



# Request for Proposals: Evaluation of ARC's ARISE Initiative

Open date:	May 1, 2023
Questions due:	May 12, 2023
Answers posted on ARC website:	May 19, 2023
Proposal due date:	May 24, 2023
Selection date:	July 14, 2023
Contract start date:	August 1, 2023

## Overview

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) invites proposals from qualified consultants to conduct an evaluation of the ARISE (Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies) Initiative, a new grant program that aims to drive large-scale, regional transformation through multi-state collaborative projects across Appalachia. This evaluation effort will help ARC understand the impact of individual ARISE grants and the ARISE Initiative as a whole, and to learn from the experiences of the grantees as they implement their grants.

ARISE was launched in 2022 with funding provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021. The Commission has allocated \$80 million in IIJA funding toward ARISE for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, currently totaling \$160 million. \$147 million of that allocation has been made available to fund ARISE projects. The Commission approves its funding allocations on an annual basis, but the ARISE Initiative may continue for the duration of availability of IIJA funding, and it is possible that by FY 2026, ARC will have allocated \$400 million toward ARISE.

Through this engagement, ARC is interested in learning about grantee experiences, individual grant impacts, and impacts of the ARISE Initiative, with a particular focus on multi-state collaboration and transformation. For this proposal, offerors should assume a three-year scope of work, and the awarding of eight ARISE implementation grants and 15 ARISE planning grants per year. Proposals should include a feasible methodology to complete the scope of work while taking into consideration the evolving nature of ARISE. Deliverables will include, at a minimum, grantee-level reports, an annual initiative-level report, and an annual staff presentation, which may be conducted virtually.

## Background

### About Appalachia

The Appalachian Region (the Region), as defined in ARC's authorizing legislation, is a 206,000-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 lives in rural communities, compared with 19% of the national population.

The Appalachian Region's economy, which was once highly dependent on extractive industries, has become more diversified and now includes larger shares of manufacturing and professional services, among other industries. Appalachia has made significant progress over the past five decades: Its poverty rate, which was 30.9% in 1960, fell to 14.7% over the 2016–2020 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 297 in 1960 to 117 over the 2016–2020 period. Since the 2011–2015 period, the share of Appalachian adults ages 25 and over with a bachelor's degree or higher has risen by nearly three percentage points, to 25.4 percent, in 2016–2020. Additionally, the high school completion rate for the Region is now almost equal to that of the country, after decades of lagging behind.

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, health clinics, and water and wastewater systems. The contrasts are not surprising in light of the Region's size and diversity—it extends more than 1,000 miles and is home to over 26 million people.

## About the Appalachian Regional Commission

The Appalachian Regional Commission is a regional economic development entity serving 423 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 of the United States and confirmed by the Senate. Annually, the group of governors elects 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. Seventy-four LDDs cover all 423 counties in the Region. The LDDs help identify the 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. ARC funds projects that address the five goals identified in its strategic plan:

1. Strengthen and diversify the Region's economy through inclusive economic development strategies and investments in entrepreneurship and business development.
2. Expand and strengthen community systems (education, healthcare, housing, childcare, and others) that help Appalachians obtain a job, stay on the job, and advance along a financially sustaining career pathway.
3. Ensure that the residents and businesses of Appalachia have access to reliable, affordable, resilient, and energy efficient utilities and infrastructure in order to successfully live and work in the Region.
4. Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by preserving and investing in the Region's local, cultural heritage, and natural assets.
5. Invest in the capacity of local leaders, organizations, and communities to address local challenges by providing technical assistance and support to access resources, engage

partners, identify strategies and tactics, and conduct effective planning and project execution.

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](http://www.arc.gov).

## About ARC's ARISE Initiative

Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) is a new ARC grant program that aims to drive large-scale, regional economic transformation through multi-state collaborative projects across Appalachia. With the additional funding provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021 (also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or BIL), ARC launched ARISE to strengthen Appalachian business and industry, and to grow and support the development of new opportunities across multiple states.

ARISE encourages the Region's 13 states to think beyond local and state lines and to spearhead projects that encourage states to work together as one, united Appalachia to advance ARC's strategic investment priorities. The initiative aims to have a transformational impact on the Appalachian Region. As such, grant proposals must contain the following elements:

- **Multistate focus.** Projects must have multistate partnerships with at least one partner from each state within the project area.
- **Targeted to advancing multistate economies.** Applicants must have assessed their assets and opportunities and have formulated a plan that significantly advances the economies of multiple states.
- **Assessment and planning.** Each project receiving implementation funding should have a well-articulated analysis of how and why this project will transform the states included in the project.
- **Demonstrable collaboration among all partners.** Each multistate partnership must be demonstrable and equitable, with shared input, goals, accountability, and benefits for each partner.
- **Leverage regional resources.** Projects should demonstrate multistate commitment to the proposed project by leveraging ARC resources with monetary and non-monetary investments from strategic partners, including private and philanthropic organizations and government entities.
- **Outcome-driven.** Projects should define specific output and outcome measures for each partner, demonstrate how the project is designed to achieve those outcomes, and commit to capturing and sharing those measures over the life of the investment.

ARISE grants may be planning grants generally lasting up to one year in duration, and up to \$500,000 in funding, or implementation grants generally lasting up to five years in duration, and up to \$10 million in funding.

Potential applicants must first submit a concept paper, using a provided template, which describes the project type (planning or implementation), proposed project and rationale, partners, geographic scope, the funding request amount, and anticipated outcomes and outputs. Concept papers are forwarded to a subject matter expert, the ARC Federal Co-Chair's office, and ARC state program managers of each state impacted by the proposal. Upon review and completion of the concept paper screening process, if there is interest in pursuing an application, applicants then receive an invitation and instructions to submit a full application. Concept papers and applications are reviewed on an ongoing basis.

All ARISE grant agreements will include a provision requiring grantees to cooperate with ARC's selected program evaluation contractor. ARC will work with applicants and grantees that have previously applied under the first iteration of the Notice of Solicitation of Applications (NOSA) to facilitate their cooperation with ARC's selected program evaluation contractor.

The Commission has allocated \$80 million in IJA/BIL funding toward ARISE for Fiscal Years 2022 and 2023, currently totaling \$160 million; \$147 million of that allocation has been made available to fund ARISE projects. The Commission approves its funding allocations on an annual basis, but the ARISE initiative may continue for the duration of availability of IJA funding, and it is possible that by FY 2026, ARC will have allocated \$400 million toward ARISE.

While it is not possible to accurately predict the number of ARISE grants that will be awarded overall, a rough estimate is that ARC will award a maximum of eight to 10 implementation grants per fiscal year, so by the end of FY 2026, there may be 40 to 50 implementation grants overall. ARC expects to award around 15 to 20 planning grants per fiscal year.

To date, 70 concept papers have been received; 14 concept paper submitters have been invited to submit full applications (eight planning, six implementation), and six of those (three implementation and three planning) have returned their full applications; and one implementation grant has been awarded. Thirty-two- concept papers are still in the processing/consideration stage.

Additional information about ARC's ARISE Initiative can be found at [www.arc.gov/arise](http://www.arc.gov/arise).

## Scope of Work

The goals of this evaluation are to assess the impact of individual ARISE grants and the ARISE Initiative, and to learn from the experiences of the grantees as they implement their grants. Through this engagement, ARC is interested in learning about the following:

### **Grantee Experiences**

Feedback from grantees about the following:

- How they found out about ARISE
- Their level of preparation to apply for an ARISE grant and the usefulness of the resources and technical assistance provided by ARC

- Successes and challenges they have experienced while implementing their grants
- Their experiences implementing multi-state projects

### **Grant Impacts**

- Early impacts of individual grants, which may include those that are still ongoing and those that have been closed out. ARC is interested in learning about impacts within each state served by a grant.
- Early impacts of the ARISE initiative, with particular focus on transformation

Proposals should include an outline of the data collection and analysis to be conducted, a work plan, and a schedule for reports and deliverables.

ARC anticipates awarding a multi-year contract for this procurement to allow for an overall evaluation of the ARISE initiative and the evaluation of individual completed and open grants. As such, the selected evaluator must have the capacity to perform the scope of work for a minimum of three years. The term may be extended or renewed by agreement of the parties.

**For this proposal, assume a three-year scope of work, and the awarding of eight implementation grants and 15 planning grants per year.**

## **Methodology**

The successful applicant will develop a feasible methodology to complete the scope of work, taking into consideration the evolving nature of the ARISE initiative. In particular:

- Grants will be awarded for projects across the full range of ARC strategic investment goals.
- Grants are awarded on a rolling timeline.
- Grant periods may range from one year for planning grants to up to five years for implementation grants.
- It is difficult to estimate the number of grants to be awarded annually (see “ARISE Application Process,” above, for rough estimates).
- Grantees will have varying levels of capacity and experience with external evaluations.

Proposed methodology should address how the evaluator will:

- Address initiative-level evaluation questions
- Address grant-level evaluation questions
- Engage grantees in the evaluation process
- Collect stakeholder feedback
- If relevant, collect grant beneficiary feedback
- Assess early impacts of the grants and the initiative

## **Data Provided by ARC**

All ARISE grantees will be required to provide projected performance measures based on [ARC's catalog of outputs and outcomes](#), and to report progress, typically on a quarterly basis. The selected contractor will have view-only access to ARC's grants management database, where they will be able to access the performance measures as well as other information

such as descriptive information about grant activities, key dates, financial information, grantee contact information, and a history of correspondence between the grantee and ARC staff.

## **Deliverables**

The proposal should include a description of deliverables to be provided by the selected contractor. At a minimum, these should include grantee-level reports as well as an annual initiative-level report and an annual staff presentation, which may be conducted virtually.

## **Technical, Management, and Cost Proposal Contents**

### **A. Technical Proposal**

The technical proposal should not exceed 15 pages, not including the abstract, accompanying resumes, and organizational background materials.

The technical proposal must contain the following elements.

#### **Summary Abstract (300 words)**

In this section, provide a brief abstract of the proposal by summarizing the background, objectives, proposed methodology, and expected outputs and results of this project.

#### **Methodology**

Describe the approach or methods intended to accomplish all the tasks specified in this RFP. The proposal should identify the tasks in this project that will require participation by ARC staff. Further, the proposal should identify specific information needs, including sources, procedures, and individual research tasks that may need to be performed by ARC staff. Finally, the proposal should identify any difficulties that may be encountered in this project and propose practical and sound solutions to these problems.

#### **Project Work Plan and Milestones**

The proposal should describe the phases into which the proposed work can be logically divided and performed. A schedule of milestones and deadlines should be specified for the completion of various work elements, including, for example, interviews, analyses, written progress reports, preliminary drafts for review, and final report. Regular check-in meetings with ARC staff are also required. Please note: It is the responsibility of the contractor to provide line editing of the final report/deliverable. Contractors should budget accordingly.

#### **Key Personnel**

Personnel performing the work must be described in this section, including the number of people and their professional classifications (e.g., project director, meeting facilitator, analyst, business consultant, writer, line editor, etc.). Brief resumes of the education and relevant experience of all key personnel are required. The selected contractor will be required to furnish the services of those identified in the proposal as key personnel. Any change in key personnel is subject to approval by ARC.

## **B. Management Proposal**

### ***Business Management Organization and Personnel***

Furnish a brief narrative description of the organization, including the division that will perform the proposed effort, and the authority responsible for controlling these resources and personnel.

### ***Staffing Plan***

A staffing plan is required that describes the contractor's proposed staff distribution to accomplish this work. The staffing plan should present a chart that assigns the time commitment of each staff member to the project's tasks and schedule. In addition, the proposal should include a detailed description of activities for key project-related personnel and anticipated deliverables. Finally, the proposal should identify the relationship of key project personnel to the contracting organization, including consultants and subcontractors.

### ***Relevant Prior Experience***

The proposal must describe the qualifications and experience of the organization and the personnel to be assigned to the project, including direct experience with the specific subject-matter area and examples (links and/or attachments) of the three most similar projects undertaken by the applicant organization and the extent to which performance goals were achieved. Provide client organization names and addresses as well as the names of contact persons and their email addresses and telephone numbers for reference.

### ***Contract Agreement Requirements***

This section of the proposal should contain any special requirements that the contractor wants included in the contract.

## **C. Cost Proposal**

The contract awarded for this project will consist of a firm, fixed price for the evaluation of the ARISE initiative, and an agreed-upon price for individual grants evaluated. Payments shall be made on a monthly or quarterly schedule (depending on contractor preference). 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.

Proposals must contain all cost information, including direct labor costs (consistent with the staffing plan), labor overhead costs, travel, estimated cost of any subcontracts, other direct costs, total direct cost and overhead, and total cost and fee or profit. For the purposes of this cost proposal, assume a three-year scope of work, and the awarding of eight implementation grants and 15 planning grants per year. Within each type of grant—implementation and planning—costs may be itemized even further. ARC will review cost proposals that reflect cost variations due to relevant factors such as expected length of time and evaluative methods employed for each type of project, as long as the proposal assumes a three-year scope of work, and the awarding of eight implementation grants and 15 planning grants per year.

Proposals should include a plan for a kickoff meeting, regular check-in meetings, and annual presentations of key findings and recommendations to all ARC staff. We anticipate these meetings to be conducted virtually. However, proposals should include travel costs, if applicable, for any potential in-person activities such as site visits.

ARC policy on allowable indirect overhead costs for university-based contracts is to permit universities to charge the same rates charged to their own state agencies. ARC will honor indirect rates as suggested by the contractor. However, be aware that a lower indirect rate may be more competitive in the selection process.

## Proposal Submission

Proposals are due at or before 5 p.m. Eastern time on May 24, 2023. Please send proposals as one Microsoft Word file or Adobe PDF to Regina Van Horne, Program Evaluator, at [rvanhorne@arc.gov](mailto:rvanhorne@arc.gov).

Additional requirements:

- Submissions must be sent via email.
- Responses or unsolicited amendments will not be accepted after the closing date and time.
- Requests for time extensions past any deadlines will not be considered.

## Proposal Evaluation

ARC will select contractors through a competitive process based on the following criteria:

- A complete, clearly articulated study design and technically competent methodology
- Qualifications and relevant prior experience in program evaluation and performance measurement in an economic development context, especially in the Appalachian Region
- Relevance of similar projects undertaken by the applicant and inclusion of contact information for three references
- A credible management proposal for staffing, and the capability to carry out and support the project in a timely fashion
- Cost effectiveness of the proposal

It is anticipated that the contractor will be selected by July 14, 2023, for an estimated contract start date of August 1, 2023. The estimated contract completion date is being determined by ARC at this time. However, a three-year contract is anticipated, depending on the project plan of the selected contractor. Contract extensions will also be considered depending on these circumstances. Contractors must have the capacity to perform this contract for a minimum of three years.