

# Capacity Building Grant Program Guide & Annotated Template

## About this Guide:

This optional document will walk you through the process of developing your application. There are multiple ways to approach developing a grant application, but it is important to make sure your final proposal is:

1. **Complete:** You must make sure your application includes all of the required elements
2. **Consistent:** Your narrative should match up with your budget and budget justification; supporting documentation; and any information entered directly into CBT's portal.
3. **Clear:** You do not want reviewers to have to guess or make assumptions about any elements of your proposal and you want them to be able to clearly connect the elements of your proposal to the evaluation criteria. Do not be afraid to use numbered or bulleted lists to organize information.
4. **Concise:** While it is important to fully explain your proposal, including extra information may make it difficult for reviewers to parse the required information.

This guide starts with the evaluation criteria and asks you to think concisely about how your project meets those criteria through a series of questions under each section. It also includes examples to help you think through how you might answer these questions.

In the annotated template, you will be able to transfer your responses to these questions into the structure required for the Narrative Questions document that will be submitted with your application.

# 2026 Capacity Building Grant Program Application

## Application Checklist:

- Narrative Questions
- Organizational Capacity Assessment (only required for Track 1)
- Budget
- Supporting Documents

## Before You Get Started:

**Step 1:** Read the RFP and note the submission deadline (Wednesday, July 15, 2026)

**Step 2:** Determine which track you are applying to (select 1):

- Track 1: Organizational Capacity Building
- Track 2: Local Government Capacity Building
- Track 3: Movement Building

**Step 2:** Ensure Eligibility. You must answer yes to all applicable questions:

For nonprofit organizations, tribal, or local governments do you:

- Provide services within the Chesapeake Bay watershed, including the DC, DE, MD, NY, PA, VA, and WV portions of the watershed, the Maryland Coastal Bays, and/or the Youghiogheny watersheds in Maryland?
- Have a water and/or natural resource focus within your work aligned with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goals?

For nonprofit organizations do you also:

- Employ at least one full-time staff member (35+ hours per week) or have a dedicated volunteer contributing 35+ hours per week.
- Have an active board of directors.
- Track 1 Only:** Have no more than 40 staff

**Step 3:** Identify roles in your organization for managing the application. Who will develop the different sections of your application, reach out to partners for letters of support, submit it in the portal, etc.? *(Note: If your organization has a fiscal sponsor, the fiscal sponsor must be the applicant, but it should be made clear throughout your application that the sponsored organization will be the beneficiary of the capacity building effort).*

**Step 4:** Create a Chesapeake Bay Trust account if your organization does not already have one. Review the required tabs for the proposal.

**Step 5:** Collect the following:

- Organizational Information, including your:
  - EIN
  - SAM UEI - if you do not have a SAM UEI this can take some time to set up.
- Contact information for an Executive Officer and a Project Leader (must be two separate individuals)

**Step 6:** Review the Organizational Capacity Assessment. This is only required for **Track 1**, but all applicants can benefit from reviewing and completing this document.

**Step 7:** Complete the Narrative Questions document

**Step 8:** Complete the other aspects of the proposal:

- Reach out to partners for Letters of Commitment (*Note: Ask partners to share letters a few days before the application is due to ensure you have them in hand when you submit through the portal*).
- Complete your Budget. Review eligible expenses guidance in the RFP.
- Collect any other supporting documentation for submission

**Step 9:** Submit your application!

## Project Narrative: Evaluation Criteria

Review the evaluation section of the RFP to understand how different elements of the proposal will be weighted by reviewers. Below is a summary of how your proposal will be scored:

- Completeness (1 - 10 points)
- Alignment with Program Intent & the Bay Agreement Goals (1 - 20 points)
- Demonstrated Need & Justification (1 - 20 points)
- Strategic Value & Positioning within the Watershed Ecosystem ( 1 - 20 points)
- Likelihood of Success & Continuity (1 - 20 points)
- Budget Justification and Cost Effectiveness (1 - 10 points)

### Alignment with Program Intent & the Bay Agreement Goals

**Connecting your work to multiple Bay Goals will not necessarily make your application stronger. Instead focus on the strength of your connection to the selected Bay Goal(s).**

Each Bay Goal has a set of outcomes. Review the outcomes to see where your work fits within the Bay Goal(s) and that your capacity building work will help support (you can select more than one):

- Thriving Habitat, Fisheries, and Wildlife. The outcomes are:
  - Blue Crabs
  - Brook Trout
  - Fish Habitat
  - Fish Passage
  - Oysters
  - Stream Health
  - Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV)
  - Wetlands
- Clean Water. The outcomes are:
  - Reducing Excess Nitrogen, Phosphorous, & Sediment
  - Toxic & Emerging Contaminants

- Water Quality, Standards Attainment, & Monitoring
- Healthy Landscapes. The outcomes are:
  - Adapting to Changing Environmental Conditions
  - Healthy Forests & Trees
  - Land Use Planning & Decision Support
  - Protected Lands
- Engaged Communities. The outcomes are:
  - Local Government Leadership
  - Public Access
  - School District Environmental Literacy Planning
  - Stewardship
  - Student Environmental Literacy Experiences
  - Workforce

For each of the selected goals:

1. Provide excerpts from your mission or strategic plan that demonstrate how your work supports that goal and/or
2. Describe how your work contributes to that goal. Consider how building your organization's capacity will allow you to better perform work that supports that goal.

*Example Template Language:* Our organization works to support the [LIST BAY GOALS].

1. [BAY GOAL 1] - We improve/increase [SELECTED CHESAPEAKE BAY GOAL] by [ACTIVITY]. This is reflected in our [MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN], which states [EXCERPT FROM MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN]. Our [PROPOSED CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITY] will allow us to increase the [EVALUATION METRIC] impacted by our work.
2. [BAY GOAL 2] - We improve/increase [SELECTED CHESAPEAKE BAY GOAL] by [ACTIVITY]. This is reflected in our [MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN], which states [EXCERPT FROM MISSION/STRATEGIC PLAN]. Our [PROPOSED CAPACITY BUILDING ACTIVITY] will allow us to increase the [EVALUATION METRIC] impacted by our work.
3. [BAY GOAL 3]...etc.

*Example:* Our organization works to support the Engaged Communities and Healthy Landscapes goals of the Chesapeake Bay Program.

1. Engaged Communities (Outcome: Stewardship) - We improve stewardship in our region by engaging residents in tree planting. This is reflected in our strategic plan, which states “we will increase the number of residents engaged in tree planting by 5% annually.” Our efforts to improve our social media outreach through this proposal will allow us to increase the number of residents reached and directly engaged in restoration activities.
2. Healthy Landscapes (Outcome: Healthy Forests and Trees) - We improve the health of our local landscapes by planting trees. This is reflected in our strategic plan, which states we will “plant 100 acres of trees by 2030.” By improving our social media

processes, we will have more volunteers during planting events, be able to identify more parcels of land where trees can be planted, and free up staff time to focus on other essential activities. This will also lead to more trees in the ground and a faster rate and a healthier watershed.

## **Demonstrated Need & Justification**

Reviewers will want to understand why your organization selected the capacity building activity you are proposing over other potential needs and how the activity will improve your organization's ability to do its work. Answer the following questions in one or two sentences:

### **What organizational need is your capacity building activity addressing (problem statement)?:**

*Example: Our organization spends a significant amount of staff time advertising our activities through social media to reach our target audiences and increase participation in our tree planting efforts. We do not currently have a marketing and communications plan or standard operating procedures for posting on social media.*

### **How will this activity address that need? Consider how the activity paid for under this grant will have a long-term impact on your organization (beyond the grant term):**

*Example: By developing templates and SOPs for social media marketing we will reduce the amount of staff time spent on this activity. This will allow more staff time for other needed activities after this grant period, such as in-person engagement, field work, and fundraising and will ultimately result in more volunteers engaged and more projects in the ground.*

### **Explain how this work meets a need in your community related to the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Goals (how other organizations are not meeting this need)?:**

*Example: Our organization is the only NGO in our region that leads tree planting efforts to protect local waterbodies. Driving more engagement will increase the rate at which these projects occur and help meet our strategic plan goal of planting 100 acres of trees by 2030.*

## **Strategic Value & Positioning within the Watershed Ecosystem**

Reviewers may not be familiar with your organization or where you work in the watershed. You will want to explain to reviewers why funding your work will help the watershed meet the Bay Agreement goals - who else is working in your region, how do you fit into that organizational landscape, and how does your work uniquely contribute to the Bay Goal(s) you identified?

### **Organizational**

- *Role Clarity* - How does your organization contribute to the identified Bay Goal(s)?
- *Organizational Ecosystem Awareness* - Are there other organizations in your region working on this issue?

- *Distinct or Additive Value* - How does your organization address an element of meeting the identified Bay Goal(s) that other organizations in your region do not - what is your organization's unique contribution? Consider:
  - Do you do work other organizations do not do?
  - Do you address a specific audience other organizations do not work with?
  - Do you build on the work of other organizations in your region? Consider highlighting partnerships.
- *Watershed Level Relevance* - Explain to reviewers that may be in other parts of the watershed how your work impacts watershed outcomes. If you have information about organizational impact goals that capacity building will help you achieve, include that here.
- *Strategic Collaboration* - If there are aligned organizations working in your region, how and when do you work with them? How will your capacity building work strengthen your partnerships and ability to build

*Example Template Language:*

[ORGANIZATION] contributes to meeting the [BAY GOAL] by [ACTIVITY]. We are the only/While there are multiple organizations in our region that [UNIQUE ASPECT OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S WORK]. This work [DESCRIBE IMPACTS]. Our work also supports the efforts of [PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS]

*Example:*

“Environmental Nonprofit” contributes to meeting the Thriving Habitats (Outcome: Brook Trout), Healthy Landscapes (Outcome: Healthy Forests & Trees), and Clean Water (Outcome: Reducing Excess Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Sediment) Bay Goals by expanding riparian buffers in our region. We are the only non-profit in our area that works directly with farmers to provide technical assistance and planting support for riparian buffers, supplementing and extending the reach of our local Conservation District, who we work closely with to ensure the buffers we install meet standards like cost-share eligibility requirements. Over the past five years we have been able to establish x linear feet which have direct impacts on habitat and water quality, especially in preserving sensitive cold water streams within our area that support Brook Trout populations.

**Movement Building** - Explain why your organization is the right organization to support the movement building capacity activities that are being proposed. Clearly define your organization's relationship with the organizations that will benefit from the capacity building.

**Likelihood of Success**

There are multiple aspects of your proposal that will demonstrate to reviewers the likelihood of success for your capacity building activity:

- **Timeline:** Reviewers will examine your timeline for consistency to make sure all of the steps included in your narrative are reflected in the timeline. For all tasks listed in your narrative make sure you clearly state when they will occur and how long they will take.

Consider developing a visual like a gantt chart to help reviewers understand the proposal.

- **Capacity to Manage the Project/Responsible Parties:** Reviewers will consider whether your organization currently has the capacity to manage the proposed activities. This can be addressed by clearly identifying the responsible party for each activity and their qualifications to complete the activity.
- **Evaluation Metrics:** Reviewers will want to understand how you are measuring the success of your capacity building efforts. These metrics should be connected to the capacity of your organization and the Bay Goals you selected. Consider also framing activities in terms of outputs and outcomes.
- **Sustainability:** Reviewers will want to understand how the work being proposed in this application will have a **long-term** impact on your organization beyond the grant period. Consider:
  - Whether, if relevant to the proposed project, systems documentation, share practices, or organizational structures are in place or will be developed to support continuity if staff roles shift or change
  - Whether, if the project includes costs that may continue beyond the grant period, there is a reasonable plan to support those costs.

For each activity you are proposing, address each of these elements:

Activity:

Timeline:

Responsible Party:

Evaluation Metric:

Long-Term Impact:

*Example:*

**Activity:** Develop RFP to hire a contractor to create a marketing and communications plan, social media templates, and SOPs for creating posts. RFP will be posted to the website, through relevant advertising boards, and sent directly to contractors that have done this type of work in our region for other partners.

**Timeline:** Month 1

**Responsible Party:** Program Manager that has been managing most of the social media posting will develop RFP with approval from the Executive Director and the Board.

**Evaluation Metric:** Staff hours saved once materials are developed

**Long-Term Impact:** These documents will support social media advertising efforts beyond the grant period at no further cost to the organization.

## **Budget Justification and Cost Effectiveness**

Reviewers will want to see justifications for all elements of your budget. Any line items in the budget should also be mentioned in the narrative so reviewers do not have to guess or make assumptions about why something was included. For the following categories, you should also consider:

- *Personnel:* Make sure to justify staff time by clearly connecting roles and responsibilities to the activities in your narrative. For each staff position listed, state how they will contribute to the project, why they were selected, and consider how the capacity building work will impact their role after the grant period.
- *Contractual:* While it is not a requirement to gather three quotes, reviewers will want to understand how you developed your budget numbers. You will want to clearly state in the proposal how you developed your estimates. Consider:
  - Market Research
  - Reaching out to contractors to get ballpark estimates
  - Connecting with similar organizations and/or municipalities that have recently performed similar activities to understand what their budgets were

## Narrative Questions: Annotated Template

Answer each question in the CBT Narrative Questions document using the information developed in the previous section to make sure you are responding to all elements of the proposal.

### Project Description

- **Project Overview**

- Organizational Capacity Needs - This can be limited to one or two sentences. You will justify and further explain this choice in the next section.
- Project Description - Use the language from the **Likelihood of Success** section of this guide. You can make it more narrative, but it is also fine to leave in the following format:

Activity:

Timeline:

Responsible Party:

- **Your Community and Environment**

- What Environmental challenges shape the work this project is intended to support - Clearly connect this response to the Chesapeake Bay Agreement Goals.
- What Environmental challenges shape the work this project is intended to support - Use the language from the **Demonstrated Need & Justification** section of this guide.

- **Expected Outcomes**

- What specific improvements do you expect to see by the end of the project? - If the activity will not contribute to an impact on your organization that will extend beyond the grant period, it may not be capacity building. Ask what your organizations will be left with - these can be improved processes, staff skills, or knowledge (i.e. pilot projects during the grant period to determine what improvements work). Tie this to your evaluation section.
- What signs, measures, or indicators will you use to track progress? - Use the language from the **Likelihood of Success** section of this guide. You can make it more narrative, but it is also fine to leave in the following format:
  - Activity:
  - Long-Term Impact:
- If this project frees up staff time, how will that time be used, and what will it make possible?: Use the language from the **Alignment with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Goals** section of this guide to discuss how your capacity building need will allow you to have a greater impact on meeting the Chesapeake Bay Agreement goal(s) you have identified.

### Justification and Strategic Context:

- **How You Chose This Need**

- How did you decide that this capacity need should take priority at this time? Use the language from the **Demonstrated Need & Justification** section of this guide. Consider also using the **CBT Organizational Capacity Assessment**.
- **Understanding Your Landscape and Watershed Impact**
  - This section is not intended to restate local challenges or project activities, which are addressed earlier. Instead, we are interested in how you understand your organization's role within the broader watershed ecosystem - Use the language from the **Strategic Value & Positioning within the Watershed Ecosystem** section of this guide.
- **Connection to Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Goals**
  - Does your mission or strategic plan directly align with one or more of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goals? - Use the language from the **Alignment with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Goals** section of this guide if there are applicable excerpts from your missions and/or strategic plan. If not, write "N/A" in this section.
  - Regardless of direct alignment in your mission or strategic plan, describe how your organization's work contributes to at least one Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goal. - Use the language from the **Alignment with the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Goals** section of this guide.

### **Sustainability**

- How will the benefits of this work continue beyond the grant period? - Use the language from the **Likelihood of Success** section of this guide.
  - If relevant to the proposed project, what plans, documentation, shared practices, or organizational structures are in place, or will be developed, to support continuity if staff roles shift or change?
  - If this project includes costs that will continue beyond the grant period, how do you plan to support them?

### **Partnerships and Contractors**

Reviewers will consider whether your team has the existing capacity and skillset to complete the proposed activities. If not, you may supplement your staff's role through partnerships and/or contractors.

Reviewers may not be familiar with your proposed partner(s) and/or contractors. You will want to clearly state who your partner is, why they were selected, and what their role is in the capacity building activity. **You should also collect letters of commitment from any partners that should restate their commitment to completing the tasks that you describe in your narrative.**

- **Partnerships and Collaboration** - Create a list of your partners and their roles in the capacity building effort. For each partner answer the following question in one or two sentences:
  - **Partner Name:**
  - **Role:**

- **Reason Selected:**
- **Contractor Use**
  - **Procurement** - For each contractor identify the procurement type and the contractor's role. For simplified acquisitions, clearly state that you have or will receive the required three quotes:
    - **Contractor:**
    - **Role/Tasks:**
    - **Acquisition Type:**
    - **Three Quotes:** For simplified acquisition only. Either type "received" or will receive"
  - **Cost Estimates**

How did you estimate the contractor's costs? - For each contractor, state how you estimated costs. While it is not required to have quotes in hand, reviewers will evaluate whether these costs seem justified so will want to see rationale like estimates, market research, or examples of similar work that either you or similar organizations have completed.
  - **If You Have Already Selected a Contractor**

Why did you choose this contractor? For each contractor list their name, role/tasks, and reason selected. Consider asking the contractor to submit to you a summary of their experience with similar projects if you do not have it on hand. They should be able to readily supply this.

    - **Contractor**
    - **Reason Selected:**

## Other Application Elements

### Supporting Documents

- Partner Letters of Commitment - Although this is not required, all partners necessary to complete the project should submit letters. Make sure this is communicated to partners and consider developing a pre-populated template letter that matches the narrative language.
- Board Letter of Support - While also not required, this is especially important to include if there will be ongoing costs that will need to be supported after the grant period (i.e. software, staff salaries, etc.) in order to demonstrate sustainability.
- Other supporting documents, such as contractor quotes, training learning objectives, strategic plan, etc. - Provide this type of information if appropriate and possible

### Budget

- The budget will be completed in CBT's new portal. More information will be provided soon.
- Make sure your budget adheres to federal funding requirements (see RFP for eligible expenses)
- If your organization has a NICRA, it must be uploaded with the application.