

Organizational Description

Most grant application guidelines require an organizational description section. This section of the grant proposal provides the grantmaker with the history of the organization applying for funding, as well as its current programs and structure.

The primary objective for including the history of your organization in a grant request is to establish the organization's credibility and its qualifications for funding. This is also an opportunity to draw the reviewer into the context of your overall grant request, to become familiar with your work. Develop two adaptations of the history. Both adaptations should refer to or quote from your organization's mission statement.

The first version should be quite short - three or four paragraphs - and the second version should be detailed, up to two pages. You will use the short version when writing letters of inquiry, or grant requests to corporations or small private foundations. You can also use the short version when you submit a request electronically because these submissions are usually limited to a specific number of words.

The long version should be used in full grant proposals, including federal and state requests, or other proposals which require more detailed information.

You should consider beginning with a story about how the organization was founded, and why. Storytelling is a powerful tool which you can use to your advantage. It inherently provides credibility to the organization, and almost always engages the reader. Here's an example of a short vignette that will give you some ideas about how to write your own opening.

Our Organization: Mothers of Mourning

In the mid-1900s four women who had each recently lost a son in WWII came together to share their grief, to provide support, and to help each other through an emotional crisis. From those first heart-wrenching yet liberating gatherings, these women instinctively knew that sharing grief was an effective way to help bear their new burdens. In 1950, shortly after WWII came to a close, these four women launched a regional program called Mothers of Mourning.

Once you set the stage, immediately move on to a present-day description of the organization and its current programs:

Today, Mothers of Mourning has blossomed into a national program with over 30 staff and at least one chapter in all 50 states. These chapters, which are run by volunteer Boards of Directors, offer a variety of services in their local communities. The operating budget for the national offices for 2010 is \$1,235,000, of which 45% goes to support the local chapters. Services at the national level include training in the areas of grief counseling...

Spring 2003: U.S. leads a multi-national invasion into Iraq

The New York Times (March 20, 2003): "Today, at approximately 02:30 UTC, explosions were heard in Baghdad. According to The Pentagon, 36 Tomahawk missiles and two F-117 launched 27 GBU bombs in this assault."

Since the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Mothers in Mourning has opened 11 new chapters in the U.S., experiencing a 72% increase in demand for services. We have implemented an interim plan to address this new demand, but the current global situation requires a sustainable approach.

In March 2010, our Board of Directors re-assessed our mission and strategic plan to embrace the increasing need for services. Our new mission statement reads: (quote)...

This present day description should include your organization's mission, goals, programs, and activities. It might also include a two or three line summary of your current operating budget.

Once you've relayed the present circumstances of your organization, you should summarize the most recent set of critical episodes so the grantmaker knows what you are facing today. Critical episodes include organizational changes, new initiatives or innovations, or even a traumatic event such as major budget cuts. You might call this section of the history: Our Challenge.

Ending this section with a quote from your mission statement is an effective transition from the organizational description to the next section, which is usually the problem or need statement.

To compliment the organizational description, you should develop an organizational chart to illustrate how your organization is structured. Include the names of individuals in administrative positions, their titles, and how long each staff person has served in a particular position. This helps to build credibility for your organization. Your objective is to demonstrate, via the organizational chart, that yours is a stable organization, with strong leadership. At the top of the organizational chart always note the population you serve or quote from your mission statement. Adding this information at the beginning of the chart conveys to the reviewer that you know whom you serve, and are aware that their needs are what drive your organization's programs.

Keep copies of this chart on your computer in two sizes: one that fits on a full page and can become an attachment to a full proposal and one that fits on half-a-page and can be inserted into the body of a proposal.

Here's a short summary of what should be covered in the organizational description:

- State the organization's mission, goals, history, current programs, and activities.
- Define existing clients or constituents.
- Provide evidence of accomplishments, including quotations and endorsements. (This may be referred to in the organizational description but the full document should be an attachment.)

- Support qualifications in the area of activity for which funds are sought (e.g., research, training, service delivery, etc.).
- Include a brief overview of the board of directors and key staff. (For example: “We have 17 board members and three key staff, including the Executive Director, Housing Loan Officer, and the Vice President of Development.”)

Don't overuse testimonials or endorsements - one embedded in the organizational description usually does the trick. These can be powerful examples of how the community supports your organization, but including too many can diminish their effectiveness.

In summary, presentation of the organizational description may vary in its length and the details you provide for different grant applications. However, one thing is always constant: It is critical to refer to your organization's mission in this section of the grant request. Whether your organization is just starting out or celebrating its 50th anniversary you have a specific mission, and that mission is the foundation for your entire grant request.

Here's a sample Organizational Chart:

