

## **CONNECT News**

**C**ommunity Support, **N**etworking, and Assistance  
for **E**nvironmental **C**areer **T**raining

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The Hazardous Materials Training and Research Institute (HMTRI) with a cooperative agreement from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assists communities establish environmental job training programs. To better exchange ideas, HMTRI distributes CONNECT, a bimonthly e-publication, featuring topics of interest among those interested in participating in the EPA Brownfields Environmental Job Training (BJT) grant program. Ideas presented do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. This month's issue discusses the BJT application process and strategies used by successful grant recipients.

### ***A beginner's guide to EPA job training grants***

This issue of CONNECT summarizes the process organizations may anticipate as they follow a path toward applying for an EPA Brownfields Job Training (BJT) grant. The following topics are addressed.

- Funding assistance available from EPA for Brownfields Job Training.
- A timeline for application and receipt of federal assistance.
- Considerations when applying for EPA Brownfields Job Training grants.
- Recruiting and managing a BJT development team.
- Components of the BJT application
- Ideas when responding to evaluation criteria presented in the RFA.
- Activities essential for inclusion in BJT grant applications.
- Common errors and omissions in grant applications.
- Tips that make BJT applications stand out.

***Funding assistance available from EPA for Brownfields Job Training***

Since the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), also known as Superfund, Congress has acknowledged the necessity for training to facilitate the assessment and remediation of sites polluted with hazardous materials. By 2002 the Small Business Liability Relief and Brownfields Revitalization Act (The Brownfields Law) specifically expanded CERCLA authorizing grants for training to facilitate identification and cleanup of brownfield sites. In 1998, Predating the Brownfields Law, EPA awarded 11 job training pilot programs. Those original pilot programs evolved into a formalized grant program which continues today. The original training program was called the Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training (EWDJT) program. Grants typically provided \$200 K with two years of training and a year of "wrap up" and placement activities.

In November 2021 Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, commonly referred to as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) authorizing \$1 trillion to rebuild the nation's

deteriorating roads, bridges, and fund new climate resilience and broadband initiatives. As part of that authorization, \$30 million is earmarked for brownfields job training. The newly renamed EPA Brownfields Training Program (BJT) has allocated approximately \$12 million for 25 grants to be awarded in FY2023. The duration of each grant is expanded from 3 to 5 years (4 years of training with 1 year of “wrap up” and placement activities) with funding amounts up to \$500K per award. Goals, objectives, and guidelines for the new BJT program remain essentially the same as its predecessor EWDJT. The first Request for Applications (RFA) was posted on June 1<sup>st</sup>. with a due date of August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. It is anticipated that the next Request for Applications will occur on a similar schedule in June of 2023.

**A timeline for application and receipt of federal assistance.**

While specific milestones are not posted, EPA is relatively consistent regarding the grant cycle for BJT grants. As an example, here is the schedule for the FY2023 grant cycle.

- Requests for Applications (RFAs) - issued June 1, 2022.
- Applications due – August 2, 2022.
- Notification of grants not qualified to proceed for further evaluation – August 22, 2022.
- Notification of applications recommended for funding – 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2023.
- Workplan and grant finalization – 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2023.
- Award finalization and authorization to spend funds – Before September 30, 2023.
- Recruitment, training, and placement – till 2027.
- Final placement, tracking, program continuation plans, and grant wrap up – through 2028.

Prior grant recipients acknowledge it takes many more than 60 days to develop, update and plan a successful BJT grant application. Organizations new to brownfields environmental job training need to plan on expanding their program development period to at least 6 months with the last 60 days “fine tuning” and responding to grant application guidelines.

**Considerations when applying for EPA Brownfields Job Training grants**

The decision for apply for EPA Job training assistance can be daunting. Unlike many grants, the EPA application requires considerable effort program planning, data collection, partnership development, and community interaction before the grant can be written. While funding announcements provide only 60 days to write and submit the application, background effort required to respond to evaluation criteria can take months to assimilate. Communities interested in establishing an environmental job training program need to begin planning their program in January with an anticipated Request for Applications (RFA) issued in June and due in August. After submission, communities can expect another 12+ months before their first training cohort begins.

Despite long lead times and a detailed application process, communities find the benefits associated with establishing an EPA BJT program reach far beyond their first grant.

- BJT programs facilitate the cleanup of local brownfield sites.
- Community job training facilitates economic development and environmental justice in underserved neighborhoods.
- Brownfield Job Training creates a pool of vetted, qualified technicians providing a workforce for local contractors.
- Once established BJT programs can unite communities, providing services

to local residents otherwise unavailable.

- BJT programs attract additional investment opportunities for underserved communities.
- Successful programs attract partnerships and leveraging opportunities that were previously nonexistent.
- BJT funding can act as a “starter grant” leading to additional federal, state, and local funding opportunities.
- Program graduates become mentors and role models to local residents.
- Local BJT programs demonstrate a commitment to environmental justice and community development.

### **Recruiting and managing a BJT development team**

In many BJT programs, program staff wear multiple hats. Most programs use a combination of partners working part time from government agencies, local nonprofits, volunteers, contractors, stakeholders, and former graduates to fill programmatic gaps. Most job training programs begin with an ad hoc group in the early stages of program planning. This activity involves recruiting a team of individuals who contribute to the development effort and usually go on to participate in and support the program as it matures. Team members should include individuals with the following skill sets, interests, and responsibilities.

- Project coordination and reporting- The project manager - orchestrates the entire project - sets milestones and deliverables.
- Community outreach—Community assessment - Interested in community development - comfortable working with target communities, residents, and community organizations - enjoys fieldwork.

- Governmental outreach – Not shy when interacting with the Mayor’s Office and City Council - familiar with local legislation, grants, and state supported programs.
- Employer and advisor outreach- Labor market assessment – knowledgeable about the business environment - has employer contacts - outgoing personality regarding graduate placement & job development – enjoys fieldwork.
- Student recruitment and assessment- A people person - identifies with program participants - will be instrumental in student support services and retention – will work closely with community outreach and employer outreach.
- Technical training – The “techie” of the team - familiar with environmental and OSHA training - has training experience and contacts.
- Leveraging, program development and sustainability – A team effort of individuals previously discussed.
- Grant writing and administration – May involve several individuals including grant writing, editing, budgeting, accounting, and grants administration including grant.gov experience.

### **Components of the BJT application**

Structurally BJT applications for federal assistance follow strict guidelines, laid out in detail, and must be followed with exacting detail. A copy of the FY2023 Request for Applications (sometimes referred to as Guidelines) can be found at the following link. <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2022-06/FY23%20BF%20JT%20RFA.pdf>

Additional information, application procedures and frequently asked questions can also be found at the following link.

<https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/fy-2023-brownfields-job-training-jt-grants>

BJT grant applications while submitted as a single PDF document consist of 4 parts.

**Federal forms** - required as part of all applications

**3-page Narrative Information Sheets** -

Threshold Criteria are used as a screen identifying proposals eligible for funding per EPA Job Training Program guidelines. Applications are reviewed on a pass/fail basis. All thresholds must be satisfied to pass the screen. Proposals that do not pass the initial threshold screen are notified within 15 days of application submission.

**The 12-page Narrative-** Ranking evaluation criteria establish a methodology for ranking applications with the highest evaluation scores. Combined with additional considerations and special factors, applications are recommended for funding. A recommendation for funding does not mean a final award or authorization to spend funds is approved. Authorization to spend funds will be made before September 30<sup>th</sup>, after Terms and Conditions and Work plans are finalized.

**The 15-page attachment** – A space to provide supplemental information not included in the narrative including letters of support and special considerations.

#### **Ideas when responding to evaluation criteria presented in the RFA**

Every organization has their own approach to writing grant proposals. Larger organizations have an opportunity to establish Application Response Teams, while smaller organizations may only have one or two part time volunteers to complete the same job. Labor market, community assessments and partnership development must start early and continue during the entire grant process. Whether your team is large or small, the following ideas on strategy are presented for consideration

- There needs to be a proposal manager with absolute responsibility and authority for the effort. The proposal manager establishes milestones and due dates leading to completion of the application.
- Dissect the RFA and break out each section and deliverable. (*i.e., identify every request for information.*)
- Identify an expert or “champion” for each section. Develop and construct the proposal as a team effort with the proposal manager guiding the project to submission. Assign every request for information to the individual best suited to respond to each question. Ensure your team has personnel or volunteers covering all the critical components of BJT operation including community outreach, recruitment, training, retention, case management, partnership development, and employer relationships.
- Establish a firm milestone for each and every element/deliverable. Discuss research and preparation requirements (time commitments) in group sessions. Identify “long tent pole” items and potential problem areas. Backload your timeline for information gathering, draft writing, edit and rewrites, and final review for each element of each section.
- Conduct frequent progress updates. Discuss the progress and direction of the proposal as a team, meeting regularly reporting progress in responding to information requests. Surface roadblocks and problems early.
- Be willing to adjust your resource level of effort, but not your timeline. Be ruthless and opportunistic regarding the scoring criteria. Answer each question to stand by itself. Do not assume the reader will read the entire proposal.

- Quality check that each section is legible, succinct, and complete. (At each handoff stage)

### **Activities essential for inclusion in BJT grant applications.**

Here are some reminders and suggestions for improving environmental BJT applications from past PLC calls and grant recipient presentations

#### **Engaging the community and government**

- Brief the Mayor's office, elected representatives, and City Council.
- Engage public municipal and service agencies.
- Locate and contact active brownfields project officers.
- Participate in public meetings.
- Recruit advisory committee members from each of these sectors.

#### **Program development**

- Be careful with curriculum choices identifying those which are supported and unsupported by the BJT grant.
- Bring contractors and consultants onboard early.
- Include advisors and employers in program and curriculum development.

#### **Responding to evaluation criteria**

- Deconstruct the RFA to ensure that every request for information is addressed in the proposal.
- Document meetings and public events.
- Research special programs in addition to those that can contribute to Other Factors.

#### **Partnership and employer recruitment**

- Lock down and formalize key partnerships. Commit partners to in-kind, service, facility, or financial support to be provided.
- Request letters of support referencing the specific commitment being offered.
- As part of the application encourage partners, employers, and advisors to participate in BJT events.

- Engage advisory committee and key partners in the proposal review process.
- Begin community and labor market assessments early with as large a net as possible.
- Visit and "get to know" the neighborhoods under consideration.
- Use search engines, internet resources and surveys for initial background information.
- Do not restrict searches to environmental related industries.
- Involve governmental and municipal agencies in community and labor market assessments.
- "Drill down" to communications with community leaders and employers exhibiting interest a local BJT program.
- Engage supporters and employers to become part of BJT.
- Always ask government officials, supporters, and potential employers for help in identifying additional program supporters
- Assign responsible and outgoing staff members to conduct community and labor market assessments.
- Document meetings and supporters for possible inclusion in the grant application.

### **Common errors and omission in BJT applications**

Below is a compilation of evaluator comments, comments from Regional Coordinators and former grant recipients. Comments are not all inclusive and may not apply to every application.

### Community description

- Community involvement and notification, regarding proposed BJT project, is not discussed in detail.
- No discussion of public meetings, attendance records, and community roles in the development and composition of the BJT proposal. No discussion of social and public health issues.
- No discussion of Specific population to be trained.
- EJ issues are not discussed.
- Demographic data is provided but it is sporadic and not cohesive to understanding the relationships.
- Did not discuss specific environmental concerns as a result of the presence of Brownfields in the Community.
- Environmental, social, and economic issues not linked to impact of the presence of Brownfields in targeted area.
- Demographic stats are provided but no contrasting data (from state, county, city, or national stats) to show need.
- Demographic stats are provided but ineffective and is not drastically indicative of need.
- Sensitive population is not discussed.
- No discussion regarding outreach/recruitment to target specific populations, i.e., unemployed, underemployed, ex-offenders, etc. with justified need for training (unemployment stats).

### Labor market demand

- Applicant failed to link labor market assessment to curriculum.
- Missing direct coordination with local employers.
- No employer survey is evidenced.
- Section does not refer to any direct surveys or polling of local employers. Job data by employment type sector concentration from table earlier years may not be current and relevant to year of application.

### Recruitment and screening

- Physicals or vision screening associated with CDLs, or equipment operations are not discussed in detail, only mentioned.
- Screening requirements not discussed. Need to test for minimum grade and skill level. (Generally, 8<sup>th</sup> grade language and math skills are required for most programs, partner with the WIBs.
- No mention of drug testing in screening process or required minimum educational background prerequisites.
- No explanation regarding associated training costs or if student will be burdened with any fees.



## Training

- Applicant's experience with delivery of training is vague and unclear. More detail is required on experience in training delivery.
- Applicant failed to discuss in detail delivery of life-skills and other non-environmental training (what partner will provide, where training will take place, how training will be funded (EPA funds cannot be used)).
- Student health and safety issues were not addressed specifically in proposal.
- Training cycles are unclear.
- Need more specifics on facility's health and safety procedures.
- Training and recruitment numbers are low in comparison with projected placement rate. (Focus should not be on training but rather on job placement).
- Certifications are discussed but no breakdown as to what certs are programmatic, state, or federal. Need breakdown.
- Overall training number is too low, and no placement targets are provided.

## Partnerships

- Applicants list some community organizations but grassroots/neighborhood organizations, labor organizations, fraternal organizations, public health, and medical community are not represented. (Must have community partners).
- Letters of support do not state roles and/or commitments only support.
- When included in proposal, ensure that key partners receive a copy of the proposal and letters of support, with project support, support role and level of commitment.

## Leveraging

- No discussion of in-kind commitments with assigned monetary value.
- Very little leveraging with no discussion of plans how Applicant will generate additional funding.
- No value given to in-kind commitments and no letters of support to substantiate claim for in-kind commitments.
- Leveraging not addressed.

## Outputs and outcomes

- No milestone or timeline provided.
- Outputs and outcomes not clear and do not easily link back to proposed work plan.
- No discussion regarding retention and attrition.
- Applicant failed to discuss how it will handle retention and attrition though case management.
- No discussion regarding Training facilities, especially access to facilities and transportation options.
- Proposal does not seem to have a targeted placement goal.
- Applicant did not address tracking program graduates.
- Program Sustainability after grant ends not discussed.

## Placement

- Employers' commitment to hire is not discussed and no letters of support from employers (although employers were listed).
- No discussion regarding projected placement target.
- Hiring incentives not discussed.

## **Tips that make BJT applications stand out**

Below are ideas and tips for new and returning grant applicants that can make a BJT application stand out among others.

- Document public meetings in the narrative.
- Establish an advisory Board prior to application submission. Board members should include representatives from the community, government, training organizations, employers leveraging partners and supporters.
- Compete and select prospective trainers (with conditions) as part of application development.
- Recruit and commit key partners regarding specific contributions to the program.
- Obtain employer letters of support and commitment to consider program graduates.
- Obtain letters of support and commitment from partners and governmental organizations leveraging the BJT program.
- Obtain letters of from community organizations encouraging and promoting local BJT.
- Ensure that curriculum offerings are supported by the labor market assessment and fundable as presented in BJT guidelines.
- Circulate program plans and progress reports to key partners noted above during development of the application.
- “What is not written in the application does not exist in the eyes of evaluators”.
- Previous performance is not a “slam dunk” or guarantee of continued funding. EPA is aware existing and BJT alumni have an advantage over new applicants.
- Legacy programs need to demonstrate why their program deserves to be refunded or expanded.
- Because the BJT program was established as “startup funding” Proposal reviewers do not want to fund recycled applications. For this reason, relationships must be updated with new

offerings, commitments of support and expanded partnerships.

- When in doubt, submit a BJT application even if more preparation could have resulted in a better program plan. Unsuccessful applications have opportunities to debrief and review their grant with suggestions for improvement. Those not funded this cycle have a “head start” in the next competition with additional mentoring and technical assistance between grant cycles.

### Join Our Listserv

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*CONNECT notes represent individual opinions and ideas from Professional Learning Community participants and EPA Environmental Job Training grant recipients. They do not represent EPA policy, guidance or opinions and should not be taken as such. Copies of prior CONNECT issues can be found at [Brownfields-toolbox.org](http://Brownfields-toolbox.org)*

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