HELPING TODAY APPLICANT GUIDE

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I. Basic Eligibility

This section details what is required for an organization to be able to apply for a Helping Today grant. Our grant guidelines remain consistent across grant programs. Our eligibility criteria are intended to ensure we are compliant with IRS rules governing community foundation grant making; that we prioritize the needs of our community in Erie County, PA; that we are holding grantees accountable to good stewardship of grant dollars; and that we equitably support the nonprofit community.

- Applicants must be **IRS-designated 501(c)(3) organizations**. In limited cases, **other federally recognized 501(c) nonprofits** may qualify if the project serves a charitable purpose and meets Helping Today guidelines.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** There is a difference between Nonprofit and Tax-exempt status. Nonprofit status refers to incorporation status under state law (Articles of Incorporation from PA); Tax-exempt status comes from the IRS and approved organizations have a Letter of Determination confirming their 501(c)(3) status

- Applicants must be located in or serving residents of **Erie County, Pennsylvania**.
- Applicants must not have received a Helping Today grant within **the last 12 months**. For example, if an organization was awarded Helping Today funds in Q2 of 2024, the organization must wait until at least Q2 of 2025 before applying to Helping Today again.
- Along with waiting at least 12 months, an organization must complete a final report discussion for the previously funded grant. That will include submitting a final budget to demonstrate that all previous grant funds have been spent.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** We can offer the option to conduct the final report discussion and pre-application meeting in the same session to make it more efficient!

It is strongly recommended that an organization has its 501(c)(3) status for at least three years before considering applying for a Helping Today grant. The prospects for success increase greatly with newer organizations encouraged to explore the Acorn grant program to assist with foundational capacity building.

II. General Information

This section covers the very basics of a grant request and provides an overall synopsis of the project.

A. Amount Requested from ECF

In this box, you will include the total amount of the Helping Today grant you are seeking. A few things to keep in mind:

- A grant request should be proportionate to the organization's annual operating budget
- For smaller organizations, the request should not represent an outsized share of their total resources or signal dependency on one funding source

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:**
> - An organization with an annual operating budget of under $100,000 should seek funding up to $15,000, perhaps focused on capacity building
> - An organization with an operating budget between $100,000 and $250,000 should seek up to $25,000 for a moderate, specific project with clear outputs
> - Requests above $35,000 typically are for larger initiatives for organizations with track record of delivery and with infrastructure to manage larger grants

B. Will this project serve your organization's entire service area?

This connects to your organizational profile that asks you to identify the zip codes your organization serves.

NOTE: The organizational profile is part of your application process. Please ensure that all information is current and complete.

C. Type of Funding Request

For simplification purposes, the project categories have been condensed. Please see definitions below:

- **Capital Purchase**
  - Support the acquisition of durable items or equipment essential to the delivery or improvement of services
  - Typically, one-time purchases with a useful life of more than a year
  - Examples include technology upgrades, vehicles, furniture, program-specific equipment, appliances, safety/security systems.

NOTE: Technology hardware, including security cameras AND vehicles require a 1:1 match. Helping Today is only able to fund up to 50% of the total cost of the purchase.

- **Facilities Improvements**

- Fund renovations, repairs or construction projects that improve safety, accessibility or functionality of a nonprofit's physical space
- Projects in this category typically focus on enhancing an organization's infrastructure rather than program operations
- Examples: roof repairs, HVAC replacement, accessibility upgrades, flooring, lighting or remodeling of service area

- **Programming**
  - Support direct services or activities designed to meet a specific community need, expand reach or enhance program quality
  - Funding may cover program-related staffing, materials and supplies directly tied to service delivery

- **Capacity Building**
  - Strengthening the internal systems, skills and structures that allow an organization to operate more effectively, grow sustainability and achieve greater impact
  - Projects focus on improving the organization itself rather than delivering a specific program
  - Examples: strategic planning, staff or board training, database improvement, financial systems improvement, marketing/community outreach planning, consultant services, staffing

D. Executive Summary

💡 **Helpful Hint:** Write this last! Build out the details in the Project Narrative section.

III. Organizational Information

Information in this section signals the organization meets basic operational guidelines regarding budgets, financial practices and transparency. Please pay special attention to new requirements regarding financial documents. Any request that does not include some financial statement will not be considered for funding.

A. Fiscal Sponsorship

There are times when a nonprofit organization may have a project or initiative but does not have its own 501(c)(3) designation. In these cases, the entity must use a fiscal sponsor, or an organization that does have IRS tax-exempt status as a 501(c)(3) and will be responsible for receiving and managing the grant funds. If you are using a fiscal sponsor, they must submit a letter of support, stating that as the fiscal sponsor, the organization agrees to take responsibility for managing the grant funds. The fiscal sponsor must also state if it will be receiving direct financial benefit from the grant. Because eligibility requirements state that an organization can only receive one Helping Today grant within a 12-month period, any financial benefit for the fiscal sponsor would disqualify them from applying for a Helping Today grant of their own. If the fiscal sponsor is simply functioning as a pass-through and providing oversight, they will remain eligible for Helping Today funding of their own.

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:** To ensure compliance, please submit the fiscal sponsor letter of support as soon as possible, even prior to completing the application.

B. Audited Financial Statements

The application asks applicants to provide audited financial statements as part of the grant application. Audited financials offer an independent, professional assessment of an organization's fiscal health and internal controls. They demonstrate that appropriate financial management systems are in place, confirm that funds are being properly accounted for, and help ensure transparency and accountability to both the public and funders. Even for smaller nonprofits, maintaining regular audits reflects strong governance practices and builds confidence among donors, partners, and the community.

We recognize, however, that **not all organizations have the resources to complete a formal audit**. If audited financial statements are not available, applicants may submit **board-approved year-end financial statements**, including a balance sheet and income statement (profit and loss). These documents should provide a clear picture of the organization's revenues, expenses, assets, and liabilities for the most recently completed fiscal year. Board approval of these statements is an important step in ensuring fiscal oversight and demonstrating accountability at the organizational level.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** If your organization does not have the documents listed above, it is unlikely that you will be ready for a Helping Today grant. If your organization is smaller, under $150,000 for your annual budget, consider applying for an Acorn grant to contract with an accounting firm or consultant to help develop good financial practices and policies that accurately help you track expenses, increase transparency, and better understand the financial landscape of your organization.

C. Current Budget

This is your organization's most current annual operating budget. It should include both revenue and expenses.

D. Board of Directors Roster

Ensure this list is up to date. This signals that your board is actively engaged in leadership of your organization.

E. Other Organizational Documents

This can include annual reports, newsletters, service brochures, or anything that highlights the overall mission and impact of your work. It is not required that you upload anything – just an opportunity to brag!

IV. Project Development

This question helps us understand how your project was developed and why it is needed. A strong response should describe:

- The community needs or challenges the project seeks to address
- Evidence that confirms this is a real and current need, such as local or organizational data, service utilization trends, waitlists or community input
- How your organization determined that this specific project is an effective response to the need

We also understand that different types of projects may have slightly different ways to demonstrate thoughtful planning, input and readiness. Use the following as guidance, depending on the primary focus of your request:

A. Capital Purchases

Projects that involve purchasing equipment, vehicles, or technology should describe:

- **How the need for the item was identified** (e.g., staff or client feedback, increased demand, outdated or failing equipment)
- **Why this purchase is essential** to maintaining or improving service delivery
- **How it fits within your organization's budget and long-term plan** for maintenance, use, and sustainability
- **Data or operational evidence** showing how the purchase will enhance efficiency, safety, or capacity (e.g., number of clients served, reduced downtime, increased access). You can focus on this in more detail in the outputs/outcomes section!

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:** A thoughtful response shows that the purchase is planned, necessary, and will have a measurable operational benefit.

B. Facilities Improvements

Projects involving repairs, renovations, or construction should describe:

- **The condition or problem prompting the improvement** and how it is currently affecting service delivery or safety
- **Documentation or professional assessments** (e.g., inspection reports, contractor estimates, safety reviews) that confirm urgency or scope (Reference these documentations or assessments here, but include the actual reports in the supporting documentation section!)
- **How the project aligns with organizational plans or strategic priorities**, such as improving accessibility, safety, or energy efficiency
- **Who was consulted in planning** (e.g., board, staff, users of the space) and how input informed the proposed solution

💡 **Helpful Hint:** A thoughtful response shows that the project is timely, necessary, and well-planned to support continued or improved service delivery.

C. Programming

Projects delivering or expanding direct services should describe:

- **The specific community need or gap** the program addresses, supported by **local data** or **internal program data** (e.g., waitlists, surveys, outcomes)
- **How the target population was engaged** in developing or refining the program (e.g., focus groups, feedback from participants, community partners)
- **Evidence that the program model is effective**, such as research-based approaches, pilot outcomes, or successful prior implementation
- **How the program fits within or strengthens existing community services** (avoiding duplication and promoting collaboration)

D. Organizational Capacity Building

Projects focused on strengthening internal systems, leadership, or planning should describe:

💡 **Helpful Hint:** A thoughtful response shows that the program is grounded in community need, informed by data, and designed for measurable impact.

- **What organizational challenge or limitation** prompted the project (e.g., lack of data systems, need for strategic planning, turnover, growth)
- **What input informed the focus**, such as a recent strategic plan, consultant assessment, funder feedback, or internal review
- **Why this investment will strengthen long-term effectiveness** and position the organization to better serve its community. This is a key component of this question. Some examples of what this could look like include:
    - Sustained fundraising capacity
    - Better tracking of program outcomes
    - Building internal expertise through staff training
    - Communication and outreach improvements
    - Strategic planning
- **Who will be involved in implementation** (staff, board, consultants) and how outcomes will be measured or applied

💡 **Helpful Hint:** A thoughtful response shows that the organization has reflected on its needs, planned strategically, and is ready to implement change for greater impact.

V. Activities, Outputs, Short-term Outcomes and Evaluation

These questions will deliver the meat of your proposal. They tell the story of what you are doing, what you plan to accomplish and how you will track progress and success. Understandably, these terms can be a bit confusing, and we hope to provide clarity on what information you should be providing for your responses to each of these components.

First, we want to provide each applicant with options on how you respond to the questions about activities, outputs, outcomes and evaluation. You can either:

- **Option A:** Complete the sections in the project narrative (Activities Timeline, Outputs & Outcomes, and Evaluation) describing your project's activities, anticipated outputs and outcomes and evaluation methods. There is no character count, so if you feel you need to provide more detail, this route may be best.

- **Option B:** Complete the accompanying "Activities-Outputs-Outcomes-Evaluation spreadsheet" that captures the same information, but much more succinctly in a tabular format. This may be best for capital or facilities improvement projects, but could be used for any project type. ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE ON THIS FORM WILL BE FOUND FURTHER IN THIS DOCUMENT.

NOTE: Both formats will be evaluated equally. Please choose the option that allows you to communicate your intended work most clearly and how impact will be measured. There is no penalty in using both formats. We recommend previewing both before deciding which option would work best for your project.

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:** If you want to use the spreadsheet, but feel you need more space, for example, to talk about the activities in greater detail, feel free to also use that space in the application to expand on your response.

A. Option A: Providing responses directly in the application

1. **Activities Timeline** – Activities are the specific actions your organization will take to accomplish an output and further outcomes. Some applicants provide a list of activities, along with their corresponding timelines, which is generally easier for reviewers to digest and get the full picture of how ECF grant dollars are being utilized.

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:** Make sure that your activities and your proposal budget align. The expenses in that proposal budget should be able to be connected directly to the activities undertaken during the grant period.

2. **Outputs/Outcomes** – one of, if not the most important question in this application- What are you going to accomplish at the end of 12 months and why it matters.

    - **Outputs:** the direct result of activities (e.g., numbers served, items purchased, milestones achieved)
    - **Short-term Outcomes:** This takes outputs a step further. Notice the "short-term" phrasing, though. You will want to identify the changes, improvements, or benefits that result from your outputs AND they must be achievable within the 12-month grant period.

    Obviously, you should be able to list at least one output and corresponding short-term outcome. After that, feel free to list as many or as few (or maybe you just have one) as you want! Below are sample output/outcome pairs to help guide your thinking. Your project outputs should reflect measurable accomplishments within the 12-month grant period, and short-term outcomes should describe the immediate benefit or change resulting from those outputs.

    a. Programming Example
        - Output: 120 middle school students will participate in after-school STEM sessions
        - Short-term Outcome: At least 75% of participants will demonstrate improved confidence and interest in STEM subjects, as measured by pre and post program surveys

    b. Capacity Building Example
        - Output: Implement a new donor management database and train relevant staff
        - Short-term Outcome: Increase donor retention by at least 10%
        - Short-term Outcome: Decrease gift acknowledgment time to 3 days

    c. Capital Purchase Example
        - Output: Acquire 25 new laptops for digital literacy program
        - Short-term Outcome: Increase program capacity from 15 to 30 participants per session

    d. Facility Improvement Example:
        - Output: Replace outdated emergency lighting and exit signage throughout the facility
        - Short-term Outcome: Facility will meet safety code requirements
        - Short-term Outcome: Facility will receive 100% compliance with fire and safety inspections

3. **Evaluation** – Here's where you describe how you plan to track your outputs or outcomes. How will you know you've accomplished your outputs? If it is a milestone, such as purchasing equipment or completing a renovation, you'll know when you have the item in hand or if the contractor completes a final inspection. If it is participant-based, you'll probably have some way to track your attendance. How will you measure the progress toward your outcomes? This can vary depending on your project. This could be pre/post tests, surveys, comparing data from year to year, tracking accomplishments of participants or even additional milestones that are completed after your initial outputs.

   The best way to structure your answer is to identify in your response:

   Output 1: explain evaluation method
   Outcome 1: evaluation method

   Output 2: explain evaluation method
   Outcome 1: evaluation method
   Outcome 2: evaluation method

B. Option B: Using Spreadsheet

If you elect to use this method to explain your activities, outputs, short-term outcomes and evaluation methods, your responses will be much more concise, but still able to articulate these important components. On the spreadsheet, there is a sheet that provides examples of how to structure your responses based on different project types. Remember, it is important to keep your outputs and outcomes quantified and tangible. Numbers are the best way to do this, but milestones are also relevant, especially with certain projects.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** If you want to use the spreadsheet, but feel you need more space, for example, to talk about the activities in greater detail, feel free to also use that space in the application to expand on your response. However, if you can provide very succinct activities summary in the spreadsheet, that would be helpful.

VI. Target Population

Remember, you have provided important information about your organization's service area in the organizational profile section on GOapply (if you haven't done so, you should do that now!).

This narrative section allows you to describe the population you serve in more detail. Connect your request with the challenges, needs, or disparities that impact your target population.

> 💡 **Helpful Hint:** Be as specific as possible about who benefits from your project and why this work is important to the community. Use demographics, geographic focus, or other relevant data to illustrate need.

VII. Organizational Capacity

This question provides additional context around your request, can highlight your organization's assets, and demonstrate that your organization is ready to take on the project you're proposing and that the project has a high potential for success. These are the ingredients. Let's break this down a bit further:

Consider including:

- Explain **who will lead** this project and why they are qualified. This may include years of experience, relevant training or credentials, previous accomplishments, or lived experience connected to the community served.
- **Collaboration** is a huge asset to a project. This is not always as relevant for capital projects or facilities improvements but is particularly important for programming-related requests. Show commitments from project partners through letters of support, and clearly describe what each partner is bringing to the project and what they are gaining from the collaboration.
- Share how your organization ensures **programs are accessible, inclusive, and responsive** to the community you serve. This may include language access, representation in leadership, staff training, or practices that build trust with participants.
- If applicable, describe past experience managing similar projects, programs, or initiatives. This helps reviewers assess your organization's predictability, readiness, and ability to execute the proposed work.
- Your organization's **financial stability** is important, whether you are a small nonprofit or a million-dollar agency. Describe where your revenue comes from, outline basic financial practices or board involvement in financial oversight, and explain whether you maintain reserve funds. Overall, show that your organization can responsibly manage grant funding.
- If **volunteers** are involved in this project, describe how they are recruited, trained, retained, and supervised. This may not be relevant to all projects; if not applicable, this section may be skipped.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** Highlight your strengths and show reviewers that your organization is capable, experienced, and prepared to achieve the project's goals.

VIII. Project Continuance

This section captures both the enduring impact of the grant and how the organization plans to sustain any ongoing operational costs associated with the project.

- In some cases, projects may require a financial investment beyond the 12-month grant period. Capital purchases may require annual maintenance; programming may involve ongoing costs related to staffing, supplies, transportation, or other resources; and capacity-building projects may require additional subscriptions or implementation expenses. Whatever those costs are, clearly demonstrate that you understand them and explain how you plan to absorb them moving forward.
- It is also helpful for the Foundation to understand how this grant could continue to be impactful for your organization after the grant period. Some responses may be simple. For example, a new roof ensures that programming and services can continue without disruption in the future.

💡 **Helpful Hint:** Show reviewers that your project is not just a one-time event and that you have thoughtfully considered sustainability and long-term impact.

IX. Proposal Budget

This section reviews the proposal budget template and provides guidance for completing it accurately and fully. Your budget should directly align with your project's activities and outputs.

A. Revenue Section:

- Include all financial resources that are supporting this project. Include line-item descriptions, not just numbers with categories
- Include volunteer support as in-kind. There are resources available to help calculate the monetary value of volunteer hours
- Requested funding from Erie Community Foundation should be listed as pending
- Feel free to edit category names if it makes more sense

B. Project Expenses:

- Use the "ECF Portion" column to identify what cost centers these funds would be allocated toward. This will help reviewers understand your project's outputs and answer the question, "What were the results of ECF's direct investment?"
- Line-item descriptions are especially important for providing context about how costs are calculated. For example, if Helping Today funds will cover $2,500 toward an intern, explain how that amount was determined (e.g., hours worked, stipend). You may use the Proposal Budget Narrative to provide additional details rather than the spreadsheet cells and reference it accordingly. If you have a detailed list of expenditures, feel free to upload it as supporting documentation.

C. Make sure your budget is correct and complete:

- ECF Portion = Your Requested Amount
- ECF Portion + Remaining Expenses = Total Project Cost
- Review the Supporting Documentation Section to make sure you've provided adequate evidence for your request

💡 **Helpful Hint: Administrative Overhead and Staffing**

Administrative Overhead: General operating expenses required to run the organization as a whole and support all programming, including:

- Executive leadership time
- Rent, utilities
- General office expenses
- Financial or HR expenses
- Insurance, Audit and legal services
- Shared IT systems

💡 **Helpful Hint: Administrative Overhead and Staffing**

Staffing: Staff time directly attributable to the project, including:

- Program staff delivering services
- Project-specific coordination or management
- Staff time tied to defined activities or outputs
- Capacity-building work with clear deliverables

Frequent Budget Question: Can a Helping Today request represent the entire funding for a project?

If any costs related to technology hardware or vehicle purchases are included, a committed 1:1 match is required. Otherwise, additional funding is not required. However, requests are strengthened when there is buy-in from other funders, partners, or the applicant organization itself. If other financial resources are not secured, please describe the steps taken to identify potential revenue sources and explain why Helping Today's sole or primary investment is appropriate at this time.

X. Supporting Documentation

These items provide solid evidence that strengthens your application and demonstrates that you have performed due diligence in understanding your costs and taken time to thoughtfully plan your project. Examples of critical supporting documents include:

- **Vehicle Purchase:** Provide at least three examples of the type of vehicle you are looking to purchase with price quotes. These do not need to be the exact vehicles ultimately purchased but should demonstrate a reasonable understanding of cost. Vehicle purchases require at least 50% in matching funds.

- **Capital Purchases:** As a best practice, any singular item over $250 should include a price quote. If your request includes office supplies, program supplies, or smaller equipment, quotes are not required, but you should be able to provide reasonable cost estimates.

- **Facilities Improvements:** Include contractor estimates or bid proposals at a minimum. Inspection reports are strongly encouraged, especially if you have conducted a recent building assessment. Photos of damage or accessibility barriers may also be included. For new construction projects, architectural drawings or floor plans are recommended.

- **Programming:** Programming projects can include a variety of elements requiring supporting documentation, which may differ depending on whether you are launching a new program, piloting a concept, or expanding or enhancing existing services. Examples include:
    - Curriculum and program description (NEW PROGRAMMING)
    - Research or evidence base supporting program design (NEW PROGRAMMING)
    - Letters of support or commitment from partners (NEW PROGRAMMING OR PROGRAM EXPANSION)
    - Needs assessment summaries (NEW PROGRAMMING OR EXPANSION)
    - Position descriptions for new staff (NEW PROGRAMMING, EXPANSION, OR ENHANCEMENT)
    - Program logic model, if available
    - Evaluation tools, surveys, or pre/post tests

- **Organizational Capacity Building:** These projects typically require consultant or professional services. Supporting documentation may include:
    - Planning (strategic plans, marketing plans or fundraising plans all will require a consultant proposal/scope of work, outlining deliverables)
    - Website design or upgrade proposals with vendor quotes
    - Technical support (grant writing assistance, financial services, human resources)

💡 **Helpful Hint:** Include supporting documentation that clearly demonstrates planning, cost understanding, and the feasibility of your project.