**Steps for Success with RUS-DLT 2021**

The RUS-DLT Program has evolved yet again! Understanding these nuanced changes can mean the difference between a project that scores well enough to fund, and one that misses the mark. The suggested steps below will help applicants focus their attention in the areas that really matter! As always, when in doubt, contact your RUS GFR (and get their response in writing when possible) so you can refer to it.

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First, let’s address the order in which you approach your grant application. Human Nature is to start with A and go through Z. We recommend that you do NOT approach your grant by section order! Instead, start with the most time-consuming things first.

**Priority One: Registration and Paperwork!** The vast majority of DLT projects that are rejected have to do with registration and paperwork problems.

* **SAM Registration - #1 Most important task** 
  + Do you have a SAM registration? If not, apply NOW. This is a lengthy process that takes several weeks to complete. Without an Active SAM Registration, your grant cannot be scored. [www.sam.gov](http://www.sam.gov) If you need help with the registration process, please contact LDA for assistance.
  + Is it Active? If not, get this updated immediately!
  + Will it expire before September of 2021? If so, extend your registration NOW.
  + Does the EBiz Point of Contact shown in your SAM registration still work for your organization? Is their contact information correct?
  + Are your Financial Certs signed/checked?
  + Screen shot your SAM registration showing your legal name, address, Cage Code, DUNS number and expiration date and include in Section K.
  + Screen shot the Financial Cert page showing that your Financial Certs have been signed off on and include in Section K.
* **Grants.gov – Necessary to submit your application!** 
  + Log into the Ebiz section of Grants.gov
  + Check to make sure your EBiz Point of Contact identified in SAM is authorized in Grants.gov/Ebiz. If you have NOT taken this step, you will see a grayed out SUBMIT button and will be unable to submit your application.

The LDA Team has an expert on all things SAM and Grants.gov who can walk you through this process if you need assistance.

* **Paperwork – Proof of Legal Existence**
  + If you are applying as Corporation or LLC, you must provide evidence of good standing. Simply go to your Secretary of State Website, search for your organization, and take a screen shot of your status to include in Section K.
  + If you are a state or local organization that exists under law, you must provide a state statute, regulation or charter that shows when your organization was formally organized and that it is a state or local entity under law. Ex: A local school district should contact their State Department of Education to get a copy of the statute or charter. An easier way of accomplishing this task is to ask an Attorney to create a Legal Opinion of Counsel that addresses the fact that your organization legally exists, and that you are eligible to apply for this grant and contract with the Federal Government if funded. LDA has a Legal Opinion Template that can be used for this purpose.
* **SF-424 – Application for Federal Assistance –** We recommend that you go ahead and create a Workspace in Grants.gov. Get the basic information populated and then add details (attachments, budget details, site worksheets, etc.) once your application elements are complete.
  + Make sure the Applicant’s Legal Name is **EXACTLY** the same as it is on your SAM and DUNS registrations.
  + Before you fill in your budget details on the SF-424, make sure your Budget Worksheet and Matching Funds Worksheets are completed and **FINAL (no more changes).** Enter the amounts from the Budget Worksheet onto the Matching Funds Worksheet and SF424 in Workspace. These amounts must be consistent, or your project will be rejected.

**Priority Two – Lock in your participating sites and solicit input on your project design.**

* **Project Sites (who you include in your application) define a large portion of your score.** HUB sites (those providing content, services or delivering benefits to rural end users) are there only to add value… share their knowledge and expertise and provide a resource not otherwise available in the target rural areas. Hub-End User or End Users will receive content, service or benefits from the project HUB sites, and are scored based on their rurality and economic need.
* **Know Your Objective Score Before Proceeding –** we recommend filling out an Objective Scoring Calculator (LDA has created their own version that we are happy to share with you) to determine if your project will be competitive. General rule of thumb as it pertains to Scoring Thresholds:
  + **Shoot for a Rurality Score Average in the 35-40 range**. The higher the score, the greater your chance of funding. In Round 2 of 2020, the average rurality score was 32.31…. and approx. 84% of those projects DID NOT FUND. ***More is more when it comes to Rurality!***
  + **Determine your Economic Need (Poverty Score).** As with Rurality, every Economic Need point counts! We strongly suggest getting your poverty score to >10, and as close to 20 as possible. The Average Economic Need score in Round 2 2020 was 14.12. The Scoring in this category has changed slightly in 2021; however, the concept is the same…. The higher your score, the better chance you have of being funded. Consider adding partners with higher SAIPE scores to improve your project average.
  + ***Give Special Consideration some Consideration!*** Special Consideration Points (10 points total) are available for projects that provide Opioid/SUD Treatment, Counseling, Training (for professionals), and Education programs. This needs to be the primary focus (>50%) of your project in order to receive the points. There are also 20 points available if you include a federally recognized tribal site in your project (with the requirement to have a tribal resolution regarding participation). If you can work with a tribal organization who is interested in joining your project, or to focus at least half of your project on Opioid/SUD, then it is well worth your effort to do so. **Every Point Counts!**
* **Solicit Input from all Stakeholders as you develop your project!** If you have a board of directors, get on their agenda for the next meeting. Solicit their approval and ideas for project focus/elements. Make this a part of public record (minutes) that you include in your Needs section.
  + **Hold a Community Forum** where community members can provide input and comments about your proposed projects. Post this notice in a newspaper or website and capture that information for inclusion in your Needs section. Capture attendance (who participated) as well as minutes or notes from the meeting and include those as well.
  + **Do you use Social Media?** If so, post information about your project on Facebook and ask for comments/suggestions. Tweet about your project and solicit feedback! Whatever platform you are using, capture your “output” and the responses back and include in your Needs section.
  + **Create a Survey!** [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) provides a free and easy platform on which you can construct a simple 5 question survey, with responses via the web. Send the URL to anyone/everyone and ask for their comments and ideas on the project you have in mind. They can comment on the needs you have identified, about whether they support your project, or provide ideas for ancillary project benefits. Once responses have been received, simply capture the questions and the aggregated responses, and include in your Needs section to demonstrate community involvement in your project.
  + Last, the best way to document support for your project is through a **360 of support.** This can be from students, teachers, administrators, patients, community members, parents, business owners, community anchor institutions or government…. And then do not forget more broadly to ask your Governor’s Office, your Elected Representatives at all Levels, your Workforce Investment System, Economic Development Office, etc. to provide letters of support for your project. Documentation of donations of money or time go a very long way! Get started on this NOW… do not wait until the very end. This is 1/3 of your Needs score… spend the time here to max out this section… because every point counts!

**Priority Three – Build Your Grant Budget & Determine the Required Match (or vice versa)**

The DLT Grant requires a 15% match… that is 15% of the federal request (which equals about 13% of the overall project costs). Applicants arrive at their match in two different ways:

* Start with your budget – hold meetings with project participants, your technical and programmatic teams, and **vendors or suppliers** who can provide you with
  + Recommendations on the types of products that will meet your specific needs.
  + Pricing and Quotations from which you will build your budget.
  + Be sure to include suppliers of all the various types of budget line items… you will need a quote for every line item (ex: Zoom licenses, laptops and headsets, video systems, displays and microphones, content packages, etc.) A single vendor may not be able to quote all the items in question.
  + Note to your vendors **(very important)** – **Do NOT combine services or technologies into one line item!** Example: It is very common for vendor quotes to list “installation and training.” Training should be its own line item, if you intend to pay for training (otherwise, just remove the reference to training). Training is subject to the 10% rule in RUS. Combined line items will potentially get your project rejected!

Once you know all the project costs and your budget total, you can easily determine the amount of match required.

* Some applicants have a finite amount of match available. This will obviously limit the amount of funding they can request. Let your suppliers know that you have a budget limitation and ask them to keep their costs within those boundaries.
* Remember that you do not get points for being price-sensitive; in fact, RUS wants you to request the equipment you NEED for your project to be successful.
* Once your budget is final, calculate the required match. Round out to 4 decimals points (make sure you have at LEAST 15.00% match). Then create a Matching Funds Commitment Letter for each organization contributing matching funds. This letter must be:
  + On the letterhead of the organization providing the matching funds
  + Signed by a person with obvious Fiscal Signature Authority and include their Signature Block.
  + During Covid, Electronic Signatures were allowed, and we assume will be allowed in this round. ***Do not use snapshots of DocuSign initials.***
  + Specific, listing the amount of CASH MATCH committed; be sure that there is no statement about the match being provisional.
  + If you are using In Kind Match (not recommended), be specific as to the exact budget line items that are used as in-kind match. Provide a quotation to document the value of that proposed match. State that these items are dedicated specifically to the project and will be used >50% of the time in support of the project and only for approved purposes. Remember that these items must be purchased AFTER the grant due date (June 4, 2021) and from non-federal sources.

**Priority Four: Identifying Primary Project Needs, How Your Project Addresses the Needs, and Anticipated General Benefits and Specific Outcomes**

* **Needs should focus on Geographic, Demographic, Educational or Healthcare Challenges.** 
  + Create a table that aligns your Needs, Project elements that address the needs, and then General Benefits and Specific Outcomes.
  + You can then follow that table in narrative form…. Make sure you stay on track and in alignment with the table!
  + Your Needs section is broken up into 3 elements:
    - **Needs** – state and quantify your needs. Provide data sources. Make comparisons between your end user sites and other similar organizations or communities in the state or nation. Follow this with a discussion of your project design…. How what you are requesting in your budget addresses those needs.
    - **Benefits** – You have just discussed how your project is going to address those specific Needs you have highlighted. Now talk about what will happen as a result…. Broad, general benefits. Better this, more of that, less bad things, more good things…. But general in nature. Follow that with Specific outcomes: X students served, X teachers trained, X new courses delivered, X increase in test scores, X patients receiving specialty care resulting in X% decrease of a chronic condition, etc. No one measure these Outcomes…. So, give it your best guess. Do not exaggerate but do consider what, if in a perfect world, your project was very successful, what might be possible. You need to be very specific in these outcome projections. End this Benefits discussion with quotes from experts…. Have them provide a letter or quote about your proposed project and include that in this section. You can include more than one!
    - **Community Support and Involvement in the Project** -- You should already have done this work! This is where you include those surveys, snapshots of social media responses. Clipping of newspaper articles announcing a community meeting, Board Minutes discussing your project, and then the support and donation letters. **More is MORE!** This is 1/3 of your Subjective Score…. Pay attention to this element even if it does not seem as important as the Needs and Benefits discussion.
  + **Request a letter from State Office of Rural Development** – as soon as you have identified your primary Needs, draft a letter to your state office of rural development. Title this document “Executive Summary for State Rural Development”. This is NOT your official project Executive Summary. This letter should include:
    - A statement about how you are (applicant) and the fact that you are applying for yourself and project partners for a RUS-DLT Grant focused on Distance Learning or Telemedicine, bringing these resources to the rural communities in your project.
    - Provide a snapshot of your Site or Rurality Worksheet showing all project partners and their location and associated population.
    - Provide a bullet pointed list of the Needs you will be addressing (Ex: We will be addressing lack of access to college and career readiness courses; the need for high quality professional development for teachers; and the need to increase academic achievement in the target communities… all using distance learning technologies.
    - Request a letter of consultation from their office, and then track that letter! Keep a copy of what you sent them (and when). This will likely require follow-up.

**Priority Five – Finish the rest of your project.** Focus on the remaining sections in the following order:

* **Complete your Project Worksheets** if you have not already done so and then separate into individual pdfs. This includes your Site Worksheet, Rurality Worksheet, Economic Need Worksheet, Special Consideration Worksheet, Matching Funds Worksheet and Budget Worksheets.
  + Note that your Special Consideration Worksheet must be filled out with Special Consideration addressed in your Needs and Executive Summary sections.
  + Your Matching Funds Worksheet should be filled out with match, federal request and project totals matching your budget worksheet. It should be followed by the signed match letters, on letterhead, for each source of match.
* **Complete Certs & Assurances, Check and Sign the Checklist, Environmental and Historic Preservation**. *Make sure you Answer the Environmental Survey and include that in your application!*
* Complete the Telecommunications Plan – you will need a geographic map showing every site in the project, as well as a line-item description of each budget line item, and the way they relate to your project. Make sure that things like computers or phone systems, address the fact that they will be used at least 50% of the time for DL or Telehealth. **This is a critical component of your application.**
* Create a Scope of Work Narrative. I recommend cutting/pasting a summary from your Needs section and then inserting a chart that identifies all project activities, who is responsible for carrying those out, and a projected timeline for the activities to occur. This is most easily done in table form. This Scope of Work precedes your budget worksheet.
* Financial Information & Sustainability and Statement of Experience – these are check the block exercises. Do not write more than 2 pages for either section. These are unscored and largely unread. Briefly answer their questions and move on

**Finally….**

* **Create your Executive Summary**—follow the questions posed in the grant guidelines. You can copy and past the answers from the various sections of your grant. There is no need to write this from scratch… you have already told your story. This is a summary. Make this complete, but remember it is a snapshot of what is to come. Make sure your budget information in the Executive Summary matches your Budget Worksheet!
* **Add in the letter you received from Rural Development –** it is almost always the last bit of paperwork you will get back.
* **Assemble your Application by Section and Review –** Ask for a 2nd or 3rd set of eyes! It is the rare completed application that does not include a mistake or two. Review for consistency (everything matches from section to section) as well as for completeness (you have all required elements). Once you have gone through a review, attach your narrative sections in the 424 Workspace under the Project Description. Separate the sections into PDFs A – N. Number your sections so that it is easier for the reviewer. Include an Excel budget attachment along with the pdf’d version that follows the Scope of Work. You should now be ready to submit!