

## RESPONDING TO RFPs

J. Christopher Watkins, Management Specialist

Proposal development is a critical aspect of ensuring the viability of a Head Start program. As many are aware, the Office of Head Start is preparing to expand Early Head Start (EHS) through a competitive process using the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) funds. This EHS funding opportunity will be an open competition and will require programs to put together proposals that will be judged and need to be ranked highly in order to be funded. This means that programs will have to prepare their proposals very carefully.

As Janet Buckley, Special Projects Specialist at T/TAS, always admonishes us, “there are three key rules in grant writing. Answer the RFP (Request for Proposal), be specific in your responses, and follow the criteria for scoring.” In order to follow this, many programs are preparing to respond to the Early Head Start RFP when it arrives. For programs that are new to this activity, this technical assistance paper is intended to provide some sort of framework to explain how to go about developing the program response to the upcoming EHS RFP. The paper also can serve as a refresher for those programs who previously have written both successful and unsuccessful proposals.

Most RFPs tend to follow a fairly standard format that includes cover page, summary, and narrative. The narrative is usually broken down into the areas of ability to provide services, proposed services and program design, and lastly the budget for both start up and on-going services.

**SAMPLE PROPOSAL FORMAT:** Your program will want to provide the required information in the order that the RFP requests the information. Follow the RFP and make sure the sections are labeled accordingly. Each item must be answered completely.

### 1. PROPOSAL FACT SHEET

This section will identify the information required. It may include the following: the submitting organization/individual, the name and title of the person authorized by the organization to contractually obligate the organization, and the name, title, signature, and telephone number of the person to be contacted for clarification of the proposal. This is usually the cover sheet to the proposal packet for the application to be considered for funding.

### 2. PROPOSAL SUMMARY (There is usually a page maximum to this section.)

This section usually focuses on the description of the applicant agency/program (purpose, service history, philosophy, etc) and a brief summary of the proposal highlighting goals, activities/services, etc.

### **3. PROPOSAL NARRATIVE (There is usually a page maximum to this section.)**

In the narrative, each item must be answered completely. Evaluation and scoring of proposals will be based on responses to the criteria described in the RFP. ***This is where the gain or loss of points takes place so make each word count!***

#### **A. Ability to Provide Services (Points are attached to this section.)**

This is where the program will describe, in detail, how the program and possibly the parent agency is qualified to provide the proposed EHS comprehensive services for pregnant women and infant/toddlers. The program will want to describe relevant agency history and may wish to include the resumes and job descriptions of key personnel, if space constraints permit. If the program will have to modify its structure in order to provide these services, the revised structure will need to be explained. Remember the ARRA is focusing on getting jobs created, so it may be desirable (or required) to weave jobs created through your proposal if the RFP references this fact/requirement.

Another section requires the program to describe the need for EHS services in your area. This service area may or may not be your complete service area. Much of this information may come from the Community Assessment if the program has been collecting it in preparation for this round of funding. The program will want to provide relevant data based on the demographic, socio-economic, and other relevant factors that support the need for expanded services. This is usually where the program states the number of children and/or pregnant women it intends to serve. The program will want to focus on birth rates, prenatal care availability of low cost child care for EHS age children and the availability of comprehensive services.

#### **B. Service Components and Design (Points are attached to this section.)**

This section is where the program describes how it proposes to provide comprehensive high-quality childcare services that meet the needs of pregnant women and infants and toddlers in the proposed service area. The RFP may ask the program to provide a sample daily schedule for each age group that the program proposes to serve (pregnant women, infants, toddlers, three year olds, or four year olds). If a schedule is requested, the program will want to provide justification about how each block of time in the schedule is developmentally appropriate in meeting the varying needs of young children. The program may cite early childhood research to justify the program's schedule.

The program will probably be asked to outline a plan of action/timeline pertaining to start up and then on-going service delivery. The focus will be on how the program expects to deliver the services in the proposed area and not merely that the program intends to provide EHS services. This means that only retyping the performance standards will not score points. The grant reviewer will be looking for how the services are expected to function, specifically given the resources that the program has the ability to draw upon.

There usually is a requirement to describe how the recruitment of children and families will occur. Another requirement may be a description of how the applicant will collaborate or partner with another Head Start program, or with other human service programs, to ensure that all the services required in the Head Start Performance Standards will be met. If the

applicant proposes to contract out any series (e.g., child screening and/or assessment; health services), these contracts would need to be described and justified.

**C. PROPOSED START UP BUDGET AND OPERATING BUDGET  
(Points are attached to this section)**

Please be very careful in developing the budgets. Proposing too few dollars is just as dangerous as proposing too many dollars. EHS services are labor intensive and the child staff ratios for center base services make Early Head Start services expensive. RFPs usually request that the standard budget forms be used, while also requiring that narratives be provided to explain in greater detail where the figures originated.

The budget narrative is where the program explains what it will cost to perform the project. This section has two main foci. One is on how much it will cost in order to get services started. This is the start up budget. The other is on how much it will cost to keep services functioning. This is the on-going budget. It is important to keep the one time or start up budget separate from the on-going or operational budget.

The program will need to bid the budget at what it really costs to provide the work proposed. If the cost is significantly overbid, points are likely to be deducted, (the grant reviewers are usually experienced at knowing what it costs to deliver services.) Underbidding will leave the program unable to afford to deliver services.

Spend some time thinking about the non-federal share that your program will contribute to this endeavor. It is an important aspect of the budget and the program will be expected to explain where the match is to be obtained. Given the heavy emphasis on non-federal share in recent reviews, it is expected that the grant reviewers will look critically at the sources of the proposed non-federal share.

Preparing a response to an RFP can be a time-consuming activity. It is suggested that if programs are interested in responding, they should be collecting information now prior to the publication of the RFP. The turnaround time for the response will be limited and programs will be pressed to complete their responses by the deadline.