



Next Step Grant Outline & FAQ Document

The Next Step Grant is a flexible, deliverables-driven grant designed to help Vermont Foodbank Network Partners invest in ongoing learning that leads to durable organizational improvement and increased financial sustainability.

We understand that many of our partners face the realities of limited staffing or fundraising infrastructure, inconsistent access to training, and limited time to step away from serving neighbors. We hope the Next Step Grant helps with these by reducing financial barriers to learning and by creating space for reflection on how to embed learning at the organizational level.

This grant supports partners who are ready to take a focused next step for their organizational learning. The focus of the next step can vary, depending on the current needs of your organization but we hope next steps will help partners:

- Clarify roles, systems, and expectations
- Build stronger leadership and succession plans
- Strengthen financial and fundraising practices
- Gain organizational clarity around strategy and scope

Projects are meant to focus on only one clear deliverable at a time to produce outcomes that clearly connect learning to meaningful organizational improvements. Partners may apply multiple times throughout the fiscal year. Partners may only apply *one time for each of the three available funding tiers* per year. Areas of focus are meant to build organizational resiliency for partners, including:

- Financial sustainability (budgeting, systems, or policies, etc.)
- Fundraising development (donor cultivation, fundraising strategies, etc.)
- Succession planning
- Policy, procedures, or role clarity
- Organizational agility & responsiveness

Strategic planning (with or without external consultation) may be used as a method, but the emphasis remains on practical and actionable outcomes.



The Next Step grant is *not* designed to fund ongoing operational costs. This should be viewed as a chance for Network Partners to have an opportunity to prioritize new learning and to work toward a concrete product that embeds self-improvement in their organization.

Funding Tiers & Associated Expectations:

Funding Tier 1:

Funding Range: \$100-\$500

Examples of use: Single online course, webinar or small learning resource.

Examples of deliverables:

- Short narrative describing what you learned, how it will be applied organizationally, and how others in your organization will benefit.
- A brief plan for implementing a new volunteer practice or procedure
- A personalized version of a toolkit gained through a training, completed for your organization

Funding Tier 2:

Funding Range: \$501-\$2,500

Examples of use: Multi-session trainings, small consultant projects, targeted internal improvement

Examples of deliverables might be a medium-sized practical output, such as:

- A new volunteer onboarding process
- A board recruitment tool that can be institutionalized and passed down to new Board members
- A financial tracking system to more closely monitor fundraising versus expenses
- A new HR policy that measurably improves staff or volunteer safety or experiences

Funding Tier 3:

Funding Range: \$2,501-\$5,000



Examples of use: Comprehensible actionable products that have meaningful organizational impact such as Executive Director certifications or consultant-supported projects.

Examples of deliverables might be:

- A full fundraising plan for the next 1-2 fiscal years
- A succession plan for key leadership at the organization
- A section of an internal policies or operations manual
- Multi-year strategic priority clarity that is clearly documented for longevity

The Next Step grant *does* fund:

- Trainings, webinars, and certificate costs
- Conference registration fees
- Certificate programs
- Consultant support for a project

The Next Step grant *does not* fund:

- Ongoing operational expenses
- General staff expenses
- Food purchasing
- Consultant time that does not contribute to a learning deliverable
- Individual's personal learning goals unrelated to organizational growth
- Travel expenses associated with conferences or trainings

Application Overview:

The application will be designed to be short and accessible. Partners can expect to describe:

- The learning opportunity or development project they want to accomplish
- The specific deliverable they will produce from their learning



- The level of effort involved
- How the learning will strengthen organizational resilience

Only one deliverable may be funded per application.

Reporting on Learning:

Reporting expectations, like depth of learning, is meant to scale with the amount of funding awarded for a project. Overall, reporting will focus on:

- The associated final deliverable
- A short reflection on what was learned
- How the learning has been embedded into the organization.

Partners may be asked for permission so that Vermont Foodbank can translate their deliverables or their knowledge into an ongoing learning opportunity for the broader Network.



Frequently Asked Questions

Who is eligible to apply for this grant?

Any staff or volunteers associated with a Vermont Foodbank Network Partner may apply for a Next Step Grant. Anyone who receives grant funding will be expected to explain how the learning will be embedded at the organizational level. The Next Step Grant is not available to organizations who are not Network Partners with Vermont Foodbank.

What is the application and reporting timeline for the Next Step Grant?

Next Step Grant review and reporting happen on a rolling basis throughout Vermont Foodbank's fiscal year (October – September). Network Partners may apply for a Next Step Grant at any time between when the application opens in October and August 31st. Reporting must be submitted by October 31st. Partners who would like to apply multiple times in a year will not be eligible to re-apply for another Next Step Grant until reporting has been submitted for the previous grant award.

Is this a competitive grant? What makes a strong application?

Yes, this is part of Vermont Foodbank's competitive grantmaking program. The application process is meant to be short and accessible. Applications are reviewed on the merits of their potential impact for your organization, not scored against each other. However, the application approval is dependent on a clear explanation of who will be doing the learning, a clear framing of the deliverable from the project, and a clear plan of how the learning will be embedded into the organization. If there are questions or concerns about any part of an application, Vermont Foodbank may request clarification. Applications may also be denied if Vermont Foodbank feels like the scope of your project is not the right fit for this grant opportunity.

Can we apply more than once?



Yes, Network Partners may apply for one learning deliverable in each of the three available tiers. This means partners may receive the following all in the same fiscal year (October – September):

- Tier 1 award: (\$100-\$500)
- Tier 2 award: (\$501-\$2,500)
- Tier 3 award: (\$2,501-\$5000)

Can we use funds for consultant-supported deliverables?

Yes, consultant-supported work is eligible under any funding tier. The same expectations apply regarding clear ownership of your organization’s learning, deliverable, and an explanation of how that learning is embedded in your organization. Projects that will not be utilized at the organizational level are not eligible for funding.

For example, using a Next Step Grant to work with a consultant on a fundraising development plan that your Board or Executive Director will work to execute might be an eligible expense.

Applying to hire a consultant for 1-on-1 personal coaching or to facilitate an annual Board retreat most likely would not be eligible, unless the applicant could draw a clear explanation between the funding used to pay for that consultant and a clear learning goal as well as an actionable deliverable that meaningfully impacts the organization.

Is strategic planning allowed?

Yes, we recognize for many organizations this is a critical need to strengthen long-term organizational resiliency. Given the funding cap of the Next Step Grant, we’d encourage applicants interested in strategic planning to be realistic about how much work might be supported by a Next Step Grant and to apply with a clear understanding of what the reported deliverable of the process will be.

Can this fund volunteer training?



Yes! Volunteers are critically important to the work Vermont Foodbank's Network does to nourish our communities. Network Partners applying on behalf of volunteers should be confident that the volunteer(s) will be able to follow and report on the grant parameters to the same level as any other applicant.

What if we're not sure what our deliverables will be yet?

Tier 1 Projects are intentionally designed to support early learning. The key is being able to demonstrate a clear plan for how learning will translate to organizational change. This can look as straightforward as taking an online training opportunity in an area of organizational need, reflecting on how the learning applies to your organization, and sharing a 1-page document of key learnings (*the grant deliverable*) at an upcoming Board meeting. The point of the Next Step Grant deliverable is not to be prescriptive or penalizing, but to encourage shared learning among the Network.