

# Grant Writing Isn't Overhead — It's Infrastructure

By Matt Leighty

Investing in grant systems and staff can be vital for small nonprofits to thrive in today's philanthropic landscape.

## What the shift from charity to philanthropy mean for small nonprofits.

A few years ago, I sat in a small nonprofit office while the executive director called a staff member whose father had just had a heart attack. The staffer was at the hospital. He was the only one who knew the password to the grants portal, and a deadline was looming.

Another time, a board member emailed me the same grant opportunity for the eighth year in a row — forgetting that the organization had never been eligible. I've seen nonprofits miss deadlines for their largest funders — not because they didn't care, but because they didn't have a system.



These stories aren't rare. After two decades in the nonprofit sector, I've come to recognize them as normal for small and midsize organizations — the trusted, embedded, essential players in their communities who are often expected to make do with duct tape and goodwill. We tell these organizations to scale. To partner. To think big. But we rarely invest in the people or processes that help them compete for the funding they need to do any of that.

## The Bridge Between Vision and Funding

A grant proposal sits at a critical intersection. It's where a dream becomes a plan. Where a program becomes a budget. And for small nonprofits, it's often where reality comes crashing in. Behind every "we're excited to apply!" email is someone — often the executive director — pulling a late night, Googling budget templates, juggling attachments, rewriting boilerplate, and refreshing a finicky grants portal. That act of translation — from community need to institutional language — is often invisible. But it's indispensable. And it's only getting harder.

## The Shift from Charity to Philanthropy

It used to be more straightforward. A well-written letter and a compelling story might be enough to earn a check from a local foundation. You knew the funder. They knew your work. But as charitable giving evolves into institutional philanthropy, the expectations have changed: Logic models, equity statements, evaluation frameworks, and dashboards. A \$10,000 grant might require a 15-page proposal, five attachments, and a portal that locks you out if you pause too long. Funders say they want to support grassroots work. But too often, their processes weed out the very organizations closest to the need.

## The Unicorn Problem

Most small nonprofits don't have a grant writer. They have someone who can *also* write grants — a program manager, office administrator, or the ED. And when it works, it feels like magic. Why pay for a new position when someone on staff can handle it? But what they've really got is a unicorn: Someone

who can write persuasively, understand budgets, translate strategy, and navigate funder portals — while doing their actual job.

### **When that person leaves, the funding often goes with them.**

I've seen organizations lose six-figure funding streams because the only person who understood the grant process walked out the door. I've seen EDs stay up until 2 am submitting a proposal. This isn't sustainable. And it shouldn't be necessary.

### **The Cost of Underinvestment**

I started as a freelance grant writer in Long Beach, CA, working out of coffee shops. I've now worked with more than 100 nonprofits, most of them small or midsize. The issue is rarely mission. It's capacity. When organizations invest in even basic grant infrastructure, everything changes. They stop writing in crisis. They start choosing which opportunities are right for them. And they stop burning out the unicorns.

### **Why it Matters Now**

Between federal grants and private philanthropy, **over \$1.5 trillion is awarded each year**. But many of the best-positioned nonprofits to do the work aren't positioned to access the funding. I've written the same federal grant for both a suburban and an urban school district. One had a full development team and a bank of templates. The other didn't have anyone who knew how to use Grants.gov. The opportunity was the same. The outcome wasn't. This isn't about who deserves the money. **It's about who can access it.**

### **Reframing the Conversation**

Grant writing isn't overhead. It's infrastructure. It deserves investment — not just because it brings in money, but because it's the front end of equity. If we want to fund small, community-led, people of color-led, and systems-changing work, we have to support the people who make that funding possible.

### **What Funders Can Do**

- Allow budgets to include time for grant writing and reporting
- Offer general operating support that strengthens infrastructure
- Streamline application processes
- Accept proposals in plain language
- Share sample proposals or host office hours

### **What Nonprofits Can Do**

- Name grant writing as a real job (even if it's part-time)
- Start a folder of past proposals and attachments
- Build cross-training into your grant process
- Involve program staff in crafting the narrative
- Ask for help — it's not weakness, it's strategy

### **Getting Started This Month**

- Take inventory of your past proposals and where they live
- Create a grants calendar with deadlines and renewal dates
- Document passwords for grants portals in a shared file
- Block two to three hours per month for strategy, not just writing
- Find peers in other organizations — swap templates, share tips, etc.

Some of the tools I've built at GrantFlow, like our CRM that creates shared grant calendars and organizes all proposal content in one place, are designed to solve exactly these problems. But this isn't a sales pitch — **it's a call to recognize that infrastructure matters.**

Whether you use software, spreadsheets, or a whiteboard on the wall, what matters is that you treat your grant process as real work that deserves real support.

### **The Infrastructure of Impact**

You can't fund what you can't write. And you can't write what you don't have the time or tools to prepare.

This isn't about perfection. It's about giving your team the breathing room and systems to compete. We talk a lot about investing in community. But it's time we invested in the capacity of the organizations who serve that community every day.

Let's stop pretending we can build a more equitable sector without investing in the people laying the bricks.