

Grant Proposal Report to Commission from Task Force

Recommendation: Fund only if corrections can be negotiated.

Legal Applicant: Alpha Legal Foundation

Application ID: 22AC246985

Category: AC Formula -- Standard
 AC Formula – Rural State
 AC Competitive
 Other Competition

Type: Planning
 Operating
 Fixed Amount
 Ed Award Only

Federal Focus Area: Education, Economic Opportunity, Capacity building

Commission Priorities: Workforce development

Applicant type: New (no prior AC experience)
 Re-compete (# of yrs: __)

Proposed Dates: 08/15/2022 to 06/23/2022
 Submitted budget is 1 year

Requested Resources: Funds and Slots (*indicates sections with calculation errors)

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating	57,117		19,500
Member Support	N/A		N/A
Indirect (Admin)	3,009		7,670
CNCS Award amount	\$ 60,126	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	27,170
% sharing proposed	69%		31%
% share required	100%		0%
Cost-per-member proposed	\$ N/A	RFP stated 6 mo planning grants could request max of \$30,000; longer (up to year) could request \$60,000.	

Program Description (executive summary): Alpha Legal Foundation (the "Foundation"), a BIPOC-led non-profit, proposes to develop an AmeriCorps program to serve the State of Maine. According to the American Bar Association's most recent profile of the legal profession, lawyers who are Black, Indigenous, or members of other people of color groups ("BIPOC Attorneys") represent 14.1% of U.S. lawyers. In Maine, where there are more than 3,500 licensed attorneys, approximately 1% are BIPOC Attorneys. The Alpha Legal Foundation submits this 10-month proposal to create and test the feasibility of a multi-faceted programming strategy that would address pipeline deficiencies (including K-12 and collegiate education), provide access to mentors and experiential opportunities, offer continuing legal education opportunities on bias and racism in the legal profession, and engage with business and legal leaders to lower the barriers, but not the standards to practice law in Maine. The direct beneficiaries of this Plan by program segment are as follows:

- (1) Pipeline programming would directly serve BIPOC youth (age K-12), beginning in three of the four counties with the highest population of BIPOC residents, according to 2021 U.S. Census Data: Androscoggin (10.1%), Cumberland (10.2%), and Penobscot (6.8%);
- (2) Experiential education would directly serve Maine-based BIPOC college students, BIPOC professionals interested in law school, and current BIPOC law school students;
- (3) Mentoring would directly serve Maine-based early-career BIPOC Attorneys and individuals across all other programming elements; however, the depth and level of mentoring contact may vary based on age-related professional development needs; and
- (4) Continuing legal education opportunities would directly serve the 3,500 members of Maine's legal community. Attorney attendance in continuing legal education is reported to the Bar of Overseers to fulfill continuing legal education licensing requirements. Indirectly, the publicly available continuing education opportunities would serve any Maine resident interested in social justice issues.

Service locations:

TBD during planning.

Other than the legal applicant, please list the agencies or organizations that appear to be the major collaborators or partners in this grant.

Maine Law School, Maine Judicial Branch, BIPOC section of the Maine Bar Association (potentially)
While the Foundation was unable to secure firm partnership commitments in time to submit with this application, the nature and strength of its informal partnerships suggest that, at the very least, members of Maine Law and the Judicial Branch would participate in the community advisory group.

Applicant proposes to deliver services:

- Within a single municipality Within a single County but not covering the entire County
 County-wide in a single County Multiple Counties but not Statewide Statewide

- A. Does the Executive Summary format exactly match the template in the RFP? Yes No
- B. Does the applicant claim the rural preference? Yes No
- C. If the applicant claimed rural preference, is it substantiated by target area? Yes No N/A
- D. Does the applicant claim a preference because the application is from a partnership or coalition whose members represent local organizations working together on a common goal? Yes No
- E. Does the applicant claim a preference because the proposal is from an organization led by or primarily supporting historically marginalized communities and/or people. Yes No

Scoring Detail:

Peer Reviewer Consensus Score. Assessment of narrative using point distribution from federal agency. Major categories (Program Design, Organizational Capability, Budget and Cost) are dictated by CFR rubric for scoring.

	Quality Rating	Score
Program Design		
Need and Target Community(ies)	Adequate	11.25
Response to Need	Weak	7.5
Readiness for Planning	Weak	7.5
Expertise and Training	Adequate	3.75
Organizational Capability		
Organizational Background & Staffing	Weak	12.5
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Adequate	18.75
Total Peer Reviewer Score		61.25

Recommend for Further Review with Hesitation

Task Force Consensus Score. The Task Force reviewers assess the additional technical criteria that states are directed to consider by the CFR.

	Quality Rating	Score
Proposal Alignment and Model		
• Alignment with Funding Priorities	Adequate	11.25
• Potential for innovation	Adequate	3.75
• Strength of evidence planning process will succeed	Adequate	11.25
Preferences from RFP Announcement (35%)		
• Serve communities described in 2522.450(c)	Adequate	3
• Proposal adds to goal of being programmatically, demographically, and geographically diverse	Strong	4
• from a partnership or coalition whose members represent local organizations working together	Weak	4.5
• serve, counties classified as 6, 7, or 8 on the USDA rural-urban continuum	Substandard	2.25
• from an organization led by or primarily supporting historically marginalized communities and/or people	Strong	9
Financial Plan	Adequate	11.25
Fiscal Systems		
• capacity of financial management system to comply with federal requirements	Weak	2.5
• strength of the sponsoring organization’s financial management practices	Weak	2.5
• strength of the sponsoring organization’s financial status/stability	Weak	2.5

Total Task Force Score	67.75
Peer Review Score	61.25
Final Score for Applicant (200 possible)	129

Final Assessment of Application:

- Forward or fund with no corrections/modifications
- Forward or fund with corrections/modifications
- Do Not Forward or fund

Referenced Conditions/Corrections

The following proposal issues need to be clarified or, in the case of missing required elements, added.

- Minor correction to bring request down to maximum of \$60,000. These funds do not require match so ask the organization to remove it for the planning grant period. Simplify financial reporting.

Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Program Design.

Need and Target Community(ies)

- Provides some statistics re: representation but does not outline consequences of lack of representation.
- A lot is missing, even the information on the consequences of having BIPOC community underrepresented in the profession.
- The proposal is quite specific as to the population to be served, namely groups of BIPOC students--K-12, college and law school; BIPOC professionals interested in law school and those in early legal careers; and, more generally, members of the legal community in Maine. Both national and local data of limited availability were provided to document the paucity of BIPOC representation in the legal arena. While there may be a broader awakening of the needs described in this proposal, for example through the Maine Bar Association and the Foundation's collaboration with the Maine Humanities Council to provide related legal education to Maine lawyers, documentation suggests few, if any, similar efforts are underway statewide. A series of interviews with BIPOC attorneys was conducted in 2021 to confirm needs described in the application.
- Data collection and acknowledgement of the disparity or representation of the community in the field and profession of Maine lawyers was clearly demonstrated, defined, and shared. The detriments of this disparity and the consequences of lack of representation are easily inferred (or should be), however, they were not specifically conveyed by the applicant in the narrative.

Response to Need

- Plan targets BIPOC population in Maine Legal community (including pipeline to it) over a continuum with appropriate strategies for each category
- The significant lack of diversity in Maine's legal profession is documented. The demonstrated need, as the application suggests, requires a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional approach to address several deficiencies. This proposal seeks to study the four areas of concern identified: 1. Pipeline issues (K-12); 2. Experiential education (BIPOC college and law school students, and BIPOC professionals interested in law school); 3. Mentoring (Early career BIPOC attorneys); 4. Continuing education (3,500 members of Maine Bar Association, and other residents interested in social justice issues). The proposed project coordinators will document "options and tradeoffs" that primarily affect the first area of concern. What appears to be lacking here is a description of the activities to be undertaken by AmeriCorps members, where within the three counties identified they are likely to occur, or how the connections will be made by the AmeriCorps members to service beneficiaries. What this applicant has failed to do in any specific way is to anticipate the number of AmeriCorps members required going forward or what their role and responsibilities might entail in responding to the need described. There is no clear picture of how all of this is envisioned going forward.
- The Response to Need section was succinct in providing rationale, but did not detail possible partners and funders, nor did it explain how it would measurably improve the community the need in the community. HOWEVER, the applicant clearly stated the conceptual nature of The Plan and the limitations of the limitations of more in depth information due to a lack of organizational capacity which it is trying to solve with this planning grant. The applicant has continued ,in this section and throughout the application, to provide the well thought out strategy and the work and research already done to substantiate the need and the possible approaches to meet their challenges and goals.
- No mention of whether the potential partners know about the concept or have agreed to participate.
- Did not address many of the criteria listed.

Readiness for Planning

- Has well developed concept & experience with strategic planning
- The Foundation is a self-described volunteer operation, in fact a one-woman-band. Given the size of the Foundation, its relative infancy (only two years old), its current volunteer organizational structure, assistance in planning to achieve the Foundation's goals is essential. Additionally, however, with respect to partners and funders, informal partnership agreements were not solidified at the time of application submission and need to be firmed up. In fact, it would be appropriate to include representation from the BIPOC section of the Maine Bar Association as part of the community advisory group to broaden the representation of those directly affected by the Foundation's mission, and the specific planning effort. What appears to be lacking here is a description of the activities to be undertaken by AmeriCorps members, where within the three counties identified they will focus their attention, or how prescribed connections will be made by AmeriCorps members to the service beneficiaries. What this applicant has failed to anticipate is the number, roles and responsibilities, location, and connections of AmeriCorps members in fulfilling the program need and design. The relevance of negotiating agreements with partners as to their roles, responsibilities, and eventually a commitment of resources is also germane. Interestingly, informal agreements were not solidified by the time of the application deadline and will need to be firmed up. Also, I note the omission of representation from the BIPOC section of the Maine Bar Association that would be particularly appropriate to include among their community advisory group.
- The two project managers seem only related to the pipeline portion of the program concept. What about the rest.
- Give a lot of credit for being very open about organizational need but presumed we knew a lot that went not discussed. Concern about single person organization.
- This section is well thought out and provides more proof that the applicant has done the necessary work to identify need and acknowledges the requirement of organizational capacity to progress and implement The Plan, and provides most of the section's required information. While the mission stated is to address the lack of diversity in Maine's legal profession this section fails to explain how that mission would directly & indirectly impact economic opportunity, education, and workforce development EVEN THOUGH that knowledge should be well understood and recognized by the reviewers and others.

Expertise and Training

- Has experience in planning and operations.
- By the Foundation leadership's own admission, she is not well versed in developing Theory of Change, Logic Models or AmeriCorps member training and supervision plans, or policies, procedures, and documentation systems pertaining specifically to AmeriCorps members. I do not, however, expect that level of expertise from an organization in its infancy. The Foundation Director expressed her willingness to undertake extensive training, and I am not penalizing their lack of exposure to these requirements.
- The honesty and transparency of the applicant with regards to expertise, or lack thereof, and training need is so appreciated and valuable and demonstrates the importance of Planning Grant opportunities. Staff comments and expertise regarding this section and the applicant overall will be crucial and important in making final recommendations.

Organizational Capability.

Organizational Background and Staffing

- All volunteer organization with no information provided about # of volunteers or scope of service
- One of the Achilles' Heels of this planning grant request has to do with the organization's structure, mentioned above. The staff is limited to one person with little to no experience engaging volunteers in the operational aspect of the Foundation. It is unclear to what extent decision-making in the organization is data-driven, though it is understood that this particular area of study and remedy does have much data upon which to rely. The only criterion about which we are aware is the Foundation's attempt to connect with BIPOC attorneys and to initiate related coursework for all Bar Association members.

- While the Foundation currently lacks extensive experience with regards to staffing and management structure the comprehensive and detailed planning with regards to structure and future operational and organizational capacity is not to be ignored. In this section that which may not be easily quantifiable seems to me compelling and valuable.
- Organization is in its infancy. Vision and concept is clear but case not made organization is able, at this point of development, to take on planning of AmeriCorps program.
- Very, very concerned about dependence on one individual as the only person in the organization.

Budget Adequacy and Cost Effectiveness. *(CNCS no longer allows narrative for this section. They directed reviewers to consider the budget narrative and its formulas, accuracy, expense items.)*

Section: Cost and Budget Adequacy (25 %)

- Reasonable cost for plan as proposed.
- The budget presented in this grant is a simple construct. Not much detail is provided.
- I have no comments on this section.

SUMMARY APPRAISAL 1. Having reviewed all elements of the proposal provided to you, do you think that this applicant would be effective in this category of grant? Yes (3) No (0)

Comments:

- Has well developed concept that targets continuum of BIPOC population involved w/Maine legal system. Understands strategic planning.
- As defined in the application, I believe the need is of singular importance. Where the grant is not as strong is in its response to the need, its expertise and training, and its organizational background. I am tempted to give a pass to a two-year-old volunteer organization, but then I grow concerned that even in the remaining ten months, this one-woman-band with a project coordinator or two will have too many hurdles to overcome. Perhaps with the addition of two project coordinators and extensive training from the Commission staff, they may be able to rise to the next level of preparedness.
- I feel the applicant has provided compelling and well thought out strategies for tackling a lack of diversity in Maine's legal profession, that fails to accurately or equitably represent Maine's communities, by seeking out the root issues and causes and working to mitigate and prevent those issues. In doing so, the work proposed would help address workforce development, educational opportunities, and economic opportunities that not only inequitably affect economically disadvantaged people but also prevent Maine from being stronger and more resilient. Whatever details and quantifications certain sections may lack the need and appropriateness of the application and the planned use are undeniable and just.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- Need is not well developed. Limited statistics available. Consequences of under-representation is not addressed.
- None
- I am unclear about the 2 positions with regards to responsibilities and specific roles (just for clarification) and also curious about the capacity of the Foundation's Founder/President to direct and oversee the proposed 10 month scope of work.

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- Increase in attention to DEI issues in Maine legal system would be valuable.
- Prior to our telephone conference, my initial thinking is that I am willing to recommend with hesitation.
- I feel the project is a sound and needed one that would benefit Maine as a whole while addressing the specific concerns of both Federal and Commission priorities. I also feel my scoring, while justified, may not reflect the true opportunity and abilities that this proposal presents. I feel that the advice and expertise of staff will be integral in guiding recommendations of the task force and the Commission.

Task Force Review Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Proposal Alignment and Model.

- The proposal targets a number of federal focus areas including economic opportunity and education. It primarily focuses on capacity building – with priority on building the capacity of a relatively new organization but through which the capacity of a disadvantaged demographic in our state will build its own capacity.
- The program could be innovative in that it addresses an issue – lack of minority representation in our state’s legal community and structural elements of the legal system that may have disparate impact – in a comprehensive manner starting with building potential interest in a legal career among elementary students through mentoring and support for college/law school students and young professionals, through overall legal system education of DEI issues. As such, it proposes a multi-faceted approach to the problem.
- The innovative element is the range of generations the concept wants to impact – kids through professionals. Hesitancy is how much the applicant could put into an actual program and whether AmeriCorps members could be involved in all the elements. What will their volunteer pool be?
- There is a real mixed bag regarding the presentation of evidence that the program planning can be successfully carried out. The strongest element is the alignment of the proposed program with the organization’s mission. There is adequate evidence of the existence of relationships with those to be served and of community engagement and close to adequate evidence that the potential partners are prepared to participate in the work. Weak areas include: the overall financial stability of the organization given its short history; the stability of leadership given its dependence upon one primary individual; and lack of volunteer management experience. Given that this is a planning grant, some benefit of the doubt is appropriate, so this category would rate as adequate.
- The application lacked details on how things will get done and transition to a AmeriCorps program.
- The applicant's proposal is interesting and potentially innovative. It is unclear to me whether or not there is sufficient capacity by the applicant to conduct this planning process, nor is it clear if there is sufficient interest or engagement by the sectors the applicant proposes to effect as part of a future implementation process.

Preferences from RFP

- 2522.450 (c) seems to focus on disadvantaged geographical areas or communities where this proposal focuses on a disadvantaged demographic that potentially cuts across geographical boundaries, including both advantaged and disadvantaged areas. This is simply a limitation imposed by the federal definition. However, it is clear that this proposal would add significantly to the diversity of the commission’s portfolio.
- The proposal would be focused on the larger communities in the state – Cumberland, Androscoggin, Penobscot. Not going to be rural focus.
- The proposal proposes a coalition; however, that coalition has not yet been formalized. This is not a huge problem for a planning grant.
- While the program has elements that are state-wide, others are more likely to focus in non-rural areas where significant minority populations exist, particularly in Cumberland and Androscoggin Counties.
- Alpha Legal is a BIPOC lead non-profit corporation.
- This project supports DEI ideals, but in this planning phase basically a one person show, initially. But has promise.
- The applicant is proposing to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of the Maine workforce, which is unique among Volunteer Maine programs. It does not, however, appear to have built a coalition which will aid in the planning process and is representative of the programmatic areas that they propose to address. The organization, being only two years old, has little history itself and therefore little to no history of supporting marginalized communities.

Assessment of Financial Plan

- The budget for a planning grant is fairly simple and straightforward. Expenses are allowable; budget generally accurate; match is not required but is proposed.
- There is little detail regarding how funds will be spent, but the request is in line with the scope of the proposed work.
- Would like to see the program work but organization is so new, have high concern.

Fiscal Systems

- Alpha Legal is a relatively new organization which until now has operated through a fiscal agent. As a result, it has limited history in financial management and established financial practices, such as an audit.
- Fiscal management expertise for this program is weak but I believe it can be done.
- The organization lacks formal policies and procedures and has not received federal funds in the past. It has only received its non-profit status in March 2022. It has little to no expressed history of managing grant funds.