental Career Training



The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute of the Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (HMTRI-EICC), through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA), assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI distributes CONNECT News, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program.

This month's issue expands on topics discussed in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) related to development, submission, and follow-ups strategies related to EPA's Brownfields Job Training Grants.



Brownfield Job Training Grant Development, Submission and Follow-up

Since the beginning of the Brownfields Job Training (JT) Program, EPA has funded over 400 grants totaling approximately \$93.5 million. Approximately 20,600 individuals have completed training, with over 15,300 graduates have obtaining employment in the environmental field. For FY24, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) will allow EPA's Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization (OBLR) to award approximately 24 five-year grants with a maximum of \$500,000 each. While the window FY24 applications has passed, it is anticipated that a similar competition will be conducted for FY25 grants. This issue of CONNECT expands on strategies summarized in HMTRI Professional Learning Community (PLC) sessions exploring techniques applicants have used in submitting successful grants and comments evaluators have made during post review briefings. HMTRI PLC sessions can be found at <https://brownfields-toolbox.org/plc-sessions/>

Technical Assistance Available to Organizations Interested in Developing JT Programs in Their Community

For organizations interested in establishing brownfields job training in their community, there is an abundance of information available from EPA, HMTRI (EPA's job training technical assistance provider) and Grants.gov (the federal government's portal for submitting grant applications).

Technical Assistance From EPA

For general assistance understanding EPA's Brownfields grant programs, the agency has established an informational resource at <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields>. To learn about technical assistance available to prospective grant applicants, interested individuals can go to: <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfields-technical-assistance-and-research>.

Applications for EPA job training grants are usually posted each summer. After EPA's Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization (OBLR) posts a Request for Applications (RFA), a Zoom call is scheduled to review application guidelines. Announcements are posted on both the EPA and the Grants.gov website. FY24 Guidelines that were due on August 2nd, 2023 can be found at: [FY24 RFA Guidelines](#). There is a high likelihood that application guidelines for FY25 will be similar to the FY24 Request for Proposals. After each posting, EPA prepares a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to assist prospective applicants in preparing their Job Training (JT) applications. Go to [FY24 FAQs to review this year's frequently asked questions](#).

The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute

The hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) is EPA's job training technical assistance provider. HMTRI provides technical assistance and professional development to prospective, new, and current JT grantees. Examples of services available to interested organizations include the following.



- **The Brownfields Toolbox**
HMTRI's repository for all things related to establishing and maintaining an environmental job training program. <http://brownfields-toolbox.org/>
- **The Environmental Workforce Professional Learning Community (PLC)**
Biweekly informal networking sessions addressing topics and strategies related to the development of successful JT programs. <https://brownfields-toolbox.org/plc-sessions/>
- **All-Grantee Meetings**
HMTRI invites past, current, and prospective JT grant recipients to a two-day networking and idea exchange.
- **Mid-year Grantee Networking and Refresher Events**
Mid-year refreshers update participants on the latest developments and best practices being used by JT programs.
- **Individualized Technical Assistance**
One-on-one outreach and assistance regarding JT issues is provided as requested.

Technical Assistance from Grants.gov (The Federal Government's Grant Submission Portal)

Interested organizations may go directly to the Grants.gov website. A direct link to the FY24 job training RFA is <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/view-opportunity.html?oppld=348423>.

To learn more about using the government's grants portal, go to the following location: <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/home.html>.

Users can also call the grants.gov Help Desk for assistance at 1-800-518-4726.

A Timeline for Application Submission and Receipt of Federal Assistance

EPA has been relatively consistent regarding the grant cycle for JT grants. While not released by EPA and subject to change, the FY25 competition might look like this:

- Prospective applicants need to consider if brownfields is applicable in their community - A year prior to anticipated application due date.
- Applicants need to begin community and labor market assessments, establish relationships with potential employers. And potential partners – January.
- Requests for Applications (RFAs) are issued - June.
- Applications are due in August - 60 days are provided to write and submit grant application.
- Applicants not eligible to receive federal funding under this program are notified 15 days after applications are due - September.
- Notification of applications recommended for funding are published - January or February of the following year.
- Workplans and grant finalization takes place - Spring and Summer.
- Award finalization and authorization to spend - Before September 30th (a little over one year from application submission date).
- Recruitment, training, and placement - takes place in the following 4 years.
- Final placement, graduate tracking, and grant windup - 5th year of the grant.

Assembling a Team That will Develop and Administer Job Training

To begin this conversation, it should be noted that many organizations applying for EPA Job training assistance are small and do not have staff available to develop the initial proposal. It is not unusual for a single person to fill all the positions about to be discussed. Larger nonprofit and governmental organizations are able to use a combination of partners working part time to develop and administer the program. Grant application development is not an allowable cost when considering Federal assistance. When individuals are available, an ad hoc group is formed in the early stages of the program and usually go on to participate in and support the program as it matures. Team members include individuals with the following skill sets, interests, and responsibilities.

- **Project Coordination and Reporting**
The project manager orchestrates the entire project, sets milestones and deliverables.
- **Community Outreach**
Community assessment incorporates community development. Individuals must be familiar with local communities, residents, and community organizations. He/she is responsible for student recruitment, assessment, and retention strategies.
- **Governmental Outreach**
Requires an individual familiar with local legislation, grants, city government, and state supported programs.
- **Employer and Advisor Outreach**
This position involves labor market assessment, knowledge of the business environment, and conducting labor market assessments.
- **Technical Training**
The “techie” of the team needs to be familiar with environmental and OSHA training, has training experience and contacts with training.
- **Leveraging, Program Development and Sustainability**
Requires a team effort of individuals previously discussed.
- **Grant Writing and Administration**
Grant writing may involve several individuals including application development, editing, budgeting, accounting, and grants administration.

Responding to a JT Request for Grant Funding

JT grant applications, while submitted as a single PDF document, consist of 4 parts:

Federal Forms

Federal forms are required as part of all Federal applications. There are no page restrictions for completing this section of the application. EPA and Grants.gov provide specific instruction on filling out mandatory federal forms.

Three-page Narrative Information Sheets

Three-page Narrative Information Sheets or Threshold Criteria are used as a screen identifying proposals eligible for funding per EPA Job Training Program guidelines. The first and second sections of the application tend to be administrative in nature and are usually put together as the application develops. Narrative information sheets (threshold criteria) support information presented in the 12-page narrative. In order for your application to be evaluated, it must first pass all threshold criteria.

Threshold criteria are evaluated on a pass/fail basis. If an applicant fails to meet any of the threshold criteria listed in the RFA, the application will be disqualified from further consideration and the applicant will be notified within 15 business days of the determination.

The 12-Page Narrative

Applications that pass threshold review will be scored on responses to questions presented in the narrative portion of the RFA by a national review panel. This section is the evaluation portion of the application. JT applications are ranked with a perfect score of around 200 points. Each evaluation or ranking criteria presented in the guidelines is assigned a point value. Depending on applicant responses to each ranking criteria, points are assigned and totaled. Final scores are reviewed and applications with the highest totals are recommended for funding consideration. It should be noted that special consideration is given to applicants in an attempt to level the playing field between new and experienced grantees, rural versus urban grantees and communities with special situations.

The 15-Page Attachment

The attachment section of the application is a space to provide supplemental information not included in the narrative including letters of support and special considerations. It is important to note that page limits for each section are strictly enforced. Materials presented beyond those limits are discarded.

Submitting Applications Through Grants.Gov

JT applications must be submitted through the grant.gov website. Applicants must:

- Be registered at www.grants.gov.
- Have a unique entity identifier (UEI).
- Have an active System for Award Management (SAM) account in www.sam.gov.
- Be designated as your organization's AOR.

For detailed information on submitting JT grants review EPA's Tips for Submitting brownfields grant Go to. [How to Apply Through Grants.gov \(pdf\)](#)

It is important to allow enough time to submit application packages allowing for unexpected errors that may require resubmission.

Proposal Development and Grant Writing Strategies

Each organization has their own approach to organizing and responding to grant applications. In many cases, a single individual will write the entire grant. In other situations, grant writing will be more methodical as previously described in this newsletter. Below are strategies suggested by successful EPA JT grantees that prospective applicants may wish to consider.



Program Development

- As the grant develops, obtain employer letters of support and commitment to consider program graduates.
- Recruit and commit key partners regarding specific contributions to the program.
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- Obtain letters of commitment from partners and governmental organizations leveraging JT resources identified in the application.
- Attend, participate, and document public meetings in the narrative section of the RFA.
- Establish an advisory board prior to application submission. Board members should include representatives from the community, government, training organizations, employers, leveraging partners, and supporters.
- Compete, screen, and select prospective trainers (with the condition of EPA funding) as part of application development process.
- Document meetings and public events.
- Research special programs in addition to those that can contribute to Other Factors.

Grant Writing Strategies

- Dissect the RFA and break out each section and deliverable. (Identify every request for information.)
- Assign every request for information to the individual best suited to respond to each question. Ensure your team has personnel or volunteers covering all the critical components of JT operation including community outreach, recruitment, training, retention, case management, partnership development and employer relationships.
- Quality check that each section is legible, succinct, and complete. (At each handoff stage)
- Conduct frequent progress updates. Discuss the progress and direction of the proposal as a team, meeting regularly reporting progress in responding to information requests. Surface roadblocks and problems early.
- As the narrative is constructed, avoid generalizations. Be as quantitative as possible.
- If possible, a single individual should be responsible for writing the final proposal. This maintains a consistent writing style, ensures continuity, and avoids piecemeal responses and contradictions.
- Circulate program plans to key partners during development of the application. Send drafts of the proposal to advisors and key partners for review.

Frequent Errors and Omissions Applicants Have Made in Presenting Their JT Applications

Over the years, HMTRI has collected evaluator comments, from Regional Coordinators and former grant recipients. Comments are not all inclusive and may not apply to every application. FYI, here are frequent errors applicants have made when presenting their proposed program plan.

- Budget numbers did not add up.
- Costs were unrealistic.
- Travel to Brownfields meetings were not included.
- A labor market assessment or employer survey was not presented.
- There was no contact with potential employers.



- Did not mention leveraging.
- Post employment tracking was not addressed.
- Target placement goals were not present.
- No discussion of specific population to be trained.
- Environmental Justice was not addressed.
- No mention of Brownfields.
- Training cycles were unclear.
- Student retention was not addressed
- Letters of Support do not state roles and/or commitments, only support.
- Health and safety considerations were not addressed.
- There was no mention of drug testing in screening process or required minimum educational background prerequisites.
- The proposal is difficult to comprehend.
- Applicant did not follow guidelines.
- Applicant did not respond to criteria in sequence.

Evaluator Comments Regarding Application Deficiencies

Below are additional comments that have cost evaluation points or have completely disqualified the grant application.

General Submission Errors

- The application was submitted with another organization's account information.
- Applicant used the wrong UEI number.
- The submitter is not the Authorized Organization Representative (AOR).
- The applicant did not have an active www.SAM.gov account and had another party submit an application package on their behalf.
- Applicant's www.SAM.gov account was inactive.
- The proposal was difficult to comprehend.
- Applicant did not follow guidelines.
- Applicant did not respond to criteria in sequence.
- Applicant response to sub-categories were not on point, and/or incomplete and were unclear.



Community Description

- Community involvement and notification regarding proposed JT project, was not discussed in detail.
- There was no discussion of public meetings, attendance records, and community roles in the development and composition of the JT proposal.
- There was no discussion of social and public health issues.
- There was no discussion of Specific population to be trained.
- EJ issues were not discussed.
- Demographic data was provided but it was sporadic and not cohesive.
- Specific environmental concerns as a result of the presence of Brownfields in the Community was not discussed.
- Environmental, social, and economic issues was not linked to the impact of the presence of Brownfields in the targeted area.

- Demographic stats were provided but no contrasting data (from state, county, city, or national stats) to show the need.
- Demographic stats were provided but ineffective and was not drastically indicative of need.
- Sensitive population was not discussed.
- There was no discussion regarding outreach/recruitment to target specific populations, i.e., unemployed, underemployed, ex-offenders, etc. with justified need for training (unemployment stats).

Labor Market Demand

- Applicant failed to link labor market assessment to curriculum.
- The applicant missed direct coordination with local employers.
- An employer survey was not evidenced.
- There were no direct surveys or polling of local employers. Job data by employment type sector concentration from table earlier years may not be current and relevant to year of application.

Recruitment and Screening

- Physical or vision screening associated with CDLs, or equipment operation was not discussed in detail, only mentioned.
- Screening requirements were not discussed. Need to test for minimum grade and skill level. (Generally, 8th grade language and math skills are required for most programs with a high school diploma or GED.)
- There was no mention of drug testing in screening process or required minimum educational background prerequisites.
- There was no explanation regarding associated training costs or if students will be burdened with any fees.

Training

- The applicant's experience with delivery of training was vague and unclear. More detail was required regarding experience in training delivery.
- Applicant failed to discuss in detail delivery of life skills and other non-environmental training (What partners will provide, where training will take place, and how training will be funded since EPA funds cannot be used).
- Student health and safety issues were not addressed.
- Training cycles were unclear.
- Training and recruitment numbers were low in comparison with the projected placement rate. (Focus should not be on training but rather on job placement).
- Certifications were discussed but no breakdown as to what certs are programmatic, state, or federal. Need breakdown.
- Overall, the training number was too low, and no placement targets were provided.

Partnerships

- Applicants list some community organizations but grassroots/neighborhood organizations, labor organizations, fraternal organizations, public health, and medical community were not represented. (Must have community partners).
- Letters of support do not state roles and/or commitments, only support.
- When included in a proposal, ensure that key partners receive a copy of the proposal and letters of support, including project support, support role and level of commitment.

Budget

- Fringe benefit cost was high.
- Mileage costs were stated but without substantive detail, more is needed to justify mileage costs.
- Personnel costs were too high.
- Travel to BF and JT conferences was not included.
- Budget numbers did not add up.
- The applicant made no distinction between EPA funds and non-EPA funds.
- Licensing/certificate fees, PPE, and incidental student expenses should be more detailed and specific. (No student cost is a stronger competitive edge) Also, collected fees must be considered programmatic income and must be discussed as such.
- Expenditures were not explained as to whether costs exist and what is covered or not covered by EPA funds.

Leveraging

- No discussion of in-kind commitments with assigned monetary value.
- Very little leveraging was presented with no discussion of plans how Applicant will generate additional funding.
- No value was given to in-kind commitments and there were no letters of support to substantiate claim for in-kind commitments.
- Leveraging was not addressed.

Outputs and Outcomes

- No milestone or timeline was provided.
- Outputs and outcomes were not clear and did not easily link back to the proposed work plan.
- There was no discussion regarding retention and attrition.
- Applicant failed to discuss how it would handle retention and attrition though case management.
- There was no discussion regarding Training facilities, especially access to facilities and transportation options.
- The proposal did not seem to have a targeted placement goal.
- Applicant did not address tracking program graduates.
- Program Sustainability after grant ends was not discussed.

Placement

- Employers' commitment to hire was not discussed and there were no letters of support from employers (although employers were listed).
- There was no discussion regarding projected placement target.
- Hiring incentives were not discussed.

Post Application Housekeeping

"It's not over when it's over" also applies to brownfield job training grant applications. The time from application submission to funding announcements is about six months. During the "long wait", here are some post application suggestions that will be beneficial in maintaining interest in the job training program.

- Organize and/or reorganize data files used to develop the submitted proposal. Questions may arise months from grant submission with award announcements and work plan finalization even later.

- Keep those included and referenced in the RFA informed. They may be contacted by proposal reviewers for additional information.
- Inform partners and stakeholders of the schedule moving forward. In the event a proposal is not funded, build upon established partnerships and contacts for an expanded proposal.
- It is important not to be discouraged if a proposal is not accepted. Many applicants consider their first submission as a learning experience. Unfunded proposals provide an opportunity for a critical review identifying deficiencies in the grant. With additional guidance from EPA, HMTRI and successful grantees, proposals can be revised and expanded for the next competition.
- HMTRI suggests distributing the proposal to key supporters and partners. Their involvement may attract additional leveraged support.
- Continue seeking letters of support from leveraged partners, potential employers, advisory committee members and community supporters. It is important that they stay committed to the program.
- During preparation for responding to an RFA, supplemental sources of “startup” funding may have been identified to begin planning an environmental workforce program before receiving JT assistance.
- Consider seeking supplemental funding from governmental agencies, community colleges and existing nonprofit organizations interested in expanding their offerings to include environmental training.
- The JT program is an annual competition with another requests for proposals only months away. It requires patience and time to assemble, coordinate and institute a working partnership team. Consider this a marathon rather than a “one off” grant opportunity.

CONNECT News is sponsored under Cooperative Agreement with The US Environmental Protection Agency in association with the Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute of the Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (HMTRI-EICC)

CONNECT News represents individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants, HMTRI staff, and EPA Environmental Job Training grant recipients. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such.

Copies of prior CONNECT News issues can be found at [Brownfields-toolbox.org](https://brownfields-toolbox.org).

HMTRI is part of Eastern Iowa Community Colleges providing technician training and environmental workforce technical assistance since 1987. For more information on HMTRI-EICC technical assistance services or to be added to our Grantee and Community Outreach Listserv, please contact us at: HMTRI@eicc.edu.

