



JUNE 2005 STAKEHOLDER MEETING MINUTES
June 29, 2005

Next Meeting

Date: Wednesday, August 31, 2005

Time: 1:30 pm- 3:30 pm

Place: HHS – Hubert H. Humphrey Building

All meeting materials and presentations are available at Grants.gov by visiting <http://www.grants.gov/meetingmaterials062905>.

Opening Remarks and Presentation:

Ms. Rebecca Spitzgo, Grants.gov Program Manager, began the meeting at 1:30 pm with the following agenda:

- Grants.gov Update and “Goal Star: Achievers
- Grants.gov System Performance and Support Update
- OMB Grants Systems Data Call Objectives and Findings
- GAO P.L. 106-107 Audit Findings Overview
- Questions & Answers

Grants.gov Update

Ms. Spitzgo provided the Grants.gov Update. Grants.gov usage has soared in the past few weeks. The number of electronic grant application submissions doubled in May 2005 from 3,751 to 7,505. In June 2005, Grants.gov expects the number of submissions will exceed that of May 2005. To date, the number of authorized registered users exceeds 12,000. This number represents those that are completely registered, approximately 80% of total registered users. There were more than 11,000 electronic submissions, with nearly 1,200 submissions in the past week alone. Grants.gov is expecting to reach its 15,000 electronic submission goal by the end of July or sooner. Over 1,100 applications packages were posted by the agencies. National Science Foundations (NSF) posted their first application package to Grants.gov. The Applicant System-to-System (S2S) functionality was successfully deployed. Applications were successfully received through the Applicant S2S from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and InfoEd which is a government-wide servicer. The receiving agencies were the Department of Energy and NSF.

Several agencies were recognized for becoming a Grants.gov “Goal” Star and meeting their goal of electronic applications received. They are:

- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Interior

- National Endowment for the Arts
- Small Business Administration
- Department of Energy

National Endowment for the Humanities and the Environmental Protection Agency are on the horizon to becoming the next Grants.gov “Goal” Stars.

Ms. Spitzgo continued the update by discussing the Executive Board Expansion to include all 26 grant-making agencies. The first full Board meeting is July 13, 2005 to discuss finalizing the charter, the funding algorithm and the Grants Management Line of Business (Grants LOB) which NSF and the Department of Health and Human Services have become managing partners. In the August Stakeholder Meeting, Charlie Havekost and Mary Santonastasso will present on the Grants LOB.

Also on the site, a survey created by the American Customer Satisfaction Index Satisfaction Survey is being distributed. The survey is randomly generated and the data is accessible real-time. Survey questions can be altered quickly and easily. The Department of Treasury runs the survey and it is standardized across the Federal government. It rates the importance of site functionality and compares websites across the government, helping Grants.gov to focus on what’s important.

The Grants.gov Find and Apply merger contract was awarded in mid-April to InfoZen. InfoZen is expected to submit a report to Grants.gov on July 8th, which will provide more details regarding the schedule for the merger. The merger is expected to be complete by the end of October 2005.

The PureEdge and Mac issue continues to be a struggle, however, with the development of Applicant S2S, Grants.gov now offers a solution that provides a platform that is independent to allow applicants to submit applications. Also, Grants.gov participated in a NIH Citrix Pilot for their Pioneer Award with no negative feedback, though participation was small. The NIH Citrix system will continue to be used until the license for the Java browser is acquired in the November 2006-May 2007 timeframe.

Grants.gov recently met with Clay Johnson from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a follow-up to the OMB marketing analysis conducted by Edelman earlier this year. The main focus of this meeting was to discuss Grants.gov’s Performance Measures, which will measure when Grants.gov has completed its goals and also determine what indicators measure this completeness. The final Grants.gov business case will outline and answer these questions.

A Grants.gov User Group will soon be established and will be expected to meet monthly. Grants.gov will have more information regarding the user group in mid-July.

Lastly, training on the Agency DAT toolkit will be conducted August 9-11, 2005. The session will be hands-on, with representation from each agency.

Q: What is the name of MIT's system that supports Applicant S2S?

A: COEUS.

Ms. Spitzgo then introduced Mr. John. Etcheverry, Grants.gov Deputy Program Manager to provide the Grants.gov System Performance and Support Update.

Grants.gov System Performance and Support Update

Mr. Etcheverry began the update by outlining recent system challenges with the Contact Center (CC), the Grants.gov system and processing times.

Grants.gov experienced a Denial of Service (DOS) attack, an explicit attempt to prevent legitimate users from gaining access of a website by flooding it with "sanctioned" requests, on the server on or around May 17, 2005. The attack clogged up the system with over 40,000 requests for PureEdge downloads. In the intervening time since the DOS attack, there also was a high volume of system activity: over 450 opportunities closed with more than 7,000 applications received. Large applications were also being submitted, anywhere from 100 MB up to 950 MB. At no point during the DOS attack was there a security breach – the data was never at risk. In response to the attack, network security blocked all traffic from the offending IP addresses and updated intrusion detection service parameters.

The Grants.gov Contact Center also experienced issues with response times. There was a surge in site usage resulting in excessive wait times in the calling queue and for email inquiry responses. As a result, the Contact Center staff was increased by 50% and overtime was authorized to clear the email backlog. Messages were also updated to help facilitate self-help. A provision was added to allow for Overflow Agents when wait queues are greater than five minutes. Callers are also provided approximate wait times when they call the Contact Center.

The surge in site usage coupled with a program reposting of a large (15MB) instruction package resulted in CPU utilization peaking as high as 70-90% during business hours, and there were tens of thousands of redundant emails sent and downloads of instructions and packages. Therefore to solve these problems:

- A Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) accelerator was installed to help unencrypt and encrypt files quickly
- A RAID-5 server was installed
- Two additional servers were installed; currently Grants.gov has three servers for processing submissions and one other handling all downloads
- Additional site monitoring tools were installed
- Downloads are now segregated from submissions
- Dynamic generation of application packages were converted to static

Grants.gov also experienced delays in processing applications. The problem is that applicants and agencies are accustomed to an "immediate" validation response upon successful submission of an application. However, in recent weeks, these email notifications have been less than immediate due to large file sizes. As a solution,

Grants.gov will add a notice to the For Grantors section notifying agencies to allow 24-48 hours. Please note that the timestamp is the time an application was submitted, not the time that it was validated.

Another problem that Grants.gov experienced involved a large volume of submissions (~2/3) that failed to match with user logins for a period because of the introduction of the third server into production. A software patch was installed to correct the problem. The patch requires manual matching, but this is transparent to the applicant. Clustering software, which will be acquired soon, will resolve this problem permanently.

Other concerns include applicants who create applications nearing 1 GB, for which applicant system limitations may preclude them from being able to submit to Grants.gov. Agencies should review package requirements and provide “How to” tips when requiring applicants to scan any information. When agencies post packages, Grants.gov knows little about them, other than the closing date and the size of the empty package. In the future, Grants.gov will ask posting agencies to provide:

- Expected number of submissions
- Whether or not e-application is required
- Average expected file size

Grants.gov also will limit the number of program closings to 50/day.

These are a few things on the horizon for Grants.gov:

- Availability of an *Applicant Report* and *Organization Report* to agencies
- An enhanced registration progress tracking for applicants
- Long-term architecture planning session in August

Q: Is the proposed number of allowable programs closings for Grants.gov or each agency?

A: 50 program closings for Grants.gov per day.

Q: What happens when there are multiple submissions?

A: For individuals who uploaded multiple times and failed to log in properly, only the successful attempts were processed and forwarded. In the case of multiple successful submissions (e.g. modifications to a submission and subsequent re-submittal), we forward all submissions to the agency just as the post office would forward all paper submissions. Agencies can handle the multiple submissions per their internal policy.

Q: What happens when there are multiple registrations for one person?

A: The additional registrations are not deleted. Only the E-Biz Point of Contact can delete registrations.

Ms. Spitzgo proceeded to introduce Ms. Stacie Higgins from OMB to discuss the OMB Grants Systems Data Call Objectives and Findings.

OMB Grants Systems Data Call Objectives and Findings

On May 9, 2005, OMB asked all E-Government initiatives to provide cost savings generated through implementation by June 3rd and that the data provided should be analytically determined, understandable, and defensible. The intent was to share these figures with Congress and the public, not to use the data provided to rescind budget authority. This has been an ongoing effort and OMB will periodically request updates to this information

The data call analyzed Budgeted Cost Savings vs. Cost Avoidance. Budgeted Cost Savings are qualified savings such as reduced capital asset and operating costs generated by the E-Government initiative which comprised part of an appropriated budget for the stated fiscal year. Some savings may be derived from canceling or scaling back of existing or planned projects. Other savings could result from efficiencies that lowered personnel or supply costs offer. Agencies may have redirected, reprogrammed, or transferred the savings to fund other authorized activities. In some cases, agencies may have returned funds to the Treasury. Cost Avoidance includes current and/or future capital asset and operating costs precluded by the E-Government initiative. Unlike budgeted cost savings, qualified savings do not result from procurements or activities, which comprised part of appropriated budget for the stated fiscal year. Some savings may emerge because the initiative obviated the need to purchase future system upgrades or implement costlier maintenance schedules. Other savings could occur because the initiative generated efficiencies that structurally reduced future labor and supply requirements.

Expectations were set based on information that had been previously reported. Unfortunately, Cost Savings totals were less than previously reported. There was substantial variability in methods and data sources used to calculate savings which presents itself an opportunity to have uniform reporting measure across the government.

With the information that was gathered, next steps include briefing Karen Evans and Congress and sharing the results with the E-Government initiatives. OMB also plans to establish a schedule and process for cost savings performance and accountability reports.

Q: Will OMB consider systems that have been functional outside of Grants.gov?

A: Substantial costs saving/avoidance were not expected. However, the data call was in line with P.L. 106-107 mandating for an e-government system for a common mechanism to Find and Apply for Federal grants.

Q: Are the data calls to e-government or agency?

A: In the past, data calls have been to e-government. This particular data call was sent directly to Grants.gov to work with the agencies to collect the information.

Q: Will the results of the data call be posted to the e-government site?

A: The information will probably become public. Please contact the initiative directly for more information.

Ms. Spitzgo then introduced Ms. Carol Patey from the Government Accountability Audit (GAO) to discuss the GAO P.L. 106-107 Audit findings overview.

GAO P.L. 106-107 Audit Findings Overview

Ms. Patey discussed the P.L. 106-107, Section 7, which mandated that GAO shall evaluate the effectiveness of the act, PL 106-107 with input from state, local, and tribal governments, and nonprofit organizations. The findings were published in April 2005.

The evaluation:

- Assessed the act's effectiveness in meeting its purposes and to make specific recommendations to further the act's implementation
- Evaluated agencies' performance in achieving goals and objectives in agency plans
- Assessed coordination among OMB, Federal agencies, state, local, and tribal governments, and nonprofits

The Goals of the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999 otherwise known as PL 106-107 are to:

- Improve effectiveness and performance of assistance programs
- Simplify application and reporting requirements
- Improve the delivery of services to the public
- Facilitate greater coordination among those delivering services

Requirements of PL 106-107 state that OMB shall direct, coordinate, and assist agencies in establishing:

- A common application or set of common applications
- A common system, including electronic processes, where a grantee can apply for, manage, and report on the use of funding from multiple programs with similar purposes administered by different agencies
- Uniform administrative rules across agencies
- An interagency process to streamline and simplify procedures and reporting requirements, improve coordination of information collection and data sharing, and improve quality of information received by agencies

This required agencies to:

- Develop and publish an initial plan (done together)
- Obtain public comments on the plan and consult with non-Federal entities during plan development and implementation.
- Participate in interagency processes and streamline and simplify their own procedures
- Report annually on plan implementation

First phase in addressing the mandate was to evaluate grant reform initiatives with a focus on activities undertaken by the Federal agencies and cross-agency work groups. Thus far, the following have been reviewed and analyzed:

- Initial plan and its development
- Cross-agency work groups – initiatives and progress
- Grants.gov
- Grants Management Line of Business
- Agencies' annual progress and activity reports and interviews with grant officials at DOT, HHS, NEH, and NSF

Results show that agencies have made some progress in streamlining parts of the early phases of the grant life cycle and some specific parts of overall grants management, but efforts toward a common electronic system for reporting financial and performance information have not progressed. Cross-agency groups have also coordinated their grant streamlining efforts but coordination with the grantee community was more limited.

Examples of projects completed include:

- Standard announcement format
- Electronic grant identification system (through Grants.gov)
- Electronic application system (through Grants.gov)
- Streamlined cost principles across circulars
- Updated the OMB Circular A-133 *Compliance Supplement* annually
- Increased audit threshold for single audits from \$300,000 to \$500,000

These are a few examples of projects underway:

- Expanding Grants.gov to accept electronic plans and applications for mandatory grants (completed since the time the Audit report was published)
- Developing standard award notice and standard government-wide terms and conditions
- Posting mandatory grant awards announcements on Grants.gov (completed since the time the Audit report was published)
- Consolidating to three payment systems (with common data elements and a common front-end)
- Developing common financial and performance progress report forms
- Co-locating OMB guidance and agency regulations that implement the guidance in Title 2 of CFR

Two key projects are Grants.gov and the Grants Management Line of Business. Grants.gov is where agencies are required to post all discretionary grant opportunities with search capabilities and a notification system. Most agencies have some grants available for electronic application through Grants.gov. The other key project, the Grants Management Line of Business, has the objective of developing a government-wide solution to support end-to-end grants management activities.

Cross-agency teams that address streamlining with representation from agencies and some contract support include:

- Pre-Award
- Post-Award

- Mandatory Grants
- Audit Oversight
- Training and Certification

These cross-agency teams are overseen by changing groups. The groups oversee three different initiatives: cross-agency work groups, Grants.gov and the Grants Management Line of Business.

When developing initial plans and identifying areas for teams to address, input from grantees was obtained via meetings with grantee sectors, through seeking public comments, and building a database to help develop the plan. A plan was developed to maintain ongoing communication with grantees as Grants.gov does, actively seeking input from users as it evolves. At this point in time, it is unclear the extent to which the Grants Management Line of Business will involve grantees.

GAO recommends that OMB:

- Ensure that agency and cross-agency initiatives have clear goals for completion
- Ensure that annual progress reports are prepared and include information on progress toward goals
- Ensure that work on a common grant-reporting system are on track
- Ensure integration of initiatives (HHS' P.L. 106-107 efforts, Grants.gov, and Grants Management Line of Business)
- Solicit grantee input and coordinate with grantees on an ongoing basis

The meeting concluded at 3:30 pm.