



2025 Cummings Coaches Guide

Thank you for volunteering to serve as a **Cummings Coach**, helping to level the playing field for small nonprofits applicants of the [Cummings \\$30 Million Grant Program](#). Before connecting with your organization(s), please take the time to review this guide. We are readily available if you have questions.

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About the Cummings \$30 Million Grant Program

Cummings Foundation has awarded more than \$500 million to date in greater Boston. In May 2025, it will grant an additional \$30 million. These funds will be shared by 150 local-area nonprofits and will be awarded as multi-year grants, to be paid over either three or 10 years. Annual grant installments will range from \$10,000 to \$100,000 each. Nonprofits that have previously received grants from Cummings Foundation will be automatically considered for 10-year awards.

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Timeline

October 22: Applicants receive invitation to the full application stage *and* to submit a [brief form](#) by **Friday, November 1** to request coaching.

November 8: Cummings sends introductory email to each assigned applicant and its coach. Those organizations not selected to participate in Cummings Coaches will also be notified.

Nov. 8 – Jan. 15: Each applicant contacts its coach to schedule an introductory meeting and discuss the preferred structure of their meetings. Applicants and coaches will then meet over this 10-week period.

January 15: Applicants submit applications by 5:00 PM.

Cummings Coaches Roster

- **Adjoa Acquah-Harrison**, *founding executive in U.S. & international philanthropy; Grant Professionals Association (GPA)-New England Conference, workshop presenter-consultant*
- **Adele Fleet Bacow**, *founder, Community Partners Consultants*
- **Sharyn Bahn**, *fundraiser and nonprofit founder (retired)*
- **Gale Druga, PhD**, *fundraising professional (retired)*
- **Marcia Hertz**, *nonprofit marketing and fundraising consultant*
- **Heidi Heinlein**, *senior program officer, GMA Foundations*
- **Robert D. Keefe, JD**, *senior counsel, WilmerHale*
- **Jim Kraus**, *senior consultant, Development Guild*
- **Patricia McCauley, DNP**, *director (retired), Clinical Resource & Simulation, Regis College*
- **Kara McLaughlin**, *first spouse, Salem State University; former executive director, The House of the Seven Gables*
- **Greg Smith**, *associate professor of business and marketing, Gordon College*
- **Gerry & Tony Sobkowicz**, *procurement coordinator (retired), commonwealth of Massachusetts; and environmental engineer (retired)*
- **Celeste Steele**, *healthcare administrator in quality, safety, and infection prevention*

Our Guiding Principles

Having embarked on our collective journey of philanthropy, we pledge to work to help ensure that no one is ever left behind.

Recognizing that the dignity of every human person is fundamental, Cummings Foundation's primary goal is to help meet the most basic needs of all people in all segments of our society.

We seek to promote and empower the social and economic inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or other status.

We will work to improve the lives of those within our priority funding regions by directly supporting the work of other effective charitable organizations.

And we will endeavor through our local outreach to aid the furthest behind first.

—Joyce and Bill Cummings



The "color wheel" is a photo of the actual pin presented to Bill Cummings when he spoke at the United Nations in June 2019. Many of the words and sentiments were inspired by portions of the United Nations' document, "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." Cummings Foundation, Inc. supports the [SDGs](#).

Our Approach to Nonprofits

They are the heroes: the nonprofit executive directors who also serve as HR managers, development officers, and marketing managers; the program staff who work diligently and passionately, often for low pay and even less recognition; the volunteers who devote precious free time in service to others. They are the heroes—not us.

We are privileged to be in a position to support their life-changing, equity-promoting, barrier-breaking, purpose-igniting work. We are not seeking to judge, eliminate, or vote out. Rather we endeavor to learn and discover synergies so Cummings Foundation can invest in organizations and efforts that match its values and priorities and that have the most meaningful, positive, and sustainable impact on local communities.

Foundation staff and volunteers possess valuable expertise gained through varied professional and personal experiences; however, we recognize and respect the intimate knowledge that nonprofit representatives have of the causes and the people to which they have dedicated their careers. The grant candidates are the true boots-on-the-ground experts, and they deserve not just a seat at the table, but the seat at the head.

We respect the beliefs of diverse populations and the uniqueness of individuals, and we believe that all people deserve to live with dignity and to have the opportunity to improve their circumstances. We recognize that we all have biases, but we strive to be aware of them, set them aside, and eliminate them from our thinking, questions, and comments. We welcome candid reminders from others when we demonstrate an unconscious bias.

***We are most grateful for the participation of our volunteers
and for the respect and kindness they show to all grant candidates.***

About Cummings Coaches

Cummings Coaches provides grant-writing mentorship and proposal development support to a limited number of small nonprofits. It was created as a result of feedback gained through a spring 2023 [survey of that year's grant applicants](#). Several of the 226 respondents strongly encouraged Cummings Foundation to offer coaching to help smaller organizations more effectively navigate the grant application process.

When selecting nonprofits to receive a coach, the Foundation prioritizes organizations that lack the sophisticated fundraising capacity or connections that more frequently benefit larger, well-established organizations that apply. It was suggested that this type of support could help make the proposal process more accessible, equitable, and inclusive.

ELIGIBILITY

Eligible nonprofits must:

- operate with an annual budget of \$500,000 or less;

- meet all eligibility requirements of the [Cummings \\$30 Million Grant Program](#); and
- use their own staff or volunteers (rather than a third-party professional) for their grant writing.

Because space is limited, preference is given to:

- applicants that have not previously participated in Cummings Coaches;
- nonprofits with limited experience, resources, and/or professional networks;
- applicants that have not received a prior award through Cummings’ primary annual grant program (smaller awards, such as through [Cummings Community Giving](#), are not disqualifying).

COACHING COMMITMENT

Coaches will:

- Commit to at least two hours of meeting time (virtually or in person) per applicant, which may be divided over multiple meetings.
- Serve as a sounding board and help the applicant think through how it presents itself—and conveys the impact of its work—in writing.
- Help ensure that the applicant is providing information that will be valuable to the grant evaluators.
- Provide feedback and recommendations to help improve a draft.
- Identify potential gaps in a proposal.

Coaches will *not*:

- Write any portion of, or provide redline edits for, a draft.
- Be involved in evaluating an applicant they coached if they serve on a grant selection committee during this cycle.

[The Coaching Process](#)

BEFORE THE MEETING

Watch for an email or call: The nonprofits will be asked to reach out to you to begin a dialogue about how you would like to work together. You are welcome, however, to reach out first if you prefer.

Make a plan: It is up to each coach and nonprofit pair to determine when, where, and for how long to meet. Some coaches may choose to dedicate more than two hours, but that is not expected. Meetings may take place virtually or in person. Most coaches break up the two hours over two or three sessions. Bear in mind that additional non-meeting time will be needed to prepare for the first meeting and evaluate one or more drafts.

Encourage them to request feedback: If the nonprofit has been declined by Cummings in the past, coaches can encourage the organization to request feedback on the declined submission. Out of respect for the significant time and effort that nonprofit professionals

dedicate to creating proposals, the Foundation has always considered it important to provide feedback when requested. To request it, nonprofits can call the Foundation's office at **781-569-2335** to be connected with an available staff member. As this feedback comes from the community volunteers who reviewed the prior submission, it offers an opportunity for the nonprofit to strengthen the initial draft you will review as a Cummings Coach.

Do some research: It will be helpful for you to review past LOIs or applications to Cummings Foundation, if applicable (see Foundant Instructions, page 14). You may also wish to look at the nonprofit's web presence (website, social media, news stories),

Request a draft: If the organization has already begun drafting its proposal, it may provide a helpful starting point. Encourage the re-use of existing language (from other grant applications, its website, marketing materials, etc.) rather than re-creating the wheel. Cummings appreciates this kind of efficiency.

Review the FAQs webpage: Answers to some of the most common questions can be found within the [Cummings \\$30 Million Grant Program](#) overview and recently expanded [FAQs webpage](#). If a nonprofit asks you a question beyond what is available online, please feel welcome to refer them to a member of the Foundation team.

Think about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): The words diversity and inclusion are often stated together, but having diversity within a group of people does not necessarily mean that the group is inclusive. Inclusiveness promotes and sustains a sense of belonging, and it values and respects people's varying backgrounds and beliefs. Please read the Inclusive Language Guide (page 15) and watch [this eight-minute video about recognizing implicit bias](#). If you have seen these materials before, we hope you will look at them again as an important refresher.



DURING THE MEETING

Say thank you: Please express to the nonprofit's staff members and volunteers that Cummings Foundation values their work and is grateful for their efforts and dedication.

Be aware of the time: Given the inspiring work of so many nonprofits, it will be easy to spend much more time than planned for each meeting. Coaches are welcome to go beyond their two-hour commitment, but if you are unable to do so, then we encourage you to remind the nonprofit at the beginning of the meeting of the time you need to conclude.

Be respectful: The applicants you work with may be unpaid volunteers, new to grant writing, or non-native English speakers. Please meet them where there are, without judgment. Our hope is for the meetings to be empowering for the organizations.

Understand the dynamics: Because you are a representative of a funding organization meeting with nonprofits that need funding, there will always be a power dynamic at play. Coaches can lessen the discomfort and limitations of this dynamic by approaching the

meeting with the intention of learning and supporting—not of investigating or judging. Presenting yourself with a friendly demeanor and a sincere interest in the nonprofit and the people it serves will help put the nonprofit representatives at ease and pave the way for more productive meetings.

Things to Look For

Joyce and Bill Cummings aim to “democratize” the philanthropy of Cummings Foundation. Rather than having a staff of program officers, the majority of grant decisions are made by [community volunteers](#), with no input from Foundation staff. Among these volunteers are nonprofit professionals (including executive directors and fundraisers), business leaders, public officials, as well as active and retired professionals from a variety of industries.

By the time a grant is made, at least nine community volunteers have reviewed each submission – ensuring a broad diversity of perspective and insight. With that in mind, there is no real “secret sauce” for a Cummings grant. There are, however, some general principles and practices that will strengthen any proposal regardless of the reviewer. The following potential pitfalls are based on input from past grant reviewers.

Insider’s perspective: When grant writers are immersed in work on a day-to-day basis, they sometimes assume that the reader knows things that s/he may not. These proposals could benefit from greater explanation of the need or the benefit of the services provided. Try to anticipate the questions a grant reviewer might have, and include the answers in the proposal.

Description without context: Compelling proposals go beyond simply describing the need or services and attempt to “sell” the organization and make a case for funding. They answer questions such as: What makes our work important? What makes it unique? What gaps are we filling? How are we well positioned to tackle the issue at hand? This is the place to toot your own horn.

Internal orientation: Rather than focusing solely on what *the nonprofit* needs (e.g., more staff, better equipment), connect the dots to explain how the grant will help *the community* (e.g., an additional staff member translates to 100 more people served each month through ESOL classes).

Disorganization: Relevant facts, compelling testimonials, and well-stated goals can still fall short if this content is not presented in a logical manner. A proposal that flows from paragraph to paragraph will be more easily understood by its readers.

Poor grammar / typos: Although we ask grant selection volunteers to value substance over form, proposals with deficient writing often lack clarity, which can hinder chances for advancement in the selection process. Because Cummings Coaches is a one-time benefit, we ask volunteers not to serve as editors, but rather to help the organization brainstorm who

within its network (board members, volunteers, local schools) might be able to provide this support now and in the future.

Hopes and dreams: Some passionate grant writers describe large-scale, long-term goals for the organization without sharing a plan or strategy. In such instances, it may be better to scale back and focus on its proven successes and realistic near-term growth.

Elephant in the room: Is there an issue that might raise a red flag for grant evaluators (e.g., recent negative news story or online reviews, very large budget, brand new organization/limited track record, annual operating deficits, staff turnover or rotating all-volunteer staff)? Grant writers are better off addressing the issue openly and providing an explanation rather than leaving the grant evaluators to wonder or speculate.

Measurement and impact: Most nonprofits have important, inspiring missions. It is critical, however, for the proposal to convey not just the mission and proposed grant activities but also how successful the organization has been in achieving its goals and how it measures that success. Alternatively, a nonprofit could engage in work that is difficult to track or measure. That might be okay, but the organization should address the point with a thoughtful rationale.

Quantitative / qualitative mix: Some proposals are full of data, which can be dry and unrelatable. Others are full of anecdotes, which can leave the reader with many questions. The most effective proposals often include a mix of hard numbers and humanizing narrative.

Sustainability: Founder-led organizations benefit from a great deal of dedication and passion. Some such nonprofits, however, lack the structure and human resources to endure if the founder were to step away. Sustainability questions can also arise due to financials. Does the organization have diverse funding streams?

Board makeup: Some smaller or newer organizations have boards made up of just a handful of people, and sometimes they are family members or friends. This model can work well in a nonprofit's early stages, but if an organization wants to grow, it should consider professionalizing its board by inviting individuals with certain expertise (e.g., legal, finance, fundraising). Ideally, these new members should be unrelated parties who will feel comfortable raising concerns and providing oversight.

“Most Helpful” Takeaways

In a survey following the pilot phase of Cummings Coaches, we asked participants: “What was the *one* most helpful piece of advice or takeaway from your coach?” Their answers, consolidated below, may prove helpful to the coaches.

- Write for extreme clarity.
- We need to “toot” our own horn more.
- Go back to the core question on the proposal.
- Anticipate questions the reviewers will ask themselves.

- Share more info about why what you are doing is important.
- Include quoted testimonials about our work to illustrate its impact.
- Interpret both the community need as well as my nonprofit's need.
- Organize our proposal in a simplified manner so it's easy to understand.
- Clarify in two sentences where the real juice is in our application and then expand on it.
- Don't be afraid to share some of your "recipe" to make your proposal more competitive.
- Focus on readability. It's easy for someone close to the nonprofit to forget that what we are trying to say isn't immediately understood by all.
- Identify the concepts/terms/activities that we (as staff at the nonprofit) assume are "known," but might not easily be understood by, or clear to, a grant reviewer.
- As a small organization we don't always have impressive/large numbers of participants, so it's important to be clear about the depth of services and impact we provide those we do serve.

[Overview of 2025 Grant Application](#)

A preview of the 2025 grant application is available [online](#). We offer this preview in a Word document to make it easy for applicants to draft their proposal directly in the document before copying and pasting it into Foundant.

Based on applicant feedback over time, the Foundation has implemented several changes to make the process more accessible for smaller nonprofits seeking less funding. Most applicants receiving coaching will be requesting grants of \$25,000 or less.

Applicants requesting this level of funding:

- Will complete an abbreviated short-form full application. Go to page 7 of the preview to see where the short-form proposal stops and, if you wish, read the supplemental questions for other applicants.
- Will all apply and receive funds for general operating support. **Please do not encourage an organization completing the short-form full application to make a pitch for a specific program or need.**
- Will *not* be asked to submit a budget.
- Will be reviewed alongside other smaller organizations seeking general operating support rather than competing against much larger, more well-established nonprofits.

In a [survey of applicants](#) during the last grant cycle, several respondents suggested that the Foundation shift its application due date away from the busy holiday and "annual appeal" season that occurs at the end of the year. We value this candid feedback and are pleased to be responsive to it.

Please note that the Foundation has moved the deadline for applications from December 18, 2024 to 5:00 PM on Wednesday, January 15, 2025.

Cummings \$30 Million Grant Program Selection Timeline and Process

July 1	LOI window opens.
Sep. 6, 5:00 PM	LOI window closes. The LOI Committee evaluates submissions and decides which will be invited to the full application stage. Volunteers are divided into pairs, with each pair independently evaluating the same set of LOIs and then meeting to compare notes and finalize a jointly agreed upon list of nonprofits to invite to submit a full application.
Oct. 22	Application invitations and decline notices are sent via email.
Jan. 15, 5:00 PM	Full application due. The Application Review Committee evaluates submissions and determines which applicants will advance to the Final Grant Selection Committee. Volunteers are divided into trios, with each trio independently evaluating the same set of applications and then meeting to compare notes and finalize a jointly agreed upon list of nonprofits to advance in the process. One member of each trio will have strong financial acumen and will evaluate each applicant's financial health.
Mar. 25	The Final Grant Selection Committee reviews the finalists' applications and determines which applicants will receive funding. Volunteers work in teams of four, with each volunteer independently evaluating the same set of 15 applications and then meeting to compare notes and finalize a jointly agreed upon list of at least seven nonprofits to receive a grant.
May 12	All newly selected grant winners that have been prior Cummings grantees are considered for elevation to 10-year awards. The 10-Year Committee will evaluate these repeat grant winners during on-site Presentation Days. In preparation, they independently review applications, plus any site visit reports and the most recent impact report, for their applicants. After hearing a presentation and having an opportunity to ask questions, the volunteers determine which grant winners will receive long-term funding.
June 2	Grant approval and decline letters are sent via email.

Selection Criteria

Participants will, hopefully, be able to submit a stronger proposal as a result of your coaching. They will, however, go through the standard competitive process and will not receive any special consideration for advancement.

Below is the guidance we offer to the grant reviewers as regards selection criteria. It will be helpful for the nonprofit to consider this information as it develops a proposal. Given the great diversity among grant recipients, we do not have a standard scoring rubric to aid in decision making. Instead, we ask committee members to rely on the key principles below, plus their own valuable experience and good judgment, to determine which applicants should receive grants.

Impact

Transformative. Game-changer. These are words grant winners often use to describe their Cummings grants. Please look for opportunities where grant funding would have the greatest impact, bearing in mind that impact can take many forms. One nonprofit may serve a large number of people, whereas another organization might serve a much smaller number, but in a long-term or in-depth manner. Both could provide enormous value.

Preferring that grant funds not be “drops in a bucket,” this program primarily supports small and medium-sized nonprofits that do not enjoy the robust donor bases and endowments that generously support many larger institutions. The Foundation *is*, however, open to awarding grants to larger organizations when they have presented compelling cases as to why they need *this* funding.

History of Success

Cummings Foundation applauds the initiative of newly formed nonprofits that seek to meet community needs. Given the large size of the grants made through the Cummings \$30 Million Grant Program, however, the Foundation gives priority to *established* nonprofits with a *proven history* of providing value to the community. Grants may be awarded to fund new programs of established nonprofits if the proposal successfully demonstrates the need for the program and the organization’s capacity to fill that need.

Population Served

Cummings Foundation gives priority to nonprofits that serve people who have been disadvantaged or marginalized in some way. We greatly appreciate effective programs that work to prevent or counteract discrimination due to race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, age, physical disability, etc.

Substance Over Form

Recognizing that applicants have varying levels of experience and expertise with both grant writing and the English language, reviewers should focus on the substance of the proposal (e.g., the merit of the mission, the need for the services, the effectiveness of the programs) rather than on more superficial aspects (e.g., grammar, writing structure).

Other Considerations

Fiscal Sponsorship

Fiscal sponsorship is when a nonprofit organization extends its tax-exempt status to another group. The fiscal sponsor accepts tax deductible donations on behalf of the sponsored project/organization, and accepts responsibility for the use of those funds,

ensuring that they are applied to the intended charitable purposes. Although Cummings Foundation (“CFI”) will consider requests from organizations that have fiscal sponsors, it is more likely to fund organizations that have their own 501(c)(3) public charity statuses because of the transparency and IRS oversight that accompany that designation.

Grant-makers

CFI changed its eligibility requirements a few years ago to allow requests from grant-makers, which are organizations that, rather than providing services or programs, raise funds to grant them to other organizations or to individuals. Grant-makers should demonstrate that they have systems and expertise in place to ensure due diligence when vetting funding requests.

Allowable Activities

Over the years, grant reviewers have reached out to CFI staff seeking guidance as to whether certain approaches or activities in the proposal align with the Foundation’s funding priorities. Below are responses to some common questions about activities that are allowable and should in no way negatively impact applicants’ opportunity to advance:

- **Requests for general operating expenses or salaries.** Although a specific program/project may appear more exciting, applicants should not be penalized for requesting general operating or salary funding, as this support is essential to a nonprofit’s ability to provide services. If an applicant makes a strong case for the value of its mission and the impact of its services, CFI is open to providing it with general operating support. This type of flexible funding is often difficult for nonprofits to secure. If the request is for general operating expenses, the applicant does not need to detail in the narrative or budget how the funds will be spent.
- **Recycled proposal language.** Recognizing that CFI is one of many current or prospective funders for applicants, and that nonprofits often have limited fundraising capacity, the Foundation encourages organizations to submit the same or similar material from previous Cummings or non-Cummings proposals, where appropriate. We view this as “working smarter, not harder.” Of course, any recycled material should be refreshed as needed to reflect the applicants’ current activities and present circumstances.
- **Fair compensation for nonprofit professionals.** Cummings Foundation believes strongly that nonprofit professionals should be compensated fairly. Many people assume that they are (or should be) motivated primarily by social change, not by their paychecks. This mindset can hurt the nonprofit sector, however, leading to a brain drain and a lack of capable leadership. Recognizing and rewarding nonprofit employees with suitable compensation can lead to better retention rates and reduced turnover.



Compensation of the highest paid employees should be reasonable relative to these individuals' expertise, the scope of their work, and the organization's budget size and mission. For example, a health-focused nonprofit might employ a clinician as its leader, or an educational nonprofit's executive director could be a former school principal or superintendent. In these cases, the specialized skills needed may merit more competitive compensation to attract/retain capable leadership.

- **Sustainability plans.** You may wonder, "How will the organization continue the program after the grant funding ends?" The answer in most cases will be: through fundraising. Whether through grants, events, or individual donors, nonprofits are consistently thinking about how to diversify their funding. CFI trusts that nonprofits are developing strategies to increase organizational sustainability and does not ask them to detail that plan.
- **Requests for a high installment.** CFI encourages its grantees to have diversified funding sources and prefers that its funding not represent an outsized percentage of an organization's budget. A general guide (more than a hard rule) is that the installment should not exceed 20 percent of an organization's average annual revenue for the past three years. If an applicant requests more than 20 percent, however, it should not be disqualified. Rather, make a note of your recommended installment so CFI can take it into consideration when determining award amounts.

In addition, CFI is open to providing larger support to aid in expansion efforts if an organization has demonstrated early programmatic and operational success, an ability to attract a diverse base of individual and institutional support, and strong/talented leadership to support rapid growth.

- **Proposals from previously declined applicants.** Worthy organizations frequently apply multiple times before receiving a grant. Factors such as changes in the number of proposals in a specific category (e.g., food insecurity) and organizational maturity can affect the chances of receiving funding. Nonprofits also often use feedback from prior review cycles to strengthen future proposals.

Accordingly, we ask grant reviewers to focus on the merits of the current proposal, rather than the number of times an organization has applied in the past or what might have "gone wrong" with the prior submission. Any prior applicant is welcome to call CFI, and its staff will provide the feedback/comments collected from volunteers who evaluated prior letters of inquiry/applications.

Reflections and Insights from a Cummings Coach

Cummings Coaches, by design, aims to support the smallest applicants that do not have the sophisticated fundraising capacity or connections that more frequently benefit the larger, well-established organizations that apply. Coaches will also experience nonprofits at various points in

organizational development (i.e., from “startups” to multiple years of operating history) and a wide range of nonprofit staff—from full-time, paid professionals to neighborhood activists who volunteer their time.

To that end, it’s important to recognize that “success” when working with these organizations can be multifaceted. Below are some reflections from one Cummings coach, used with permission, to provide a sense of all that can be gained by the participating applicants, along with some helpful insights for coaches themselves.

- **You may be giving the nonprofit some insights, even if they do not put together a successful LOI/proposal.**

An executive director I recently coached, who leads a small health-focused nonprofit in Boston’s Mission Hill neighborhood, was astonished to hear that other nonprofits I have worked with were writing and editing, with my guidance and feedback, for three to five weeks, with several drafts in between, before they submitted the final product to Cummings Foundation. She said, *“Oh, I usually just put things together at the last minute,”* and *“My usual time horizon is only about one week.”* Participating nonprofit staff need to have the capacity to plan, to discuss (internally and/or with a Cummings Coach), and to revise, and they need to know that such capacity is part of being “ready” to apply for a Cummings grant. This experience also put into greater focus, for me, that many of these applicants are all volunteer, half-time staff, or one full-time person wearing several hats. Bearing this in mind helps to adjust my own expectations. A slow response time, while perhaps not the most professional course of action, given the rare opportunity offered by the coaching program, also suggests something else... the organization is very busy or, perhaps, overwhelmed.

- **Being a Cummings Coach isn’t about me. It’s all about the nonprofit’s needs and capacity.**

I, initially, felt somewhat frustrated when one of my nonprofits didn’t contact me promptly, didn’t start writing a draft of the LOI immediately, didn’t send me materials to review and (hopefully) help them improve, and despite our late start, didn’t even log on to our final Zoom meeting, three days before their LOI deadline. We only had our first conversation after several weeks had passed, and after I had written them several emails, urging them to set up a meeting with me. Finally, I contacted Andrew at the Foundation, who facilitated our first meeting, multiple weeks into the five-week window of coaching time. I felt as if I couldn’t give the nonprofit the help that they needed and felt as if I had let down the Cummings Foundation, although I had certainly tried to do my part.

It is useful to remember the adage, “One can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make her drink.” You are there to try to support the nonprofit, but it is not your job to force help upon them. This nonprofit did not have the bandwidth to benefit from all the help they might have received from me. However, one’s willingness to be there, to let the organization’s staff know that you appreciate their mission and support their efforts, and perhaps to share a few limited thoughts about the LOI process may be all the help the nonprofit can absorb, at that time. This will not be their only chance to submit a proposal to the Cummings Foundation. You cannot really know to

what extent you were able to be helpful to a nonprofit. Perhaps just extending the offer of help is validating, in its own way.

I will add, however, that the experience with the nonprofit referenced above is certainly the “exception” not the “norm” in my experience. It will not keep me from volunteering to be a coach again, in the future. I think it is a wonderful program and the impact on those organizations I’ve worked with, who have taken full advantage of the opportunity, becomes clear immediately after the first meeting.

• Not every nonprofit is “mature” enough, or ready, to submit a proposal to Cummings Foundation, and that’s okay.

What eventually became clear to me was that this organization, which is doing some wonderful work in a community with many varied needs, did not yet have the capacity to do the serious work of writing a competitive proposal to an institutional funder like Cummings Foundation. It employed a single, half-time staff member who was so overextended that when an unrelated crisis arose in the community, the executive director had no bandwidth left to work on the proposal.

Furthermore, their board was fairly un-involved, and was not offering to support the executive director with the work of the Cummings LOI, even in the face of this unexpected community crisis (despite the board’s statements that they wanted to be involved in the coaching process - they never were).

Nonprofits who submit a proposal to Cummings Foundation are playing in a “Major League,” now. An all-volunteer group, or a single (perhaps part-time) staff person may just not have the skills, the time, or the resources available to them to submit a competitive proposal, however important their mission, intentions, or how much good their nonprofit is doing. They may need to put together a few more small grants to get the staffing needed to expand their capacity, or have their board assess what additional resources they can pull together to enable the staff to write a good proposal for Cummings. Then, the nonprofit may be ready to try again. It’s a learning experience, and our job is to make it as positive and constructive an experience as we can, whether the nonprofit is successful or not, this time.

Inclusive Language Guide

Adapted from multiple sources, including The Lenny Zakim Fund

Cummings Foundation is committed to creating an inclusive, supportive environment for all people, regardless of differences. We strive to embody this spirit of inclusion during every interaction we have with nonprofit organizations. To that end, volunteers should avoid using language that is insensitive to cultural differences or that excludes or offends any group of people (based on their ability/disability, age, ethnicity and race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, etc.).

Communication is not what you say, but how it's heard. Making a conscious effort to use language that is more inclusive offers us a chance to grow and become better communicators while also caring for those with whom we are communicating. Here are some guiding principles:

- **Put people first:** Default to person-first constructions that put the person ahead of his/her characteristics, e.g., instead of “disabled people” or “the homeless,” use “people with disabilities” or “people experiencing homelessness.” People-first language keeps the individual as the most essential element; there is more to each of us than our descriptors. Mention characteristics like gender, sexual orientation, religion, racial group, or ability only when relevant to the discussion.
- **Be respectful of a person or group’s preference regarding vocabulary and be guided in your communication by that preference.** Listen to the words they use, and adopt those terms, e.g., Latino, developmental disability, transgender. If you’re unsure about the preferred language, simply ask. Also, if you meet someone with a name that is unfamiliar to you, repeat it back to the person and ask if you’re pronouncing it correctly. Practice until you get it right.
- **Avoid microaggressions:** Impact is more important than intent, so make a real effort to avoid unintentional microinsults based on stereotypes and biases. Examples include: Telling a person of color, “You are so articulate”; asking a person who appears Asian, “Where are you from?”; and downplaying the reality of racism with comments such as, “I don’t see color.”
- **Avoid phrases that suggest victimhood or deficit,** e.g., suffers from, confined to a wheelchair, needy, vulnerable. Instead, simply state the facts: has muscular dystrophy, uses a wheelchair, is experiencing poverty, historically underrepresented.
- **Don’t underplay the impact of mental health conditions.** Terms like bipolar, OCD, and ADD are descriptors of real mental health conditions. They are not metaphors for everyday behaviors. Also, avoid derogatory terms that stem from the context of mental health, e.g., crazy, mad, or psycho.
- **“Guys” is not a gender-neutral term.** The “universal male” (i.e., using “guys” to mean “people”) assumes that the default human being is male. Although “he” and “man” are often meant to be neutral, studies show that these words cause people to think specifically of males.

Some habits are hard to break. When trying to change a language pattern, it is easy to fall back into old habits. Below are some suggested language substitutions for common situations. Please be open-minded (and even grateful) when someone suggests that your language could be more inclusive. If you are unsure of the most appropriate terminology for the situation, simply ask—and then listen.

	More Inclusive	Less Inclusive
<i>When referring to a group of people</i>	Folks, people, you all, teammates, friends	Guys (or women) when referring to people overall
<i>When referring to staff</i>	Workforce, personnel, workers, team, colleagues	Manpower, man hours
<i>When referring to board leadership or facilitators</i>	Chairperson, chair, moderator, discussion leader	Chairman, foreman
<i>When referring to someone's significant other</i>	Spouse, partner	Wife, husband, boyfriend, girlfriend
<i>When describing norms</i>	Typical	Normal
<i>When referring to groups traditionally called "minority"</i>	Historically excluded groups, marginalized groups, or underrepresented groups	Minorities (Not all marginalized groups are minorities.) Vulnerable (implies there is something inherently wrong with them)

To further illustrate the important difference language choices can make, please consider the following examples of questions or comments.

Less Inclusive	Concern	More Inclusive
Smithfield is a poor town with a lot of problems, but we want to help that community.	<i>Condescending; increases power dynamic</i>	We appreciate the important work you do in Smithfield and want to learn how we might support your efforts.
Your location doesn't seem convenient/safe/etc. Why didn't you locate it in XYZ?	<i>Implies you know more than the nonprofit about its community or cause</i>	Why did you choose this location?
As a first-generation college student, have you inspired your family to place a higher value on education?	<i>Implies that the family did not value education highly before</i>	How, if at all, has your college experience affected your family and their feelings about higher education?

Foundant Instructions

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