FREE GUIDE

Where to Find Grants for Nonprofits: Free Guide (PDF)

A dated guide to the official sites and local sources where nonprofits can look for grants, the warning signs of grant scams and a search log to fill in.

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> This guide lists the places where nonprofits can look for grant funding without paying for a list, and the warning signs of a scam. It names official government sites and general kinds of source only. A funder's own current guidelines always come first.

Checked November 2026. Sites and programs change, so confirm on the official site.

What we are looking for

Write this down before you search. It keeps the search narrow.

Program or need to be funded:

Who it serves and where:

Amount needed and by when:

Search words to use (topic, population, place):

1. Federal grants: Grants.gov

Grants.gov is the federal government's website for grant opportunities. Federal agencies post their funding opportunities there, and the list is free to search.

- Search by keyword and narrow the results with the filters the site offers, then read the full funding notice for any opportunity that looks like a match
- Federal grants are typically for states and organizations, not for individuals' personal expenses
- An organization must register in SAM.gov before it can apply through Grants.gov. Registering with SAM.gov and with Grants.gov is free
- Registration takes time, so start well before any deadline. Check both sites for the current steps

2. Federal program descriptions: SAM.gov Assistance Listings

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SAM.gov, the federal System for Award Management, publishes Assistance Listings. These are public descriptions of federal programs, including grants, loans, scholarships and insurance. You can browse them across all agencies.

- Use the listings to learn which agencies run programs in your field and who is eligible
- A listing describes a program. It does not mean applications are open now. Look on Grants.gov for current opportunities
- Many federal funds reach local organizations through states. If a listing shows that states receive the money, ask the state agency how it awards it

3. State and local government

State agencies, counties and cities run their own grant programs, and some states have a central grants page.

- Look on the websites of the state agencies that work in your field, such as health, education, arts, housing or human services
- Check your city and county websites, and ask the staff of the department closest to your work
- Sign up for agency email lists where they exist, because many notices are open for a short time
- Confirm you are on an official government site before you enter any information

4. Community foundations

A community foundation makes grants in a defined area, such as a city, county or region.

- Find the community foundation that covers your area and read its grant guidelines and deadlines
- Many list their past grants, which shows the size and kind of grant they make
- Staff can often tell you which of their programs fits, so ask before you apply if the guidelines allow contact

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5. Foundation tax filings: Form 990-PF

Private foundations file an annual return with the IRS called Form 990-PF, and it is a public document. The IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search tool on IRS.gov lets you look up an organization and view the Form 990-series returns available for it, including Form 990-PF.

What to look for in a foundation's return:

- The list of grants paid during the year: who received them, for what purpose and how much
- Whether the foundation has ticked the box saying it gives only to preselected organizations and does not accept unsolicited applications
- Any application information it gives, such as a contact and restrictions on who can apply
- Whether its grants go to organizations like yours, in your area, in amounts close to what you need

Compare what you find with the foundation's own website. The return shows what it did in a past year. The website shows what it is asking for now.

6. Corporate giving

Many companies give through a giving program or a company foundation.

- Look for a "community", "giving" or "social responsibility" page on the company's own website
- Start with businesses that have a location, employees or customers in your community
- Ask your board, staff and volunteers where they work. Some companies favor groups their employees are involved with
- Follow the company's own request process and its stated focus areas

7. Professional and membership associations

- State nonprofit associations and associations in your field often share funding notices with members
- National and state associations for your profession or cause sometimes run small grant programs of their own
- Peers at similar organizations are a good source. Ask who funds them, and read their annual reports and donor lists

8. Your local library

Some public libraries and university libraries offer free on-site access to subscription funder databases, and librarians who can show you how to search them. Ask the reference desk what your library offers before you pay for any database yourself.

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How to spot a grant scam

The Federal Trade Commission warns that offers of "free money" from government grants are scams. Real grants require an application and are for a specific purpose. Stop if you see any of these.

Warning sign	What is true
You are contacted out of the blue and told you have won or qualify for a government grant	The government does not get in touch unexpectedly to offer grants
You are asked to pay a fee to apply for, receive or "release" a grant	Government agencies do not demand payment to give you a grant
You are asked to pay for a list of government grants	The list of federal grant opportunities on Grants.gov is free
You are asked to pay by cash, gift card, wire transfer or cryptocurrency	No government agency asks for payment that way
The award is "guaranteed", or you are told you cannot be turned down	No one can guarantee a grant. Real funders review applications
A caller, text or social media message uses an official-sounding agency name	Check the name on an official government site, and do not use the contact details in the message
You are asked for bank account or other personal information to "deposit" a grant	Do not give it. Legitimate applications go through the funder's official process

If you spot a scam, you can report it to the Federal Trade Commission at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.

A paid grant writer or consultant is a different thing from a scam. A legitimate one charges for the work, and tells you plainly that no award can be promised.

Search log

Record every source you check, even when it leads nowhere. It saves repeating the search next time.

Date	Source checked	Search words	Possible funder or opportunity	Deadline	Fit (high, medium, low)	Next step

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Before you add a funder to your list

- [ ] We read the funder's current guidelines on its own site
- [ ] We are eligible by type of organization, location and field
- [ ] The funder accepts applications, or we have been invited
- [ ] Its usual grant size matches what we need
- [ ] The deadline leaves us enough time to prepare
- [ ] Nothing about the opportunity matches a scam warning sign

> **Want help with this?** The Complete Grant Architect is a free 16-week grant writing course, and you can hire a grant writer for your next proposal. Both are at subthesis.com.

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