

Cummings \$30MILLION GRANT PROGRAM

2024 Final Grant Selection Committee Guide

Thank you for participating in Cummings Foundation’s 2024 grants cycle, through which a total of \$30 million will be awarded to 150 local nonprofits. As a member of the Final Grant Selection Committee, you will be making the most challenging decisions of the selection process. We have great confidence, however, that your varied backgrounds, experiences, and insights will enable you to choose the most promising nonprofits to receive this significant funding. Our team is readily available to answer any questions that may arise.

- Andrew Bishop, deputy director, 781-569-2337, aeb@cummings.com
(for general questions or further committee guidance)
- Katie Torrey, grants & communications coordinator, 781-569-2335, kmt@cummings.com
(for technical questions related to Foundant, the online grants management portal)
- Joyce Vyriotes, executive director, 781-932-7072, jkv@cummings.com
(for general questions or further committee guidance)

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Timeline

Tuesday, March 12	Committee Orientation and beginning of individual application reviews
Week of April 1	Committees meet to discuss and select grant recipients
By Friday, April 5	Committee chairs notify Foundation that selections are complete
Monday, May 20	Foundation emails award packages and decline letters to applicants
Thursday, June 13	Grant Winner Celebration



Our Approach to Nonprofits

They are the heroes: the nonprofit executive directors who also serve as HR managers, development officers, and marketing managers; the program staff who work diligently and passionately, often for low pay and even less recognition; the volunteers who devote precious free time in service to others. They are the heroes—not us.

We are privileged to be in a position to support their life-changing, equity-promoting, barrier-breaking, purpose-igniting work. We are not seeking to judge, eliminate, or vote out. Rather we endeavor to learn and discover synergies so Cummings Foundation can invest in organizations and efforts that match its values and priorities and that have the most meaningful, positive, and sustainable impact on local communities.

Foundation staff and volunteers possess valuable expertise gained through varied professional and personal experiences; however, we recognize and respect the intimate knowledge that nonprofit representatives have of the causes and the people to which they have dedicated their careers. The grant candidates are the true boots-on-the-ground experts, and they deserve not just a seat at the table, but the seat at the head.

We respect the beliefs of diverse populations and the uniqueness of individuals, and we believe that all people deserve to live with dignity and to have the opportunity to improve their circumstances. We recognize that we all have biases, but we strive to be aware of them, set them aside, and eliminate them from our thinking, questions, and comments. We welcome candid reminders from others when we demonstrate an unconscious bias.

***We are most grateful for the participation of our volunteers
and for the respect and kindness they show to all grant candidates.***

Our Guiding Principles

Having embarked on our collective journey of philanthropy, we pledge to work to help ensure that no one is ever left behind.

Recognizing that the dignity of every human person is fundamental, Cummings Foundation's primary goal is to help meet the most basic needs of all people in all segments of our society.

We seek to promote and empower the social and economic inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or other status.

We will work to improve the lives of those within our priority funding regions by directly supporting the work of other effective charitable organizations.

And we will endeavor through our local outreach to aid the furthest behind first.

—*Bill and Joyce Cummings*



This "color wheel" is a photo of the actual pin presented to Bill Cummings when he spoke at the United Nations in June 2019. Many of the words and sentiments here were inspired by portions of the United Nations' document "Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." Cummings Foundation, Inc. supports the [SDGs](#).

About the Cummings \$30 Million Grant Program

This initiative awards a total of \$30 million every year to 150 nonprofits that are based in, and primarily serve, Middlesex, Essex, and Suffolk counties, plus six communities in Norfolk County: Brookline, Dedham, Milton, Needham, Quincy, and Wellesley.

Cummings Foundation (CFI) and about 90 generous, insightful volunteers will first identify 150 organizations to receive three-year grants of \$30,000 - \$300,000 each. Among the winners will be first-time recipients as well as nonprofits that have previously received grants from Cummings Foundation. Then, 25 of this latter group of repeat recipients will be elevated to 10-year awards, ranging mostly from \$100,000 to \$1 million each.

At the application stage, the Foundation asked that all requests be made with three-year awards in mind. Discussions about 10-year grants will take place at the end of the selection process.



At least two thirds of the 150 grant winners each year are decided completely by volunteers. Accordingly, you and other members of the Final Grant Selection Committee will collectively determine a minimum of 100 award recipients. To accomplish this, each of the 10 committees will evaluate and score 13 - 20 applications. Depending on the number of applications in your batch, between eight and 14 of the top-scoring nonprofits from each committee will be awarded grants.

Other grants are decided internally by Foundation staff and are considered “Early Decision” winners. In the event there are extra Early Decision slots, the Foundation will typically look to the committees’ “runners up.”

All applications should have been written with three-year awards in mind, with annual installments ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000. Decisions about which *repeat* grant winners will have their three-year awards elevated to long-term grants will take place following this committee’s work by another group of volunteers.



Changes to the 2024 Grant Application

A preview of the 2024 grant application is available [online](#). CFI implemented several changes this year to make the process more accessible, particularly for smaller nonprofits seeking annual installments of \$25,000 or less.

Applicants requesting this level of funding:

- Completed an abbreviated short-form full application. Go to page 7 of the preview to see where the short-form proposal stops and, if you wish, read the supplemental questions for other applicants.
- Applied and will receive funds for general operating support. **Organization completing the short-form full application did not need to make a pitch for a specific program or need.**
- Were *not* asked to submit a budget.
- Will be reviewed alongside other smaller organizations seeking general operating support rather than competing against much larger, more well-established nonprofits.

Selection Guidelines

Given the great diversity among grant recipients, we do not have a standard scoring rubric to aid in decision making. Instead, we ask committee members to rely on the key principles below, plus their own valuable experience and good judgment, to determine which applicants should receive grants.



In addition, we ask you to view and bear in mind [this eight-minute thought-provoking video](#) about **Recognizing Unconscious Bias**. According to University of California, San Francisco:

“Unconscious biases are social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Everyone holds unconscious beliefs about various social and identity groups, and these biases stem from one’s tendency to organize social worlds by categorizing.”

Being aware of one’s biases can help ensure that decisions about applicants are more equitable.

Impact

Transformative. Game-changer. These are words grant winners often use to describe their Cummings grants. Please look for opportunities where grant funding would have the greatest impact, bearing in mind that impact can take many forms. One nonprofit may serve a large number of people, whereas another organization might serve a much smaller number, but in a long-term or in-depth manner. Both could provide enormous value.

Preferring that grant funds not be “drops in a bucket,” this program primarily supports small and medium-sized nonprofits that do not enjoy the robust donor bases and endowments that generously support many larger institutions. The Foundation *is*, however, open to awarding grants to larger organizations when they have presented compelling cases as to why they need *this* funding.

History of Success

Cummings Foundation applauds the initiative of newly formed nonprofits that seek to meet community needs. Given the large size of the grants made through the Cummings \$30 Million Grant Program, however, the Foundation gives priority to *established* nonprofits with a *proven history* of providing value to the community. Grants may be awarded to fund new programs of established nonprofits if the application successfully demonstrates the need for the program and the organization’s capacity to fill that need.

Population Served

Cummings Foundation gives priority to nonprofits that serve people who have been disadvantaged or marginalized in some way. We greatly appreciate effective programs that work to prevent or counteract discrimination due to race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, age, physical disability, etc.

Substance Over Form

Recognizing that applicants have varying levels of experience and expertise with both grant writing and the English language, reviewers should focus on the substance of the proposal (e.g., the merit of the mission, the need for the services, the effectiveness of the programs) rather than on more superficial aspects (e.g., grammar, writing structure).

Other Considerations

Fiscal Sponsorship

Fiscal sponsorship is when a nonprofit organization extends its tax-exempt status to another group. The fiscal sponsor accepts tax deductible donations on behalf of the sponsored project/organization, and accepts responsibility for the use of those funds, ensuring their application toward the intended charitable purposes. Although CFI will consider requests from organizations that have fiscal sponsors, it is more likely to fund organizations that have their own 501(c)(3) public charity statuses because of the transparency and IRS oversight that accompany that designation.

Grant-makers

CFI changed its eligibility requirements a few years ago to allow requests from grant-makers, which are organizations that, rather than providing services or programs, raise funds to grant them to other organizations or to individuals. Grant-makers should demonstrate that they have systems and expertise in place to ensure due diligence when vetting funding requests.

Allowable Activities



Over the years, grant reviewers have reached out to CFI staff seeking guidance as to whether certain approaches or activities in the application align with the Foundation's funding priorities. Below are responses to some common questions about activities that are allowable and should in no way negatively impact applicants' opportunity to advance:

- **Requests for general operating expenses or salaries.** Although a specific program/project may appear more exciting, applicants should not be penalized for requesting general operating or salary funding, as this support is essential to a nonprofit's ability to provide services. If an applicant makes a strong case for the value of its mission and the impact of its services, CFI is open to providing it with general operating support. This type of flexible funding is often difficult for nonprofits to secure. If the request is for general operating expenses, the applicant does not need to detail in the budget how the funds will be spent.
- **Recycled proposal language.** Recognizing that CFI is one of many current or prospective funders for applicants, and that nonprofits often have limited fundraising capacity, the Foundation encourages organizations to submit the same or similar material from previous Cummings or non-Cummings proposals, where appropriate. We view this as "working smarter, not harder." Of course, any recycled material should be refreshed as needed to reflect the applicants' current activities and present circumstances.

- **Fair compensation for nonprofit professionals.** Cummings Foundation believes strongly that nonprofit professionals should be compensated fairly. Many people assume that they are (or should be) motivated primarily by social change, not by their paychecks. This mindset can hurt the nonprofit sector, however, leading to a brain drain and a lack of capable leadership. Recognizing and rewarding nonprofit employees with suitable compensation can lead to better retention rates and reduced turnover.



Compensation of the highest paid employees should be reasonable relative to these individuals' expertise, the scope of their work, and the organization's budget size and mission. For example, a health-focused nonprofit might employ a clinician as its leader, or an educational nonprofit's executive director could be a former school principal or superintendent. In these cases, the specialized skills needed may merit more competitive compensation to attract/retain capable leadership.

- **Sustainability plans.** You may wonder, "How will the organization continue the program after the grant funding ends?" The answer in most cases will be: through fundraising. Whether through grants, events, or individual donors, nonprofits are consistently thinking about how to diversify their funding. CFI trusts that nonprofits are developing strategies to increase organizational sustainability and does not ask them to detail that plan.
- **Requests for a high installment.** CFI encourages its grantees to have diversified funding sources and prefers that its funding not represent an outsized percentage of an organization's budget. A general guide (more than a hard rule) is that the installment should not exceed 20 percent of an organization's average annual revenue for the past three years. If an applicant requests more than 20 percent, however, it should not be automatically disqualified. Rather, make a note of your recommended installment so CFI can take it into consideration when determining award amounts.

In addition, CFI is open to providing larger support to aid in expansion efforts if an organization has demonstrated early programmatic and operational success, an ability to attract a diverse base of individual and institutional support, and strong/talented leadership to support rapid growth.

- **Proposals from previously declined applicants.** Worthy organizations frequently apply multiple times before receiving a grant. Factors such as changes in the number of applications in a specific category (e.g., food insecurity) and organizational maturity can affect the chances of receiving funding. Nonprofits also often use feedback from prior review cycles to strengthen future applications.

Accordingly, we ask grant reviewers to focus on the merits of the current application, rather than the number of times an organization has applied in the past or what might have "gone wrong" with the prior submission. Any prior applicant is welcome to call CFI, and its staff will provide the feedback/comments collected from volunteers who evaluated prior letters of inquiry (LOIs)/applications.

Pre-meeting

- **Review your assigned applications** at any time by logging into Foundant, our online grants management system. See *Foundant Instructions* (page 9) for step-by-step instructions.
- Feel free to **contact applicants to request further information** or clarification if you wish. (Contact information is at the top of each application in Foundant.)
- **Complete your Individual Ranking Form** (Google Doc link was sent via email), providing a ranking (with 1 being the most worthy of a grant) in the Initial Rank column.
- On the same Google Doc, **provide brief feedback for every application**. This column is



extremely important, as this is where CFI staff members look when nonprofits call seeking feedback. Please provide a few informal sentences or phrases that describe the thinking behind your decision (rather than general facts about the proposal). Because *you* are making the funding decision, CFI is relying on you to provide the insights behind these decisions. Although many foundations do not provide such feedback, we are dedicated to showing respect for the time and effort nonprofits invest in these applications and to helping them be more successful in their future grant-seeking efforts.

Committee Meeting (led by chairperson)

- The chair will **add the rankings** assigned to each applicant by the four committee members. For example, a nonprofit with rankings of 4, 10, 8, and 7 would have a combined total of 29. For committees with 15 applications, the totals will range from a potential low of 4 to a potential high of 60. The chair will enter these numbers in the Initial Rank column of the *Committee Ranking Form*.

The group totals will show where there is already consensus about applications that should be approved for grants (those with very low totals) as well as those that should be declined (those with very high totals).

- **Discuss the applications that fall in the middle.** All members are encouraged to share their thoughts on the relative merits of each proposal.
- Allow a few minutes for committee members to **individually rank the applications once again**, this time using the *Final Rank* columns on their Individual Ranking Forms. As a result of the discussion, members may opt to assign different rankings than they did originally (but please do not change the rankings in the Initial Ranking column).
- The chair will **calculate the new totals** for each applicant by adding the rankings assigned by the four committee members in their Final Rank columns. The chair will enter these totals in the Final Rank column of the *Committee Ranking Form*. The applicants with the highest rankings (i.e., lowest totals) will receive grants.
- **Recommending an alternative installment schedule.** Although the application asks for applicants' preferred annual installments, ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000, the actual disbursements are determined by CFI. To ensure sustainability, CFI does not want to be responsible for a disproportionate share of a nonprofit's total revenue. **If you feel that a different disbursement amount than the one requested would be more appropriate for a proposal, please make a note in the Feedback column on the *Committee Ranking Form*.**

Post-meeting

- Committee chairs are asked to **complete the Committee Ranking Form and alert Andrew that the committee has made and recorded its decisions**. The Foundation will then download all Individual and Committee Ranking Forms from Google Drive. The Committee Ranking Form should show the final totals (rather than a 1 through 15 ranking). Please also indicate the winners by checking the appropriate boxes.
- The 10 committees' selected applicants will be combined with the Early Decision list to create the complete list of this year's 150 grant winners.

Foundant Instructions

For data privacy and to protect the information of applicants/grantees, the Foundation does not make its grants management system user guide publicly available. Volunteers on grant selection and site visits committees are provided with access to applicant/grantee materials (e.g., letters of inquiry, applications, impact reports, site visit reports, contact records) to be well informed and adequately carry out relevant activities while representing Cummings Foundation.