

Grant writers step into a widening gap

When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered businesses and strained nonprofits across the country in 2020, grant funding went from a niche tool to a survival mechanism. The resulting surge in demand transformed what had been a modest professional services sector into something far more visible, competitive and consequential.

"Grants really exploded in 2020," said Lauren Palmer, vice president of Aspire Grant & Development, a certified woman-owned firm celebrating its 10th year in business. "When the pandemic hit, grants became necessary for businesses and nonprofits to thrive, but also more mainstream."

That mainstreaming has had lasting effects on who applies, who wins and who gets left behind.

A high-pressure environment

The grant writing industry now operates in a more demanding environment than it did a decade ago. Federal funding priorities have shifted dramatically. The Trump administration's 2025 freeze and cancellation of certain federal grants sent shock waves through the sector.

Chris Crytzer, a Cranberry Township-based grant writer and member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, said



CHRIS CRYTZER

the fallout has been swift.

"Since early 2025, instability caused by federal grant freezes and cancellations has intensified the competition for available resources from foundations," she said. "Funders are reporting that they're being inundated with grant requests. Several have noted that for their most recent grant cycles they received a record number of applications."

The sheer size of the nonprofit sector compounds the pressure. Crytzer cited a 2025 report from the Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations estimating that the state has approximately 49,000 public charities, with roughly 15,000 concentrated in Southwestern Pennsylvania alone, most in Allegheny County.

Veteran grant writer Stephen Catt, who spent more than a decade as chief grant

writer at Butler County Community College before founding K2Gray Workforce, has watched the field shift constantly throughout his career.

"I see constant changing," Catt said. "Depending on what the situation is politically or what the regional priorities become, all these things influence grant writing and successfully obtaining grants."

Among the more notable recent changes: Any mention of diversity in federal grant applications has become a liability under



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the current administration.

"It's always changing," Catt said. "You have to go to the well that has water. When one well dries up, you have to find another. A good grant writer has to be able to pivot, change and constantly learn."

Palmer said private foundations are helping fill the void. "Private foundations are doing a good job of filling in the gaps right now," she said.

Who's winning, and why

The rise of professional grant writers has sparked a pointed question. Are better-resourced organizations winning grants because their programs are stronger, or because their applications are more polished?

The answer, according to those working in the field, is complicated.

Crytzer pushed back on the idea that professional polish confers an unfair advantage. Many funders do not base decisions on how polished an application is, she said. Numerous funders have worked to reduce the imbalance, simplifying application processes and, in some cases, allowing nonprofits to reuse applications submitted to other funders within a recent time frame. Some have created grant programs specifically designed for small nonprofits.

She also flagged a newer wrinkle: Funders are now scrutinizing applications for signs of artificial intelligence authorship.

"I'm starting to see funders emphasize that AI-generated submissions will lead to disqualification," she said. "I've also heard some funders note that applications which appear overly polished or perfect raise concerns."

The awareness gap, rather than application quality, may be the more significant obstacle for underresourced communities. Palmer said larger municipalities often have more grant writing experience and, as a result, more knowledge of available opportunities. To help level that, Aspire offers pro bono workshops for smaller municipalities to walk through what makes a project fundable and how to access services.

Butler Mayor Robert Dandoy acknowl-



Zach Carlino is director of development at the Alliance for Nonprofit Resources.

edged the challenge directly. "Absolutely. If you talk to any municipality, any organization, that's always a disadvantage and a hurdle to get over," he said. "Grant applications can be very complicated. If you are successful in getting the grant, administration can be complicated as well."

Who's hiring professional help

The client base for professional grant writers has diversified considerably. Palmer said Aspire's top three client categories are municipalities, nonprofits and development corporations. Crytzer said his typical clients are small to mid-sized nonprofits and small businesses. Zach Carlino, director of development at the Alliance for Nonprofit Resources — a nonprofit that helps other nonprofits with back-end operations, including grant writing — said the options for how organizations engage with professional writers vary widely.

"That's the name of the game in grant writing," Carlino said. "How do you separate yourself from everyone else seeking funding? At the end of the day, you're competing with a lot of different organizations for the same funding."

For-profit businesses represent a small but growing slice of grant activity. Palmer said for-profit companies can qualify for economic development grants, but it remains rare and typically requires partnering with a municipality or nonprofit to

be eligible. Catt said businesses seeking workforce development funding should consider joining forces with existing nonprofits already providing those services. "A lot of businesses aren't aware of these organizations, they just want workers," he said.

Public money pursuing public money

When a township or county government hires a grant writer, taxpayers are funding the pursuit of additional public funds. The practice raises questions about transparency and accountability that practitioners generally agree fall outside their professional responsibility.

"That's up to the municipality to communicate and be transparent with taxpayers," Palmer said. "It's not the role of the grant writing agency to fulfill this responsibility."

Catt took a broader view, arguing that greater public awareness of grant-funded projects would benefit everyone. "I don't think the public has enough information about the good that is happening that would never happen without the additional support from a variety of areas, whether it be federal or private foundations," he said. He encourages municipalities and nonprofits to publicize when grant money is received, noting that the awards themselves function as endorsements of the projects.

Dandoy offered a pragmatic rationale for the expenditure. The city has no dedicated grant writing department, instead drawing on a small network of contacts, including staff at the Community Development Block Grant office and the Butler County Community Development Corporation. That arrangement helped the city secure \$1.5 million for sidewalk improvements on Main Street. "We'll use whatever is at our fingertips," Dandoy said.

The road to equitable access

Across the industry, practitioners point to meaningful partnership as the most powerful tool for organizations that lack resources to compete alone. Catt built his early career on this strategy at BC3.

"My strategy to make us successful was to join with other larger institutions and make ourselves valuable," he said. The approach helped BC3 land multiple National Science Foundation grants with Purdue University as the lead institution and, eventually, manage \$3 million annually for the Heinz Endowments on behalf of Southwestern Pennsylvania community colleges.

"There is always competition with the larger entities, people who have the skill levels and the resources," Catt said. "But if you partner with them, it can be to your advantage as long as you show competency in what you're doing."

Palmer also recommends hyperfocusing on meaningful partnerships to share dollars rather than compete for them, saying joint applications tend to score higher and stretch grant funds further.

Carlino offered a sobering reminder for organizations new to the process. The most common misconception he encounters, he said, is that "there's millions of dollars out there and all you have to do is write the grant and it'll come to your doorstep. Yes, there are millions of dollars out there, but it's not that easy to get."

The most equitable change, Dandoy said, would be simpler applications. "If these could be streamlined and simplified so that not just municipalities but nonprofit organizations throughout our community can more readily and more easily apply for these funds," he said, "that would be a big step in the right direction."

— Article by Shari Berg, file photos