FOSTERING EQUITABLE RESILIENCE BRIEF

MAY 2024

CEDR

Consortium for Emergent Disaster Resilience



Fostering Equitable Resilience: An Evidence-Informed Community Fellowship

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This document captures CEDR's evidence informed process and approach to program development. It highlights the evidence we used to inform the program development, the lessons learned along the way, and briefly highlights the capacity building program that resulted.



Identifying the challenge

Despite billions in funding earmarked for marginalized populations[1] and trillions allocated for resilience initiatives[2], **a critical gap remains: these funds often fail to reach the hands of marginalized communities**.

Through community engaged research and experience, we have identified a central factor contributing to this disconnect: **the challenge of channeling funds to small community-based organizations**. Often, these grassroots groups emerge in response to unmet needs among marginalized populations, underserved by larger organizations and institutions. Logic suggests that to effectively reach marginalized communities, continuing to fund traditional organizations that have repeatedly failed to engage these populations is not the optimal approach. Instead, directing resources towards grassroots organizations formed in response to these failures presents a more promising avenue.

These community-driven initiatives, born out of necessity, inherently possess higher levels of trust within the communities they serve. This trust is essential for engaging marginalized populations, who often harbor reservations about interacting with systems and programs that have historically disenfranchised them.

However, **allocating funds to these marginalized communities poses challenges from both the funder and the applicant perspectives**. For applicants, navigating the grant application process can be daunting. Many organizations lack the capacity and infrastructure to manage large-scale grants effectively. Funders, particularly those entrusted with taxpayer dollars, often are faced with the dilemma of either allocating significant funds to either;

A an organization with proven track record of reaching the most marginalize but has limited capacity for managing large grants, or

B an organization with less than a stellar track record for reaching the marginalized but has a greater capacity to manage large funding opportunities.



In response, the Consortium for Emergent Disaster Resilience (CEDR) embarked on a mission to tackle these complex issues through rigorous research, leading to the development and pilot testing of an equity-focused program.

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Using evidence to develop and design an equitable fellowship program



Key insights for scaling-up

There is over a trillion dollars of funding available to enhance resilience[2]. However, many organizations struggle to access these funds[1,15,16]. **To increase the amount of funding that reaches the most marginalized, grant application processes need to be streamlined.**

Few funders have approached grant applications through this lens of **"less is more"** as CEDR has, and based on our experience, many would find that **surprisingly very little is lost even with significant cuts to requirements**.

Our equitable evidence-informed application had significantly less requirements than the majority of 30+ other grant applications reviewed. Even with a fraction of the narrative, the reviewers were easily able to distinguish the best fits for this particular opportunity. While CEDR's pilot was small in scale, this same pattern would certainly be seen with larger opportunities if similar cuts to requirements were made.

> Funders should consider the power of subtraction wherever possible – what would happen if less were required on an application.



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FUNDING INTO COMMUNITIES

- Funders need to be mindful that while getting money into the community is a priority, research on the "Matthew Effect" suggests the effect of **not tactfully handling rejected applications could do exponentially more harm than any one particular funding opportunity will do good** (see page 7 for further details). As effort on a proposal increases, so does the potential for a rejection to be the fatal blow that causes applicants to decide that pursuing future funding to support or expand their services is not worth the effort.
- Funders should strive to ensure rejected applicants walk away with tangible feedback. Additionally, careful consideration should be given to effectively screen out applicants early on before significant levels of effort have been dedicated to the application. This means being more transparent and clear in their communication at each step of the process.
- This might include eligibility quizzes, clearly stating funding priorities, communicating clearly and often in personal ways, and providing the criteria on which the proposal will be evaluated. Other options to reduce the impact of the "Matthew Effect" might also include using a scaled-down pre-application or a letter of intent as a screening mechanism, or even brief 5–10-minute grant concept pitches to assess early alignment before significant effort is invested in a full application.

Addressing these challenges would reduce the burden on applicants and reduce the review time needed. This is a suggested first step to increasing the diversity of applicants and increasing the probability that the applicants are serving the most marginalized.



INTERMEDIARY FUNDERS

While streamlining an application process does reduce the overall burden and would increase the number of smaller organizations that could apply for funding, there still may be a gap in their ability to receive such funding. This could be addressed by finding intermediary funders, like CEDR, who have the staffing infrastructure to receive larger amounts of funds that can then be dispersed to smaller organizations, or by fostering collaboration between smaller community-based organizations and providing shared resources (e.g., an accountant, a grants manager, etc.). This shared resource model has shown promising results in terms of return on investment as demonstrated both by CEDR and by the SBP (another fellow grantee of the Walmart Foundation) with their fellows program.

Ultimately, small organizations birthed from the community itself know how to best serve their constituents and reach its most vulnerable. Funders need to prioritize not just getting funding into people's hands, but into the right hands, where it can have the most impact, which is in the hands of front-line community-based organizations.

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Evidence base for the development of an equitable application process

CEDR aimed to engage historically marginalized and underfunded community-based organizations, particularly focusing on BIPOC populations affected by Hurricane Ida, through an accessible and straightforward fellowship application process. The goal was to ensure that eligible organizations supporting disaster resilience in Louisiana's most impacted parishes could participate, even if they had limited grant writing capacity. To achieve this, **CEDR devised an application process that was notably simpler to navigate and less onerous for applicants compared to traditional grant application processes**. These efforts were informed by:

Literature review on barriers to recovery - Key findings: Analyzing over 100 peer-reviewed articles provided insights into the challenges faced by historically marginalized communities in accessing disaster finances and resources. See our website for the detailed research brief: https://cedrhub.org/publications/



Literature review on the "Matthew Effect": Inspired by Robert Merton's concept of cumulative advantage, the team delved into how early successes in securing funding create disparities in subsequent opportunities for equally capable organizations.

Critical review of philanthropic grant portals: Studying more than 30 philanthropic grant application platforms helped identify best and worst practices, informing the development of an easy-to-navigate web portal and user-friendly application process.



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While the literature review on barriers to recovery and the review of the philanthropic websites were foundational to the development of this pilot program's portal and fellowship program, the "Matthew Effect" particularly caught our attention due to its relevance in the disaster resilience space.

Drawing inspiration from the book of Matthew 25:29 which states, "...everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away," Robert Merton coined the term "Matthew Effect". The concept highlights the exceptional advantage gained by those who receive funding, and the disadvantage of equally qualified organizations without early wins. Research suggests applicants who secure funding initially, gain boosts in confidence and as a result apply at higher rates than their equally qualified counterparts[4,11,12]. As a result, **they secure funding more than twice as often as their peers, not because of an improvement in the quality or size of their grant proposals, but rather due to the frequency of their application attempts**[4].

Furthermore, applicants who secure more grants enhance their organizational credibility and further increase their likelihood of future funding, see Figure 2.



Figure 1. Overlooked impact of not securing a grant

This cycle just described perpetuates the pattern of **those who apply more receive more,** leading to increased resilience levels of well-funded communities. Conversely, those who receive fewer grants face escalating challenges over time.

For funders, this underscores the need to more carefully consider their interactions with unsuccessful applicants, particularly in grants with high rejection rates. Ultimately, while even a small award can yield significant community benefits, if 50 unsuccessful candidates experience diminished confidence and subsequently apply for other grants less frequently, the long-term impact on the community could be substantial.

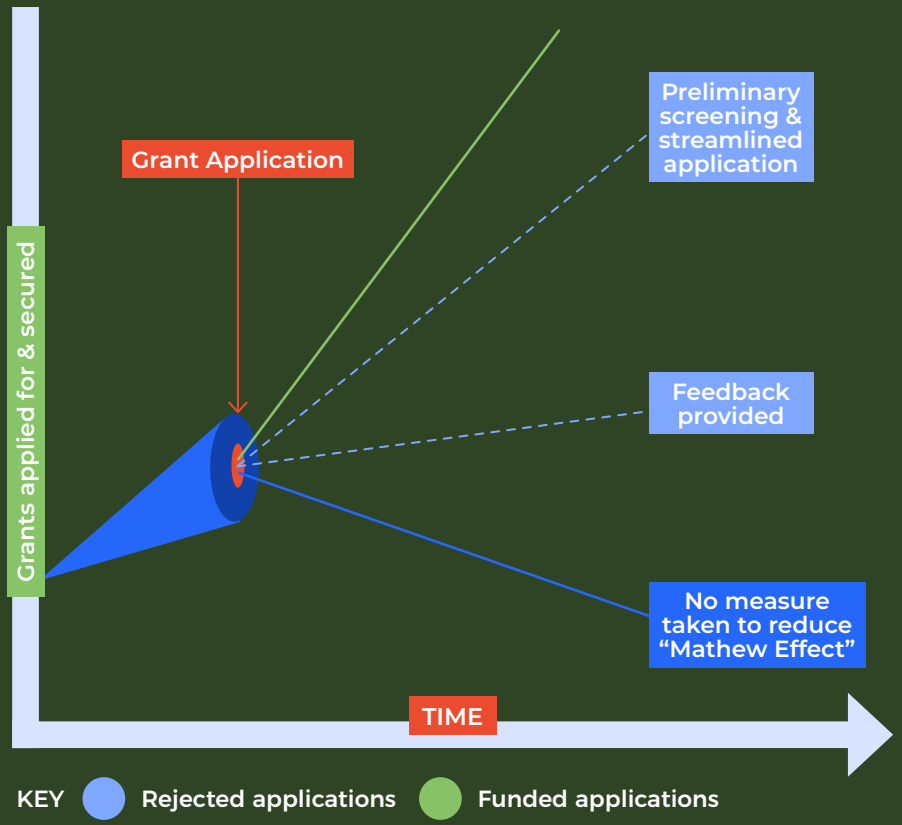


Figure 2. Matthew Effect interventions and outcomes

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CEDR attempted to addressed the Matthew Effect by carefully designing the application process to mitigate the potential impact on unsuccessful applicants, a strategy discussed in more detail below.

In addition to the two literature reviews, the team evaluated the grant application procedures of over 30 philanthropic funders supporting community-based organizations. This evidence-driven analysis aimed to identify best and worst practices in website design, application and selection processes, and question formulation. By discerning effective and ineffective approaches, the team developed a web-based portal and simplified application questions. This approach aimed to foster greater participation from small, underfunded community organizations. This robustly designed, evidence-based application process successfully encouraged eligible organizations to apply, facilitating a more inclusive fellowship program.

Development of an Equitable Application Process

The team employed evidence-informed strategies to create an inviting, accessible, and straightforward application process, including:

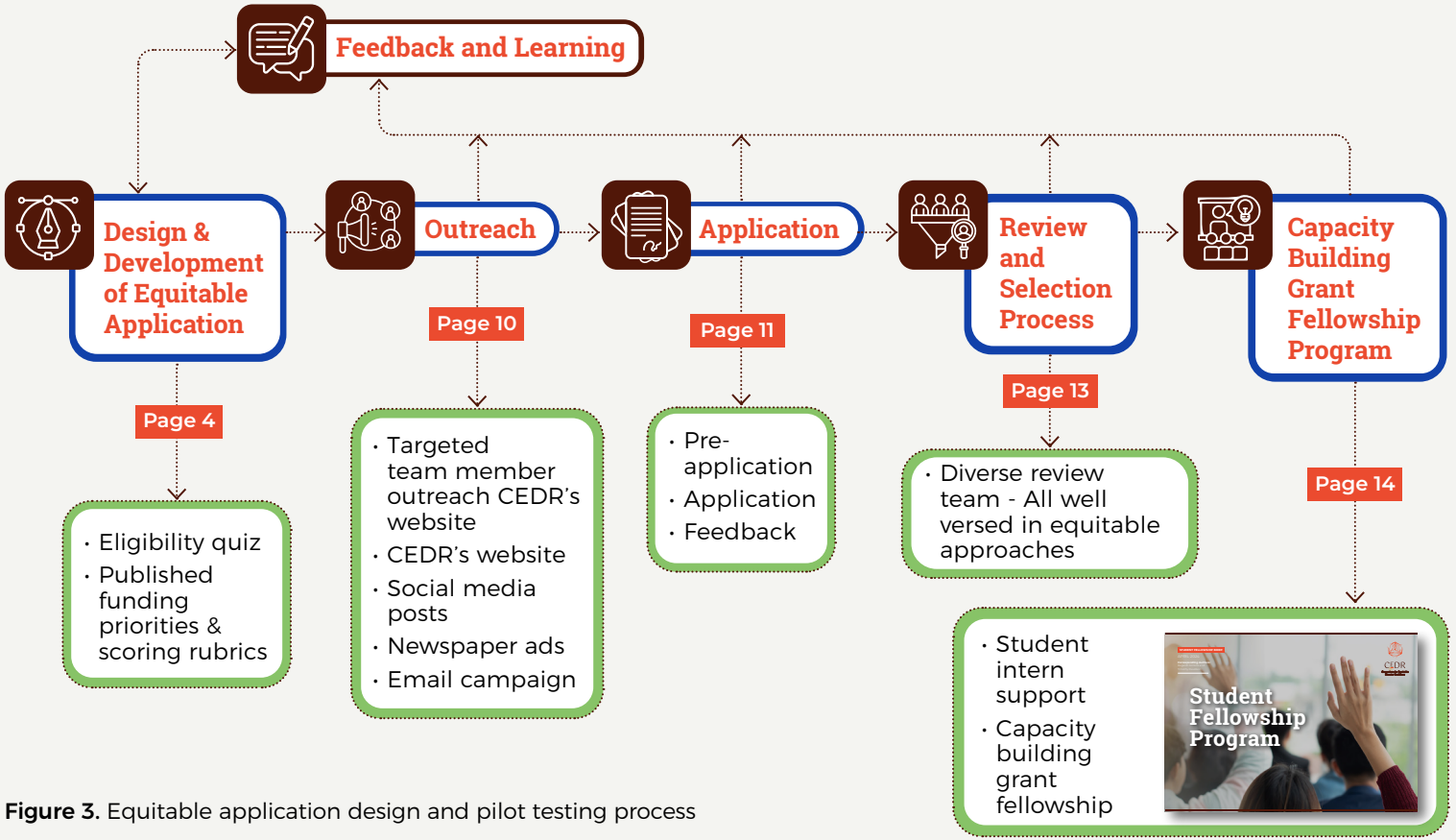


Figure 3. Equitable application design and pilot testing process

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Eligibility Quiz: An eligibility quiz on the CEDR Home Page enabled prospective applicants to quickly determine their eligibility for the grant. This reduced the risk of ineligible applicants investing time in the application process and streamlined the review process for reviewers. For instance, for a pool of eight $20,000 grants, the eligibility quiz successfully screened over 625 ineligible applicants. Despite its effectiveness, few funding portals reviewed utilized such quizzes. More commonly, eligibility criteria were simply noted somewhere on the web page or in request for proposals. Benefits of eligibility quizzes include:

- Rapid eligibility determination.
- Reduction in eligibility related inquiries.
- Participants confirm their eligibility before spending any further time exploring the opportunity.
- Reduction in ineligible submissions.

Clearly communicated funding priorities: To ensure an equitable process, funding priorities were clearly communicated in several places, ensuring prospective applicants could easily determine whether the grant aligned with their missions and priorities and was worth applying for, thus optimizing the use of their time and resources. In CEDR's case, project criteria included being community-based, community-driven, resilience-focused, while incorporating equitable leadership development components. Missing among most of the reviewed application portals were clarity around funding priorities. Transparent communication of funding priorities facilitated self-screening by participants, ensuring that only those closely aligned with the fellowship applied. This approach reduced the overall burden on both applicants and the funder.

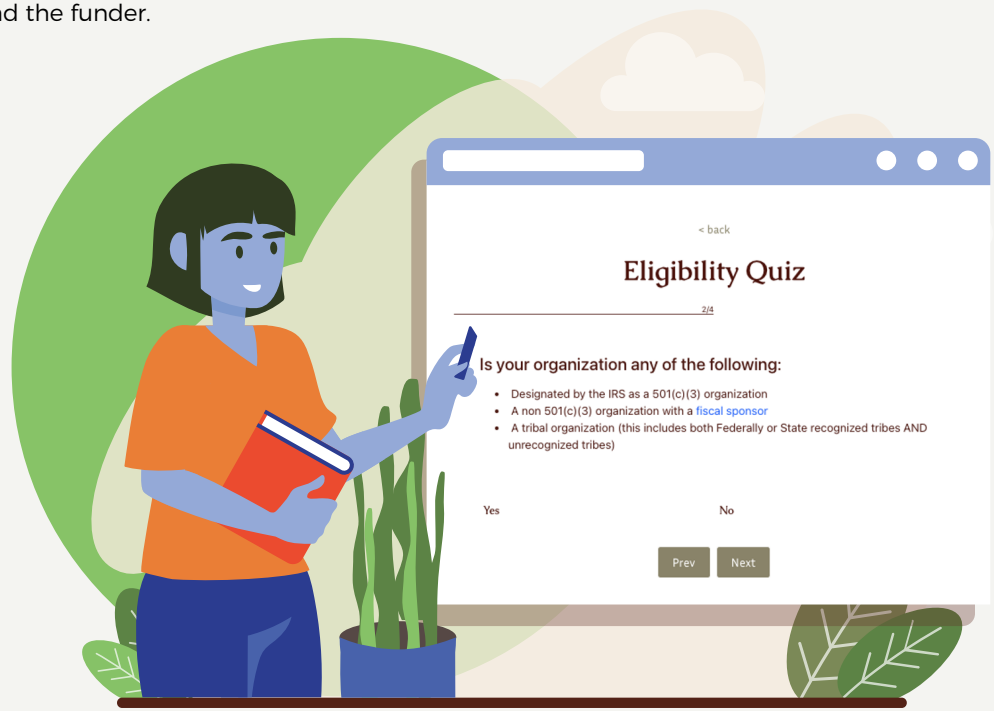


Figure 4. Screenshot of eligibility quiz

- **Published scoring rubrics:** CEDR published scoring rubrics on its website to ensure transparency in the selection criteria for grantees. These rubrics showed how applications would be scored. Such transparency reassured applicants of a fair assessment and minimized biases based on pre-existing relationships with the funder. Rubric weighting prioritized the potential impact on marginalized communities and alignment with CEDR's funding priorities.
- **Personal outreach and communication:** Personal outreach and communication between CEDR and applicants, including emails and phone calls before, during, and after the application process, alleviated distrust and confusion, particularly among first-time grant applicants. Open dialogue throughout the program allowed for adaptation to meet needs and expectations of fellows.

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Equitable outreach strategies

CEDR developed a comprehensive communication strategy to inform community-based organizations about the capacity-building grant opportunity. This strategy utilized multiple methods and media platforms to reach organizations with varying technological access and capacities across urban and rural parishes, promoting CEDR's inclusivity and accessibility goals. Key components included:



CEDR's website and social media

Utilization of digital platforms ensured broader dissemination of information.



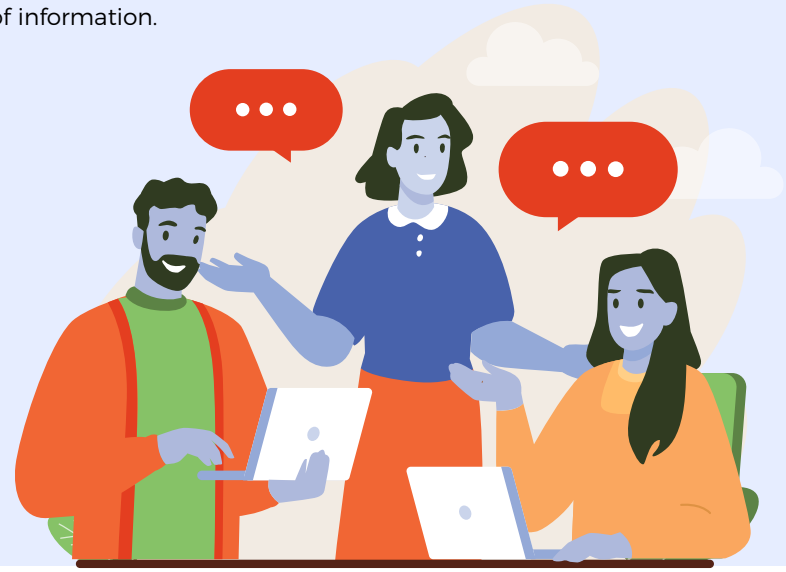
Newspaper ads

Ads were strategically placed to reach communities with limited technological access, ensuring broader awareness.



Targeted team member outreach

Personalized outreach to social and professional networks helped maximize engagement and reach.





Email campaign

Targeted emails were sent to local organizations in areas most impacted by Hurricane Ida, facilitating direct communication.

While tracking the impact of these media strategies was challenging, personal network invitations yielded the highest number of applicants. By casting a wide net, the team aimed to identify small to mid-sized community-based organizations supporting disaster resilience efforts, particularly in overlooked communities affected by Hurricane Ida.

LEARNINGS

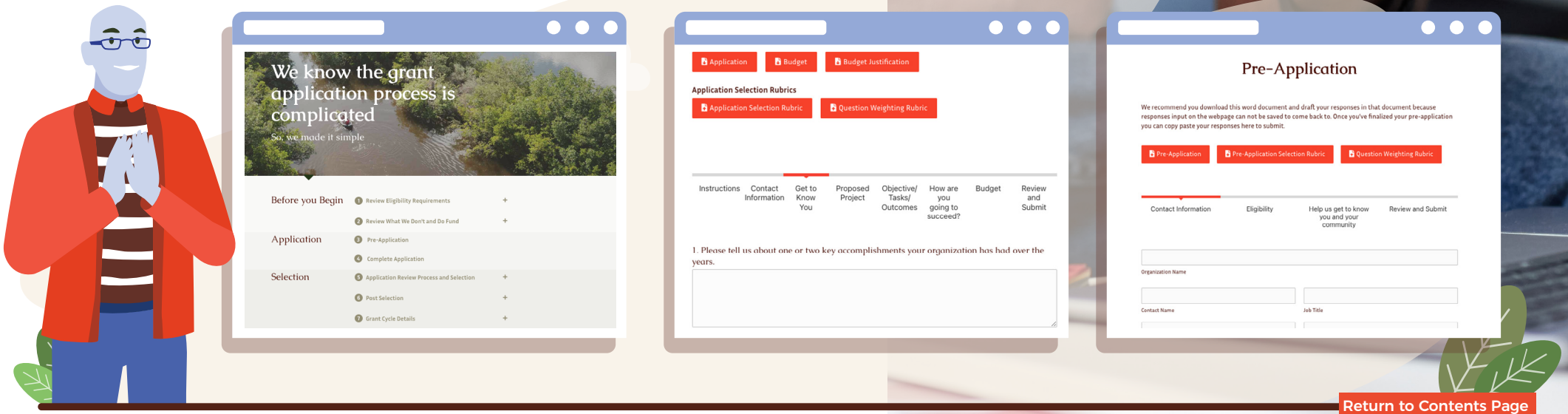
- **Invest in community relationships:** Building strong relationships with communities is invaluable for effective outreach. Consistent investment in community engagment yields long-term benefits.
- **Harness personal social networks:** Personalized communication through trusted sources significantly increases grant application rates, highlighting the importance of personal networks in outreach efforts.
- **Transparency and personalization:** Organizations appreciated transparent and personalized communication from funders, fostering trust and engagement.

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Application and feedback

CEDR embarked on an exploratory mission to simplify grant application requirements, aiming to gather only essential information while ensuring informed selection.

The primary focus when designing this application process and portal was to minimize applicant burden, with reviewer burden being a secondary concern. This approach stood in contrast to the common “the more, the merrier” approach of many funders, requesting extensive details without considering the strain on smaller organizations with limited resources or the additional strain on reviewers. For perspective, one of the applications reviewed for a grant similar in size to that offered by CEDR in this pilot program asked for an equivalent of 62 pages of single-spaced content (22 pages for the pre-application and 40 for the application), others required 15-20 pages. In contrast, CEDR’s process required less than 6-8 pages, including the pre-application of only 2.5 pages or less.



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KEY FEATURES

Simplified Two-Stage Application Process: Applicants first submitted a short and straightforward pre-application expressing their interests and intentions for the grant. The CEDR selection committee then invited a subset of organizations to submit a full application, minimizing demands on under-resourced organizations. Both stages were designed to be distinct yet complementary, reducing redundancy and time demands.

- **Pre-application:** Required a brief organizational overview, project ideas the grant would fund, and basic organizational and demographic information, with a maximum word count of 250-400 words per question. Applicants found this step minimally demanding, with some submitting within several hours of receiving information about the grant.
- **Full-application:** Requested more detailed information on organizational accomplishments and strengths, project details including needs addressed and populations served, project leadership, objectives, tasks, outcomes, and possible challenges, as well as a project budget and budget justification using a template that was designed to simplify the process. The equitable application limited the word count to the equivalent of 5-6 single-spaced pages.

Personalized Feedback: All organizations selected in the pre-application phase received personalized feedback, all other applicants were offered feedback upon request. This type of feedback, rarely provided by grantors, aimed to strengthen future applications and mitigate the "Matthew Effect" by encouraging organizations near the funding threshold (i.e., those who were close to receiving funding) to continue applying. It was also consistent with CEDR's goal to support the development of equitable resilience in the region. Reviewers, who were already assessing and critiquing each section as part of their evaluation process, found that providing detailed feedback required minimal additional effort and this feedback was highly valued by applicants. This aligns with research on the "Matthew Effect," which suggests that providing words of encouragement, particularly to those near the funding threshold, can increase the likelihood of organizations applying for future grants[4]. Considering the limited additional effort required and the value applicants derived from it, offering personalized feedback should become a much more common standard practice for funders.



Achieving equity may require exploring innovative approaches beyond traditionally used application processes and engagement strategies.

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Implementing a two-stage application process**, like a pre-application followed by a full application, a letter of intent, or concept note, can alleviate the burden on underfunded communities if carefully designed. This approach may mitigate the funding discrepancies associated with the "Matthew Effect" by reducing the initial effort required and lessening the impact of the rejection on the applicants' future grant-seeking pursuits.

- **Funders should embrace applicants with limited grant experience and be open to building their capacity**. Research on the "Matthew Effect" suggests that candidates with established funding records may be no more qualified than other candidates who simply haven't benefited over the years from the compounding interest of early success. Many such candidates could thrive if given the opportunity[4,7,9,10,12]. Funders

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willing to fund qualified candidates with limited funding experience may ultimately achieve greater value for their investment. This is because experienced candidates are often in higher demand and therefore charge higher rates for their work, resulting in increased costs for funders. Increasing the number of grants awarded while reducing the amount per grant could offer more opportunities to emerging organizations. This approach not only allows new applicants to demonstrate their capabilities but also minimizes risk for the funder.

- **Designing a more equitable application process** necessitates reevaluating and reconceptualizing the requirements of each stage to minimize applicant burden. While many funders now offer multi-stage grant application processes, the requirements often remain challenging for under-resourced communities and community-based organizations.

- **Simplifying narrative requirements in applications** is crucial for fostering equity and encouraging under-resourced organizations to apply. Offering alternatives to a traditional written application like video submissions and virtual or in-person meetings can enhance accessibility.

- **Institutional bureaucracy poses challenges and constraints** that need proactive mitigation to minimize their impact on grantees.

- **Providing reviewers with clear instructions** on which part of their feedback will be shared with applicants and encouraging them to offer both summative and constructive feedback requires minimal effort but yields invaluable insights for both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

Review and selection process

Based on the evidence from our literature reviews, CEDR implemented an equitable review process by selecting a diverse group of reviewers and providing them with detailed scoring rubrics outlining the program's overarching goals and priorities. These rubrics encouraged careful assessment of each application component. Each application was reviewed by at least two randomly assigned reviewers, with a third reviewer involved if there was disagreement. Final selection decisions were made based on the rubric scores and group discussions, particularly for applications near the funding threshold. Additional details were requested from applicants as needed.



LEARNINGS

- **Simplifying the application is important, but it's not enough**, as high-capacity organizations may still have an advantage. Initiatives targeting lower-capacity organizations should have specific goals, missions, and directives aligned with reaching the most vulnerable, with rubrics and selection processes reflecting this focus. Reviewer training may be necessary to shift focus from "grading writing quality" to assessing fit and alignment with grant goals. Differentiating between seeking the best written grant application and assessing fit and impact, especially when targeting low-capacity organizations, is crucial.

- **Tiered applications pools based on organization size or capacity** (e.g., operating budget of X or less, # of staff is less than Y, etc.) can help ensure that smaller organizations aren't competing against drastically larger organizations .

- **Streamlining the application process** benefits both applicants and reviewers, enabling quicker review and ultimately faster allocation of funds to communities.

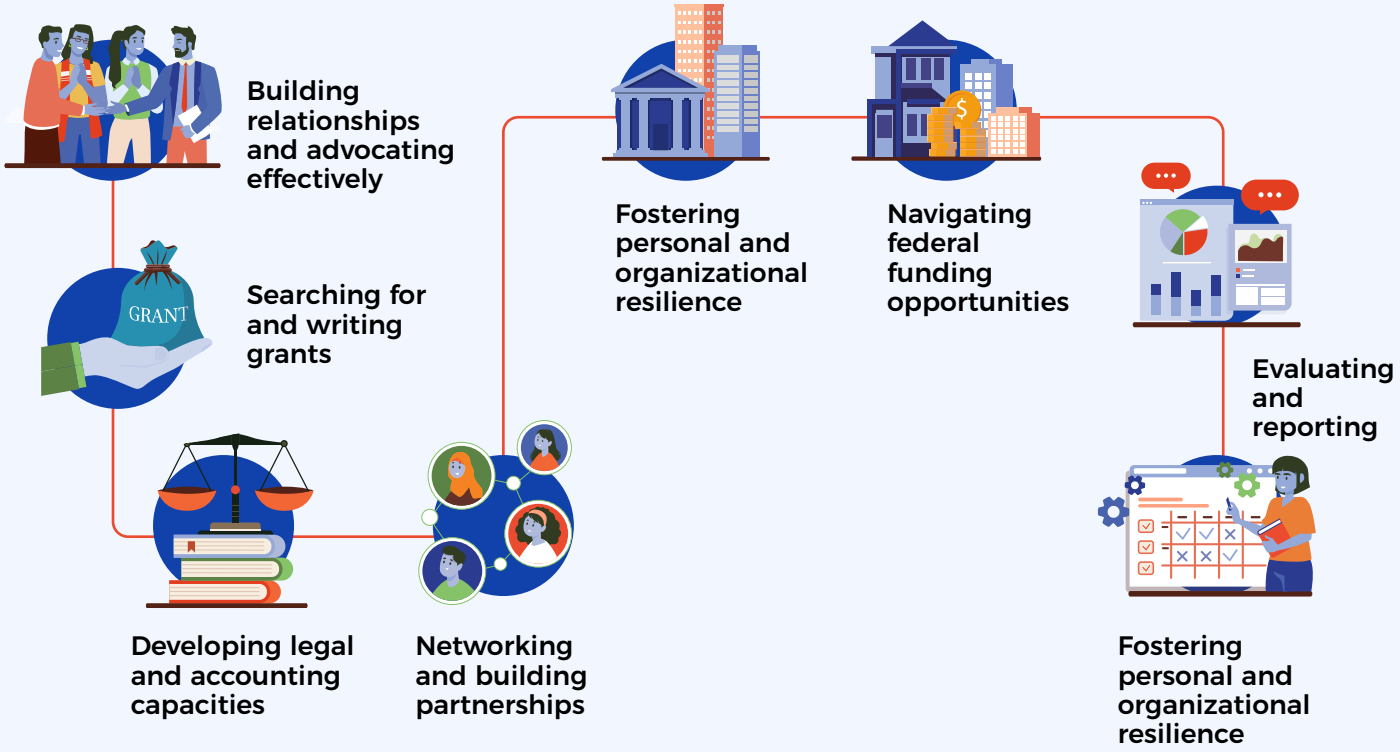
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Capacity-building grant fellowship

After designing and implementing a more equitable grant application process, CEDR selected a diverse group of eight organizations for its capacity-building grant fellowship. These organizations were engaged in a wide range of activities, including reconstruction and home repair, mental health services, criminal justice advocacy, recycling, and aiding unhoused individuals. Each organizations received $20,000 to fund their proposed disaster resilience projects, which varied from home reconstructions, disaster supply storage sheds, preparedness kits, and disaster supply distribution to focus group research, and the development and distribution of educational materials and programs.

These projects focused on marginalized populations such as Tribal communities, the elderly, families impacted by the criminal justice system, single-parent households, individuals that are unhoused, and historically disinvested communities. Additionally, organizations were supported by student interns trained in grant searches, community engagement, and conducting scholarly literature reviews to support grant proposals (see our full write up of this component on our website https://cedrhub.org/publications/).

In collaboration with CEDR, the organizations participated in a capacity-building curriculum tailored to their needs, covering a range of topics essential for organizational development:



Additionally, fellows had the opportunity to attend major conferences, such as the 2023 Climate Week in New York City. This experience provided them with a platform to showcase their work and share their experiences with a global audience. It also offered attendees of the conference a rare chance to hear directly from community-based organizations carrying out the daily, practical work required in a region that has already experienced significant climate change impacts. Organizations reported a boost in confidence, particularly smaller organizations, as they had not previously had the opportunity to share their story at such a prestigious global conference.

KEY INSIGHTS

- **Organizations faced greater time and resource constraints than expected**, impacting their ability to engage in additional activities outside of the organization's daily work (e.g., search for additional grants, build partnerships, etc.).
- **Collaborating with organizations to customize trainings** is essential for delivering an equitable and meaningful experience.

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