



# Inspire Grants for Small Museums Grant Program

September 2023

Welcome to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Office of Museum Services informational video “Inspire Grants for Small Museums Grant Program Applicant Information Session.”



The goal of this video is to provide an overview of our Inspire Grants for Small Museums grant program – which we call “Inspire” for short - and the process of preparing an application for funding.

# Video Chapters

- 1 Chapter 1: What is Inspire Grants for Small Museums (Inspire)?
- 2 Chapter 2: What can Inspire Grants Fund?
- 3 Chapter 3: Application Components – Overview
- 4 Chapter 4: Application Components – Organizational Profile
- 5 Chapter 5: Application Components – Narrative
- 6 Chapter 6: Application Components – Budget
- 7 Chapter 7: Application Tips and Next Steps

This video is organized into seven chapters:

- What is Inspire? This section explains the purpose and design of the Inspire grant program.
- What can Inspire Grants Fund? This section explains the types of projects that can be funded in Inspire and the amount of funds that can be requested.
- Application Components – Overview. This section describes the types of documents that are needed to create an Inspire grant application.
- Applicant Components – Organizational Profile. This section is where you will talk about your institution and make the case for being a small museum.
- Application Components – Narrative. This section provides guidance on composing the narrative part of the application.
- Application Components – Budget. This section provides details on the information to include in your project budget.
- Application Tips and Next Steps. The concluding section provides a few tips and next steps.

The complete set of instructions for how to prepare and submit an Inspire grant application are found in the Notice of Funding Opportunity published on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) and also available on the IMLS website. Please refer to the Notice of Funding Opportunity for the most detailed information to prepare your application.

## Using This Video



- To get the most out of this video, we recommend that you watch it in its entirety,
- This will give you an understanding of the Inspire grant program, the types of projects that can be funded, and the necessary application components.
- You may also want to review the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity before, during, and after you watch the video.
- Notices of Funding Opportunities, also known as NOFOs, are documents that detail the requirements of each of our grant programs for Fiscal Year 2024. All of our NOFOs can be found at [imls.gov/grants](http://imls.gov/grants).
- As you navigate the application process, you can use this video as a reference tool.
- If you'd like to skip to a specific section, please use the time bar below, or the links in the description box, to navigate the chapters



In this section we will answer the question “What is Inspire?” providing information on the purpose and intent of this grant program and who it is designed to serve.



## Inspire = Inspire Grants for Small Museums

Inspire! supports projects that strengthen the ability of a **small** museum to serve its public.

Activities might reflect museums as:

- active resources for lifelong learning
- institutions important in improving the well-being of their communities
- good stewards of the nation's collections

**Emphasis is on local impact.**



Children's Museum of New Hampshire

Inspire! Grants for Small Museums is a special initiative of the Museums for America program. The overall goal of the program is to support activities that strengthen the abilities of individual **SMALL** museums to serve their publics. This might be through activities that reflect museums as active resources for lifelong learning, as institutions important in improving the well-being of their communities, or as good stewards of the nation's collections.

Inspire is all about what **your** museum needs in order to better serve **your** public. It may well be exactly the same as what the museum across town or in a neighboring state needs, and that's ok. The important thing here is that our support should help you make a local impact.

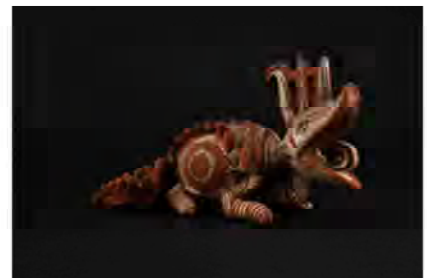
## Inspire and Your Strategic Plan

Inspire projects are expected to focus on a key component of your museum's strategic plan.

IMLS wants to support your museum in priority areas that benefit your community.



Art Museum of Southeast Texas



Inspire projects are expected to focus on a key component of your museum's strategic plan. IMLS wants to support your museum in priority areas that benefit your community.

The priorities in your strategic plan may connect to a range of activities from exhibitions, educational/interpretive programs, digital learning resources, professional development, institutional planning, audience-focused studies, and/or collections management, curation, care, and conservation. These are the kinds of activities that can be funded in the Inspire grant program.

A characteristic of a successful Inspire grant application is making the connection between the proposed project and a key need or challenge that faces your museum and whose resolution is identified in your strategic plan.

To help illustrate that connection, in your grant application we ask for a summary of your strategic plan—usually no more than two pages—so that reviewers will be able to understand how your proposed project's activities will further your institutional goals and objectives. The strategic plan summary is your opportunity to make a thoughtful and well-constructed connection between the proposed project and your museum's priorities.

# Inspire is for Museums

- Museums must
  - ✓ Have at least one full time or equivalent professional staff person, either paid or unpaid
  - ✓ Have a physical location that it owns or operates
  - ✓ Have been open to the public for at least 120 days in the year prior to November 15th, 2023
  - ✓ Own or use tangible objects
- Museums may be stand-alone organizations, or they may be part of a larger institution, such as a college, university, Tribe, or a state or local government.

Inspire is a grant program for museums.

As a museum, you should keep in mind that all applicants must meet certain requirements to be eligible for federal funding

- Your organization must be located in one of the United States' 50 States, its Territories, or the District of Columbia
- Your organization must be a unit of State, local, or tribal government, or a private nonprofit organization with tax-exempt status

If you meet those two requirements, then the next step is to consider what it means to be eligible for IMLS funding as a museum.

Museums must:

- Have at least one full time or equivalent professional staff person, either paid or unpaid
- Have a physical location that it owns or operates
- Have been open to the public for at least 120 days in the year prior to November 15th, 2023
- And own or use tangible objects

Museums may be stand-alone organizations, or they may be part of a larger institution, such as a college, university, Tribe, or a state or local government.





## Inspire is for all Types of Museums

- Aquariums
- Arboretums
- Art museums
- Botanical gardens
- Children's/youth museums
- General museums
- Historic houses/sites
- History museums
- Natural history/ anthropology museums
- Nature centers
- Planetariums
- Science/technology centers
- Specialized museums
- Zoological parks

Inspire is a grant program for all types of museums. Here's a brief list of some of the types of museums that routinely apply to this grant program.



## What is a Small Museum?

Applicants should think about a range of attributes that describe their organization, such as:

- number of staff members and volunteers
- estimate of total person-hours worked per week;
- operating budget and sources of revenue;
- number and types of objects in the collection;
- size of facility and property;
- types and numbers of audiences served; and
- size relative to other organizations of the same discipline, or within the same geographic region.

There are a wide variety of museum disciplines and geographic locations where museums are located across the country and determining an institution's size may rest on a number of factors. As a result, IMLS invites applicants to consider whether their organization is a good fit for this special initiative, and to make a case clearly within the application's Organizational Profile document for why they think they are a small museum. Reviewers will use the information provided in the Organizational Profile to determine if the applicant made a clear case for being a small museum. Applicants should think about a range of attributes that describe their organization such as:

- number of staff members and volunteers
- estimate of total person-hours worked per week;
- operating budget and sources of revenue;
- number and types of objects in the collection;
- size of facility and property;
- types and numbers of audiences served; and
- size relative to other organizations of the same discipline, or within the same geographic region.



## What Can Inspire Fund?

In this section we will answer the question “What can Inspire Fund?” providing details on the types of projects and associated goal objectives within the Inspire grant program as well as offer some summary data on the number and type of Inspire projects that were funded last year.

## Inspire Funds Projects

What is a “project”? A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.



Historic Cherry Hill

- A project is **temporary** in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources.
- And a project is **unique** in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

Inspire grants are designed to support project-based activities, so let's take a minute to consider just exactly what that means. The Project Management Institute has a good definition, which is “A temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result.” They go on further to explain that a project is temporary because it has a defined beginning and end in time and therefore defined scope and resources.

And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation but rather a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal.

We recommend that you keep this definition in mind as you conceptualize your IMLS project. Think of it as a temporary non-routine set of activities, which collectively have a beginning and an end in time, a defined scope requiring specific resources, and which are designed to accomplish a specific, singular goal.

## What Makes an Inspire Project Successful?



INSTITUTIONAL  
IMPACT



IN-DEPTH  
KNOWLEDGE



PROJECT-BASED  
DESIGN



DEMONSTRABLE  
RESULTS

Keeping our focus on project-based activities, let's look a little further at what characteristics are most often seen in successful Inspire applications.

- **Institutional Impact:** The project addresses a key goal identified in the institution's strategic plan.
- **In-depth knowledge:** The project design reflects a thorough understanding of current practice and knowledge about the subject matter.
- **Project-based design:** The work plan consists of a set of logical, interrelated activities tied directly to addressing the key need or challenge.
- **Demonstrable results:** The project generates measurable results that tie directly to the need or challenge it was designed to address.

Successful projects most often exemplify all these four characteristics and fit well within the Inspire grant program.

It has been our experience that unfunded applications fail to deliver convincingly on one or more of these areas.



## Inspire Program Goal and Objectives

**Program Goal: Build the capacity of small museums to provide museum services to their communities.**

- **Objective 1:** Support the development of cross-disciplinary learning experiences in small museums.
- **Objective 2:** Support the professional development of the small-museum workforce.
- **Objective 3:** Support the development of policies and institutional plans for small museums.
- **Objective 4:** Support the management and care of collections in small museums.

With that concept of “project” in mind, let’s turn to the program goal and its associated objectives. You should align your proposed project with one or more of the associated objectives. The choice of objective should be identified clearly in the Narrative. The choice of objective also informs the choice of project category, which we will discuss on the next slide.



## Inspire Project Categories

**Lifelong Learning:** IMLS supports the ability of museums to empower people of all ages and backgrounds through experiential and cross-disciplinary learning and discovery.

**Institutional Capacity:** IMLS supports building the capacity of small museums to serve their communities.

**Collections Stewardship and Access:** IMLS supports the role of museums as trusted stewards of museum collections as the natural, cultural, artistic, historical, and scientific foundations of our shared heritage and knowledge.

After selecting a program objective, this is likely to be the most important decision you make about your funding application. As you can see here, there are three options: Lifelong Learning, Institutional Capacity, and Collections Stewardship and Access.

You will find these three areas align with your selection of a program objective. You will select your program goal, objective, and project category on the Museum Program Information Form.

Why is your decision about which project category to choose so important? For one thing, your application will be reviewed by museum professionals who have experience and expertise in these general categories. And for another, your application will be competing against others who have chosen the same category. In short, the entire review process incorporates an assumption that your project aligns with the category you've identified. It's an important choice.



# Inspire Lifelong Learning

## Objective 1: Support the development of cross-disciplinary learning experiences in small museums.

- Public programs, adult programs, family programs, and early childhood programs.
- Exhibitions, interpretation, and digital media.
- In-school and out-of-school programs.

*Successful Lifelong Learning projects will provide high-quality, inclusive educational opportunities that address particular audience needs.*

So let's look at what kinds of activities a project in each of these categories might include. In this, and the two slides that follow, we include a list of the types of projects that fit within the category and associated objective(s).

A project in Lifelong Learning might include, but is not limited to, all or part of an exhibit, program development for all types of audiences, creating interpretive plans, media, training for teachers, partnerships with schools or out-of-school audiences, or program evaluation.

As you plan your project in this category, we strongly recommend starting with the concept of "learner at the center" and build around it. Spend time really thinking through who your learners in this project are and what their needs are. It's not likely going to be "everybody," so who is it really? What do they want to learn, what do you want them to learn, and what's the best way to go at that? We'll get to the whole idea of problems and needs in a few minutes, but a major takeaway here is to be focused in identifying your audience and in thinking about how you are going to serve them.





## Inspire Institutional Capacity

**Objective 2: Support the professional development of the small-museum workforce.**

- Recruitment, training, and development of museum staff and volunteers.

**Objective 3: Support the development of policies and institutional plans for small museums.**

- Foundational organizational policies and procedures, such as Collections Management Policies, Interpretive Plans, and Master Facilities Plans

*Successful Institutional Capacity projects strive to build the capacity of the small museum workforce and the institution itself.*

An Institutional Capacity project is likely to include activities that contribute directly to your work to build the capacity of your museum.

A project in Institutional Capacity might include, but is not limited to, institutional planning and policy development, and the recruitment, training, and development of museum staff and volunteers.



## Inspire Collections Stewardship and Access

**Objective 4: Support the management and care of collections in small museums.**

- Cataloging, inventorying, and registration; collections information management; and collections planning.
- Conservation and environmental improvement and/or rehousing; conservation surveys; and conservation treatment.
- Database management, digital asset management, and digitization.

*Successful Collections Stewardship and Access projects contribute to the long-term preservation of, increased access to, and expanded use of materials entrusted to the museum's care.*

Our third project category is that of Collections Stewardship and Access, and this includes just about anything you need to do for and with collections, except acquire them.

We are very open to projects that have multiple components configured in ways that make sense for you. One project might consist of cataloging, taking digital photographs, and updating database records, while another might combine digitization activities with rehousing.

We support conservation projects of all kinds—general, detailed, and environmental surveys as well as treatments and environmental improvements. And you are welcome to incorporate aspects of training and/or collections management into these projects if doing so makes sense for your situation.

It's important to note that in this project category, we encourage a step-by-step, progressive approach to collections work, including conservation. This means assessing needs, creating a prioritized list of activities, and following through by doing the most important things first.

# Choosing a Project Category



Lifelong Learning



Institutional Capacity



Collections Stewardship  
and Access

## ***Having a hard time choosing? Try these:***

1. Think carefully about what is “in the center” of your project. Who or what will benefit from your work? What will be improved once you’ve finished your project?
2. Decide whom you want to review your application. What kind of skillset and experience do you want them to have?
3. List all the activities you plan to carry out and assign each to a category. Which category includes the largest number of activities? Where will most of the resources be spent?

Before we close our discussion of project categories, we want to mention our guidance for projects that could belong logically in more than one. Sometimes it’s tough to choose, and you might be tempted to think that the best strategy would be to align with more than one—two, and maybe even three! We advise against that for several reasons.

The project categories have different goals, and we expect that projects aligned with each will address different problems, use different approaches, and will measure success in achieving the intended results in different ways.

So how can you choose the best category for your project?

Here are three things we suggest you try. Think carefully about what is “in the center” of your project. Is it the learner? Will people who engage with you as a result of your project to create a new exhibition and programming to go with it acquire new knowledge, develop a skill, experience a change in attitude about the subject of your exhibit? Or is it your institution that’s in the center of your thinking? Is your project one that will address an important need within your museum and will it result in an enhancement of technology or new policy or staff that has received a professional development opportunity? Or is your project about the collections? Will your project result in a better managed, better cared-for, or more accessible set of objects?

A second way to go at this might be to think about who you want to review your application. If you apply under Lifelong Learning, we will put your application in front of educators, learning theorists, and professionals with deep experience in understanding how people learn in museum environments. Would you rather we put it in front of a combination of experts in

museum planning, website design, or policy creation? If that sounds “right,” then it may push you toward Institutional Capacity. And if you apply under Collections Stewardship and Access, you can be confident that your application will be reviewed by some combination of registrars, collection managers, curators, conservators, or collections information specialists. If that seems appropriate, then this is most likely your best choice.

A third strategy to try might be to make a list of all the activities you plan to carry out. Then assign each to a project category, and then count to see where MOST of these activities occur and where MOST of the time and money will be spent. That might well provide your answer.

Our most heartfelt advice, then, is to choose one project category, study the instructions for preparing an application as well as the review criteria for that category, and write your proposal accordingly. As always, if you have questions, call the IMLS staff to discuss them.

## What Size Are Inspire Projects?

Inspire project budgets can range in size



Small Project: \$5,000 - \$25,000 in federal grants funds with **no cost share required**.

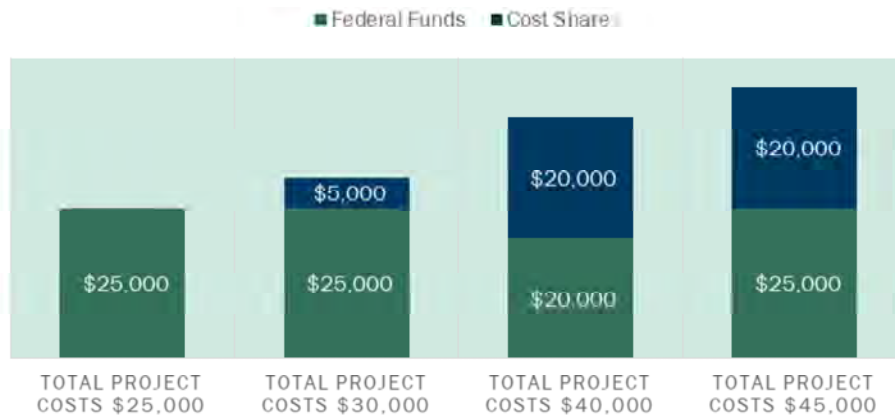
Large Project: \$25,001 - \$75,000 in federal grant funds with **1:1 cost share required**.

Inspire supports projects of all sizes, but there is a specific range of funding available in this grant program. For a small project, your project budget can request a minimum of \$5,000 to a maximum of \$25,000 in federal funds with **no cost share required**. For a large project, your project budget can request a minimum of \$25,001 to a maximum of \$75,000 with a **1:1 cost share required**. If you ask for less than \$5,000 or more than \$75,000 in federal grant funds, your application may be rejected and not reviewed. Remember to keep your budget aligned to the scope and scale of your project, including all costs necessary to complete the proposed activities.

Cost share can take a number of forms—among them are cash, staff time, volunteer time, third-party contributions, grants from foundations, and support from state or local government. Cost share cannot come from other federal sources.

# Inspire Funding Levels

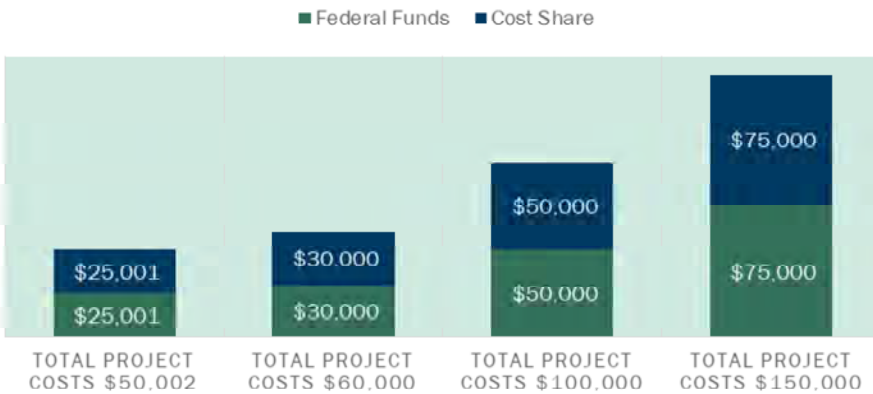
## SMALL PROJECTS WITH NO OR LESS THAN 1:1 COST SHARE



In the Inspire program, small project budgets are **NOT** required to have cost share. In the graph on the screen, there are four examples. The first example is of a total project budget of \$25,000 with no cost share. In the three other examples, the IMLS request amount never exceeds \$25,000, but the applicant is choosing to include partial cost share.

# Inspire Funding Levels

## LARGE PROJECTS WITH 1:1 COST SHARE

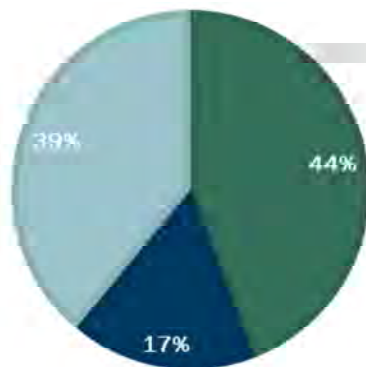


Large project budgets in the Inspire program are required to have at least a 1:1 non-federal cost share. In the graph on the screen, there are four examples. In all examples, the IMLS request amount and the cost share are 1:1. Applicants can choose to have more than the required 1:1 cost share for large projects.

## How Many Inspire Projects Get Funded?

### INSPIRE AWARDS FY23

■ Lifelong Learning ■ Institutional Capacity ■ Collections Stewardship



In FY23 IMLS made 77 Inspire awards for a total of \$3.4M.

The amount of applications received and the amount of awards made can vary from year to year. Here is a snapshot of our most recent application and award cycle.

In FY23 IMLS made 77 Inspire awards with a total of \$3.4 million in federal funds. We received 234 Inspire applications last year, resulting in 33% of those applications being funded.

About 44% of the Inspire awards were for projects supporting the Lifelong Learning goal, 39% of the projects supported the Collections Stewardship and Access goal, and 17% of the projects supported the Institutional Capacity goal.





In this section we will introduce the components of an Inspire grant application, and provide an overview about the required, conditionally required, and supporting documents.



## Application Components

The Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) includes a complete list of all the application components.

Most of these components are created and saved as a PDF for uploading as part of your application package in Grants.gov.

The Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) includes a complete list of all the application components. Most of these components are created by applicants and saved as a PDF for uploading as part of your application package in Grants.gov.

The Table of Application Components starting on page 8 (section D2a of the NOFO) lists which application components are required, as well as those that are conditionally required. For example, some components are included in the application depending on the type of applicant or the type of project.

Aside from the SF-424S and the IMLS Museum Program Information Form, which are completed in the Grants.gov Workspace, all application components must be submitted as PDF documents.

## Required Documents

These components are required of all Inspire applications.

- Application for Federal Assistance (SF-424S)
- IMLS Museum Program Information Form (including Abstract)
- Organizational Profile
- Strategic Plan Summary
- Narrative (5 pages max.)
- Schedule of Completion
- Performance Measurement Plan
- IMLS Budget Form
- Budget Justification
- List of Key Project Staff and Consultants
- Resumes

These are the **Required Documents**. **All applications must include the documents listed here.** Omission of even just one might result in your application's rejection.

Also important to note there is a 5-page limit for the narrative. If you exceed the page limit specified in the Notice of Funding Opportunity, we must remove the extras before your application goes out for review. That means your reviewer may well see a paragraph or sentence end in mid air and will wonder about your organizational skills and your attentiveness to detail.

So, make sure your content fits into the page limits specified and make sure the number of pages holds when you convert your document to a PDF.

## Conditionally Required Documents

These components are required of some Inspire applications.

- Proof of Private, Nonprofit Status
- Final Federally Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement
- Digital Products Plan
- Detailed Condition Reports and/or Conservation Treatment Proposals

The second category of application components is that of **Conditionally Required Documents**. **Some** applications must include one, two, or even all four of these, and it's your job to figure out which are required for yours.

- If you are applying as a nonprofit, then you must include your proof of nonprofit status issued by the Internal Revenue Service. We will not accept a letter of State sales tax exemption as proof of nonprofit status.
- If you are using a federally negotiated indirect cost rate in your budget, then you must include a copy of your final rate agreement.
- If you will create digital products during the course of your project, then you must complete and submit a Digital Products Plan.
- If you are requesting support for conservation treatment, then you must include detailed condition reports and/or formal conservation treatment proposals.

Just like the required documents, omission of even one might result in your application's rejections.

Please note that the term “digital product” includes (1) digitized and born-digital content, resources, or assets; and (2) software. If you are creating any of these types of materials, you must include the form with your application.

# Supporting Documents

These components are optional in Inspire applications. Include only those that supplement the Narrative and support the project description provided in the application.

- Letters of commitment from partners, consultants, or any third-parties you will work with on your project
- Bibliography or references relevant to your proposed project design or evaluation strategy
- Letters of support from experts and stakeholders
- Relevant images
- Exhibit design plans
- Reports from planning activities
- Contractor or vendor quotes
- Equipment specifications
- Products or evaluations from similar projects
- Collections, technology, or other departmental plans applicable to the proposed project
- Web links to relevant online materials
- Needs assessments

The third group of application components is Supporting Documents, and here is a partial list of examples. Supporting documents are optional. You may submit some or none. Include only those items that will supplement your proposal. This is not the place to introduce brand new information, rather, as the name suggests, they should lend support to your project justification, work plan, and intended results that you've already spelled out in your application narrative.

For example, have you identified a partner whose involvement is key to the project's success? If so, a letter of support or commitment would go a long way to reassuring reviewers that they are 'on board' and the project will succeed. Pictures can help give reviewers – who may not be familiar with your institution, programs, collections, or community – a better idea of what you're describing within your narrative. Vendor quotes or equipment specifications show you've done some of the legwork in getting appropriate estimates for project costs.

We recommend that you be respectful of your reviewers' time and avoid any temptation to include hundreds of pages of extraneous material. Being judicious really does work to your benefit, as supporting documents can make – or break – an application. Include what is important, helpful, and directly relevant to your project, and stop there.

# Application Components

In the following sections of this presentation, we will focus on three application components:

- Organizational Profile
- Narrative
- Budget

The Notice of Funding Opportunity offers complete instructions on how to prepare and complete all application components.



Wright Museum of Art

In the following sections of this presentation, we will focus on these application components:

- Organizational Profile
- Narrative
- Budget

Go to the Notice of Funding Opportunity for complete instructions on how to prepare and complete all of the application components.



In this section we will go over the Organizational Profile and what you need to include on each page of this required document.



# Organizational Profile

## Page One:

- your organization's mission or statement of purpose;
- your organization's governance structure, including parent/child relationships (if applicable) and the level of support provided by the parent organization;
- your service area; and
- a brief history of your organization

## Page Two:

- number of staff members and volunteers;
- estimate of total person-hours worked per week;
- operating budget and sources of revenue;
- number and types of objects in the collection;
- size of facility and property;
- types and numbers of audiences served; and
- size relative to other organizations of the same discipline, or within the same geographic region.

We ask that you create a two-page document describing your organization. On the first page, we ask that you address your organization's mission or statement of purpose; your organization's governance structure, including if your museum is an organizational unit under a larger "parent" organization (for instance, if the applicant is an art museum under a university) and the level of support provided by the "parent" organization; your service area; and a brief history of your organization.

On page two of this document, we ask that you describe your organization's size using the range of attributes that we shared earlier in this presentation. This is where you make your case for being a small museum!





In this section we will go over the questions you will need to answer in your project Narrative and offer details on the review criteria associated with each section: Project Justification, Project Work Plan and Project Results.

# Narrative: Project Justification

## Tell us:

- Which program goal/project category and associated objective(s) of Inspire! Grants for Small Museums will your project address?
- How will your project advance your museum's strategic plan?
- What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?
- Who is the target group for your project and how have they been involved in the planning?
- Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project?

Now let's talk about the **Narrative** of your proposal. You have five pages to cover three very important issues, and the Notice of Funding Opportunity provides lengthy guidance on what the Narrative should cover.

## First is the PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified? Describe how you have used demographic information, economic circumstances, condition assessments, and other relevant data from reliable sources to define the need, problem, or challenge and develop the scope for the project.

Who is the target group for your project and how have they been involved in the planning? "Target group" refers to those who will be most immediately and positively affected by your project. Identify the number of individuals in the target group or in each target group, if you identify more than one.

Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project? "Beneficiaries" refers to those who are likely to be aided in the long-term by your project. They may or may not be the same as your "target group." Identify the number of individuals who will benefit from your project in the long term, if reliable and defensible counts are possible. Otherwise describe the characteristics of the beneficiaries you expect to be served eventually by your project.



## Narrative: Project Justification

### *Reviewers will look for:*

- Has the applicant selected an appropriate program goal/project category and one or more associated objectives of Inspire! Grants for Small Museums?
- Are the ways in which this project advances the museum's strategic plan specific and measurable?
- How well has the applicant used relevant data and best practices to describe the need, problem, or challenge to be addressed?
- Has the applicant appropriately defined the target group(s) and beneficiaries, as applicable, for this work?
- Have the target group and other project stakeholders been involved appropriately in planning the project?
- *For Collections Stewardship and Access projects:* Are the collections and/or records that are the focus of the project and their current condition described and quantified in enough detail?

In section E of the Notice of Funding Opportunity, under Review Criteria, you will find a list of questions that reviewers are asked to consider when they review your proposal. It is a good idea to refer to these as you craft your narrative to be certain you are providing Reviewers clear, solid information. You will see that they correspond fairly directly with the prompts you are given to write your narrative.

## Defining a need, problem, or challenge



- Remember that the federal government wants its investment to result in something getting better.
- Articulate what will get better as a result of your project as precisely as possible.
- Identify why it is important that this change happens.
- Hone your problem definition carefully.
- Present data that support your problem definition.

Because the need, problem, or challenge is foundational in your application, keep these points in mind.

- The federal government wants its investment to result in SOMETHING getting better.
- As you define your need, problem, or challenge, articulate WHAT will get better as a result of your project as precisely as possible. Will someone learn something, develop a skill, change an attitude? Will members of your community be better able to work together to solve problems? Will collections be better cared for? Will their lifespan be extended? Will access to your collections and the information surrounding them be expanded? Identify why it is important that this particular change happens.
- Hone your problem definition carefully in clear, succinct terms.
- Gather and present data that support your problem definition.



## Narrative: Project Work Plan

### Tell us:

- What specific activities will you carry out and in what sequence?
- What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?
- Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?
- What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?
- How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?

### PROJECT WORK PLAN

If the Project Justification section was the "why", the Project Work Plan section is where you identify the 'who, what, when, and how'. Who will do what activities when, and using what resources? You should explain how you will track your progress toward achieving your intended results, and what you'll do if you need to correct course. We also ask you to think about risks that are inherent in your particular project and to tell us how you've taken that into account in your planning. I'll say more about that in a few minutes.



## Narrative: Project Work Plan

### *Reviewers will look for:*

- Are the proposed activities informed by relevant theory and practice?
- Are the goals, assumptions, and risks clearly stated?
- Do the identified staff, partners, consultants, and service providers possess the experience and skills necessary to complete the work successfully?
- Are the time, financial, personnel, and other resources identified realistic for the scope and scale of the project?
- Is the proposed Performance Measurement Plan likely to generate the required measures of Effectiveness, Efficiency, Quality, and Timeliness?
- If present, does the Digital Products Plan reflect appropriate practices and standards for creating and managing the types of digital products proposed?
- Will the proposed methods for tracking the project's progress toward achieving the intended results allow course adjustments when necessary and result in reliable and measurable information about the results of the project?

Reviewers will evaluate your proposal on how well your activities are informed by appropriate theory and practice; whether the goals, assumptions and risks clearly stated.

Reviewers want to see that the team you've put together has the experience and skills necessary to complete the work successfully; and whether your schedule is realistic and achievable. They'll also be looking at whether the time, personnel, and financial resources identified are appropriate for the scope and scale of the project. They will consider if you've described a clear methodology for tracking your progress and adjusting course when necessary.

## Defining an activity



- An activity is something that someone does.
- It has a beginning and an end.
- You know when you've finished it because it doesn't need to be done any more (or it is no longer on your To Do List).
- It is not a "goal," "result," or "outcome." It is a thing you do as part of striving to achieve those.
- Aim for a reasonable level of granularity in identifying your activities—not too much, not too little, just right.

[Image: <https://pixabay.com/en/stick-figure-road-sign-traffic-sign-1097163/>]

Your work plan will be built on activities, so it's important to be clear about just what an activity is.

An activity is something that someone does. It has a beginning and an end (just like projects), and you know when you've finished it because it doesn't need to be done any more. It is no longer on your To Do List.

An activity is NOT a goal, a result, or an outcome. Rather it is something you do as part of striving to achieve those.

Aim for a reasonable level of granularity in identifying your activities. That might be hard, but strive for not too much, not too little, but rather just right.

# Defining risks

## About Risk

- There is no checklist of risks, but every project has them.
- The best proposals will show that the applicant is aware of them and has thought through a plan for dealing with them.
- Answer the question, "What if?"

## Examples of Risk

- A project may be structured around interns, who will be selected and trained according to well thought-out processes. What will happen if one or more interns drops out? What's the plan for replacing them mid-project?
- A project involving rehousing collections into new museum-quality collections storage furniture might run into delays in preparing the space or in the delivery of the cabinets. What happens to the collection items then? How will the institution ensure that they remain safe and secure?

[Image: <https://cheekymunkey.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/What-is-an-IT-security-risk-1024x437.jpg>]

We also ask you to think about risks that are inherent in your particular project and to tell us how you've taken that into account in your planning. Think of it as answering the question, "What if?"

There is no checklist of risks, but every project has them. The best proposals will show that you are aware of them and have thought through a plan for dealing with them. Look at your activities and think about what could go wrong. Focus on the ones where your experience (your own or that of your group) tells you, "Yes, that could happen" and identify steps you would take in response.

IMLS knows things go differently than expected. We just want you to prepare by identifying implementable options.

**Here are some examples of risk that might be part of a project for which you might seek Inspire! funding.**

- A project may be structured around interns, who will be selected and trained according to well thought-out processes. What will happen if one or more interns drops out? What's the plan for replacing them mid-project?
- A project involving rehousing collections into new museum-quality collections storage furniture might run into delays in preparing the space or in the delivery of the cabinets. What



happens to the collection items then? How will the institution ensure that they remain safe and secure?

# Narrative: Project Results

## Tell us:

- What are your project's intended results and how will they address the need, problem, or challenge you have identified? Be sure to address this question from the dual perspectives of advancing knowledge and understanding and ensuring that the federal investment made through this grant generates benefits to society.
- How will the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes of the target group change as a result of your project?
- What products will result from your project?
- How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance?
- *For Collections Stewardship and Access projects:* How will the care, condition, management, access to, or use of the museum collections and/or associated data that define the focus of your project improve?

## PROJECT RESULTS

The third section of your Narrative should be devoted to articulating your project's intended results.

This section is your chance to convince the reviewers that your project will result in something getting better. The need or problem you identified in your Project Justification will be addressed directly, and it will be diminished or eliminated altogether.

We ask you to tell us what data you will collect and report in order to measure your project's success.

If your project will generate tangible products (and most do), here's the opportunity to describe them and make the case that they will be useful. And last, but not least, we ask that you tell us how you will sustain the benefit of the project. How will this improvement that you propose to make continue once your grant is over?



## Narrative: Project Results

### *Reviewers will look for:*

- Are the project's intended results clearly articulated, realistic, meaningful, and linked to the need, problem, or challenge addressed by the project?
- Is the plan to effect meaningful change in knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes solidly grounded and appropriately structured?
- Is it clear that the federal investment made through this grant will generate identifiable benefits to society?
- Will the products created by the project be made available and accessible to the target group?
- Is the plan to sustain the benefits of the project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance reasonable and practical?
- *For Collections Stewardship and Access projects:* Will the care, condition, management, access to, or use of the museum collections and/or records improve as a result of the project?

Reviewers will give us their opinions on how well you've designed a feasible plan for collecting and reporting data; how likely the improvements that you've proposed will be realized; will the tangible products you plan to create be accessible to the target audience you identified; and whether your plan for sustaining the benefits of the project are reasonable and practical.

## Defining intended results, success measures



- Answer the question, “What will be better as the result of this work?”
- Think through how you’ll recognize success and how you’ll measure it for each of your high-level activities.
- Tie everything back to your need, problem, or challenge.
- Include tangential benefits or positive outcomes, but make sure they are in addition to, not instead of, your original intended results.
- Consider constructing a logic model to explain your intended results and your plan for achieving them.

We often hear that defining intended results and success measures is challenging for applicants, so it’s worth spending a bit of time on this here.

Let’s think back to the questions we referenced a couple of slides ago when we talked about defining the need, problem, or challenge that your project is addressing. If you said someone will learn something, how will you know? If your problem related to segments of your community being better able to work together, how will you know when that has been achieved? If collections will be better cared for, how will you be sure and how will you measure “better”? If you’re digitizing to expand accessibility, how will you know when you’ve done it?

All of your results should tie back to your need, problem, or challenge. You may well experience tangential benefits and/or positive outcomes, but make sure you identify them as “in addition to” and not “instead of” your original intended results. Reviewers are likely to see that as a disconnect.



## Narrative Recap

- Your Narrative has three sections—Project Justification, Project Work Plan, and Project Results
- 5-page maximum
- Refer to the review criteria in section E of the Notice of Funding Opportunity

So, to recap: Your Narrative has three sections—Project Justification, Project Work Plan, and Project Results, and you have five pages for it. The sections are all equally important. Write clearly, address what we ask you to address, and keep an eye on those review criteria. We're telling you here exactly what the reviewers will look for, so make it easy for them to find it and understand it.



# Application Components

Budget

In this section we will provide information on what to include in your project budget and budget justification and provide some examples of allowable and unallowable costs.



## Allowable Cost Examples

- personnel salaries, wages, and fringe benefits
- travel expenses for key project staff and consultants
- materials, supplies, software, and equipment related directly to project activities
- equipment to improve collections storage and exhibit environments
- third-party costs
- publication design and printing
- program evaluation
- staff and volunteer training
- paid internships/fellowships
- indirect or overhead costs

As you develop your budget, keep in mind that there are certain costs that are either allowable or unallowable according to federal regulations. The allowability of a cost item for all federal grants are specified in the Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) sometimes referred to as "2 CFR 200" for short, but the full title is "Title 2, Subtitle A, Chapter II, Part 200 – Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles, and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards."

Using the 2 CFR 200 as a basis, we've developed a short list of allowable costs that are most common to Inspire projects. See page 18 of the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity which includes a partial list of the most common examples of allowable costs – this short list of allowable cost are also shown on this slide.

These costs may be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for with federal funds or what you will pay for as part of your cost share. The rules about allowability apply equally to grant funds as well as cost share.

When completing your project budget, be sure to check that all the costs you include, whether grant funds or cost share, are allowable.





## Unallowable Cost Examples

- general fundraising costs
- contributions to endowments
- general operating support
- acquisition of collections
- general advertising or public relations costs
- construction or renovation of facilities
- social activities, receptions, or entertainment
- research projects

There are also some costs which are unallowable according to the federal regulations in 2 CFR 200. On pages 18-19 of the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity, we also provide an abbreviated list of unallowable costs – these are also listed on this slide. Unallowable costs may **not** be part of what you ask IMLS to pay for, **nor** can they be part of what you will pay for as part of your cost share. In fact, unallowable expenses can't show up anywhere in your proposal.

As you prepare your application, it's a good idea to compare your list of proposed expenses against these lists of allowable and unallowable costs and against the appropriate set of cost principles. If after that you have specific questions, please contact us and we'll be happy to help.

## Budget Justification

The Budget Justification is an opportunity to provide in a more detailed narrative format, an explanation or justification for the project costs itemized in the IMLS Budget Form.

For example:

- In Salaries and Wages, you should identify each person whose salary or wages will be paid with IMLS funds or by cost share. If cost share is being provided by unpaid volunteers, explain how you arrived at the dollar amount used to represent the value of their services.
- In Supplies, Materials and Equipment you should list each type of supply, material, and equipment you propose to purchase or provide as cost share for the project. Provide vendor quotes or price lists as Supporting Documents with your application.

In addition to the IMLS Budget Form, you will also prepare a Budget Justification. This is an opportunity to provide a more detailed narrative format, an explanation or justification for the project costs.

The Budget Justification should be written to follow the costs categories in the IMLS Budget Form. In the justification you will identify each expense and show the method of cost computation used to determine each dollar amount, including any that you may have consolidated and summarized on the IMLS Budget Form. In other words, please show your math!

For example, in the section Salaries and Wages you should identify each person whose salary or wages will be paid with IMLS funds or by cost share, provide their names, and describe their role in the project. Document the method of cost computation by including the base salary or wages for each person and the percentage of time each person is allocated to the project activities, which may be shown as a percentage of time, number of days, or number of hours. If cost share is being provided by unpaid volunteers, explain how you arrived at the dollar amount used to represent the value of their services.

In the section for Supplies, Materials and Equipment, you should list each type of supply, material, and equipment you propose to purchase or provide as cost share for the project. Detail the number and unit cost for each item and explain how you arrived at the dollar amounts. You may also provide vendor quotes or price lists as Supporting Documents with your application.



In this final section of our presentation, we offer some application tips and next steps.



## Application Tips

We can make grants only to **eligible** applicants that submit **complete** applications, including attachments, **on or before the deadline**. So...

- Start early.
- Become familiar with Grants.gov Workspace. See <https://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/workspace-overview.html>
- Do your background research.
- Be sure your application is complete.
- Make sure all application components are in the proper format and follow the correct naming conventions.
- Submit to Grants.gov **early** so you can correct any errors.

We can only make grants to **eligible** applicants that submit **complete** applications, including attachments, **on or before the deadline**. So here are some tips to help you do just that.

- Start early. You've already done that by participating in this webinar.
- Become familiar with Grants.gov's Workspace. It has many good features, including upfront validation, which allows you to correct errors prior to submission, and the opportunity to collaborate with others in creating your application. Consider starting with the Workspace Overview and check out the tutorials.
- Do your background research. Make it easy for the reviewers to see that you are up to date and know what you're talking about.
- Be sure your application is complete. Check it against the Table of Application Components in the Notice of Funding Opportunity.
- Make sure all application components are in the proper format and follow the correct naming conventions.
- Submit to Grants.gov early so you can correct any errors and avoid any trauma created by technology challenges.

## Application Tips

Check your registrations and know your usernames and passwords.



System for Award Management ([www.sam.gov](http://www.sam.gov))

- Unique Entity Identifier (UEI)
- Registration must be renewed every year!



Grants.gov ([www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov))

- Passwords expire every 60 days!
- Accounts are deactivated after 365 days of inactivity.

**START EARLY, DON'T DELAY**

It's important to get your application submitted online through Grants.gov before the deadline. IMLS does not accept applications by mail or email.

In order to register with Grants.gov, you must have an active SAM.gov registration and Unique Entity Identifier number. So make sure your registrations for both of these sites are complete, your accounts are active, and that any necessary passwords are current. These registrations expire periodically so DO NOT WAIT until it's time to hit the 'submit' button to check on them. You should coordinate with any other staff members, such as your Authorized Organization Representative, who may hold the accounts and passwords you'll need to submit.

Both the SAM.gov and Grants.gov websites have robust help features and FAQs. If you run into technical issues with either of these sites, you should reach out to their help desks and request a tracking, case, or ticket number in order to document your issue and attempts at resolving it. Failure to have active SAM.gov or Grants.gov registrations by the application deadline is not an excuse for submitting a late application so again, start early.



## Application Tips

Peer reviewers – museum professionals from all types of museums – will be selected by IMLS to read each application and provide constructive and critical comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed projects.

To help make sure your Narrative is as clear and complete as possible:

- Follow the Narrative outline in the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity.
- Consider the review criteria associated with section of the Narrative.
- Use headings, subheadings, or numbered sections in your Narrative to make it easy for reviewers to read.
- Avoid generalities, acronyms, and jargon.
- Ask a colleague to review everything with fresh eyes before you submit it.

There are many components to the application, and the Narrative is an essential and critical part of the package.

Peer reviewers – museum professionals from all types of museums – will be selected by IMLS to read each application and provide constructive and critical comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed projects. They also base their reviews only on the information contained in the application – so don't assume that a reviewer or IMLS will know something about your museum or your proposed project.

To help make sure your Narrative is as clear and complete as possible:

- Revisit the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity and follow the Narrative outline it provides.
- Be sure to consider the review criteria associated with each section of the Narrative.
- Use headings, subheadings, or numbered sections in your Narrative to make it easy for reviewers to read.
- Avoid generalities, acronyms, and jargon. The people who will review your application are museum professionals, but they may not be totally familiar with your particular field's shorthand. Make it easy for them to understand what you mean.
- An advantage to starting your application early is that you can ask a colleague to review everything with fresh eyes before you submit. Ask them to act like a reviewer who's

seeing this for the first time.



## Important Dates and Times

Applications are due by **11:59 pm EST** on **November 15, 2023**.

- Awards will be announced in **August 2024**.
- Projects must start **September 1, 2024**.

Here are a few important dates relating to Inspire applications.

Applications must be received through Grants.gov by 11:59 pm Eastern Time on November 15, 2023. The date is non-negotiable. The time stamp is auto-generated by the Grants.gov system, and we have no ability to override it. We will say this repeatedly, to start early and submit your application early. That way, if you encounter a difficulty of any kind when submitting your proposal, you'll have some time to resolve the problem and resubmit.

After the application deadline, IMLS staff will review your application for completeness and eligibility, and you will hear from us via email if there are any problems. Next, we will select experienced and knowledgeable peer reviewers to read your applications and provide scores and comments based on the criteria outlined in the Inspire Notice of Funding Opportunity. IMLS staff will examine your budget, your financials, and your track record with past and current grants. We then prepare materials for the IMLS Deputy Director for Museums and the IMLS Director. By law, the IMLS Director is charged with the authority and responsibility to make final award decisions, and this typically happens in July.

In early August 2024, we will notify you by email of the award decisions and provide the scores and comments created by the reviewers.

Inspire projects must be scheduled to start on the first day of September 2024.





## Next Steps

Connect with IMLS Program Staff in the Office of Museum Services to ask questions about the:

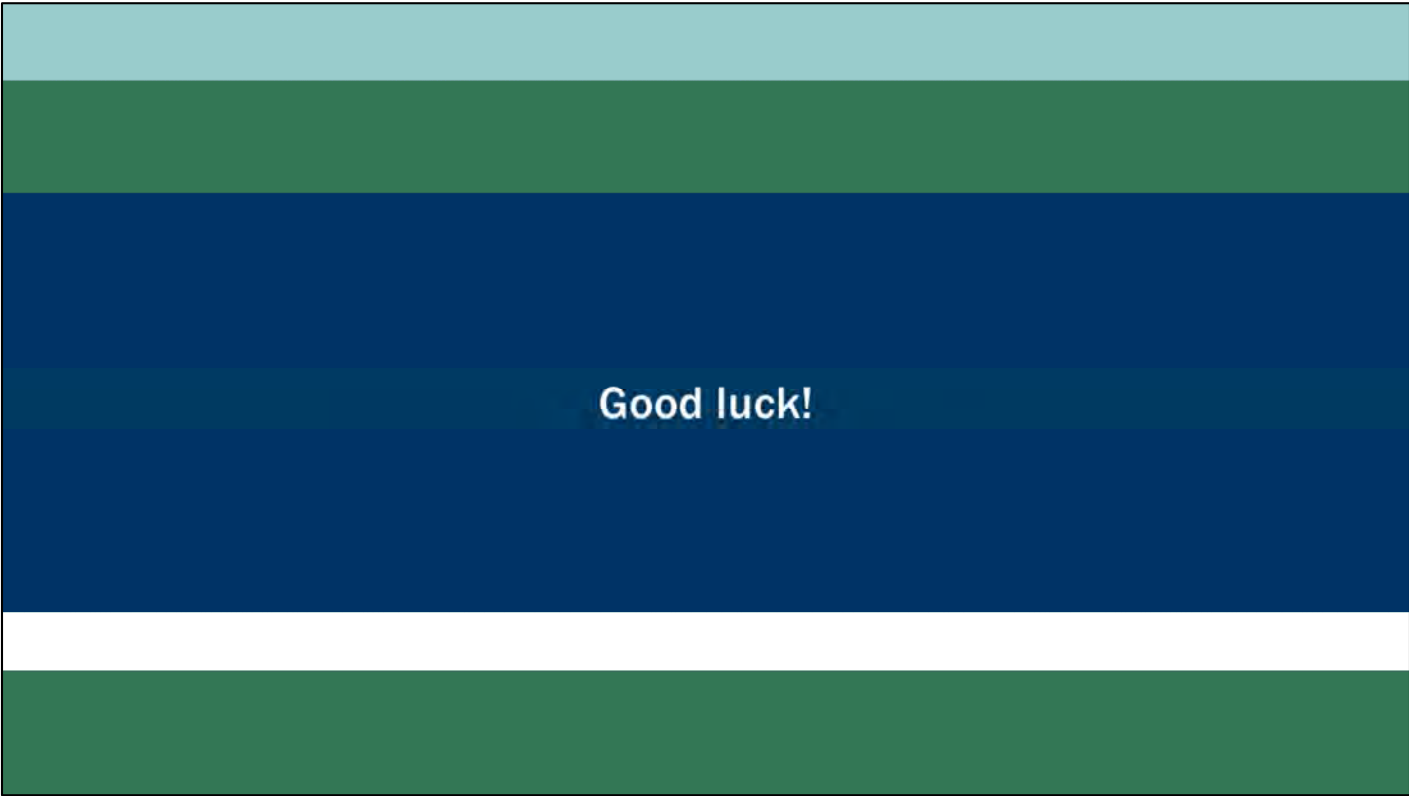
- Inspire grant program
- Application Components
- Review Process

<https://www.imls.gov/grants/available/inspire-grants-small-museums>

As you read through the NOFO and prepare your application, additional questions may arise before the application deadline. We can help you with learning more about the Inspire grant program, or other grant programs at IMLS, address any specific concerns with the various application components, or help you understand the review process.

You may contact IMLS program staff by email or phone. Contact information is listed on the grant program landing page on the IMLS website.

You may also schedule a counseling call to meet directly with program staff. Use the links found on the grant program landing to find an available time slot on our calendars. You will then receive an email with a calendar invite and Microsoft Teams meeting link.



Thank you very much for your interest in IMLS and in the Inspire Grants for Small Museums funding opportunity. I hope you have found the information in this applicant webinar helpful.

Good luck, and we look forward to seeing your application in November!

## Credit

This presentation text is a work of the U.S. Government and its contents are in the public domain. Images in this presentation are used with permission of the source noted, unless otherwise indicated. If you reuse our work, please acknowledge IMLS as the source.