



An Introduction to the 2015 AFI Funding Opportunity Announcement
May 2015

Welcome and thank you for attending the AFI Resource Center's May 2015 webinar, "An Introduction to the 2015 AFI Funding Opportunity Announcement"

My name is Emily Appel-Newby and I am a technical assistance provider on the outreach team with the AFI Resource Center. The AFI Resource Center provides training and technical assistance to AFI grantees, their project partners, and other organizations that are providing asset building services across the nation.

In today's webinar you will:

- Learn how to access the FOA
- Learn the application due dates for FY 2015-2017
- Become familiar with the content of the FOA
- Learn where they can get answers to questions about the FOA and the application process

Assets for Independence (AFI) is a discretionary grant program administered by the Office of Community Services (OCS) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), which is part of the US Department of Health & Human Services.

AFI was created by Congress in 1998 to demonstrate and support an assets-based approach for increasing the economic self-sufficiency of low-income individuals and families. Asset building is an anti-poverty approach that supports the acquisition of assets that can increase opportunities, build wealth, and increase economic stability for low-income families. These assets can be tangible, such as a home, or intangible, such as education.

AFI funds projects that provide Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) and related services to low-income people.

- IDAs are matched savings accounts with the specific goal of purchasing an asset.
- AFI IDAs may be used for one of three asset goals:
 - To purchase a first home,
 - To capitalize a business, or
 - To fund post-secondary education or training.

In early April 2015, OCS released a new Funding Opportunity Announcement (or FOA) for the Assets for Independence program. The purpose of a FOA is to explain the goals of the program, the activities that program grantees are expected to deliver, and the criteria by which applications for funding will be reviewed. Anyone who is interested in applying for AFI should download the FOA from the link shown here and read it thoroughly. While this presentation is meant to provide an introduction to the contents of the FOA, it does not replace reading it for yourself.

The next application due date is June 15, 2015. The FOA also includes the due dates in federal fiscal years 2016 and 2017, which will be in October and April of each year.

The deadline for electronic application submission is 11:59 p.m., ET, on the due dates listed.

Any applications submitted after the 11:59 p.m., will be disqualified as late.

Now I am going to walk you through the sections of the FOA, since it's a long document – what is in each section and why it's important.

Executive Summary provides some key points in a high-level overview of AFI program. This is also the section where you can find a summary of changes that have been made to the FOA when it has been modified.

Section I, Program Description, goes into more detail about the AFI program, starting with the Program Overview and Program Requirements. These sections are important for understanding the overall goals your potential project should support, as well as the specific requirements that come directly from the authorizing legislation, the AFI Act of 1998. Even if you have operated an AFI project before, we encourage you to re-familiarize yourself with these requirements.

Also, while this section provides a summary of the AFI Act requirements, to fully understand the requirements we recommend reviewing the actual AFI legislation. For example, the Withdrawals for Emergencies and Qualified Expenses description in the FOA does not provide all the details of the legislative requirements, but provides the relevant AFI Act sections. There's a link to the legislation at the beginning of the Program Requirements section.

Note that the final two requirements, Administrative Requirements and Reporting and Recognition of Same-Sex Marriage, are not specifically derived from the AFI Act, but stem from other federal laws, regulations, and judicial decisions. However, the descriptions here in this section describe how these requirements specifically apply to AFI projects.

Section I also includes information on Project Design and Definition of Terms from the FOA.

- The Project Design section gives you some considerations for putting the project together, including which allowable assets to offer based on the cost of assets in your market, and targeting a specific set of participants for your project. These are ways that the project can be tailored to your community's needs and strengths.
- Then, the definition of terms provides a lot of additional information, both AFI specific, such as Business Capitalization, Eligible Educational Institution, and First-Home Purchase, and more general, such as information on other federal programs and special populations that later referenced in the Bonus Points. Many of the definitions include links to additional information.

Section II is information about the federal award: which tells us the budget period is 60 months, the grants ranges from \$10,000 to \$1,000,000, and warns that applications can be disqualified if they request an amount above this grant ceiling. It also notes a change from previous FOAs, indicating that applicants should request award amounts in whole dollars as grant awards are made in whole dollar amounts only.

Section III, Eligibility Information, is an important section. Section III.1 explains the types of eligible applicants, which are shown on this slide, and describes the additional eligibility information required for governmental entities and financial institution applicants.

Specially for governmental entities, which must apply jointly with a 501c3, applications must include documentation of the 501c3 status of the non-profit joint applicant and include a signed agreement between the government entity and the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

For Low-Income Credit Unions and Community Development Financial Institutions, applications must include documentation of the federal designation of the credit union or CDFI status and A third-party agreement with a local community-based organization that describes the collaborative relationship between the applicant and the community-based organization. Documentation of 501c3 status is not required in these applications.

Section III.2 provides some key information regarding the cost sharing of a 1-to-1 nonfederal cash commitment that is required for all AFI projects:

- It states that the federal AFI grant must comprise no more than 50 percent of the total project budget and explains that applicants must provide documentation of a non-federal cash commitment. It also notes that there is a disqualification factor related to non-federal cash documentation.
- By the same token, it states that applicants should not request an AFI grant amount that exceeds the amount of non-federal cash commitment that is documented in their application.
- To understand the specific requirements ACF has created for the documentation of non-federal cash commitments, see Section IV.2. Content and Form of Application Submission.

Section III.3 is just called Other but it has some critically important information for all applicants.

First is the DUNS and SAM registration, which is key for submitting your application. As the FOA states, "Failure to comply with these requirements may result in your inability to submit your application through Grants.gov or prevent the award of a grant." This process is also covered well on ACF's How to Apply for a Grant page, which we have linked here.

Next are the Application Disqualification factors, which are critical. Applications that are disqualified do NOT proceed to the competitive review phase. You do not want to have your application disqualified!

Here are the disqualification factors:

- requesting an amount above the ceiling of \$1,000,000
- applications from entities that are not eligible for AFI grants, including individuals (including sole proprietorships) and foreign entities
- failure to provide documentation of non-federal cash commitment
- missing the application due date/time
- paper applications from applicants who have not been approved for exemption from electronic submission requirement

Applicants who have been disqualified will be notified by mail or email within 30 days of the due date.

Section IV, Application and submission information, is another critical section. It provides key information for developing your application.

Section IV.1 provides information on how to access the application package, which includes all the forms needed for the application.

Section IV.2 is a lengthy section that addresses Content and Form of Application Submission. This includes the technical requirements, such as page limits, font and formatting, the two-file

requirement, the authorized organizational representative and their role in submitting the application, and required forms, assurances, and certifications.

The two-file requirement is a rule that all electronic applications consist of only 2 electronic files, the Project Description and Appendices. The FOA provides lists of the contents for each of these files, as shown on this slide. There is a page limit of 225 pages total for the applications (this is a hard limit), with a suggestion that you allocate 75 to the project description and 150 to the appendices. Separate from these two files are the standard forms and OMB-approved forms, which are automatically included as part of the AFI Application Package. NOTE that a failure to adhere to the two-file rule, the page limit of 225, or the formatting requirements (such as using smaller margins or font size) will result in part of your application being removed from the competitive review process.

Section IV.2 also provides instruction on the content of the application, specifically what the Project Description and Budget and Budget Narrative must address. When I say “must,” it means that reviewers will be evaluating your application based on these criteria, and so failure to address them will impact your competitive review score. Note that this is different from the requirements discussed regarding disqualification, which results in your application being removed prior to the competitive review.

I am now going to preview the topics that are covered in section IV.2. I will not be going over every specific requirement for each of these sections in this presentation. My goal here is to describe each section and to highlight key points. The FOA is very detailed, and you will need to read it thoroughly.

First section within the Approach is the Project Design. As the FOA says, “The project design is the “what” of the application. Given the parameters set by the AFI program requirements, what is your specific project going to be?” So this is where you get to convey what your project will look like, both the details of the IDA and the program as a whole. Within the AFI Act requirements, there are areas where the applicant has discretion in terms of design. The specific topics that must be addressed in this section are listed in the FOA, and include things like asset purchases allowed and timeframe for individual participants’ savings.

The FOA also makes an important point early in Section 1 that should guide the design of your project. It states that grantees have significant flexibility with regard to setting requirements for their participants, and to consider the needs and circumstances of their potential participants. “For example, if an organization intends to serve a population that has high rates of seasonal employment, requiring every participant to make bi-weekly deposits for 12 months is probably not a good fit.” So you are encouraged to read the FOA and the AFI legislation, to understand what truly are the AFI program requirements, and then to think creatively about a project design that maximizes success for your participants. Of course, if you have any questions about what is or isn’t allowed, give us a call at the AFI Resource Center.

The next section is the Work Plan, which is a detailed description of how your project will be implemented across the full five-year project period. As the FOA puts it, “The work plan is the “how” of the application. Given the AFI program requirements and the specifics of your proposed project, how will you implement it?” This section should address things like outreach and recruitment activities, skills and information necessary to achieve economic self-sufficiency, and participant retention strategies.

As an overall note about the work plan, the FOA reminds applicants to make sure the work plan is “consistent with all other aspects of the proposed project, such as the Project Design, the timing of non-federal funding availability as detailed in the applicant’s non-federal cash commitment documentation, and the Project Timeline and Milestones” and “If the proposed project includes project partners, their roles and activities must be clearly identified in the work plan.”

The next section is “Project Viability and Fit with the AFI Program.” Here, you are asked to demonstrate things like having the necessary resources to implement the project as described in the Work Plan. Please note that if you do not intend to leverage partners, the application must clearly explain how each part of the project will be accomplished using resources provided by your organization only.

A new requirement in this FOA is that “If the applicant is implementing an on-going AFI project serving the same target population in the same service area, the applicant must demonstrate that there is sufficient need and demand for a new AFI project.” This refers to returning grantees who are adding subsequent projects, not new grantees starting projects where there is a current AFI project.

Also new in this FOA, The applicant must demonstrate the viability of the proposed project with regard to the asset purchases included in the design. So if the project will focus on first-home purchases, is there enough available affordable housing stock in the area?

Again, this is not a complete list of the items you must address, you will read those in the FOA.

The Project Management section asks applicants to demonstrate things like experience with AFI or non-AFI IDAs or other asset building or economic development projects, and capacity to develop and maintain collaborations with appropriate project partners.

The application’s Staffing Plan addresses the total number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) for the project, identify the roles, and describes their qualifications. As with other sections, it’s important to think about if your proposed staffing is adequate for the project you’ve proposed. Also note, the FOA says applicants may provide resumes, organizational charts, position descriptions, and other supporting documentation in the Appendices – but these are no longer required documents.

So that is all under the Approach section of the Project Description, but there are more parts to the Project Description, shown here. First there is a bit of information about the bonus points, which I will discuss that later when we get to evaluation criteria.

The Project Timeline and Milestones asks for clear, detailed information on the project timeline and milestones – and again, it must be consistent with the other sections of the application. One note – a common question we get at the AFI Resource Center is when awards will be announced and thus when projects can start, which obviously impacts the project timeline. According to Section II of the FOA, Awards must be announced by September 30, so a safe start date is the beginning of October.

Next you will need to describe the precise location of the project and boundaries of the area to be served by the proposed project, and state the Legal Status of Applicant Entity, confirming that you are one of the types eligible to apply for AFI. In the Appendices file, applicants will

provide the relevant documentation about their legal status as well as any Additional Eligibility Documentation described in Section III.

Finally, in the Plan For Oversight Of Federal Award Funds, applicants identify the staff/entities responsible for oversight, both for activities within their organization and at their partners, if the project includes partners.

After the Project Description, you will need to address the project budget. In the Budget and Budget Justification, the reviewers will be looking for a specific and thorough budget and justification that provides detailed calculations. Again, they are looking for these to be clear and consistent with each other and with the rest of the application materials, and to describe adequate funding to support the proposed Work Plan and the Project Design. The budget must comply with the AFI program limitations on uses identified in *Section IV.5.* and other federal financial guidelines.

The last area for points in the Budget and Budget Justification section is the Documentation of the Non-Federal Cash Commitment, which are very similar to the documentation requirements from the last FOA, so I am only going to introduce them briefly here.

There are three universal requirements for your documentation, regardless of the source, which are to specify:

- Specific grant application to which the commitment is being made
- Amount of commitment
- When cash will be available

In addition, there additional documentation requirements for commitments from specific sources:

- Third-party organizations
- Applicant organization
- State, local, tribal legislative entity
- Individuals
- Other

The requirements for each are listed clearly in Section IV.2 of the FOA, and we also have a page on the AFI Resource Center with examples and checklists, at the link shown on the screen.

The final part of Section IV.2. provides information on Application Submission Options.

Section IV.3 lists the application due dates and provides some additional explanation of the due dates and application submission.

Section IV.4 reviews the Intergovernmental Review of applications, also known as the Single Point of Contact procedure, which is only applicable to some states. You can tell if it applies to you by clicking the link listed in that section.

IV.5 explains general funding restrictions as well as the AFI program funding restrictions. Specifically, Section IV.5 explains that 85% of project funds must be used to match participant savings, both the federal grant and non-federal cash. The AFI Act specifies how the remaining

15% of the grant funds must be spent, for data collection, non-administrative functions, and administrative costs.

One clarification that is made in this FOA is about the use of the remaining 15% of the non-federal cash contribution, which is to point out that it may be used for any of the 4 areas allowed by the AFI Act and does not have to be used in the same proportions as the 15% of the federal funds.

IV.6 Provides information on where to deliver paper applications if you have the exemption.

Section V explains how applications will be reviewed. The first section talks about the evaluation criteria, which align very closely with how the FOA sets up the sections of the Project Description and Budget in Section IV. We'll go through the detailed points distribution now.

The single largest category in the Evaluation Criteria is the Approach section. It is worth up to 60 points, and consists of 5 subsections. The Project Timeline and Milestones section is worth up to 5 points, the Plan for Oversight of Federal Award Funds up to 10, and the Project Budget and Budget Justification up to 25 points. You will also notice that now, unlike in the past, Documentation of Non-federal Cash Commitment(s) is part of the evaluation criteria. This makes it all the more important to make sure that your documentation meets the requirements laid out in the FOA.

Also, there are three areas where bonus points can be earned under this FOA.

- Partnerships with Federal Place-based Initiatives can be worth up to 5 points. The federal place-based initiatives that this refers to are listed in the Appendix of the FOA, and are Promise Neighborhoods; Choice Neighborhoods; Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation program; Building Neighborhood Capacity program; and Promise Zones initiative.
- Key collaborations can be worth up to 5 points. The list of partners that qualify for these key collaborations is in this section of the FOA, and basically it is organizations serving populations that are served by other ACF programs, such as TANF participants or youth in the foster care system.
- Serving unserved areas can be worth up to 5 points. The list has been expanded to now also include U.S. territories, that is, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Rhode Island and Wyoming are still the only 2 states without AFI projects for which these points can be earned.

Finally, I want to point out that it is important to keep these criteria in mind as you are writing the Project Description, and to specifically cite the evaluation criteria as you address them. The FOA specifically asks for this in Section IV.2. Doing this will make it easier for reviewers to evaluate your proposal and allocate points correctly.

Next, section V.2 talks about the Review and Selection Process for applications. It explains that there are three stages:

- the initial ACF screening looks for the disqualification factors that we talked about earlier
- Then an objective review panel compares the application to the evaluation criteria
- Finally, there is a review by the AFI program, which considers the current and past performance of applicants that have received AFI grants previously, in terms of ability to meet project targets, compliance with reporting requirements, and other factors. This section also includes a preference from the AFI Act and how this preference will impact the award decision-making process.

The next couple of sections: V.3, VI.1, VI.2, and VI.3 contain standard FOA language about general grant requirements. Much of this language is not tailored for AFI specifically, but it is important to be aware of. One key item in sections IV.2 and IV.3 is the reporting requirements and schedules, which you should take into account in your workplan. For the AFI program, it says Performance Progress Reports and Financial Reports are each due semi-annually, which means two times a year.

Section VII lists the points of contact for the AFI program at the Office of Community Services and at the Office of Grants Management. As an applicant, though, the AFI Resource Center is the best place to start if you have questions. Our contact information is listed on this slide and at the end of this presentation.

Section VIII provides a list of websites to look at for more information about federal funding and an application checklist that correlates with the contents of the application package.

Finally, the Appendix lists the sites participating in the various federal place-based initiatives, as referenced in the bonus points section.

So hopefully this gives you a clear picture of what the FOA asks for and how you can respond.

If you are a first time applicant or are looking for a refresher on preparing an application, here are some further resources that may be of service:

In the “Apply for an AFI Grant” section of the AFI Resource Center’s website, there is the AFI Project Builder, which offers considerations about designing a project based on the experience of grantees through the country. It also has a Toolkit that includes templates and worksheets that can be very helpful for applicants, such as a project budget template.

Also in the Apply section, there are other webinars on topics of interest to prospective grantees, in addition to this one, on topics such as Understanding the AFI Program, Developing Resources and Partners, and Preparing and Submitting an AFI Application.

Then, on the Administration for Children and Families’ site, the page on “How to Apply for a Grant” covers crucial topics like registering for grants.gov and understanding the review process.

If you discover that you have any questions as you read through the FOA or begin your application, you can always reach out to the AFI Resource Center for assistance. This slide shows the contact information for the AFI Resource Center.