

Grant Task Force Report to Commission-- Planning Proposal

Recommendation: Fund the proposal. [Note: There are minor corrections and a clarification needed in the budget.]

Legal Applicant: A Climate to Thrive

Application ID: 23AC256692

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

- Type:** Planning
 Operating
 Fixed Amount
 Cost Reimbursement

Federal Focus Area: Environmental Stewardship

Commission Priorities: Climate Action, Workforce Development

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

Proposed Dates: 08/15/2023 to 06/15/2024

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

	CNCS		Local Share
Operating	39,265		16,828
Member Support	n/a		n/a
Indirect (Admin)	2,065		0
CNCS Award amount	41,330	Total Local Share (cash + in-kind)	16,828
% sharing proposed	71%		29%
% share required	n/a*		n/a*
Cost-per-member proposed	n/a	*This grant would use the ARP match replacement option to cover the local share so it is really all AC funds.	

Program Description (executive summary):

A Climate to Thrive proposes to develop an AmeriCorps program to serve communities throughout Maine, with preference given to disadvantaged Communities, as identified through the Federal Government's Climate and Environmental Justice Screening Tool, those with the highest energy burden, and communities in Aroostook, Franklin, Knox, Lincoln, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington counties. It will address the need to build local capacity for climate mitigation and energy projects that simultaneously increase local resilience that impacts the lives of community members throughout the state of Maine in the AmeriCorps focus area(s) of Capacity Building and Environmental Stewardship. The AmeriCorps federal ARP investment \$58,158 will support planning activities carried out in collaboration with Sharon Klein from the University of Maine's Mitchell Center and Local Leads the Way Communities. No AmeriCorps members will be needed to execute this plan.

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.

University of Maine Mitchell Climate Center, Dr. Sharron Klein, and Local Leads the Way Committees

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.*

CATEGORY	Rating	Points
Rationale & Approach/Program Design Section (50%)		
Need and Target Community(ies)	Adequate	11.25
Response to Need	Adequate	11.25
Readiness for Planning	Adequate	11.25
Expertise and Training	Adequate	3.75
Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%		
Organizational Background and Staffing	Strong	25
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy 25%		
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Adequate	18.75
Total		81.25
Recommend for further review.		

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	13.5
• Serve communities described in 2522.450(c)	Adequate	2.25
• Proposal adds to goal of being programmatically, demographically, and geographically diverse	Adequate	2.25
• Potential for innovation and/or replication	Adequate	2.25
• Strength of evidence planning process will succeed	Adequate	2.25
Preferences from RFA Announcement		
• from a partnership or coalition whose members represent local organizations working together	Adequate	7.5
• serve, counties classified as 6, 7, or 8 on the USDA rural-urban continuum	Adequate	7.5

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> from an organization led by or primarily supporting historically marginalized communities and/or people 	Adequate	7.5
Financial Plan	Adequate	11.25
Fiscal Systems		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> capacity of financial management system to comply with federal requirements 	Adequate	3.75
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strength of the sponsoring organization’s financial management practices 	Incomplete/ Nonresponsive	0
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strength of the sponsoring organization’s financial status/stability 	Adequate	3.75
Grant Readiness	Adequate	11.25
Total Task Force Score		75
Peer Review Score		81.25
Final Score for Applicant (200 possible)		156.25

Final Assessment of Application:

- Forward or fund
- 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 errors in budget calculation need correction. Clarification of match replacement amount needed given there is a local share entered in the Source of Funds screen. National Service Criminal History Background Checks are not required for planning grants – item can be removed. Indirect cost allocation on local share needs clarification.

Peer Reviewer Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Program Design.

Need and Target Community(ies)

- This section of the application responds to all criteria– no omissions or additions. Specific counties and the method of selecting communities is outlined, however it does not suggest a process for soliciting placements within those areas at this time. Capacity is highlighted as the inequity of the targeted communities that an AC member may alleviate Outlined previous conversations and studies that speak to both the need of the communities and the engagement of the community voices- outlined complimentary program of the State Resiliency Grants and the service providers.
- Maine's Climate Action Plan identifies the reasons many high energy-burdened communities cannot address climate risks: capacity, expertise, and funding. The proposal is direct in identifying the target areas in need, as defined through the Federal Government Climate and Environmental Screening Tool, specifically nine counties.

Response to Need

- This section of the application responds to all criteria– no omissions or additions. The proposal reaffirms the need for capacity as the main activity and need of the targeted communities and outlines similar models undertaken in other states. The applicant states it has current partners in targeted counties they would continue to work with Applicant is looking at partnering with UMaine and specifically Dr Klein Applicant would spend time if funded trying to secure further resources including staff and grant funding but does not currently have the resources

- The purpose of the planning effort is to address the need to build local capacity for climate mitigation and energy projects in order to meet State of Maine climate goals. Also, this planning effort will try to improve upon the low energy literacy about State and Federal support available.

Readiness for Planning

- This section of the application responds to all criteria– no omissions or additions. Through capacity and education applicant would align Ac activities with their goals of moving away from fossil fuels and towards broader climate action. Applicant currently has engaged both volunteers and interns and described the interview, data collection and training available Applicant is looking to hire new staff and outlined desired qualifications Applicant discussed the intention for an advisory group and the use of current relationships to staff the committee
- They derive high-level expertise from their collaboration with Dr. Sharon Klein, representatives on their Advisory Committee from the Environmental Justice Committee, and the Community Resilience Partnership that will aid them in the program development process. Experience with 38 interns over the last five years is also beneficial.

Expertise and Training

- This section of the application responds to all criteria– no omissions or additions. The argument shows this element has had some success or could possibly succeed as described. The applicant touched on each criterion with the experience they have had while also acknowledging the benefit of support through technical assistance. While it seems the program has experience and past success on smaller projects and programs the applicant was not able to be critically specific regarding some of the expertise aside from asserting the existence of this proficiency. Applicant responded to each criteria fully but without additional information that would warrant strong
- Presentation of personnel expertise and training was very solid.

Organizational Capability.

Organizational Background and Staffing

- the argument shows this element shows high levels of success or highly likely to be successful. Of its strengths the applicant seems to be able to demonstrate effective planning and collaboration efforts leading me to believe the past efforts and current make up of the applicant would be successful for the management and staffing to plan the proposed program
- Identification of related past projects were especially helpful. As examples, the Climate Ambassadors Program, the municipally-owned solar array in Tremont, and the electric school bus on Mount Desert Island are important indicators of the work they can and will perform. Their connections to the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future, the Governor's Energy Office, and the Efficiency Maine Trust support participation in a strong network of like-minded entities.

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 %)

- All criteria met, the proposed budget is simple and falls within the allowable fields.
- Source of funds section of budget does not account for the full amount of local share.

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 (1) No (1)

Comments:

- Overall, the applicant responded to all needed criteria and while certain aspects of their assertions do not at this time rise to the management level of AC grant and program, the full funding of their application to plan would allow them to get there.

- I believe their specific sense of what the need and target population are, the expertise and training they exhibit as an organization, their capability given diverse projects they have previously undertaken, the strength of their network all point positively to their potential effectiveness.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- Some of the elements of the program and the specific skills or expertise involved in past projects are not clearly outlined outside of asserting the existence of. It would be helpful to be able to point to more specific actions or skills in further development but do not feel like a barrier for the planning process.
- I found the proposal clear overall. However, I was unclear as to how this planning proposal would be supplementary to the work of the Community Resilience Partnership. This was not explained. In fact, the question that arises is could this be duplicative?

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- While the applicant’s current model is engaging and seemingly effective, the criteria of an AC grant can often be rigid in its execution, it is valuable the applicant has connected with similar models of interest and has alumni for those models. As the applicant develops their program I wonder about the application process for sites due to the state wide nature and mission to serve under resourced communities. As the need for capacity can impact the site fees attached and the application process- outside of the points of connection already held by applicant. Some of the areas of experience/ expertise and the number of responsibilities outlined as desired for the projected hire seem to potentially be a high ask in relation to the compensation offered. While UMaine and Dr Klein seem to be key partners I would encourage applicant to further pursue other partners more fully specifically Island Institute and its Fellowship program in relation to the applicants work. Of note the applicant places a large amount of assertion on its ability to secure grant funding as part of the proposed program design. Unsecured and or unknown grant funding sources does not feel like a particularly strong case for program success and I would encourage applicant to further develop plans on determined and specific funding sources.
- I give my support to this proposal, given the needs environmental literacy, but, more importantly, for communities to have assistance in building capacity so as to mitigate climate change impacts.

Task Force Review Notes and Appraisal Summary:

Section A: Proposal Alignment with Funding Priority and Model

- The degree to which the community need targeted by the proposal is aligned with one of the funding priorities stated in the RFP- Adequate because of the indirect focus on Environmental Stewardship and commission’s Climate action focus through electrifying communities providing higher energy efficiency while trying to minimize the cost to change over from fossil fuels through awareness of discount and rebate programs. There is a capacity building focus through training programs. The extent to which the applicant proposes to serve communities described in 2522.450(c). An Adequate focus on the rural counties are the stated priority but this would be a state wide project. The extent to which the proposal adds to the AmeriCorps grant portfolio goal of being programmatically, demographically, and geographically diverse. This looks to be strong since the demographics focus across Maine counties and is part of the focus are for the AmeriCorps. This program would be similar to other programs operating in Maine but has the focus on getting the word out on grants and support and educating families on energy opportunities that are better for the environment/climate change effects. The extent to which the proposal could be an innovative use of national service and, if successful, could feasibly be replicated in other parts of the state. This received an adequate rating. There are many programs in several states that do similar projects as being proposed. The program seeks to put more boots in the field to help communities with the possibilities for switching to more friendly energy sources for the environment. The strength of evidence the program planning can be successfully carried out. The program does align with the organization’s plans and has created community relationships through other programs it is running “Local Leads the Way” – ACTT program would expand the reach of this by adding resources to reach out to more communities and expand communities’ ability to develop alternative energy sources. I did have a concern over the year to year decrease and with no audit to

back up the 990 it is a concern. The program actually had to supplement the budget in 2021 with expenses exceeding revenues by \$6443. I feel the organization does know how to manage volunteers but there appears not to be a single point for volunteer management. There is an expectation that the current partners and organizations that support the current program would also support ACTT.

- Applicant responded to all criteria addressing the need for capacity and appear to have partners in place for planning/support. Applicant did not provide a lot of detail in terms of expertise and training but have experience and have worked on smaller projects.
- The program is directly and strongly aligned with two VM priority areas: Climate action compatible with Maine Won't Wait (the state climate action plan) and Maine Climate Corps; and, Environmental/community resilience, adaptation, and sustainability including emergency preparedness.
- While the specific communities are not identified, the concept is to work with small communities in Maine's rural counties.
- While VM currently funds several environmentally related programs and has operations in some of the rural counties, this would potentially expand that presence to additional areas.
- The proposed model closely mirrors the Maine Climate Corps model and could serve to provide evidence of the viability of this approach. Should Climate Corps not be funded, this program could serve as a replacement for the effort and might model ways in which other programs, such as MCC, could expand their efforts in the climate response and resilience arena.
- The proposed program aligns well with the mission of the agency and its activities on Mt. Desert. It would extend those to other rural areas based in part due to interest that other communities have expressed in adopting CTTs model.
- As noted, CTT has had conversations with other communities potentially interested in their model; at the same time, however, a full partnership does not exist, something that is not unexpected for a planning grant.
- While the agency is fairly new and has only in recent years hired program staff, its finances appear to be acceptably stable with a reasonable cash balance for such a new agency. Only caution, recent revenue decline at the same time staffing costs are increasing.
- The agency is heavily reliant on contributions, especially from a cadre of major donors. This adds an element of potential instability should some of these donors reduce their support.
- It is difficult to judge the stability of leadership although the interview indicated that many have been supporting and associated with the agency since its founding. They are proposing to hire an additional staff member to manage this program and appear to have adequate other staff to fill-in/cover in case of turnover.
- The agency has traditionally relied on and been guided by substantial community engagement, having begun as a completely volunteer agency. This ethic seems to be embedded in their overall approach. This also provides evidence that they have significant volunteer management experience and success, although elements of their volunteer management approach remain somewhat ad-hoc and have not been fully formalized.

Section B: Preferences from RFA Announcement

- The proposal is an extension of Locals Lead the Way and Climate Ambassadors programs. ACTT said it has partnered with other programs such as Island Institute by hosting a Fellow member as well as being a Service Provider for Community Resilience Partnership. As far as serving or having a physical presence in counties in Aroostook, Franklin, Hancock, Knox, Lincoln, Oxford, Piscataquis, Somerset, Waldo, and Washington I again rated this as Adequate since this appears to be a Hancock based group and stated in the narrative that in the program it will give preference or priority to these counties as well as Disadvantaged

communities as identified by the Federal Government's Climate and Environmental Justice Screening tool. As far as the proposal is from an organization led by or primarily supporting historically marginalized communities and/or people, I found the proposal to be a statewide proposal with priorities given to the identified counties.

- Applicant is looking to serve additional underserved, rural areas in Maine and provided information about their work in the community and with various partnerships.
- The proposal is not from a partnership or coalition, although the program itself if implemented may have elements of such in its design. It is not from an organization led or supporting historically marginalized communities.

Section C: Financial Plan

- I have reviewed the budget and all looks to be appropriate and reasonable, though I questioned \$0 in supplies. The match is within the CNCS guidelines but I was also confused if the Grant Match resource is this coming from ARP funds or does funding in the identified In-Kind monies under Source of funds become the match or is additional backup funding?
- Budget seems to be appropriate to the effort.
- Local funding includes \$10,000 in in kind staff support.
- Question about whether local share will be required if funded from ARP funds.

Section D: Fiscal Systems

- The financial management system in place is for the most part in compliance with the federal requirements for accounting for public grant funding. There are a few training concerns around risk management, cyber security and Fraud, Waste and Abuse that are missing – the biggest omission was the audit even though the organization's accountant wrote a letter of review this did not take the place of an audit. There was also a noted drop in revenue year over year and the overspending (expenses to revenue) in the organization.
- Organization has not been audited.
- The agency is still relatively young and is in the process of moving to a more formal accounting and reporting system with the hiring of a bookkeeper; however, additional enhancements and improvements may be required to meet federal AC grant requirements.

Section E: Grant Readiness

- I'm impressed by what the organization has accomplished over its relatively short existence and the broad volunteer support it has received. I'm confident it can undertake and complete the planning process. The larger challenge, of course, will be successful implementation when and if the organization decides to move forward with a full grant application. I'm hopeful that will occur.
- The organization has strong leadership and successful working models from other states to base their program on, from which you could expect a successful outcome. The budget looks reasonable and it has had several partnerships and has hosted a Fellow from the Island Institute so are aware that specific reporting requirements are necessary – the organization would need to be tightened some and it was noted in the narrative – Volunteer coordinator would need to be designated to oversee the AmeriCorps and the program's lead person would be newly hired.