Museums Empowered

Sample Application ME-249537-OMS-21
Project Category: Organizational Management

Powell Gardens

Amount awarded by IMLS: $230,254
Amount of cost share: $230,670

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/me-249537-oms-21

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.
Project Justification

Powell Gardens, Inc. (the Gardens) respectfully requests support from the IMLS MFA Museums Empowered Initiative for the Supporting Professionally Relevant Opportunities for Understanding and Training (SPROUT) project. SPROUT will make critical investments in the Gardens’ operational infrastructure. These investments will improve the Gardens’ ability to provide visitors with meaningful encounters with plants within the Midwest ecosystem. Specifically, the project will address the Gardens’ staff needs through enhanced human resources support and expanded team and individual talent development opportunities for staff. Professional development offerings will include technical trainings and safety demonstrations for horticulture and administrative staff as well as leadership training for managers and directors. The SPROUT project’s four primary objectives will create an operational infrastructure and culture that is conducive to progress: 1) Increase organizational capacity for workforce engagement and development, 2) enhance organization-wide technical skills and safety, 3) define an approach for improving individual effectiveness to create greater cohesion and positive impact within the Gardens’ leadership structure and teams, and 4) define an approach to address the attraction, development, retention, and continuity of talent within the Gardens.

Need: Botanical gardens play an important role in society, caring for and displaying plant collections that promote biodiversity and conservation while also fostering a connection between people and nature. Powell Gardens serves as Kansas City’s botanical garden and exists to be an experience that embraces the uniqueness of the Midwest landscape and inspires an appreciation for the importance of plants in our lives. Powell Gardens’ 970-acre footprint includes the Heartland Harvest Garden, the nation’s largest edible landscape; the Island Garden, featuring more than 200 varieties of water plants; the David T. Beals III Woodland and Stream Garden, where plants thrive in the shade; and the 3.5-acre Perennial Garden featuring the Susan Lordi Marker Native Plant Garden. To invoke the unique feeling of the Midwest landscape and preserve the local ecosystem, much of Powell Gardens’ acreage is remnant (undisturbed) and reconstructed prairie.

Maintaining a garden of this size requires a well-qualified, highly skilled workforce of horticulturists, gardeners, administrative personnel, and leaders. Without the right people with the right knowledge, skills, and understanding of how to utilize those skills in their crucial positions, the Gardens will experience stagnation or, worse, regression. The loss or degradation of Powell Gardens’ plant collection would impede crucial conservation strategies for species identified as endangered or vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Local youth would lose hands-on experiences that help them understand the role plants and pollinators play in the food cycle. The community would lose its botanical garden, a retreat from urban life, and an integral part of the Kansas City experience.

After 28 years under a founding director, the Gardens gained a new leadership direction with the hiring of a new President/Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in 2016. Since then, the leadership and governing body have invested a great deal of effort into conducting online surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, and conversations with staff to identify areas for systemic improvement. However, attraction and retention of talent has been a distinct challenge for the Gardens. The turnover rate among full-time employees is 21%. Despite being lower than the 2019 national average of 45% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020, Table 16. Annual total separations rates by industry and region), minimizing turnover, especially in key leadership positions, is a priority for the Gardens. Since 2017, the Gardens have had three directors of development, two directors of education, four chief operating officers (COOs) (including one interim), three directors of horticulture, and four volunteer coordinators. Resistance to change, length of commute, and inadequate performance are among the reasons for these staff departures. Staff across all departments have reported the inability to grow within their positions at the Gardens as their reason for leaving in exit interviews. Turnover is especially hard on the Gardens given the scarcity of workers with the desired skill set regionally and the large investment required to onboard new staff.

One of the biggest barriers to attracting and retaining employees is the Gardens’ proximity to the Kansas City metropolitan area. Less than an hour drive from downtown Kansas City, the Gardens are easily accessible to Kansas City residents seeking recreational or educational experiences. However, the extended commute is a challenge for employees who must travel to and from the Gardens daily. The one-way commute to the Gardens is approximately 45 minutes from downtown Kansas City, Missouri and many of the metropolitan area’s residential areas. Even Lee’s Summit, the closest major city to the Gardens within the Kansas City metropolitan area, is still a 20-minute one-way commute. Horticulture staff that must be on-site to conduct their jobs are...
more forgiving of the commute because the Gardens is one of the few places in the metropolitan area that they can use their skills, with many staff relocating to the Kansas City area specifically to work at the Gardens. Leadership and administrative staff, however, have many competitive job opportunities in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The Gardens recently implemented collaborative workflow tools that enable remote work capabilities for positions that are primarily computer-based. However, as teams spend increasingly less time in the same physical space due to COVID-19 restrictions and general workplace trends toward remote work, the need for intentional workforce management and team development has become more apparent.

Currently, the Gardens does not have a designated human resources (HR) staff member, which compounds recruitment and retention challenges. Currently, HR tasks are secondary responsibilities for several other staff members. With approximately 80 employees (full time, part time, and interns), HR limitations are incredibly noticeable. Minimal support for onboarding, orientation, ongoing training contributes to a workforce that feels disconnected with the goals and direction of the organization. An internal 2020 job satisfaction survey found that 62% of full-time employees and 42% of part-time employees identified that new processes, training, or other professional development focused on clarifying priorities would be helpful in making work easier and more satisfying. Additionally, 25% of full-time employees and 33% of part-time employees feel they do not have the appropriate information to make correct decisions about their work. The COO oversees HR admin, benefits, and compensation management on top of overseeing the Gardens’ day-to-day operations. Managers do not have access to human resources information and all employee actions must go through the COO. This places the burden of coordination on managers who are already overwhelmed balancing their personal workload with supervision and guidance tasks.

Garden lifecycles go through three phases: development, maturity, and establishment. Powell Gardens is entering the second phase: maturity. For the first 30 years, the Gardens’ leadership was focused on developing things, not people. Now that the Gardens has an established footprint, leadership is shifting its focus to elevating the Gardens’ quality across all departments. The Gardens are also transitioning from being primarily guided by a family foundation under the leadership of a legacy CEO. A major leadership transition began in 2017 with new directors in all positions. Today, many staff members are missing fundamental technical skills and lack knowledge of how to effectively communicate with coworkers and operate as part of a team. The Gardens also lack regular and frequent reminders to promote a culture of safety when working with equipment and machinery. Furthermore, many team members in supervisory roles, while very talented in their areas of expertise, have not received adequate training to equip them to mold and guide the entry-level employees. Leadership skills and process development will increase the cohesion of the leadership team as a unit as well as the divisions’ abilities to work internally and cross-sectionally, improving efficiency and ultimately elevating the quality of the Gardens’ collection and programs.

Project Development Planning Activities: In choosing the interventions included in SPROUT, the Gardens’ leadership has looked to fellow gardens, museums, nonprofits, and corporate institutions. Leadership dialogued with fellow community leaders and conducted extensive research to determine the best fit given the Gardens’ unique challenges. As an example, in May 2017, Powell Gardens conducted a horticulture leaders’ weekend where representatives from the horticulture departments of seven regional universities toured the Gardens and then discussed the viability of current practices and recommended strategies for sustainable maintenance and growth. In addition, the Gardens made considerable changes to the SPROUT programs’ design based on reviewer feedback on its initial proposal submitted during the FY 2020 IMLS MFA Museums Empowered competition. One major change in this version of the proposal is a shift from seeking external HR consulting services to requesting funds to support the hiring of an internal HR staff position. This position will not only serve as the champion for the sustainability of this initiative beyond the life of the grant but is in line with best practices for an organization of the Gardens’ size. The Gardens’ also leveraged community connections in selection of the SPROUT project’s second primary activity, contracting with an organization and leadership development firm to implement a team and individual talent development process. The Gardens’ COO, Paula Cornwall, most recently served as the COO for the Health Forward Foundation, one of the Kansas City metropolitan area’s foremost thought leaders in the realm of nonprofit development. In 2018, Navalent (the SPROUT project’s chosen consultant) led several strategic initiatives with the Health Forward Foundation
leadership and board, including an executive team alignment assessment, a strategic direction and priorities workshop, and executive succession planning and transition work.

Who Benefits? The SPROUT project will most directly benefit the Gardens’ staff through operational infrastructure enhancement and talent development. However, the Gardens anticipates that visitors and program participants will reap secondary benefits from access to the high-quality garden collections and programming that result when well-trained staff are consistently in place with a clear understanding of purpose and plans.

Advancing Strategic Plan: SPROUT activities were informed by and impact execution of the Gardens’ 2019-2022 strategic plan. The plan outlines five strategic priorities, two of which are directly aligned.

Objective 3: Implement Effective Business Practices - The project will align with this strategic priority by streamlining the Gardens’ HR processes through hiring an HR manager. The project will also empower managers and directors to lead their teams more effectively through critical evaluation of existing processes and adoption of new procedures. Actions and progress measured through execution of SPROUT project objective 2 (enhance organization-wide technical skills and safety) align directly with strategic objective 3.

Objective 5: Build a Culture of Collaboration, Accountability, and Transparency - This strategic priority is all about workforce engagement and culture. This objective involves improving hiring processes with an eye to right fit and investing in the workforce. This will improve communication and empower individual workers to foster a culture shift toward functional collaboration and progress toward a unified vision. Hiring an HR manager and implementing the team and individual talent development process with Navalent directly support this strategic objective. The activities and progress measures for SPROUT project objectives 1 (increase organizational capacity for workforce engagement and development), 3 (define an approach for improving individual effectiveness to create greater cohesion and positive impact within the Gardens’ leadership structure and teams), and 4 (define an approach to address the attraction, development, retention, and continuity of talent within the Gardens) align directly with strategic objective 5.

Museums Empowered Alignment: SPROUT project aligns with the Museums Empowered initiative’s goals by providing professional development to botanical garden staff and leadership to enhance their skills and ensure the highest standards in all aspects of the Gardens’ operations. The project will build the skills of garden staff at all levels through technical trainings and safety demonstrations. The project will build the leadership skills of managers and directors through organization and leadership development work with Navalent.

The SPROUT project aligns with the Museums Empowered initiative’s Organizational Management project category. The hiring of an HR manager and defining of organizational processes will streamline operations. Professional development specifically for executive leadership and staff supervisors will improve knowledge of best practices and foster an agile workforce. A leadership strategy that focuses on making sure the right person is in the right position will allow individuals to play to their strengths within their organizational roles, decreasing interpersonal friction, and allowing leadership to prioritize strategic thinking and innovation.

Project Work Plan

The SPROUT project will address the needs identified in the Project Justification section through two primary activities: 1) hire a human resources generalist to manage onboarding, orientation, payroll, benefits, staff technical skill development, and safety initiatives and 2) contract with an organization and leadership development firm to implement a team and individual talent development process.

1) Hire a Human Resources Generalist to Manage Onboarding, Orientation, Payroll, Benefits, Staff Technical Skill Development, and Safety Initiatives

The COO will initiate the hiring process for an HR manager upon notice of award. The HR manager will report to the COO and will primarily be responsible for development and implementation of global HR policies and programs. These policies and programs will focus on acquiring and developing top talent, building leadership and organizational capability, championing organizational culture, and promoting values and diversity that will enable the Gardens to achieve its strategic objectives and deliver its value proposition. Specifically, the HR manager will oversee general personnel-related aspects of the Gardens’ operations, including onboarding, orientation, payroll, benefits, morale, performance management review, staff technical skill development, and safety initiatives (see the HR manager job description in the resumes attachment for full detail of responsibilities). The HR manager will also coordinate with Uncover KC, the Gardens’ volunteer
management consultant, to adjust volunteer management practices in alignment with operational changes and culture initiatives. One of the first major initiatives the HR manager will lead is standardizing the onboarding program for new employees and seasonal interns. No such program currently exists, and staff supervisors of new hires often feel ill equipped to welcome new employees. This results in frustration among supervisors and confusion among new employees. A standardized onboarding process will help the Gardens put its best foot forward when welcoming new staff which is an important component of building a staff member’s confidence in the organization’s leadership and direction.

The HR manager will also take ownership of recruitment for the Gardens’ seasonal internship program. The Gardens’ annual internship program provides five individuals pursuing a career in horticulture with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience in a botanical garden setting. Working for both the Gardens and Unity Village, a historic landmark in Lee’s Summit, Missouri, interns will have the opportunity to sample a variety of horticultural specialties including seasonal displays, edibles, aquatic, production, grounds/natural resources, golf course/turf management, and rose gardening. All interns work 40 hours a week for 12-16 weeks over the summer at a rate of $8 per hour with free housing at Unity Village. Currently, the Gardens lacks the capacity to actively recruit interns. Without recruitment, the program struggles to attract high-quality applicants. As a result, these valuable internship positions are sometimes reduced to a summer job instead of a springboard for a career in horticulture either within the Gardens’ permanent staff or in the broader horticultural sector. The proposed internship recruitment activities will occur annually each winter for summer positions. The HR manager will lead an abbreviated onboarding process for seasonal interns in May of each year, with position-specific technical trainings and safety trainings for interns occurring in May or June.

The HR manager will lead organization-wide and division-specific technical skill and safety development initiatives. The Gardens’ existing Health, Safety, and Security Committee will support this work. This committee was organized to develop, implement, and maintain a comprehensive safety program for the Gardens. The Health, Safety, and Security Committee will assess organizational needs and select training opportunities and demonstrations that increase situational awareness and create a culture of safety to benefit both staff and guests. This group will also maintain updated standard operating procedures and recommends policy updates to enable staff to react appropriately and efficiently to incidents of safety, illness, security, or other emergency situations. This group also ensures employees and volunteers have access to proper personal protective equipment, tracks reported incidents and safety concerns, and addresses incidents and safety concerns in a timely manner. The Health, Safety, and Security Committee is an interdisciplinary team composed of the COO, director of horticulture, the greenhouse lead horticulturist, two gardeners, and the education program coordinator. Examples of training activities include worker safety videos, tool and equipment safety trainings, chemical applicator licensure, and arborist training. These trainings will primarily occur during the Gardens’ off-season in the winter when staff have reduced tasks related to daily operations and increased capacity for professional development.

2) Contract with an Organization and Leadership Development Firm to Implement a Team and Individual Talent Development Process

Through the SPROUT project, the Gardens will contract with Navalent to implement a two-year, multi-phase team and individual talent development process. Navalent is an organizational leadership and development firm with a track record within Kansas City and nation-wide. With over 150 years of combined experience, Navalent has completed 1,400 organization projects with 160 different organizations from both the nonprofit and private sectors. Talent development activities and discussions will take place during regularly scheduled executive team meetings which include weekly directors meetings involving all director-level staff, and monthly leadership team meetings, involving all director- and manager-level staff. Activities and discussions will align with the following implementation phases (full Navalent proposal for work to be completed with the Gardens is included in supporting document 1).

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<th>Table 1: Team and Individual Talent Development Process Outline</th>
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With the Gardens’ strategic priorities as the starting point, Navelent will assist leadership in developing skills and tools to help weave the organization’s vision into the daily operations and tasks of each staff member. The process intentionally begins at the governance level and then permeates throughout the organization chart to divisions and eventually individual job roles. The deliverables described in the table above will help extend the project’s impact beyond the life of the grant. The governance calendar (phase 2 deliverable) will establish long-term planning and review procedures according to best practices (e.g., strategic planning every three years, annual operational planning, quarterly business review, and annual talent reviews).

**Project Maturity and Risks:** This two-year exploratory project will enable the Gardens to evaluate the efficacy of the chosen interventions to address hiring, retention, and workforce development within a botanical garden setting. Geography remains a significant risk to the project’s success. Even with the introduction of collaborative workflow tools that enable remote work, two-thirds of the Gardens’ staff positions must physically report to the Gardens to perform their job responsibilities. Adversity to long daily commutes and limitations of the local job pool are obstacles that will be difficult to overcome even with improved talent management practices. Additionally, the potential of mandated shutdowns amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic remains a concern. However, the Gardens’ acreage and the outdoor nature of most roles limits the impact of potential shutdowns. The Gardens will continue to explore ways to mitigate these risks through
flexible policies that encourage work-life balance and continuing its local education initiatives to inspire future
generations to consider careers in horticulture.

**Project Team:** Paula Cornwell, COO, will act as the SPROUT project director. She will be responsible for
keeping the project on track, including managing the hiring process for the HR manager. Tabitha Schmidt,
President and CEO, will provide the project with visionary guidance and will be instrumental in the Navalent
talent development activities. Molly Maddox, Director of Development, will oversee grant progress tracking
and will be responsible for grant reporting and also be involved in the Navalent talent development activities.
Susan Mertz, director of horticulture, will also be involved in the Navalent talent development activities and
will assist the HR manager and safety team in selecting horticulture-specific technical skill training and safety
demonstrations. Eric Hansen will serve as Nalavent’s primary point of contact and facilitator for the described
organization and leadership development activities. Other staff members primarily involved in organization and
leadership development activities include all manager-level staff positions in the Gardens’ administrative
divisions and lead horticulturists within the horticulture division. The project team and its advisors represent
individuals with varied fields of expertise and experience (museum leadership, development, horticulture, and
strategic planning among others). This multi-disciplinary approach will help ensure that the project is equitable
and mutually beneficial by encouraging diverse perspectives and allowing the needs of varied departments and
workers within the Gardens to be acknowledged and accounted for.

**Resources Needed:** Costs associated with SPROUT include the HR manager’s salary and benefits,
consultant fees, and salaries for existing staff for time spent on planning and project implementation, supplies,
and materials necessary to carry out the aforementioned activities. Powell Gardens will primarily match IMLS
funds through salaries and other expenses incurred in a typical budget year.

**Progress Tracking:** Powell Gardens will track its progress toward achieving the SPROUT project’s intended
results through execution of the described activities: creation, utilization, and revision of the described
deliverables; and employee feedback as measured by employee engagement annual surveys, performance
reviews, new-hire surveys, and evaluation tools developed specifically for this project. Past results from
employee engagement surveys are included in supporting documents (see supporting document 2). The project
team will review progress toward project objectives throughout the two-year project as detailed in the Project
Results section. When possible, the project team will compare results to pre-tests or baseline data. The project
team will meet to discuss progress toward project objectives quarterly. These meetings will focus on review and
interpretation of available measurement data to assess effectiveness and inform necessary project adjustments.

**Dissemination:** SPROUT project results will contribute to the broader public garden community by helping
to establish best practices in talent acquisition, retention, and development in a botanical garden setting. Project
results will be published on the Gardens’ website and will be advertised in the Gardens’ newsletter, Garden
View. Leadership will also submit to present results and lessons learned at the American Public Gardens
Association Conference following completion of the grant period.

**Project Results**

The intended result of the SPROUT project, as measured by progress toward SPROUT objectives, is to
make critical investments in operational infrastructure to build a culture of collaboration, accountability,
and transparency and implement effective business practices, in alignment with the Gardens’ strategic plan.

**Objective 1:** Increase organizational capacity for workforce engagement and development.

- **Related Project Activities:** Hiring an HR manager, developing governance and division charters, and defining
job roles

- **Measurement 1.1:** All employees will report they understand the strategic goals of the organization
  (increase from 72% of full-time employees and 92% of part-time employees in 2019), as measured by
  the employee engagement survey.

- **Measurement 1.2:** Increase average workplace happiness among full-time employees from an average of
  3.66 (2019) on a five-point scale, as measured by the employee engagement survey.

- **Measurement 1.3:** Decrease overall turnover compared to 21% (2020), as measured by the number of staff
  separated related to the average number of full-time employees.
**Objective 2: Enhance organization-wide technical skills and safety.**

- **Related Project Activities:** Hiring an HR manager
  - **Measurement 2.1:** Integrate a safety feature in all staff meetings by the beginning of project year two.
  - **Measurement 2.2:** Implement technical skill and safety trainings as identified by the HR manager and the Health, Safety, and Security Committee throughout project years one and two.
  - **Measurement 2.3:** Staff members will express growth in knowledge or skills after completing technical skill and safety trainings, as measured by a survey administered by the HR manager following each training.
  - **Measurement 2.4:** At least 75% of staff will express they feel the Gardens promotes a culture of safety, as measured by a new question added to the employee engagement survey.

**Objective 3: Define an approach for improving individual effectiveness to create greater cohesion and positive impact within the Gardens’ leadership structure and teams.**

- **Related Project Activities:** Navalent talent development activities and deliverables in phases 1, 2, and 3a.
  - **Measurement 3.1:** Directors and managers will report feeling better equipped to lead their teams as a result of the talent development process, as measured by surveys administered before and after each project phase.
  - **Measurement 3.2:** All employees will report improved cohesion among teams, as measured by surveys administered at the start of year one, start of year two, and end of year two.
  - **Measurement 3.3:** All staff will report they have the appropriate information to make correct decisions about their work (increase from 75% of full-time employees and 67% of part-time employees in 2019), as measured by the employee engagement survey.

**Objective 4: Define an approach to address the attraction, development, retention, and continuity of talent within the Gardens.**

- **Related Project Activities:** Navalent talent development activities and deliverables in phase 3b.
  - **Measurement 4.1:** New hires will report the information and support received during onboarding was adequate, as measured by new-hire surveys administered one, three, and six months after hire date.
  - **Measurement 4.2:** Staff supervisors who onboard new staff will report that they were adequately supported during the process, as measured by supervisors’ annual performance reviews.
  - **Measurement 4.3:** Directors and managers will report that their talent and skills represented in their divisions and teams is adequate to make progress toward strategic objectives, as measured by surveys administered at the start of year one, start of year two, and end of year two.

**Barriers for Replication:** Many of the proposed interventions will have universal applicability to various museum institutions; however, some activities, such as professional development for horticulture staff and some hiring retention strategies, will have limited applicability to non-garden institutions. Gardens have unique staffing needs given that the collections are living, require daily attention, and are subject to external and uncontrollable factors (e.g., weather).

**Tangible Products and Sustained Benefits:** Tangible products created by the SPROUT project include the creation of governance and divisional charters, a governance calendar, refined job role profiles, and success profiles for evaluation benchmarking. The Gardens will benefit from the SPROUT project through implementation of processes and procedures, recorded in these tangible products, which will be utilized well beyond the grant period. Team and individual talent development will also enable the Gardens to cultivate and nurture its existing staff. This is especially important because the COO’s financial projections estimate that it will likely take at least two fiscal years for the Gardens to overcome the financial losses realized as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the Gardens is restricted in its ability to expand staffing or pursue strategic initiatives like those described without support from the IMLS MFA Museums Empowered competition. This support would underwrite the much-needed HR manager position until the Gardens has recovered from the financial impacts of COVID-19 in alignment with the Gardens’ three-year recovery plan. The team and individual talent development process involves one-time costs that require increased investment at implementation due to consultant time required to train staff. Ongoing costs to maintain these processes are much lower and within the limits of the Gardens’ typical operating budget.
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