



# Lessons Learned from AA & NH/PI Organizations' Experiences with Federal Funds

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**The Urban Institute conducted 13 exploratory conversations with organizations serving Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AA & NH/PI) communities to learn about their experiences, or lack thereof, with federal funding.**

The AA & NH/PI population in the United States today exceeds 25 million, or over 7 percent of the nation, per US Census Bureau data (AAPI Data 2022). These communities are among the fastest-growing groups across the United States.

In a 2021 survey of more than 400 AA & NH/PI-serving organizations conducted by the Urban Institute, 75 percent of respondents cited lack of funding or funding instability as extremely challenging for initiatives focused on the well-being of AA & NH/PI communities (Ford et al. 2021).

Such challenges are evident from recent research on foundation grants: only 0.2 percent are awarded to AA & NH/PI communities, levels similar to those three decades back (Kan 2021).

Less is known about how access to federal government funding, both competitive and noncompetitive grants, can vary across AA & NH/PI communities and organizations. To help AA & NH/PI communities unlock federal resources requires a better understanding of how AA & NH/PI-focused nonprofit organizations are currently accessing federal funding and what might be done to lower the barriers to entry they may face.

## Background

We spoke with leaders from 13 nonprofit organizations that serve AA & NH/PI communities about their experiences, or lack thereof, with federal funding (table 1; box 1).

Our selection was drawn from a list of AA & NH/PI-serving organizations from both a 2021 Urban Institute landscape scan as well as a VENG Group analysis that used data from USAspending.gov and online grant portals maintained by federal agencies to identify AA & NH/PI-serving organizations that received any federal grant between 2018 and 2022. We supplemented this list with organizations that may not have received any federal grants in recent years.

In our final list of more than 20 organizations, we focused on local and regional organizations that provide direct services or work on community initiatives. We also considered the diversity of location and locational focus of organizations across the United States, their type of work, and AA & NH/PI communities by ethnicity, faith, and nationality served. We spoke mainly with executive directors and development leads, and each conversation lasted 30 to 40 minutes. Altogether, the organizations we spoke with encompassed those that receive federal grants often, those that do not apply for or receive federal grants often but are interested in receiving more, and those that do not prioritize seeking federal funds.

**TABLE 1**  
**Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AA & NH/PI) Organizations Interviewed on their Experiences Seeking Federal Funding**

<b>Organization</b>	<b>Headquarters</b>	<b>Primary focus</b>	<b>Primary AA &amp; NH/PI subgroup served</b>
<b>Advancing Justice–Asian Law Caucus</b>	San Francisco, CA	Legal; civic engagement	NA
<b>Asian Pacific Environmental Network</b>	Oakland, CA	Environment; immigration	NA
<b>Boat People SOS</b>	Falls Church, VA	Immigration; civic engagement	Vietnamese
<b>Center for Pan Asian Community Services</b>	Atlanta, GA	Health and human services	NA
<b>Fred T. Korematsu Institute</b>	San Francisco, CA	Social justice and civic education	NA
<b>Japanese American Service Committee</b>	Chicago, IL	Health and human services	Japanese
<b>Korean Community Service Center of Greater Washington</b>	Annandale, VA	Health and human services	Korean
<b>Laal</b>	Bronx, NY	Civic engagement	Bangladeshi
<b>National Asian Pacific American Bar Association</b>	Washington, DC	Legal; civic engagement	NA
<b>New Mexico Asian Family Center</b>	Albuquerque, NM	Health and human services	NA
<b>North Carolina Asian Americans Together</b>	Raleigh, NC	Civic engagement	NA
<b>Papa Ola Lōkahi</b>	Honolulu, HI	Health and human services	Native Hawaiian
<b>Sikh Coalition</b>	New York City, NY	Civic engagement	Sikh

Source: Urban Institute.

Notes: AA & NH/PI = Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander; NA = not applicable.

In our exploratory conversations, we gained insight into the complexities of application and reporting processes, successful informational and relationship strategies, the effect of data availability on federal grant applications, reasons some organizations do not wish to pursue federal funds, and ideas for supporting organizations in pursuing federal funds going forward.

Lastly, because the subset of organizations we interviewed may be relatively well resourced and knowledgeable about federal funding opportunities, the challenges they discuss may be especially striking for smaller and newer AA & NH/PI-serving organizations.

## Scope of Organizations' Experiences with Grants

The extent to which the AA & NH/PI organizations interviewed rely upon and how they learn about federal grants can be summarized as follows:

- For organizations that accessed at least some federal funding, grantmaking programs and their points of contact at local, state, or federal government levels varied.
- Federal funding as a share of total funding ranged from little to nearly all of the AA & NH/PI organizations' respective budgets.
- Organizations learned about federal opportunities largely through existing local networks of similar organizations or through government agency notifications.

### Federal Grantmaking Departments and Programs

Organizations that accessed some amount of federal funding received them from a wide variety of programs, including the following:

- The US Department of Health and Human Services' Assets for Independence and Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs
- The US Department of Justice's programs under the Office on Violence against Women
- The National Parks Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites grants
- The Corporation for National and Community Service's AmeriCorps grants
- Service grants under the Native Hawaiian Health Care Improvement Act
- The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' funds for organizations providing health services

These federal grants spanned a mix of funding streams, including direct federal government resources, pass-through from respective states or local governments, or subcontracts through larger organizations such as the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum. We did not ask interviewees to specifically discuss whether they accessed the unprecedented infusion of federal funds during the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, through 2020's Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act and 2021's American Rescue Plan Act.

## Federal Funding as a Share of Organizations' Budgets

Federal funding as a share of our subset of AA & NH/PI organizations' budgets ranged from under 1 percent to over 99 percent. Organizations that operate with little to no federal funding cited administrative burdens or preferences for other funding streams, such as individual donations or foundations. Some forayed into federal funds as recently as the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention program on Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health, so as to boost vaccination rates for AA & NH/PI communities.

Organizations with the most federal funding are primarily long-standing providers of health and human services in their respective states and localities.

## Sources of Information about Federal Opportunities

Most organizations that relied on federal funding receive notifications from newsletters or closely follow portals such as Grants.gov to find opportunities in their areas of work. Some hear about opportunities directly from agencies with which they often have long-lasting relationships.

Many also noted the importance of existing AA & NH/PI networks, whether they be formalized coalitions, such as the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans and the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum, or informal connections between similarly focused local organizations that inform each other of federal grant opportunities.

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*We get notifications from the website about certain applications coming up or opening. For others, we get emails directly from each agency letting us know we can apply.*

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*[Pull quotes throughout this brief are statements from leaders of AA & NH/PI-serving organizations.]*

## Challenges with Applying for and Implementing Grants

Our interviewees named three main challenges with applying for and implementing grants:

- Applying for federal grants is an inaccessible, difficult, and confusing process for many organizations.
- Federal grants require significant budgeting and operational capacity, and organizations must calculate whether the administrative burden is worth their time and efforts.
- Lack of disaggregated data on AA & NH/PI populations is detrimental for AA & NH/PI-serving organizations trying to prove a need in their communities.

## Inaccessible Applications

Several interviewees told us that getting a federal grant can be complicated, and that applications are not user-friendly. The sheer volume of documents required, along with the familiarity and research needed to understand the basic protocols, can be intimidating. One interviewee said that grantmakers may tend to cater to organizations with staff that have “white-collar backgrounds and education,” because the process is “extremely inaccessible, really confusing, and not linguistically accessible.”

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*We did not delve into federal funding until the beginning of the pandemic because it is incredibly challenging to navigate and hard to figure out which grants we'd even be eligible for.*

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## Administrative Burdens

A few organizations noted that the cost-benefit analysis of applying for and receiving federal grants is not in their favor because of restrictions on how the money can be spent and the administrative burdens of reporting.

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*Federal funding requires so much administrative work in comparison to other grants. We once received a \$100,000 grant but 50 percent of that went back into the administrative tasks, which means only 50 percent went to the client. That does not seem right.*

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Merely collecting the data necessary for a grant application can be challenging, and some organizations make special arrangements or hire staff with extensive experience in grantmaking and grant reporting to just compete.

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*The hesitation [with pursuing federal funds] comes from the administrative burden of implementing. It's a trade-off of, 'How much money are we going to get [from the grant]?' versus 'How much time will [the grant] take to manage?'"*

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## **Lack of Disaggregated Data**

Federal grants often require applicants to quantitatively prove that a critical problem exists and the organization can address it effectively. Disaggregated AA & NH/PI data can be key to success. However, such data are often available only at an aggregated level as “Asian and Pacific Islander,” or worse, combined with data on other races and ethnicities into an “Other” category. One interviewee shared that they had been denied a recent governmental grant because the organization could not demonstrate a need with “hard, accredited, disaggregated data,” even though the pandemic’s negative economic impacts and the rise of anti-Asian violence was widely known.

Many interviewees expressed that the lack of filterable, issue-specific, and location-specific data for AA & NH/PI communities directly hindered their success with federal grants. Given these limitations, some have relied on literature reviews, outdated quantitative studies, or data from other states. But the landscape of the AA & NH/PI population has changed significantly over the past decade alone. Access to data has not kept up, impeding organizations that provide services for populations whose “need” has been harder to prove quantitatively. Examples include AA & NH/PI communities in Southern states and refugee Burmese, Bhutanese, and Laotian communities across the country.

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*Sometimes the challenge with data is that Native Hawaiians are tied to Asian Americans, when really, Native Hawaiians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders should be [specific] categories. This becomes an issue when we are trying to apply for grants. Communities need to have access to disaggregated data... Our mission is very specific to us and no other organization serves the mandate that we do, and we do not want our needs and our stories being told for us or being translated for us. Data sovereignty is important.*

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## Higher Barriers for Smaller or Newer Organizations

Smaller or newer AA & NH/PI organizations can face special barriers in seeking federal funds:

- The access curve can be steep, particularly for smaller organizations that have fewer established relationships and less experience applying for federal grants.
- Newer organizations may lack the internal organizational capacity to fund the dedicated grant-writing staff necessary to both apply for and implement federal grants.

### Steep Access Curve

Federal grants tend to be made on a reimbursable basis, or require matching funds to be raised elsewhere, creating a steep barrier for smaller organizations. By design, therefore, federal grant opportunities favor organizations that have other funding streams that can sustain them while they apply for and implement a federal grant's programmatic activities.

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*[We have a] reimbursable federal grant. That's the big challenge for small organizations like ours. It's a two for one match—that's a lot. Especially during the pandemic, it's been hard to find that seed money and matching money... That twofold combination of having to raise a third of the budget on our own, and the grant from government being reimbursable, makes things very difficult.*

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Smaller organizations that are not in geographic hubs with sizable AA & NH/PI communities note additional difficulties in accessing federal funding opportunities.

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*We find it difficult to compete at the same level with big organizations in California and New York, for example, where there's a much larger and long-established presence of Asian American communities and organizations. We cannot compete on that level from a numeric standpoint, in terms of metrics of success.*

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## Lack of Grant-Writing Staff

Interviewees said that the current system is impossible to navigate unless an organization is staffed with at least a few individuals working full time solely on federal grant applications. Hiring dedicated grant-writing staff can be especially difficult for organizations that do not have the in-house capacity or infrastructure necessary to learn about, apply for, implement, and complete reporting requirements to fulfill federal grants. Restrictions on spending federal programmatic funds on administrative expenses, such as hiring grant-writing personnel, can mean that organizations must find other funding streams to cover grant writers.

## Differing Perspectives

Our interviewees did not have uniform experiences, and some of their conflicting views were as follows:

- Some organizations prefer to receive funding through other sources, such as local communities and members, the city or state, foundations, and corporations.
- Nuances within AA & NH/PI communities can influence organizations' relationships with and attitudes toward federal funding.

## Preference for Other Funding Sources

A few interviewees noted that corporations and foundations make their applications and reporting processes more approachable than daunting federal grants. Points of contact at corporations and foundations, interviewees say, are more proactive in building personal relationships with organizations, and those individuals often become long-term supporters and make reapplying for further grants more feasible.

Even among government funding streams, some mentioned, building relationships and maintaining communications at the state or local level was significantly easier than at the federal level.

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*At the state level, we have a lot closer connections to the agencies. There is greater dialogue and cooperation. On the other hand, we view the federal level as an anonymous entity. There's a ton of paperwork and it feels less back and forth than what you get at the local level.*

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One interviewee said that constituents perceive federal funding as a “conflict of interest” because it may change the way an organization operates.



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*We have a fast and pretty hard rule on not taking government funding. The caveat is, very occasionally, we've said yes to government funding through a well-trusted third-party... We think it can become a pretty significant conflict of interest. The moment you start taking money from government agencies, it starts shaping how you approach work and could affect to what extent you're holding groups accountable.*

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### **Varying Perceptions among Subgroups**

Some AA & NH/PI organizations perceive federal grants differently based on their nature of work and the communities they serve. For example, interviewees expressed conflicted feelings over broadening their scope to access federal funds that will help them serve the overarching AA & NH/PI community, rather than focusing on work specific to an ethnic group. Interviewees highlighted the importance of having those discussions among their staff and board members because it impacts their mission and values. Another interviewee described that federal funding for immigration-related work can mean different things across organizations: the stories and immigration trends of AA & NH/PI communities have varied by nationality of origin, time, and a community's location within the US.

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*We want to expand into mental health—it's a huge issue for Asian Americans, but especially for Vietnamese communities because many of us are refugees and we have lived through trauma. We can find that funding at the state and local level, but we're not really sure where or how to get that at the federal level.*

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## **Recommendations for Partners and External Supports**

Interviewees recommended several specific types of resources and assistance that could support AA & NH/PI organizations access a larger share of federal grant funding:

- Technical assistance in understanding and writing grant applications
- Tools, templates, and written resources
- Navigators, consultants, or advisors to offer individualized and more specific guidance
- Learning communities and peer networks

- Resources tailored to AA & NH/PI communities

## Technical Assistance

Various interviewees mentioned that they might seek and win more federal awards if partners or larger external organizations were to provide grant-writing supports. Some noted that more experienced organizations could educate less-familiar organizations, such as walking interested applicants through a “mock application,” explaining what opportunities are available, and demonstrating how to price, create budgets, and build a logic model and narrative for federal grants.

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*We try to be really thoughtful before we even apply for federal funding. We take a look at who was funded in previous cycles and ask ourselves, ‘Have any ethnic-led and/or Asian American organizations been awarded this funding before? Is it too much of a long shot? Would preparing a complicated application be a waste of time if the chance for success is so slim?’ That’s where technical assistance can be very useful, helping people learn how to make these kinds of assessments.*

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## Tools, Templates, and Written Resources

Some interviewees said examples of deliverables from recent successful applicants would clarify the process and documentation requirements. Help with data collection, especially with disaggregated data specific to issue areas, AA & NH/PI communities, or states and localities, would also be valuable.

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*I had been using [application] materials we had from before, and now I’m wondering, do I follow the materials we have from the past, or are other people doing things differently now?... We’re [also] currently in the process of creating a data and grant management system. Are there templates we could use? I’ve just been creating tables in a Word document.*

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## **Navigators, Consultants, or Advisors**

Federal grant applications can be made more approachable if external supports tailor guidance to each organization's specific circumstances. Some interviewees stressed the importance of having a person to talk with and ask questions, which can be difficult in widely-attended webinars. An interviewee said that smaller organizations have limited capacity to research grants extensively, so knowing "pro tips" and "things to watch out for" with specific federal grants would be beneficial.

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*Sometimes it's very hard to anticipate all the program costs. People who could help talk through those [and other] things would be helpful.*

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## **Learning Communities and Peer Networks**

Some organizations have found success by tapping into existing networks of similar organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing about the grants available and how to approach them.

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*A friend at another local organization talked us through this process. I wish that was more accessible... Creating a mentor network of organizations who've gotten the funding before is helpful, especially when it comes to reporting, contracts, and other things that people would not understand from the beginning.*

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## **Resources Tailored to AA & NH/PI communities**

A well-developed, regularly maintained database of grant opportunities geared toward AA & NH/PI communities that also included filter and search functions for type of work and demographics of communities served, would be indispensable.

Furthermore, if more philanthropic and unrestricted funding for AA & NH/PI-serving organizations were available, as opposed to project-specific funding streams, organizations would be able to build their development and grant management capacity and be better positioned to access federal funding.

# Recommendations for Policymakers and Grant Administrators

We asked interviewees what kinds of assistance AA & NH/PI-serving organizations may need to access more federal funding, while specifically mentioning a few options, such as facilitated networks and learning communities, as possible solutions. Several recommendations applicable to federal policymakers and grant administrators emerged from our conversations:

- Up-front disbursement of funds
- Relaxation of reporting and budgeting requirements
- Establishment of relationships with AA & NH/PI organizations
- Access to disaggregated federal data

## Disbursement of Funds

Nonprofit organizations often lack fiscal flexibility; federal grants disbursed up front and not on a reimbursable basis would benefit a wider range of AA & NH/PI organizations. Some interviewees also mentioned that federal grant opportunities could be made somewhat unrestrictive, rather than project-specific, to better support capacity-building activities. More AA & NH/PI organizations—especially those that are newer and smaller—would then be able to grow with federal funds.

A few interviewees noted that federal funds have already been or will be particularly helpful when organizations try to transition to different work, build their annual budget, or undertake capital projects, partly because the funding amounts tend to be larger than those from local or private sources. But, particularly for smaller or newer organizations, this is only viable if they are to receive the funds up front and to help support their administrative activities.

## Reporting and Budgeting Requirements

Many interviewees shared that easing the complexities of reporting requirements with federal grants would be valuable. Some mentioned that reporting is easier with private funding and proposed that federal grant administrators establish a grant threshold amount sufficiently small to relieve organizations of the most burdensome reporting standards, especially if much of the information is regurgitative and can easily be obtained from prior government grants or platforms such as GuideStar.

Another interviewee expressed that revising budgets and resubmitting forms whenever minor aspects of projects change are extraneous steps that can dominate staff time and slow project activities down. Alleviating such requirements would also be helpful.

## Establishment of Relationships

For newer or smaller AA & NH/PI organizations trying to access federal grants, establishing communications and developing long-standing relationships can be challenging. An interviewee shared that a conference they attended to connect with funders felt “business as usual,” and that they left feeling that grants will continue to go to the same organizations that have gotten funded for the last 50 years or more. One interviewee asked for a national-level dialogue with federal agencies on their goals for addressing particular issues in AA & NH/PI communities. This would allow organizations to align their projects in that same direction.

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*Any time we apply for funding from funders who do not know us or our work [i.e., the “cold call” method], it’s that much more challenging to get that funding (though not impossible!).*

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## Access to Data

A few organizations mentioned better data “starts from the top,” at the federal level. If federal agencies and the US Census Bureau would collect and share more disaggregated data on AA & NH/PI communities, organizations could expand their scope of research and provision of services. On the other hand, some interviewees mentioned federal grant administrators and reviewers might also want to better recognize lived experiences as legitimate data on grant applications.

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*Try to understand and allow us to provide different kinds of data, such as qualitative stories, not just quantitative numbers.*

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### BOX 1

#### Interview Guide

- Has your organization ever applied for and received federal funds?
  - If not, could you tell us the reasons why?
- What has been your organization’s experiences with obtaining federal funds?

- From which agency or program—directly from the federal government, routed through a state or local government, or as a subgrantee?
- Have you received federal funds recently—this year or the past three years?
- Do federal funds make up a big share of your budget—can you give us a rough ballpark (for example, is federal funding over half, a third, or a tenth of your budget)?
- How did you learn about the opportunity to receive federal funding—were you contacted by a grantmaking agency prior to applying?
- Overall, how easy or difficult would you say it is to obtain a federal grant—what makes the process challenging or what could make it more accessible?
  - Are you currently considering applying for a federal grant? If so, which one and why?
- The Asian American Foundation (TAAF) is interested in knowing what kinds of assistance AA & NH/PI-serving organizations may need to access more federal funding. What kinds of assistance might be most helpful to you: for example, staying current on what grants are available, technical assistance in writing grant applications, do not need any help, or not interested in federal grants?
  - How could facilitated networks or learning communities be helpful in increasing your organizations capacity to apply to federal grants?
- Anything else you'd like for us to know?
- Do you have any questions for us about this project?

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