

Finding the Money: Identifying Grants That Are Right for Your District

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Your Team



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Agenda

- Why Finding the Right Grant Is So Hard
- How to Search Grants.gov Strategically
- Assessing Whether a Grant is Right for Your District
- NSDA Grant Services, 2026 Survey, Upcoming Webinars

Why Is Finding the Right Grant So Hard?

So Many Programs, Not Enough Time!

What Districts Are Up Against

- Programs span dozens of agencies, each with different rules and priorities
- Few districts have staff dedicated solely to searching for grants
- Keeping up is a constant effort, not a one-time task
- Application windows are short: often just 30 to 60 days once a NOFO is posted
- Eligibility language varies: “special district” isn’t always listed even when you qualify

So Many Programs, Not Enough Time!

Where Time Gets Lost

- Chasing programs that don't fit your district type or project scope
- Starting applications from scratch instead of reusing prior narratives and data
- Navigating registration systems like SAM.gov and Grants.gov without a clear process

What We Hear from Districts

68%

say unfamiliarity with available programs is at least somewhat a barrier

Top Ask

"Show us grants that are relevant to our District"

94%

say Grants.gov is time-consuming, difficult to navigate, or burdensome for their District

Source: 2026 NSDA Member Survey

Federal Funding for Special Districts

Discretionary (Competitive) Grants

- Most common type for special districts: funding for a fixed period for a specific project
- Awarded competitively based on merit and alignment with federal priorities
- Examples: DOI WaterSMART WEEG, FEMA AFG, EDA Public Works

Loan Programs

- Low-interest federal loans that complement grant funding
- Examples: EPA WIFIA, USDA Water & Waste Disposal Loan Program, State SRF
- Often paired with grants to cover full project costs



Note: *Many districts combine a competitive grant with a low-interest federal loan to cover 100% of project costs. Don't think of these categories as either/or.*

Popular Grant Programs by District Sector

Water & Wastewater

- USDA Water & Waste Disposal Grants/Loans
- DOI-BOR WaterSMART Grants (WEEG/DPR/SWEP)
- EPA Drinking Water System Infrastructure Resilience and Sustainability Program
- USDA Community Facilities Grants

Fire & Emergency Management

- FEMA Assistance to Firefighters (AFG)
- FEMA Staffing For Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER)
- FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure & Communities (BRIC)
- DHS State & Local Cybersecurity Grant (SLCGP)



*FEMA grants require a **SAM.gov registration** and a **FEMA GO account**. Get both set up now before grants open!*

Energy & Utilities

- DOE Speed to Power through Accelerated Reconductoring and other Key Advanced Transmission Technology Upgrades (SPARK)
- USDA Rural Energy for America (REAP)
- EDA Public Works

Transportation & Infrastructure

- DOT Safe Streets & Roads for All (SS4A)
- DOT Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD)
- DOT Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program (RTA)
- DoD Defense Community Infrastructure (DCIP)

Other Grant Submission Platforms

- DOJ – [JustGrants](#)
- FEMA – [FEMAGO](#)
- EDA – [EDGE](#)
- USDA – [EZFedGrants](#) (select programs)
- NSF – [Research.gov](#)
- NFWF – [Easygrants](#)
- DOE – [FedConnect](#)




Make sure you are registered early in the correct submission platform for the grant you'd like to pursue

How to Search Grants.gov Strategically

Landing Page: SIMPLER.Grants.gov

https://simpler.grants.gov/search

An official website of the United States government [Here's how you know](#)



Home Search About Community Sign in

Simpler.Grants.gov is the new way to [search](#). To access classic search, you must sign in to [www.grants.gov](#).

Search funding opportunities

Tip: Use a minus sign to exclude words or phrases, like "-research"

Search **Filters** [Copy this search query](#)

Must include all words (ex. transportation AND safety)
 May include any words (ex. transportation OR safety)

Forecasted × Open ×

1,712 Opportunities

[Export results as .csv](#)

Sort by **Most relevant (Default)**

Close date	Status	Title	Agency	Award min	Award max
Apr 14, 2026	Open	Drug-Free Communities (DFC) Support Program – NEW (Year 1) Number: CDC-RFA-CE-26-0061	Centers for Disease Control - NCIPC Posted date: Mar 11, 2026		\$125,000

Searching Grants.gov: Keywords That Work

The Problem with Open-Ended Searches

- Searching broad terms like "water" returns hundreds of unrelated results
- Results include state-only, tribal-only, and nonprofit-only programs

Keyword Strategies That Narrow Results

- Use quotation marks for exact phrases: "drinking water" vs drinking water
- Search by program name if you know it: "Assistance to Firefighters"
- Combine topic + activity: "wastewater infrastructure" or "fire department equipment"
- Be careful not to get too specific. Search is dependent on program description: for example, "SCADA"
- Search by funding opportunity or assistance listing numbers for known programs



Be careful not to limit the search too far. Special districts are typically eligible when municipalities are, even if special districts are not called out explicitly!

Filter Options Available on Grants.gov

- Eligibility: select "Special District Government" or local government options when available
- Agency: Filter to a specific federal department

The Search



Tip: Sign in to Grants.gov to save a search to your account and use it again later. You can also copy and share the link without signing in.

Search funding opportunities

Tip: Use a minus sign to exclude words or phrases, like "-research"

- Must include all words (ex. transportation AND safety)
- May include any words (ex. transportation OR safety)

43 Opportunities

[Export results as .csv](#)

1 **2** [Next >](#)

Sort by

Close date	Status	Title	Agency	Award min	Award max
Apr 17, 2026	Open	☆ Small Surface Water and Groundwater Storage Projects (Small Storage Program) Number: R25AS00270	Bureau of Reclamation Posted date: Jul 17, 2025 Expected awards: --		\$30,000,000
Jul 3, 2025	Closed	☆ Defense Community Infrastructure Program: Notice of Funding Opportunity Number: OLDCC-25-F-0001	Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation Posted date: May 27, 2025 Expected awards: --	\$250,000	\$20,000,000
Aug 28, 2025	Archived	☆ Realize Energy-rich Compound Opportunities Valorizing Extraction from Refuse waters SBIR/STTR (RECOVER SBIR/STTR) Number: DE-FOA-0003511	Advanced Research Projects Agency Energy Posted date: Nov 21, 2024 Expected awards: 16	\$1,500,000	\$4,000,000

Sort by

- Most relevant (Default)
- Close date (Furthest)
- Close date (Soonest)
- Posted date (Newest)
- Posted date (Oldest)
- Opportunity title (A to Z)
- Opportunity title (Z to A)
- Award minimum (Lowest)
- Award minimum (Highest)
- Award maximum (Lowest)
- Award maximum (Highest)

Eligibility

- Any eligibility
- State governments [0]
- County governments [1]
- City or township governments [1]
- Special district governments [1]
- Independent school districts [1]
- Public and state institutions of higher education [1]
- Private institutions of higher education [0]
- Federally recognized Native American tribal governments [1]
- Other Native American tribal organizations [0]
- Public and Indian housing authorities [0]
- Nonprofits non-higher education with 501(c)(3) [0]
- Nonprofits non-higher education without 501(c)(3) [0]
- Individuals [0]
- For-profit organizations other than small businesses [0]
- Small businesses [0]
- Other [1]
- Unrestricted [0]

Opportunity Status

Open Opportunities

- Actively accepting applications with an upcoming deadline
- Review the NOFO: eligibility, match requirements, award size, project period
- If a good fit: start your application checklist immediately

Opportunity status —

Any opportunity status

Forecasted [701]

Open [1011]

Closed [8073]

Archived [72007]

Forecasted Opportunities

- Coming soon, but not yet accepting applications
- Use these to plan ahead and begin project documentation
- Contact the program officer now to introduce your project
- Review prior year NOFOs to understand requirements and scoring criteria



Use recent closed NOFOs to draft your narrative and budget before the new cycle opens. Districts that prepare early submit stronger applications.

Closed/Archived Opportunities

- Review previous NOFOs to understand what was funded, typical award size, and eligibility
- Look for successful application examples when agencies publish them

View a Specific Opportunity

Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program (AFG)



Agency: Department of Homeland Security - FEMA

Assistance Listings: 97.044 -- Assistance to Firefighters Grant

Last Updated: November 6, 2024

[View version history on Grants.gov](#)

Description

[Jump to all documents](#)

The AFG Program provides financial assistance directly to eligible fire departments, nonaffiliated emergency medical service (EMS) organizations, and State Fire Training Academies (SFTAs) to equip and train emergency personnel to recognized standards, outfit responders with compliant personal protective equipment, provide funding to retrofit or modify facilities to protect personnel from known health hazards, acquire emergency response vehicles, design and implement health, wellness and resiliency programs that prepare responders for incident response, enhance operational efficiencies, foster interoperability, and support community resilience.

Applicants can submit applications for this funding opportunity through FEMA Grants Outcomes (GO). Access the system at <https://go.fema.gov/>

Archived: January 19, 2025

Application process

This site is a work in progress. Go to www.grants.gov to apply, track application status, and subscribe to updates.

[View on Grants.gov](#)

Award

\$291,600,000 Program Funding	2000 Expected awards
\$-- Award Minimum	\$9,000,000 Award Maximum

Eligibility

Eligible applicants

Miscellaneous

- Other

Government

- City or township governments
- Federally recognized Native American tribal governments
- County governments

Nonprofit

- Nonprofits non-higher education with 501(c)(3)

Additional information

Fire Departments, State Fire Training Academies, Nonaffiliated Emergency Medical Services

Grantor contact information

Description

FEMA GO Help Desk Phone: 1-877-585-3242 E-mail: femago@fema.dhs.gov

Email

femago@fema.dhs.gov

femago@fema.dhs.gov

Documents

[Download all](#)

File name	Description	Last updated
FY_2024_AFG_NOFO.pdf	FY 2024 AFG NOFO	Nov 6, 2024 02:01 PM UTC

Link to additional information

<https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/firefighters>

Award Minimum: \$0,000,000
Award Maximum: \$9,000,000

Funding opportunity number:

DHS-24-GPD-044-00-08

Cost sharing or matching requirement:

Yes

Funding mechanism:

Grant

Opportunity Category:

Discretionary

Opportunity Category Explanation:

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Category of Funding Activity:

Other

Category Explanation:

Firefighting equipment, personal protective equipment, training, and wellness.

History

Version:

1

Posted date:

November 6, 2024

Archive date:

January 19, 2025

Other Grant Funding Search Tools

Grants.gov

- Federal grants only

Federal Register

- Federal grants only

Funding Agency Websites and Listservs

- All grants

FedConnect

- DOE grants only

Google

- All grants

Paid Subscriptions

- Euna Solutions (eCivis)
- *NSDA Grants Weekly Update – included in your membership!*



Sign up for email notifications and subscriptions

Assessing Whether a Grant Is Right for You

Understanding the NOFO Structure

Understanding the NOFO Structure

- Section A: Program Description → what is this grant trying to accomplish?
- Section B: Federal Award Information → amounts, number of awards, project period
- Section C: Eligibility → the most important section. Read carefully!
- Section D: Application Requirements → forms, narrative, attachments
- Section E: Evaluation Criteria → how your application will be scored



The eligibility section is the single most important part of any NOFO. Read it before anything else.



If your project can't score well on the top-weighted evaluation criteria, consider redirecting your effort to a better-fitting opportunity or explore how your project can be rescope to get those points.

The 5-Question Eligibility Filter

1. Are we eligible to apply?

- Is your district type listed? (Special District, Local Government, Other)
- Are there geographic restrictions? (rural only, specific states, etc.)

2. Does this fund our project type?

- Match your project scope to the NOFO's eligible activities
- Check both the program description AND the eligible uses list

3. Is the funding amount right for our project?

- Is the award ceiling appropriate for the project size? Can the project be phased?

4. Can we meet the match requirement?

- Many programs require 10%–50% local cost share. Confirm you can cover it

5. Can we meet the timeline?

- Do we have 30–60 days to prepare a quality application?
- Can the project be completed within the grant's performance period?



Answer “no” to any of the first 3? Move on. There are better opportunities worth your limited time.

Red Flags That Save You Time

- Only states or tribes are listed as eligible → **skip it**
- Match requirement you cannot meet → **reconsider it**
- Project period too short for your scope → **flag it**
- Application due in less than 1 month with no prior preparation → **evaluate it carefully**



Putting It Into Practice: Grant Search Action Plan

This Week

- Go to grants.gov and set up a saved search for your sector
- Subscribe to daily Grants.gov email alerts
- **Subscribe to the NSDA Weekly Grants Update**
- Identify 2–3 projects you want to fund in the next 12 months

This Month

- For each project: search for 2–3 aligned grant programs
- Apply the 5-Question Eligibility Filter to each opportunity
- Review prior year NOFOs for your top programs
- Contact program officers for your top 1–2 opportunities
- **Submit projects to the NSDA Grant Project Idea Portal**
- **Request a Grant Guide for your general topic area**



Putting It Into Practice: Grant Search Action Plan

Ongoing Habits

- Monitor Grants.gov weekly for new and forecasted opportunities and **review NSDA Weekly Grants Update**
- Review agency websites for programs not yet on Grants.gov
- Subscribe to and monitor state agencies for relevant opportunities
- Attend agency webinars and informational sessions on open NOFOs

When You Find a Match

- Read the full NOFO, especially the eligibility section
- Run the 5-Question Filter before committing staff time
- Contact the program officer with targeted questions
- Begin your application checklist immediately
- **Submit to NSDA Grants for member support and guidance**



NSDA Grant Services and Announcements

Upcoming 2026 Brown Bag Webinars



- **July 16, 2026** - Getting Through the Front Door: SAM.gov, Federal Forms, and Your First Application
- **September 9, 2026** - Making the Case and Managing the Grant: From Board Buy-In to Post-Award

Fill out the 2026 NSDA Grants Survey!

The survey seeks to understand NSDA members' familiarity with federal grant opportunities and their interest in pursuing them. Your responses will help NSDA better tailor grant resources and support to meet member needs. Estimated time to complete: 5-7 minutes.

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) is currently conducting a review of Grants.gov and has reached out to NSDA for feedback on how special districts use the platform and what could make it work better. To make sure we bring as much member input to that conversation as possible, we are **extending the deadline for the 2026 NSDA Grants Survey to April 24**!

Your anonymous responses will inform what we share with GAO about the barriers special districts face when trying to identify and access federal funding opportunities.



Scan here to access the survey!

How to Access NSDA Grant Services

1

Submit your funding needs to the NSDA Project Idea Portal

- Easy to use online tool to provide information on specific project needs or general funding inquiries

2

Book time during NSDA Grant Office Hours

- TFG reviews and connects with your district through a personal consultation

3

Sign up for upcoming NSDA TFG Brown Bag Webinars

- Registration found on the NSDA Events Calendar and email notification from NSDA

Thank you!

Contact us at
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