COVID-19 Technical Assistance Program for Appalachian Nonprofits

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS
The Appalachian Regional Commission Request for Proposals:

Appalachian Nonprofit COVID-19 Technical Assistance Cohort Training Initiative

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Overview of Request for Proposals

The Appalachian Regional Commission (the Commission, ARC) invites proposals from qualified organizations to design and execute a technical assistance program that supports Appalachian-based nonprofit organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May, the Commission reserved $250,000 of recovered POWER (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization) funds for the creation of a program to offer technical assistance to Appalachian nonprofits to mitigate COVID-19 impacts. These funds have been approved to assist Appalachian communities regardless of coal impact level.

The purpose of this program is to provide Appalachian nonprofits undergoing COVID-19–related financial and organizational hardship with tools and strategies to remain solvent through the pandemic and emerge resilient in the post-COVID world. This program, titled “COVID-19 Technical Assistance Program for Appalachian Nonprofits,” will consist of two parts: a publicly available, continually curated online resource guide, and an individualized cohort training initiative.

The main objectives of the program will be to:

- Provide small groups of Appalachian nonprofit organizations with personalized, actionable technical assistance to survive the COVID-19 pandemic and succeed beyond the crisis,
- Offer mentorship and expertise to low- and medium-capacity nonprofit organizations on the topics of short- and long-term financial management, missional and operational shifts, and fundraising.
- Encourage long-term, local cooperation between nonprofits to collectively address impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The successful applicant will take the role of the “coordinating consultant,” tasked with the organization and execution of the overall program. The coordinating consultant will oversee the program in its entirety, including planning, execution, evaluation, and coordinating with ARC staff. The coordinating consultant will be tasked with all of the following:

- Creation and deployment of an online resource guide
- Design and implementation of a multi-week cohort technical assistance (TA) training program
- Design and implementation of a participant selection process
- Post-program evaluation and reconvening of participants
The contract awarded for this project will be a FIRM FIXED-PRICE CONTRACT, with a total budget not to exceed $250,000. The contract period is between August 26, 2020 and February 28, 2022.

**Background**

**About Appalachia**

The Appalachian Region, as defined in ARC’s authorizing legislation, is a 205,000 square-mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Forty-two percent of the Region’s population is rural, compared with 20 percent of the national population.

The Appalachian Region’s economy, which was once highly dependent on extractive industries, has become more diversified in recent times and now includes larger shares of manufacturing and professional services, among other industries. Appalachia has made significant socioeconomic progress over the past five decades: Its poverty rate, which was 31 percent in 1960, fell to 15.8 percent over the 2014–2018 period. The number of high-poverty counties in the Region (those with poverty rates greater than 1.5 times the U.S. average) declined from 295 in 1960 to 98 over the 2013–2017 period.

These gains have transformed the Region from one of widespread poverty to one of economic contrasts. Some communities have successfully diversified their economies, while others still lack basic infrastructure such as roads, clinics, and water and wastewater systems. The contrasts are not surprising in light of the Region’s size and diversity—the Region extends more than 1,000 miles from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi, and is home to more than 25 million people.

**About the Appalachian Regional Commission**

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a regional economic development agency serving 420 counties across the Appalachian Region. Established by an act of Congress in 1965, the Commission is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states, as well as a federal co-chair appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Annually, the group of governors elect one governor to serve as the states’ co-chair. To strengthen local participation, ARC works with the Appalachian states to support a network of multicounty planning and development organizations, or local development districts (LDDs), throughout the Region. The 73 LDDs cover all 420 counties in the Region. The LDDs help identify needs of local communities, assist with participation in ARC programs, and at times serve as pass-through entities or fiscal agents to local grantees.
ARC’s mission is to innovate, partner, and invest to build community capacity and strengthen economic growth in Appalachia to help the Region achieve socioeconomic parity with the nation. The Commission funds projects that address the five goals identified in ARC’s strategic plan:

1. Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that strengthen Appalachia’s economy.
2. Increase the education, knowledge, skills, and health of residents to work and succeed in Appalachia.
3. Invest in critical infrastructure, especially broadband; transportation, including the Appalachian Development Highway System; and water/wastewater systems.
4. Strengthen Appalachia’s community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region’s natural and cultural heritage assets.
5. Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development.

Each year, ARC provides funding for approximately 500 projects in the Appalachian Region in areas such as business development, education and job training, telecommunications, infrastructure, community development, housing, and transportation. These projects create thousands of new jobs, improve local water and wastewater systems, train the Region’s workforce, assist local communities with strategic planning, and provide entrepreneurial assistance to emerging businesses. Additional information about the Appalachian Regional Commission can be found at www.arc.gov.

COVID-19-Pandemic–Related ARC Initiatives

ARC has sought to support the Appalachian region during the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the COVID crisis began, ARC has received a number of requests from the states on behalf of grantees for relief from the effects of the crisis on their projects. The Commission has approved changes to scopes related to COVID, as well as budget revisions, extensions of timelines, and recalculations of outcomes and outputs. ARC has processed dozens of project amendments to assist ARC’s regional partners.

In accordance with OMB (Office of Management and Budget) guidance, ARC repurposed $4 million in recovered funds from the POWER Initiative to address the COVID-19 pandemic in Appalachia. While POWER grants target coal-impacted communities, these funds have been approved to assist Appalachian communities regardless of coal impact level. Up to $250,000 of these repurposed funds were reserved for ARC’s use for technical assistance to the Appalachian Region’s nonprofits to help them access sources of short-term capital and shift their operations to be able to provide the same services in the wake of the pandemic. This request for proposals seeks to deploy these reserved funds in accordance with the Commission’s goal to provide nonprofits with the technical assistance needed to survive and thrive beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
For more information on ARC’s commitment to assisting the region during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, please visit [www.arc.gov/coronavirus](http://www.arc.gov/coronavirus).

**Scope of Work**

**Program Vision**
Increase the resiliency of Appalachian nonprofit organizations impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Program Objectives**
- Provide the general population of Appalachian nonprofits with an accessible, expertly curated source of strategies and tools to address the program’s four topics, as described under the next heading.
- Provide training participants with implementable technical assistance to evaluate and adapt their current financial and operational position in the “new normal.”
- Equip Appalachian nonprofits with hands-on, expert-guided actions that cater to their unique needs through a one-on-one or one-on-few mentorship approach.
- Create a network in which participants feel comfortable exploring current financial and operational hardships with the content specialists, coordinating consultant, and fellow cohort members.
- Encourage long-term cooperation and information-sharing among nonprofits within the cohorts.
- Engage with participants beyond the training programs to reflect upon progress and problems faced throughout the crisis.

**Purpose**
In accordance with ARC’s effort to repurpose POWER funds to respond to COVID-19 impacts in Appalachia, ARC plans to provide technical assistance to Appalachia-based nonprofit organizations impacted by the pandemic. The purpose of this initiative is to provide Appalachian nonprofits undergoing COVID-19–related financial and organizational hardships with tools and strategies to remain solvent through the pandemic and emerge resilient in the post-COVID world.

This program (“COVID-19 Technical Assistance Program for Appalachian Nonprofits”) will consist of two parts: a publicly available, curated online resource guide and an individualized cohort training initiative. Both components will be based upon four topics that have been identified as key focus areas for technical assistance. The online resource guide is intended to organize what already exists related to the four desired topics (specified below), providing a general overview of the topics and where nonprofits can find help. The cohort initiative is intended to provide in-depth, individualized training that responds to an individual organization’s needs.
The four areas of focus for the resource guide and the cohort initiative were identified by holding a virtual focus group with several entities that work with nonprofit organizations in the region, informal discussions with ARC partner organizations, and discussions among the ARC staff working group.

Both the resource guide and the cohort initiative will revolve around the following topics:

1. Short-Term Financial Management: Strategies for financial triage and internal decisions to stabilize organizations during the COVID-19 crisis.
2. Long-Term Financial Management: Recommendations and strategies to maintain financial solvency in the long run, such as restructuring budgets, mergers and acquisitions, and staffing decisions.
3. Mission and Operations: Re-evaluating or refining an organization’s overall mission to thrive in and after the pandemic, and then adapting regular processes and internal operations.
4. Fundraising: Approaches to adapt income sources in a crisis environment, including grants and donations. Particular focus will be given to integrating social media and online platforms to increase stakeholder engagement, as well as organizing online events.

These topics are subject to change based on the desires of the cohorts, as indicated in the program application. Applicants will be asked to indicate their first and second preference of topic and will be matched with a content specialist, who will coordinate the cohort training sessions.

The coordinating consultant is responsible for overseeing the development of the instructional content and strategy recommendations that will be deployed to participants. To the extent possible, content should be geared towards an Appalachian nonprofit audience, providing actionable strategies and recommendations that address the Appalachian region’s specific pandemic-related challenges.

**Online Resource Guide**

The coordinating consultant will identify, curate, annotate, and organize the most useful existing online resources in a central, accessible resource guide. Resources will include, but not be limited to, webinars, videos, toolkits, and exercises that address the instructional goals of the overall program. Resources will be separated by the four topics and will be used to guide nonprofits in their search for strategies and tools to address impacts from COVID-19. The coordinating consultant is responsible for vetting all content and maintaining the online resource guide for the duration of the contract.

This resource guide will be utilized by stakeholders within the Appalachian nonprofit ecosystem, including prior grantees and other participants in ARC programs. The audience is intended to be as broad as possible, while still focusing on the four main topics identified above. It will also be utilized by members of the cohort’s training program. The coordinating consultant is thus encouraged to include resources and strategies relevant to the training program in the online resource guide.
Considering the overwhelming volume of online content available for nonprofits to address COVID-19 impacts, the guide will refine the universe of resources into a limited selection of easily digestible, high-quality resources that can be easily viewed and understood by Appalachian nonprofits. This emphasis is particularly important for organizations with limited capacity that may lack the ability to explore such a large number of resources. The resources will be well-labeled and organized according to general topic and/or use, so nonprofits can easily find what they need.

**Cohort Training Program**

The coordinating consultant will design a 5- to 10-week (depending on cohort preference) training and consultation program for cohorts that consist of three to four Appalachian nonprofits each. Each cohort will apply to participate in a program that emphasizes one of the four topic areas listed above.

It is the responsibility of the coordinating consultant to oversee the development and delivery of a general curriculum for each of the four topics to address COVID-19–related impacts and strategies specific to the topic area. This may be accomplished either directly by the coordinating consultant or through subcontracts with external experts. While each curriculum will emphasize the specified topic, the coordinating consultant is encouraged to provide information and strategies that are intersectional with other topic areas, as many aspects of the topic areas are interrelated. Training plans will be subject to ARC review and approval.

The coordinating consultant will identify content-area specialists to lead the cohorts and will oversee the cohort activities. A content-area specialist will lead each cohort through a training program and will organize collaborative and instructional sessions with each cohort. The training sessions will take place over 5 to 10 weeks, with either weekly or biweekly sessions, depending on cohort preference. The goal is to reach at least 30 cohorts of three to four organizations each, for a total of 90 to 120 participants. Proposals should provide a method to optimize the amount of teaching time combined with individualized TA time to serve these 90 to 120 participants over 5 to 10 weeks. Each participating nonprofit will be invited to select two representatives to participate in the sessions. Sessions will explore practical problems and hands-on solutions that are customized to the member organizations’ needs. While training plans will serve as a guiding foundation for the training program, the specialist will be encouraged to adapt training content to the information and perspectives provided by the cohorts.

The content-area specialists will assign cohort participants tasks and exercises related to their organization to be completed outside of training sessions. The specialists will be expected to review and offer feedback on these assignments in a timely fashion. Feedback should take the form of one-on-one mentorship, in which the content-area specialist provides individualized recommendations to the participant organization. The coordinating consultant will determine the most effective method to offer one-on-one review and mentorship to cohort participants. Possibilities could include “breakout” time with participants during regular sessions, one-on-one discussions separate from regular sessions, or a hybrid model. Cohorts will also be encouraged to review their specified topic section in the online resource guide. Participants will view the
resource guide like an optional syllabus, providing additional ideas and tools to be discussed in sessions.

At the conclusion of the cohort training program, the cohort will be encouraged to continue communication and collaboration throughout and beyond the crisis. In addition to performing check-ins and convening all the participants for peer sharing and presentations, the coordinating consultant will design and implement an evaluation of the program (see more detail in the “Evaluation and Performance Measurement” section).

Cohort Eligibility and Selection
The coordinating consultant will design and conduct a selection process for cohort training participants based on a variety of factors. The consultant will design and disseminate the program request for applications (RFA) based on the guidance of this document and ARC staff. Groups of three to four Appalachian nonprofit organizations will form a cohort training application. Applicants will be encouraged to make the case for why they need the assistance and how they expect to benefit from the program. Generally, the program will target nonprofits with mid-level resources and capacity that have undergone financial or organizational distress in the COVID-19 pandemic; large, well-established nonprofits will be discouraged from applying. Additionally, preference will be given to organizations whose primary work aligns with ARC’s focus on economic and community development and advances at least one of ARC’s strategic goal areas.

Geography will be a crucial aspect of individual cohorts and the overall accepted class of cohorts. Within individual cohorts, selection preference may be given to cohorts consisting of members from the same area, to help strengthen the local nonprofit ecosystem. However, cohort members from different areas of Appalachia may also be considered to encourage peer learning and ensure breadth of impact. The coordinating consultant will also ensure geographic diversity in the overall cohort program. All thirteen ARC states will be represented within the training program, with at least one cohort from each state.

Eligibility and selection criteria in addition to what is outlined above may be implemented by the coordinating consultant pending ARC approval. The coordinating consultant will implement these criteria to create a process for applicant selection. During the cohort selection process, the coordinating consultant will be required to consult with the ARC program manager or alternate from the applicant’s state to incorporate the state leadership’s perspective and recommendations.

Evaluation and Performance Measurement
A crucial responsibility of the coordinating consultant will be the development of a plan to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of both the cohort training program and the online resource guide.

With most of the cohort sessions taking place in 2020, nearly the entire year of 2021 provides time for program impacts to take effect. In consultation with ARC staff, the consultant will develop a plan to set goals for the cohorts, define indicators of success, monitor the progress of the participants as they move through the program, and evaluate the program’s effectiveness. The consultant will collect baseline data for both the online resource guide and the cohort training program and compare this with post-program figures to evaluate its effectiveness. To
evaluate the online resource guide’s effectiveness, the consultant may choose to examine access data and to survey users. To evaluate the cohort program’s effectiveness, the consultant may design and conduct a pre-and post-program survey to gather and examine relevant qualitative and quantitative data. Impact measures to be considered may include staff feedback, revenue changes, implemented processes, donor or stakeholder feedback, organizational changes, cash flow statements and projections, and other metrics used in similar programs. The consultant should also demonstrate sensitivity throughout the evaluation process to ensure the participants do not feel pressure to have been “successful.”

**Program Timeline**

The following timeline for deliverables and program components should be considered a guide, as it will be amended to accommodate input from the coordinating consultant as well as decisions and changes made throughout the program’s creation and execution.

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**Eligibility and Past Performance**

The selected coordinating consultant should be a nonprofit entity, a for-profit entity, or a consortium of entities that offer assistance and consultation to nonprofit organizations.

ARC is particularly seeking organizations with previous experience in managing Appalachian-focused nonprofit development programs, technical assistance, or similar programs. This assistance experience should encompass some or all topics outlined in the project’s four focus
areas. Applicants that do not have experience in one or more of these topic areas are encouraged to include a description of plans to identify and subcontract individuals or organizations with expertise that supplements the applicant’s experience.

The coordinating consultant should be diligent, a good communicator, possess excellent management skills, and be committed to supporting nonprofits through troubled times. The consultant should also be resourceful and tech-savvy, and possess critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

While being physically located within the region is not a requirement, the selected coordinating consultant will have deep experience in working with Appalachian nonprofits. Connection with and knowledge of the Appalachian nonprofit ecosystem will be considered critical in the proposal evaluation process. Applicants are encouraged to explicitly outline their relevant past experiences and existing partnerships within the region.

Deliverables
The coordinating consultant will have the responsibility to design and implement all necessary aspects of “COVID-19 Technical Assistance Program for Appalachian Nonprofits” not specifically outlined within this document, subject to ARC review. Deliverables expected of the coordinating consultant include the following:

- Regularly communicating with ARC staff
- Producing a curriculum for the four topics
- Designing and implementing an application submission and evaluation process, including the writing and dissemination of the RFA
- Producing the online resource guide
- Identifying and/or subcontracting content specialists
- Conducting application review and selection of cohorts
- Overseeing experts conducting training sessions and helping review assignments
- Producing a cohort training program exit report at the conclusion of the training sessions
- Designing and carrying out a monitoring and evaluation plan
- Conducting a cohort “check-in” and peer-sharing session roughly one year after training conclusion
- Producing a final report at contract closure that evaluates the project’s impact

Responsibilities
The coordinating consultant will operate as head of project management under the review of ARC staff. Specific roles for the coordinating consultant may include the following:

- Project management
- Program design
• Content development
• RFA development
• Nonprofit consultation
• Expertise identification
• Application review
• Program evaluation
• Communication with ARC staff
• Subcontracting
• Other responsibilities as needed

ARC will approve decisions and recommendations from the coordinating consultant and will submit recommendations on behalf of its stakeholders to the coordinating consultant. ARC will designate a program manager to oversee the commission’s responsibilities in the program and to serve as a point-of-contact for the coordinating consultant. Specific roles for ARC may include the following:

• Design and content review and approval
• Assistance with the application and selection process
• Publicity and dissemination of the overall program
• Dissemination of the resource guide to regional stakeholders
• Feedback and requests on implementation
• Communication with ARC stakeholders
• Other assistance as needed

Communication Expectations

Until the completion of the training sessions, the coordinating consultant will deliver a status briefing to the ARC program manager on a biweekly basis to ensure ARC staff is up to date on deadlines, expectations, decisions, and progress. Following the completion of the training sessions, the coordinating consultant and ARC manager will have a monthly status update until the end of the contract. These status briefings may take the form of virtual meetings and/or digital reports as deemed necessary.

During the training sessions component of the program, the coordinating consultant will also provide ARC with regular updates concerning feedback and progress from the program cohorts. Regular cohort updates are not required to include organization-specific information discussed between the participant and the specialist, namely sensitive financial or operational information.

The ARC program manager will also receive and review any components of the program designated as subject to ARC approval. ARC will ensure that review and approval take place in a timely manner.
At the conclusion of the contract, the coordinating consultant will provide ARC with a final report and presentation concerning the outcomes of the program. This report will include, but is not limited to, narrative discussion about the program development process, program impact measures, and quantitative/qualitative outcomes.

**Proposal Formatting and Submission**

**Pricing**
The contract awarded for this project will be a **FIRM FIXED-PRICE CONTRACT**, with a total budget not to exceed $250,000. Payments shall be made on a monthly schedule. The contract terms shall remain firm during the project and shall include all charges that may be incurred in fulfilling the terms of the contract.

During the execution of the program, additional funding sources to expand the program may come to light. The coordinating consultant is encouraged to pursue additional funding streams with the support of ARC with the idea that this could be a pilot of a larger program. While not a deliverable, the coordinating consultant should continually be thinking about how the program could be expanded through funding outside ARC.

**Proposal Format**
Proposals should not exceed 30 pages in length, including attachments and appendices.

**A. Narrative Section**
This section should outline how the coordinating consultant will achieve the goals and objectives of the project, as well as the proposed approach of the consultant. Components should include the following:

1. If you plan on using expert subcontractors, what work will they be responsible for and what methods will you use to select them?
2. What methods do you plan on using to select and communicate with cohorts?
3. In general, how do you plan on designing the application and scoring matrix?
4. How do you envision basic curriculum for the cohorts? How will you develop the instructional content? What will the sessions look like? What subtopics can be covered? (Please see the scope of work for guidance.)
5. How involved will you be in overseeing any subcontractor work? How often will you communicate with subcontractors? What topics will you cover?
6. How do you plan on monitoring and evaluating the program’s success? What pre- and post-program data collection methods do you plan on using, and how will you approach the evaluation that will take place roughly one year following the conclusion of the cohort sessions?
7. What is your work plan to develop, maintain, and disseminate the online resource guide, including relevant point-persons and an expected timeline?
B. Management Section
This section should inform ARC about the organization’s capacity to carry out the program. Components should include the following:

1. Brief description(s) of organization and any proposed subcontractor(s).
2. Relevant experience in the Appalachian Region, particularly managing technical assistance or nonprofit development programs.
3. Relevant experience with the subject matter of this RFP.
4. Resumé(s) of the project manager, all key staff, and key staff representing possible subcontractors. Any change in key personnel is subject to ARC approval.
5. A staffing plan that describes proposed staff distribution to accomplish this work, including a time commitment and proposed activities of each professional staff member to the project’s tasks and schedule.
6. References relating to the three most similar projects undertaken by the coordinating consultant (and subcontractor if applicable), including names and contact information for reference.
7. Any contract requirements.

C. Cost Section

Submission Process
Proposals are due on or before 5 p.m. EDT, August 12, 2020.
Please send proposals as one Word or PDF file to nonprofitTA@arc.gov. Questions regarding this RFP should also be sent to the above email address before close of business on or before Friday, August 7, 2020.

Additional requirements for submission:
- Telephone or fax responses will not be accepted for this RFP.
- Submissions MUST be sent via email.
- Responses or unsolicited amendments will not be accepted after the closing date.
- Requests for time extensions past any deadlines will not be considered.

It is anticipated that the contractor will be selected by August 21, 2020 for estimated contract start date of August 26, 2020 and completion date of February 28, 2022.

Proposal Evaluation
ARC will select a contractor through a competitive process based on the following criteria, in no particular order:

- Effectiveness of the proposed approach to developing, maintaining, and disseminating the online resource guide
- Strength and thoroughness of suggested approach for designing the application, selecting cohorts, managing the program, and evaluating its success
• Relevant experience with managing nonprofit technical assistance or support programs
• Relevant experience in the Appalachian Region, particularly assisting Appalachian nonprofit organizations
• The potential of the suggested approach to be flexible and helpful during difficult times and to result in lasting change for Appalachian nonprofits
• A credible management proposal for staffing, and the organizational capacity to execute the program on a limited timeline
• Cost effectiveness of the proposal