Equitable Parks and Green Spaces in Small and Midsize Cities: Planning Grant

BACKGROUND

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation seeks an organization (or up to three collaborating organizations) to plan an initiative, which, by influencing policy and systems change, rectifies the inequitable distribution of parks and green spaces in low-income communities and communities of color in urban regions, including small and midsize cities (pop. 50,000–500,000). This work will build on the Foundation’s several years of field learning—including the work of grantees, interviews, scans, conferences, and media communications. Based on this learning, the Foundation developed a set of near-term and longer-term objectives, and created an initial design for a program. However, the program was developed before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic consequences. These events have presented new challenges to the program as planned, and as a result, we are issuing this open call for an organization(s) to co-create with the Foundation a new plan for achieving the objectives. Applicants should have the capacity to implement the planned effort, which will be funded separately.

Why parks and green spaces?

City parks and green spaces play a vital role in the social, economic, and physical well-being of America’s cities and their residents. They provide access to recreational opportunities, improve physical and mental health, spur local economies, facilitate social cohesion, improve safety, mitigate storm water runoff, and provide protection from heat islands and other environmental threats. The COVID-19 pandemic increased recognition of the crucial role that parks and green spaces play as they provide an outlet from the stress of indoor confinement. However, parks and green spaces are not equitably distributed across cities. Low-income communities and communities of color experience a range of negative effects from disinvestment, including the availability of quality parks. Green infrastructure is particularly needed in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, which—due to historic housing discrimination and residential segregation—often are located in flood-prone areas; are exposed to disproportionately higher heat levels; air pollution and other environmental risks; and have fewer resources to prepare for and recover from extreme weather events and climate change.

Community members can realize the benefits of parks and green spaces only when they are accessible, inclusive, meet community priorities, and are well maintained and operated. Studies have shown that people living in disadvantaged communities reap the most benefits from urban greening and that increasing the availability of urban green space may help to reduce inequalities in health related to income, race, disability, and other socioeconomic and demographic factors. Municipal staff in parks and recreation agencies, sustainability/resiliency offices and other departments are increasingly aware of the inequitable distribution of parks and green infrastructure and are seeking innovative approaches to making funding and practices more equitable. Community organizations are innovating to reclaim deteriorated, unsafe parks and to capture alternative spaces, such as school yards, blighted properties, vacant lots, and other open public spaces for conversion to health-promoting green spaces that benefit the local residents. These community-driven efforts respond to resident priorities and create a space where people feel they belong and have shared ownership. In some communities, there is mistrust of government based upon past lack of investment or unfulfilled promises. Respect for community priorities, lived experience, and openness to shared decision-making and resources can help increase the trust between community groups and municipal agencies and enable collaboration. Communities and municipalities can learn from each other and from experts on specific topics to develop solutions that maximize the benefits of parks and green spaces for equitable community health and resilience.

THE PROGRAM

The Foundation created an initial design for the program based on learnings from national park and green space organizations, community efforts, research, philanthropic initiatives, and multiple interviews over a three-year period. Through our grant with Groundwork USA, we learned about the impact of green space interventions on health and health equity in marginalized communities and about local investments, policies, and practices that empower residents, strengthen civic infrastructure and civic engagement, and improve resilience. We also learned about the importance of addressing brownfield and other environmental toxins when creating new green spaces. A grant to the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), with consultant Willamette Partnership, addressed the role of parks and greening in mitigating the effects of climate change on communities by the use of green storm water infrastructure in parks and produced a suite of resources on greener parks for health. NRPA also developed a guide for parks and recreation professionals on authentically engaging communities. City Park Alliance received funding to collaborate with Groundwork USA and the Urban Institute to produce a report Investing in Equitable Park Systems, which identified innovative funding sources; delineated the options that were regressive; and shared strategies to avoid displacement impacts of improved parks or green spaces. They also produced a report featuring case studies and recommendations from seven cities investing in equitable urban park systems. We also learned from other ongoing programs, including SPARCC, regarding cross-sector efforts to incorporate parks and greening of public spaces as part of larger green infrastructure, affordable housing, climate resilience, and/or economic development efforts. Through interviews, scans, and review of other parks and green space programs, we learned that:

- There is a great deal of need—and opportunity—among small and midsize cities when it comes to parks and equity. Big cities tend to have multiple sources for funding and with bigger departments, more depth of interdisciplinary staff.

- There is a lack of funding for the “soft” costs of parks-related work: planning, and community engagement, as well as ongoing operations, maintenance, stewardship, and programming that can dynamically respond to communities’ changing needs and priorities.

- Few grassroots organizations specifically self-identify as parks or green infrastructure organizations in lower-income communities or communities of color. Community-based organizations working on related issues—such as climate resilience, environmental justice, civic engagement, or blight reduction—may see more equitably distributed and created parks and green spaces as relevant to their efforts.

With the onset of COVID 19 and the consequent economic collapse, community organizations have necessarily pivoted to focus on basic needs, eviction moratoria, unemployment payments, and other issues critical to their community members. However, at the same time, municipal governments have experienced high expenditures and decreased revenue related to COVID 19, and local government deficits have reduced the budgets and resulted in layoffs in parks and recreation and other departments, even as the use of open parks increased. It is also difficult to predict when large in-person convenings will again be possible, further complicating the peer learning and technical assistance aspects of the initial design. As a result of these challenges, the Foundation has decided to revisit the planned design and implementation, and seeks an organization (or partnership of up to three organizations with complementary areas of expertise) to co-create with the Foundation a revised approach. The plan should consistently reinforce the critical importance of operationalizing equity and promoting a community-driven approach to parks and urban greening.

Based upon our learning, we developed an overall goal: The benefits of parks and other green spaces will become more equitably accessible for members of low-income communities and communities of color in small and midsize cities. In addition, based on our learning with the field and understanding of health impacts on health equity, we developed a set of near-term and longer-term impacts that would be advanced by policy and systems change approaches:

Near-term impacts:

- Equity is operationalized in local, state, and federal decisions about parks and green infrastructure.

- Resources are preferentially allocated to areas of greatest need.
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- Equitable financing mechanisms provide funding for capital needs and operations and displacement is prevented.
- Community is involved at all stages, from planning through ongoing operation.
- Designs offer connection to nature, storm water management, and community resiliency.
- Inclusive features and programs offer physical activity for seniors and the differently abled.
- A variety of spaces are used for greening (e.g., school yards, public spaces, vacant lots and others).

Longer-term impacts:
- Proximity/access to parks and green spaces and safety is increased in low-income and communities of color.
- Features and programs meet the interests and needs of the community.
- Climate & resilience benefits such as protection from heat and reduction of air pollutants; reduced flood risks.
- Increased civic engagement and collective “ownership.”
- Decreased social isolation and greater social cohesion.
- Increased physical activity for children, seniors, and the differently abled.
- Improved mental health and well-being.

Planning project activities and deliverables:
- Review and synthesize prior research, scans, and design documents to inform a new strategy. Identify gaps in knowledge. (The Foundation will share our learning resources with the planning organization(s).
- Develop a plan for the effort, including a description of the key components.
- Consult with relevant stakeholders—either through an advisory body or key informant interviews—to iterate and finalize the plan.
- Develop an implementation strategy, time line, and resource needs to realize the planned effort.

TOTAL AWARDS
- RWJF expects to award one planning grant of up to $400,000.
- Planning project will be six months in duration.
- Planning grant will begin in December 2020.
- This initial award will be for a planning grant with the expectation that the selected organization(s) will apply for a significantly larger grant to implement the planned effort or program.
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ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Applicants may include nonprofit organizations and nongovernmental organizations.
- Preference will be given to applicants that are either public entities or nonprofit organizations that are tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and are not private foundations or Type III supporting organizations. RWJF may require additional documentation.
- Awards will be made to organizations, not to individuals.
- Applicant organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.
- The successful applicant could be one organization or a partnership between up to three organizations. In the case of a partnership between organizations, one organization must be the lead applicant and will be responsible for administrative oversight of the grant.

OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to building a Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. Achieving this goal requires focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. To that end, we are committed to fostering diverse perspectives. We recognize that individuals’ perspectives are shaped by a host of factors, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, familial status, education, religion, legal status, military service, political affiliation, geography, and other personal and professional experiences.

We know that the presence of diverse perspectives alone is not sufficient. Therefore, we also are committed to creating inclusive environments where all individuals are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences. We believe that only through valuing our differences and similarities, and remaining vigilant in advancing equity, will we be able to maintain an equitable workplace and actively pursue equity in all aspects of our work. We commit to being continuous learners and working alongside others to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion.

SELECTION CRITERIA

A team of external and internal reviewers will evaluate all proposals. The review process will consider the applicant’s responses to the program elements described above, as well as the degree to which the applicant organization(s) meet the following selection criteria:

- Vision for the proposed project and alignment with the call for proposals (CFP) purpose and focus.
  - The proposal describes how the applicant would design a plan that would successfully advance a policy or systems approach that attends to key equity principles (e.g., builds trust and shared decision-making between community members and municipal governmental entities.)
  - The proposal suggests how the plan for the design will meaningfully contribute to the field’s understanding of the range of innovative and effective policy, financing, and practices being applied across the country that result in equitable access to parks and urban green spaces.
  - The proposal acknowledges and supports program co-creation with RWJF.

- Quality and feasibility of the proposed program.
  - The proposal clearly describes the key components of the planning period and how they will be carried out.
  - The proposed approach is well-matched to the CFP purpose and is feasible within the allotted time frame and budget.
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- Focus, qualifications, and experience of applicant organization(s), and key personnel.
  - Applicant demonstrates program development experience, including in collaboration with philanthropic organizations.
  - Applicant team clearly demonstrates the ability to understand, conceive of, and implement an effort that works concurrently on both local and national scale, including deep expertise in supporting community-based building organizations and other grassroots organizations; expertise in disciplines relevant to parks and urban greening (e.g., planning, parks and recreation, public health, storm water management, climate resilience); expertise and experience in fostering trust and collaborations between community-based organizations and municipal government entities; and a deep understanding, mission alignment, and significant experience advancing health and social equity.
  - Demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- Appropriateness of the proposed budget and management structure for the project.
  - The proposed budget appears reasonable to accomplish the plan of work.
  - If applicant is a collaboration of more than one organization, the applicant describes the roles and management structure for the collaboration.
  - The applicant describes clear and regular points for RWJF’s engagement in the planning.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING
Grantees are expected to meet RWJF requirements for the submission of narrative and financial reports, as well as periodic information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. We may ask project directors to participate in periodic meetings and give progress reports on their grants. At the close of each grant, the evaluation partner is expected to provide a written report on the project and its findings suitable for wide dissemination.

APPLICANT SURVEY PROCESS
The project director of the proposal may be contacted after the submission deadline by SSRS, an independent research firm. The project director will be asked to complete a brief, online survey about the proposal process and applicant characteristics. This voluntary questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Responses provided to SSRS will not impact the funding decision for your proposal in any way.

SSRS will protect the confidentiality of your responses. RWJF will not receive any data that links your name with your survey responses.

USE OF GRANT FUNDS
Grant funds may be used for project staff salaries, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, meetings, supplies, project-related travel, and other direct project expenses, including a limited amount of equipment essential to the project, and indirect costs to support the general operations of the applicant organization. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may not be used to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate...
facilities, for lobbying, for political activities, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities. Additional budget guidelines are provided in the online application materials.

The planning grant opportunity outlined in this call for proposals is contingent upon final funding confirmation from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

**OPEN ACCESS**

In order to ensure RWJF-supported research is made accessible to a wide and diverse audience, grantees who publish findings in peer-reviewed publications must do so in open access journals and/or must include funds in their budgets to cover the cost of making the resulting publications open access (typically $2,000–$5,000 per manuscript).

**HOW TO APPLY**

Proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/paug and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process.

All proposal details and instructions are available via the RWJF online application system. Applicants should not begin drafting their proposals until they have familiarized themselves with the detailed instructions and formatting requirements displayed in the online application system.

Proposals must include the following elements:

1. A proposal narrative (maximum eight pages, 11-point font, single-spaced).

2. A budget and budget narrative that includes the budget for up to six months, beginning December 1, 2020.

3. Supporting documentation, including a time line/workplan and CV/resume/biosketch for the proposed project director and up to two co-directors. (The resumes do not count toward the eight-page proposal narrative maximum and should be uploaded in the “Supporting Documents” section of the proposal.) For collaborative proposals, a letter of support from any confirmed key partner organization is required.

Please direct inquiries to:
Pamela Russo, senior program officer
Email: Pauginfo@rwjf.org

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

**KEY DATES AND DEADLINES**

- **August 10, 2020 (2 p.m. ET)**
  Optional applicant webinar. Registration is required through this link.
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- **September 9, 2020 (3 p.m. ET)**
  Deadline for receipt of proposals.

- **December 1, 2020**
  Grant start.

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*Late Submissions*

RWJF will accept only those proposals that are completed/submitted at the time of the deadline. Because one of our Guiding Principles is to treat everyone with fairness and respect, RWJF’s deadline policy applies to all applicants. If an applicant experiences a problem with the online application system that may prevent them from submitting on time, please notify the program administrator immediately. To do so, click on the “Contact Us” link found in the “Resources” area on the left side of most screens within the online proposal site. We encourage you to submit your proposal in advance of the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties, e.g., technical problems, may be addressed well before the deadline.

*ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION*

For more than 45 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working alongside others to build a national Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. For more information, visit [rwjf.org](http://rwjf.org). Follow the Foundation on Twitter at [www.rwjf.org/twitter](http://www.rwjf.org/twitter) or on Facebook at [www.rwjf.org/facebook](http://www.rwjf.org/facebook).

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at [www.rwjf.org/manager-your-subscriptions.html](http://www.rwjf.org/manager-your-subscriptions.html).

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