The Health Foundation of Central Mass

APPLICANT & GRANTEE GUIDE

Activation Fund Grant Program

BEFORE YOU APPLY

We recognize that preparing a grant application requires a significant amount of staff time and planning. Before investing time in preparing a concept paper, please review the following guidelines, including the Foundation's eligibility criteria for grantmaking, the types of support considered for Activation Fund grants, and other funding considerations to keep in mind.

TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS ELIGIBLE FOR GRANTS

Requests are considered from non-profit organizations with a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) designation as determined by the Internal Revenue Service, programs or coalitions operating under a fiscal sponsor with verified tax-exempt status, and government or quasi-government entities (e.g. municipalities, school districts). For those looking for a fiscal sponsor or considering serving as a fiscal sponsor, the National Council on Nonprofits website has a list of useful resources.

GEOGRAPHIC SERVICE AREA

Primary consideration is given to organizations located in or directly serving individuals who live or work in the Foundation's geographic service area, which consists of 81 cities and towns in and around Worcester County (a map is available on our website). Organizations located outside of the Foundation's geographic service area seeking funding for projects focused in Central Massachusetts should contact Foundation staff at info@thfcm.org for guidance before applying, as additional information may be required to demonstrate relationships in the region.

ACTIVATION FUND GOALS

The Activation Fund provides support for discrete, one-year projects outside the normal scope of operations that are designed to help community organizations move to the next level of capacity and effectiveness. The Foundation is unique in that it **does not** identify specific health issues/priority areas for funding for the Activation Fund or other grantmaking programs and strives to be flexible and responsive to community identified needs. The Foundation applies a broad definition of health, which encompasses the social determinants of health (SDOH), non-medical factors that contribute to health, and it has held a longstanding commitment to addressing health inequities. For examples of health issues that have been addressed through funded projects, please see the list of previous Activation Fund grants on our website.

Provided the organization meets the Foundation's overarching eligibility criteria for grantmaking described above, the Foundation looks for alignment with Activation Fund goals related to capacity-building and types of support considered (described below) rather than specific issue areas identified as priorities.

TYPES OF SUPPORT CONSIDERED

The Foundation will consider support for discrete projects or programs aimed at building capacity. Examples of the types of funding requests considered for Activation Fund grants include but are not limited to: discrete capital projects/equipment and technology purchases; one-time, train-the-trainer professional development activities; and program planning or bridge funding for initial

implementation costs of new programs or service areas, provided funding is identified for sustainability beyond the grant period.

In general, the following types of requests are not considered:

- Startup or seed funding to support general operations for newly established organizations;
- Endowments;
- Undesignated support for fundraising campaigns;
- Sponsorship of events;
- Scholarships;
- Recurring operating expenses (as the sole purpose of the grant);
- Retirement of operating deficits/debt; or
- Electoral activities or candidates for public office

OTHER FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

- **Grant Range**: While request amounts vary by project, the Activation Fund considers requests for grants ranging from $50,000 - $125,000. If total project costs exceed that amount, applicants should be prepared to include information on other sources of support they have secured or will be seeking to fund the balance needed, as this helps the Foundation to assess the feasibility of the project being completed within the planned timeframe.

- **Limit of One Request per Organization**: The Foundation limits organizations to one request/concept paper submission per grant cycle. Large organizations (e.g., hospital systems or colleges and universities with multiple departments) should prioritize needs internally and consult with Foundation staff for guidance, as needed.

- **Waiting Period Between Applications & Previous Funding**: While there is no required waiting period between application submissions, the Foundation aims to support as many different organizations as possible; therefore, preference may be given to organizations that have not received Foundation funding within the last 12 months.

- **Project Timeline & Grant Period:** In general, grants are limited to a 12-month duration, beginning July 1 of a given calendar year and ending June 30 the following year, and funds must be expended within the grant period. The Foundation does not allow utilization of grant funds for reimbursement of expenses incurred prior to the grant period start date. Organizations should carefully consider alignment of proposed projects with this timeline before applying.

INFORMATION SESSIONS & CONSULTATIONS

Each year the Activation Fund opens, the Foundation hosts information sessions for interested applicants to discuss the application guidelines and answer questions related to eligibility. Specifics related to timing and registration for information sessions will be posted on our website for each active grant cycle. New applicants and those with specific questions related to eligibility, proposed projects or ideas, are encouraged to contact program staff to arrange a consultation, which will be conducted virtually. To contact staff, please send an email to info@thfcm.org.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How many grants are awarded per Activation Fund grant cycle?

The Activation Fund typically opens once per year, and the number of grant awards varies from cycle to cycle depending on the Foundation's budget and the request amounts. Since 2018, the Foundation has awarded an average of 10 Activation Fund grants per grant cycle.

Does the Activation Fund consider requests for multi-year funding?

No, the Activation Fund is designed to support projects that can be completed within 12 months.

What are the chances of my project being funded?

The Foundation receives far more requests than it can fund, receiving as many as 75-100 concept papers per grant cycle. In recent years, 25-30% of organizations that submitted concept papers have been invited to apply. Among those invited to apply in recent years, there has been a roughly 50% chance of receiving a grant.

Does the Foundation accept meetings with interested applicants?

Interested applicants are encouraged to reach out to program staff via email at info@thfcm.org to arrange a virtual meeting to seek guidance prior to submitting a concept paper, particularly if the organization is a new applicant. Each year the Activation Fund opens, the Foundation also hosts information sessions for interested applicants to provide clarification regarding the application guidelines and answer questions related to eligibility. Specifics related to timing and registration for information sessions will be posted on our website for each active grant cycle.

Is it helpful to reach out to Foundation Directors directly to discuss a proposal?

It is strongly recommended that all inquiries be directed to Foundation staff.

What is the average grant size awarded? Are indirect costs allowable?

Grant amounts vary by project and need, but **requests are considered for grants between $50,000 - $125,000.** For additional budget guidance, including policies related to indirect costs, please see the "How to Apply" section of this guide.

HOW TO APPLY

TIMELINE

When the Activation Fund grant opportunity opens, the Foundation will make a public announcement and post deadlines for receipt of application materials on our website along with details related to information sessions. In general, the grant cycle follows this timeline, but specific dates may vary:

March 1	Phase I Concept Paper and supporting materials are due
April 1- April 15	Applicants are notified of the Board's decisions to invite full applications
Mid-May	Phase II Application materials are due (by invitation)
Mid-June	Applicants are notified of the Board's funding decisions
July 1 – June 30	Activation Fund Grant Period

APPLICATION PROCESS

The Activation Fund has a two-step application process. At each phase, the required materials should be sent via email to info@thfcm.org by 5:00 p.m. on the posted deadlines. Late submissions may not be reviewed.

Phase I Concept Paper

During this initial phase of the application process, we ask for a concept paper to explore alignment between the organization's work and the Activation Fund goals before significant time and resources are devoted to a full proposal. If there is a strong fit, a full proposal will be invited.

Concept papers should be no more than **two pages** and be accompanied by the **Phase I AF Cover Sheet** that may be downloaded from our website, along with a list of Board members with affiliations or a list of senior leadership for government/quasi-government entities. While there is no specific template or format required, concept papers should include the following:

- Summary of the organization's mission, core programs/services, and geographic service area

  This information gives us context regarding the organization's history, population(s) of focus, and location, which helps us to assess alignment with the Foundation's eligibility criteria and mission.

- Project description and its anticipated impact on organizational capacity or effectiveness

  Organizations are encouraged to describe the need for the proposed project, key elements or activities involved, and its anticipated impact, e.g., numbers of people served. This information helps us to assess alignment with the Activation Fund's primary goal of capacity building.

- Estimated costs, grant request amount, and other sources of support (if any)

  This information is critical to help us understand the scope of the project, and what portion the grant funds requested would represent. Applicants are encouraged to conduct due diligence needed to include a rough estimate for project costs. If estimated costs exceed the grant range for the Activation Fund, applicants should describe plans to fund the balance, as this helps us to assess the feasibility of the project being completed during the one-year grant period.

General Guidance for Concept Paper Submissions

- Use a minimum of 11-point font for the narrative.
- Attach a copy of the organization's board list with both names and business or community affiliations. For public/government or quasi-government entities, attach a list of leadership team members. If applying with a fiscal sponsor, please include the sponsoring agency's board list.
- Avoid using acronyms or terms that are not universally known.
- Letters of support are not required at this phase, but may be requested of organizations not located in the Foundation's geographic service area seeking funding for projects in Central Massachusetts to demonstrate relationships in the region.

Phase II Application

Organizations invited to apply in Phase II will receive notification via email from Foundation staff, which will be accompanied by a request to arrange a follow-up meeting or visit to convey any questions from the Foundation's Board of Directors and staff and address questions from the applicant. Staff's goal is to provide guidance on the Phase II application to maximize an applicant's chances of success! Additionally, organizations invited to submit Phase II applications will have the option to schedule a free consultation with an experienced grant writer who can help with proposal development and offer feedback on a draft prior to submission. The deadline for submission will be posted on our website.

A complete Phase II application submission includes the following completed forms, which may be downloaded from our website:

- **Phase II AF Cover Sheet**
  Recognizing that project plans have been further developed since the concept paper was submitted, the Phase II Cover Sheet gives organizations the opportunity to update the project description, grant request amount, and project costs accordingly. The Cover Sheet includes an optional demographic survey, which gives organizations the opportunity to provide further detail about the population(s) served and their commitment to health equity, which is core to the Foundation's mission.

- **Phase II Application Form**
  Responses to the application questions (the narrative portion) should not exceed 7 pages, not including the other forms and attachments. Please use a minimum of 11-point font and do not adjust the margins. Applicants are encouraged to ask program staff for clarification if they are uncertain how to address specific questions on the application.

- **AF Project Budget Form**

  The Project Budget form includes both a budget template and budget narrative on two separate tabs within the Excel worksheet. Please complete the necessary sections in white on the budget tab, which will automatically update the budget narrative tab. On the narrative page, please provide a brief description of all budget line items. Please note, ***this form should be submitted as a separate document in Excel Format*** *(rather than as a PDF) as this will be updated throughout the grant period. A sample project budget may be found on the website underneath the Project Budget Form with helpful tips.*

Indirect Costs Policy: Indirect costs include fixed costs associated with operation and management of the organization such as rent/mortgage, utilities, insurance, accounting & administrative staff. Informed by an analysis of best practices in the field in 2025, the Foundation has adopted a three-tiered approach based upon the size of the applicant/grantee's annual operating budget for the most recently completed fiscal year, which is self-reported on the application cover sheet.

- Tier 1: Smaller organizations with annual operating budgets under $1 million may include up to 20% of the total direct costs for reimbursement of indirect costs;
- Tier 2: Organizations with annual operating budgets between $1 million and $100 million may include up to 15% of the total direct costs for reimbursement of indirect costs; and
- Tier 3: Larger organizations with annual operating budgets of more than $100 million may include up to 10% of the total direct costs for reimbursement of direct costs.

Organizations with fiscal sponsors and those that operate as affiliates or subordinate organizations within larger systems should contact Foundation staff for guidance.

The following items must be omitted from the total direct costs on which the indirect cost calculation is based: subcontracting arrangements, capital improvements (including renovation and purchase), and equipment purchases. However, the Foundation will allow applicants engaging subcontractors performing programmatic activities (e.g., nonprofit partners responsible for specific project deliverables) to invite them to include up to ten percent of total direct costs for reimbursement of indirect costs at their discretion.

- **Fiscal Sponsor Form (if applicable)**

  This form is required for applicants without tax-exempt status to document the sponsoring agency's willingness to administer the grant funds and adhere to the Foundation's reporting requirements.

The **Phase II AF Cover Sheet** includes a list of required and optional supporting materials including:

- **Financials** (required): IRS Form 990 or financial statements (audited, if available) for the most recent fiscal year. If applying with a fiscal sponsor, please include that organization's financials and a program or operating budget for the entity applying for the grant.

- **Letters of Support** (if applicable): Applicants are encouraged to include a letter of support or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) from any partner organization or entity responsible for one or more specific deliverables associated with the project. Letters should be signed by the Executive Director or CEO. Additional letters from community leaders or public officials expressing support for project goals are optional.

- **Quotes or Professional Estimates** (if applicable): Please attach a professional estimate for capital projects or quotes for purchase of equipment or services exceeding $5,000. This is requested to ensure that the grant amount requested will be sufficient to cover project-related costs.

ASSESSMENT

Funding requests are reviewed by Foundation staff and a Distribution Committee comprised of Board members and final decisions are made by the Foundation's Board of Directors. Requests are assessed on multiple criteria, including, but not limited to: evidence of need and/or alignment with local community priorities; organizational capacity; clarity of goals and outcomes identified; impact on marginalized populations; and potential for sustaining impact or results beyond the grant period.

Successful applicants typically possess these characteristics:

- Demonstrated commitment to health equity
- Representation of the population of focus in decision-making
- Track record of sustainable operations (or a fiscal sponsor with financial stability)
- Proven program effectiveness
- Measurable goals and objectives

INFORMATION FOR GRANTEES

- **Grant Agreement**

  Grantees are required to sign and return a grant contract summarizing the terms and conditions of the grant. Payments are usually made in two installments, with half at the beginning of the grant period and half at the midpoint, but exceptions may be considered when requested in advance. Grantees are asked to provide evidence of liability insurance coverage as a provision in the grant agreement. Organizations without coverage may include the cost of purchasing insurance as indirect costs.

- **Grant Reporting**

  The Foundation seeks to learn from each grant, using progress meetings and summary reports to record lessons learned that can inform our work and that of future grantees. Two interim progress meetings are requested with Foundation staff during the 12-month grant period. The goal for these meetings is to learn about project updates, help with any challenges, and discuss any proposed budget or timeline modifications. A final project summary report is due within sixty days of the end of the grant period.

- **Grant Publicity**

  After each round of funding is awarded, the Foundation typically makes a public announcement of Activation Fund grant recipients, which includes a brief summary of funded projects. Staff will seek grantees' approval of content referencing the organization and the project. Following the Foundation's announcement, organizations are encouraged to partner with the Foundation on individual announcements, if desired, and our Publicity Guide, which may be downloaded from the Resources for Applicants & Grantees section of our website, offers suggestions.