



MEMORANDUM

TO: Community Technology & Telecommunications Commission

FROM: Jesse Rodriguez, Program Manager
Financial Services Department - Telecom & Regulatory Affairs

DATE: September 13, 2023

SUBJECT: Grant For Technology Opportunities Program 2023 Action Plan

Background

The City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan, as adopted by [Resolution No. 20141120-074](#), includes every Austin resident having an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society, accessing and using digital and communications technology. Financial Services Department - Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs (FSD - TARA) is the lead office for implementation of this plan. The Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) is a grant administered by FSD - TARA directed at improving the community's ability to fully participate in the digital society to achieve the goals of the Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan.


Purpose and Process

The purpose of this report is to review the significant changes coming to the 2024 cycle of the GTOPs. Each year, FSD - TARA performs a review of the prior grant cycle in preparation for the next year of grants. For this year's annual strategic planning and review process, feedback surveys were deployed to all GTOPs applicants and reviewers. Contractor closeout reports also have process feedback questions, the response of which were included in the analysis. Lastly, staff observations collected throughout the year were considered. From these data sources, an Action Plan was drafted. This Action Plan is being presented to the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission for evaluation and feedback.

Please feel free to contact me at 512.974.7676 if you need additional information.

Jesse Rodriguez, Program Manager

Date



09/12/2023

cc: Rondella Hawkins, TARA Officer, FSD - TARA, Khotan Harmon, TARA Sr. Program Manager, FSD

Attachments

Attachment A – GTOPs 2023 Action Plan



Attachment A: GTOPs 2023 Action Plan

Action Item 1: Enhancements to the Applicant and Reviewer Experience

1. **Timely Recognition for Reviewers:** Current practice is for certificates of appreciation and gift cards to be provided to GTOPs Core reviewers at some time after final deliberation. Staff will change the process to deliver both gift cards and certificates of appreciation at the final deliberation session. This process update will be reflected on the GTOPs website and in all guidance documentation.
2. **Self-Service and Automation Enhancements:** Explore the possibility of making self-service and automated enhancements to the GTOPs structure:
 - a. *GTOPs Contact Management:* Create a system for folks to be able to add or change their contact information for GTOPs marketing updates. This could be linked on the GTOPs landing page and be periodically sent out to DECA contacts.
 - b. *Volunteer Opportunity Sharing:* Consider adding a section to the posted GTOPs awardee page and/or volunteer page for organizations to be able to contribute to a list of yearly volunteer programs.
 - c. *Automated Application Record Provision:* Implement a mechanism, automated or otherwise, whereby the GTOPs Mini and Capacity application is provided to applicants for their records.
3. **Rich Text Formatting In Applications:** The current application for GTOPs Core does not properly handle Rich Text. Going forward, we will allow Rich Text in the application.
4. **Resource Sharing in Award Disposition Email:** Several suggestions were received to share more information relating to other award opportunities, community resources, and devices. To address this, information will be added to the award decision notification to applicants, to include: List of community resources, information on other GTOPs award pathways, information on the Community PC Program, and relevant links and dates related to these.

Action Item 2: Targeted Updates to the Program Guidance Materials

1. **Guidance on Reviewer Score Removal:** The internal and external program guidance and panelist orientation material will be enhanced to include guidance on when and under what circumstances reviewer scores might be thrown out. This would be limited to cases where the scores are indefensibly out of line with the other scores without clear written justification, scores follow an indefensible pattern (e.g. all scores are 0/50/100), scores are found to have been done by a reviewer with conflicts of interest who should have recused from scoring, or other circumstances where inclusion of the scores will undermine the integrity of the overall scoring process.
2. **Notification of Award Rounding:** The internal and external program guidance will be updated to note that award amounts are rounded (either up or down, depending on funding).
3. **Detailed Program Guidance on Construction of Review Panels and Panelist Removal After Appointment:** The internal and external program guidance will be enhanced to clarify how panels are constructed, proper communication with panelists, and under what circumstances a reviewer might be removed and who has that authority.



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TARA staff maintain final control of all GTOPs processes, but does consult with the Community Technology and Telecommunications Commission (CTTC) at various stages of the GTOPs Process. This updated process will define how staff will handle panelist appointments in the future. Panelists will only be removed as needed by TARA staff due to the panelist not adhering to the code of conduct, acting in a way that causes ethical concerns, lack of ability to meet the requirements of being a panelist, or other circumstances in which keeping the panelist would endanger the integrity of the overall scoring process.

Action Item 3: Changes to the GTOPs Timeline

1. **More Review Binder Printing Time:** More time will be built into the GTOPs schedule between application close and reviewer orientation for the binder printing.
2. **Non-Weekend Deadlines:** Due to many requests being received, deadlines will be adjusted away from weekends. Staff will consider the merits of and decide on either a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday standard for deadlines.

Action Item 4: Changes to the GTOPs Applications

1. **GTOPs Capacity Application Question Connecting Funding to Digital Equity Programming:** One of the items that came up during the GTOPs Capacity review this year was the ambiguity many reviewers felt about how the request was going to support digital equity activity. To address this, a question will be added on the GTOPs Capacity application: "Describe the digital equity related programming that this funding would help to build capacity for, and describe how this funding will impact that programming."
2. **Improve the Performance Measure Form for GTOPs Mini:** Many organizations are having trouble navigating and successfully submitting the current performance measure form required for the GTOPs Mini application. A full review of the form and built-in guidance will be conducted, with the goal of making the form more navigable, easy to fill out, and clear to understand.
3. **Enhancements to the Q&A Process for GTOPs Core:** Several challenges with the current Q&A process were raised by applicants. The questions submitted are often unclear, ask questions that are answered in the application already, and ask the same question multiple times. In addition, the format of the questions (tables sent in emails) has been noted as hard to interact with. In response, the Q&A process will be changed to be a group activity by panelists to build in cross-checking, reduce redundancy, and enhance the clarity of questions submitted. The format that the question are provided will also be reviewed to be more user-friendly.

Action Item 5: Changes to the GTOPs Review Panels

1. **Increase Minimum Panel Size:** The minimum recommended number of reviewers will be raised for GTOPs Core to 8, for GTOPs Mini to 6, and for Capacity to 4.

Action Item 6: Explore Ways to Encourage and Facilitate Exposure and Networking Opportunities for Grantees

1. **Exposure and Networking Opportunities for GTOPs Awardees:** A significant amount of feedback was received requesting additional opportunities for project share-out, for networking between awardees, and to generally be more connected around the work being done. Staff will investigate ways for GTOPs awardees to be able to highlight their projects, to meet each other, and to learn from each other.



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Action Item 7: Work with Law Department to Evaluate Possible Changes to the GTOPs Contract and Contract Requirements

1. **Use of GTOPs Awards for Required Insurance:** Every year of GTOPs, feedback is received on the onerous nature of the insurance coverages required by the City. The possibility of changing the contract terms to allow grant funds to be used for GTOPs required coverages will be explored.
2. **Blanket Waiver of Liability in Lieu of Insurance Requirements:** Every year of GTOPs, feedback is received on the onerous nature of the insurance coverages required by the City. The possibility of removing insurance requirements in cases where the grantee agrees to a blanket waiver of liability clause in favor of the City will be discussed with Law Department.
3. **Protecting Personally Identifiable Information (PII) for Awardees:** In an effort to allow for protection of the PII collected by awardees, Law Department will be consulted on protecting PII in the cases of audits. A balance between robust audit compliance and protection of PII will be the goal.
4. **Termination Without Cause:** The Termination Without Cause clause of the contract, which allows for the City to unilaterally terminate the agreement without cause, has been objected to by awardees. Law Department will be consulted on the possibility of removing this clause.

Action Item 8: Re-Incorporate GTOPs Connect Funding to Other GTOPs Pathways

1. **Close GTOPs Connect:** GTOPs Connect has been a successful grant pathway, but with federal support of the program in question, the GTOPs Connect Pathway will be closed, with funds being re-allocated to other GTOPs funding pathways.