

Rural Access to Financial Services Initiative

Request for Proposals: Planning Grants

Early submissions due February 26, 2021

Final applications due March 26, 2021

Background

Powered by a network of credit unions, the Northwest Credit Union Foundation (NWCUF) is uniquely positioned to harness and deliver resources that strengthen the financial lives of people throughout our region. We do this through asset building, economic empowerment, and cooperative development. In cooperation with the Northwest Credit Union Association (NWCUA), we help more than 165 Idaho, Oregon, and Washington credit unions achieve positive social impact in their communities.

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Our region has diverse landscapes, ranging from urban metropolises to the rural countryside. The challenges facing urban and rural communities differ greatly, resulting in a range of needs and approaches to financial health. Rural communities are rich with opportunities for innovative collaboration and out-of-the-box solutions. When faced with change, they are resilient, finding unique solutions to challenges and utilizing nontraditional resources. With the exodus of bank branches, the rural landscape is a prime environment for credit unions to pilot new products and services to better serve these communities.

Our region's rural communities are far more diverse — and have far greater potential — than the national dialogue suggests. When credit unions come to the table with the right mix of flexible financial services for rural families and businesses, they play an important role in the economic vitality of present and future rural communities. Credit unions are uniquely positioned to think creatively and leverage resources to support the financial health of rural communities.

The Northwest Credit Union Foundation will serve as a hub for incubating innovative ideas that improve access to financial services options across our rural communities. We will partner with credit unions, providing funding and resources, to pilot new solutions to rural challenges and help increase financial well-being across all of our Northwest communities. NWCUF will work to connect with other philanthropic organizations and funders interested in supporting this work in the Northwest region to further the efforts of credit unions.

We invite all NWCUA member credit unions interested in applying for financial support to address rural access to financial services in their communities to submit their interest to NWCUF [here](#). If your credit union would like feedback on your proposal prior to submitting your final application, please submit your plan by February 26. NWCUF staff is happy to provide feedback and clarify any questions applicants may have on their proposals.

Early submissions are not required but are strongly encouraged, especially for first-time applicants. All final grant submissions are due by no later than 6 p.m. PST on **March 26**.

Overview

The long-term goal of NWCUF's rural access initiative is to spur innovative approaches to increase access and affordability to financial services in our rural areas. Nationally, credit unions that are effectively working in the rural space are successful because of the partnerships they develop to bolster resources, encourage innovation in existing practices, and decrease barriers to products and services for members. Being community-based cooperatives, credit unions have close relationships with their membership base and local partners that big banks, traditional mortgage brokers, and the current alternative lending market simply do not have. These connections to the community make the design and delivery of innovative solutions not only possible, but an incredible opportunity to showcase credit unions as leaders in addressing the lack of adaptability and services to rural areas across the country. We also encourage credit unions to see this grant as an opportunity to increase their membership in underserved markets or connect with additional community partners.

Defining Rural

Rural has a variety of definitions, but for purposes of this NWCUF grant opportunity, the Foundation considers rural areas as the following:

- Any population, territory, sovereign nation, or tribal lands with populations under 30,000 and/or a lack of proximity to urban areas (50,000 or more)
- With a special consideration for communities with limited infrastructure such as social services, healthcare, public transportation, or economic services (access to financial services included).

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

NWCUF is committed to supporting efforts that improve equitable access to financial services in our Northwest communities. NWCUF believes credit unions are the solution to offering affordable products and services to those who have been traditionally underserved by the financial services industry. The Northwest is home to agricultural landscapes and urban metropolises, filled with families and residents from all different backgrounds. Our rural businesses and residents need a different approach than their urban counterparts, and with higher levels of underbanked populations and a lack of brick and mortar institutions, rural communities are often left without high quality options.

Diversity is woven into and looks different in every community – from cultural practices to economic status to multigenerational households. In order to create relevant and accessible products and services for your membership, NWCUF encourages you to include a diverse group of stakeholders into your planning and design process. These varied perspectives will support your credit union’s understanding of the needs and challenges facing underserved populations so that you may create pertinent solutions to the historical, cultural, and institutional barriers impacting their access to financial services. NWCUF believes credit unions have a role in including diverse voices in their institutions to positively impact the financial health of our Northwest communities.

Types of Eligible Projects

NWCUF is committed to supporting innovative solutions in rural communities across the Northwest. Rural access to financial services is a complex issue with no single solution that will work for all communities or populations. However, NWCUF is interested in funding grants that identify nontraditional or “out of the box” solutions that are responsive to the needs of local communities. The project should focus on impacting rural populations in the credit union’s field of membership. What works in urban regions might not be what works in rural areas, and what works in Idaho might not fit in Washington, etc. Some credit unions may choose to identify ways they can positively impact small businesses or entrepreneurs, while others may choose to focus on how they can help members build their credit or create a unique product to match a local need. With this funding opportunity, the sky is the limit.

Planning Grants

The Northwest Credit Union Foundation is currently accepting planning grant applications for credit unions interested in expanding their service to rural communities or piloting innovative new approaches. Planning grants are an opportunity to explore your membership’s specific needs or the role your credit union can play in addressing local issues impacting your rural membership. The purpose of a planning grant is to identify a local need or challenge faced by residents in rural communities and then develop an action plan to pilot solutions to address the barrier. The plan should be well-reasoned, broadly accepted by your stakeholders, and specifically designed to identify and address the unique challenges faced by your credit union’s own communities.

Through this grant opportunity, NWCUF will fund a variety of opportunities, including feasibility studies, financial analysis, policy research and development, project management expenses (staff time), focus groups, and any other reasonable expenses necessary to fully develop a product, service or program to expand rural access to financial services. Planning grants recipients will not be guaranteed project grant funding after completion of their planning activities. However, NWCUF is committed to building valuable relationships with Northwest credit unions and will work to help your credit union achieve its community impact goals.

Some examples of project explorations could include:

- Employer sponsored small dollar lending;

- Energy loans (agriculture, small business, or personal);
- Home improvement or rehabilitation loans (work-from-home investments, adding an ADU, increasing ADA compliance, etc.);
- Small business/entrepreneur loans or childcare provider loans ;
- Rural cooperative loans (housing, farming, land trust, etc.);
- Infrastructure assessments (broadband needs, ITM/ATMs, financial deserts, etc.).

Eligibility Requirements for Credit Unions

NWCUF invites applications from all NWCUA member credit unions. Rural access projects must focus on credit union communities in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Credit unions are welcome to partner and combine their efforts to form a collective project; only one submission is needed as long as the partner credit unions are defined in the Team and Partnerships section of the application. If you are submitting a collective proposal, it is strongly encouraged to submit your plan in the first application window, **February 26**, to make sure you have all the needed information for a joint submission.

Letter of Commitment

In order to increase the sustainability of the proposed projects, NWCUF will require a letter of commitment from each credit union or credit union partnership that applies for the grant on their credit union's level of contribution to their project and what resources will be dedicated to make it successful. This could include staff time, marketing support, interest subsidies, charitable contributions to community partners (related to the project), direct investment, and more.

Priority Funding

While all applications will be considered, priority will be given to applications that include collaboration between multiple credit unions, first-time applicants for NWCUF program grants, and proposals that incorporate a DEI framework. Also, we will look to support unique and innovative approaches to increasing access to financial services to rural communities and more "out of the box" solutions. We encourage credit unions to utilize NWCUF grant funds as an opportunity to pilot new products or initiatives versus the continuation or expansion of your credit union's current offerings.

Funding Availability and Award Range

NWCUF has committed funds to grant rural access projects in 2021. While we anticipate making awards of up to \$15,000, we anticipate making average awards of \$8-12,000. Each credit union or credit union partnership is encouraged to apply for the reasonable funding necessary to implement a planning project as detailed in your application, but applicants will not be negatively impacted for requesting the full award of \$15,000. We encourage credit unions to find opportunities to utilize funds from additional funders or project partners as a matching component for this project proposal, but it is not a requirement of submission. NWCUF is committed to supporting credit unions having a positive

impact in rural communities and will work in partnership with credit unions to identify future funding opportunities, regardless if they receive NWCUF grant awards.

Award Timeline

NWCUF strongly encourages you to submit your interest in applying for rural access grants as soon as possible to allow NWCUF staff time to follow up with each inquiry. There are two important deadlines for this planning grant opportunity. The deadline for the final submission of applications for this RFP will close on **March 26 at 6 p.m. PST**. NWCUF anticipates making grant award announcements by May 2021. NWCUF staff is available during the entire RFP application window to answer any questions or provide additional information or resources.

If your credit union is a first-time applicant or if you want to get feedback on your proposal prior to your final submission, it is recommended you submit an application by **February 26 at 6 p.m. PST**. By submitting early, NWCUF can review your application and provide feedback to your project. This will allow time for any revisions to your proposal and the ability to resubmit a final application by the final deadline. You will not be penalized for utilizing the early application window. Please reach out if you have any questions.

Submission Guidelines

Please submit your interest in the NWCUF Rural Access Initiative to Claire Hendrix at chendrix@nwcua.org or online [here](#). All planning project applications are due by no later than **6 p.m. PST on March 26**. To access the grant application forms, visit our [website](#). All fields must be completed before the form can be submitted. There will not be an option to change or edit your application once it has been submitted, unless submitted before the first application window (Feb. 26). However, if new opportunities arise or key elements of your plan need revision after you submit your application, please contact NWCUF to discuss the needed modifications.

Grant Application Details

NWCUF upholds the credit union mantra of People Helping People and believes this rural access grant is an opportunity to do just that. We are looking for planning projects that are intuitive to community needs and identify opportunities for long-term sustainability. Planning projects should be ready for implementation by the time of the grant award in May 2021.

The following includes a general overview of the rural access grant applications requirements and questions:

- **Proposal Narrative**
 - *Project Title*

- ***Community Needs Being Addressed***
 - What is the state of rural communities in your field of membership? What barriers to accessing financial products and services exist? Please include supporting data and facts, where possible.
- ***Credit Union's Experience in Serving Rural***
 - Describe your credit union's history with offering products or services (including mortgages, small business loans, credit building products, financial education, agriculture based loans, etc.) to rural members.
- ***How will you utilize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion frameworks or principles in your project?***
 - Does your credit union already have policies around diversity, equity, and inclusion? If so, what are they and how will you utilize them in this project? If not, how will you build DEI principles into your project or your credit union?
- **Project Plan**
 - ***Project Description***
 - Please provide an overview for your intended project. What research or focus groups will you complete to help you better understand your communities' needs? What topics or opportunities do you want to explore?
 - ***Impact***
 - Describe your credit union's long-term goals and metrics for success, as well as any project deliverables you are hoping for with this grant award. How will you know if this planning project is successful?
 - ***Beneficiaries and Community Outreach***
 - Describe the populations that are most likely to ultimately benefit from your project. Are you planning to target services/products to specific underserved or minority populations? How do you plan to engage these groups during the planning process?
 - ***Team and Partnerships***
 - NWCUF will prioritize funding to those credit unions who demonstrate an intent to collaborate and partner with other credit unions and nonprofits.
 - Please identify who from your credit union will be working on this project (internal team) and other credit unions, if any, you have partnered with.
 - List partnerships (community-based organizations, private market, government agencies, etc.) you are currently working with or interested in engaging.
 - ***Timeline***
 - What is the general timeline for you to implement your planning project? What are the key milestones for you to keep your project on track?
 - ***Budget***
 - Provide a detailed budget (to the best of your ability) on the necessary expenses to complete your planning project. Identify how you will utilize NWCUF funds (and credit union resources).

- If uncertain about your project's budget allocation, please reach out to NWCUF to clarify eligible budget expenses.
- **Additional documentation**
 - ***Letter of Commitment***
 - Each credit union or credit union partnership that applies for the grant will need to include a letter stating their credit union's level of contribution to the project and what resources will be dedicated to make it successful. This could include staff time, marketing support, charitable contributions to community partners (related to the project), direct investment, and more.

Reporting

Every credit union or credit union project receiving a grant from NWCUF has a responsibility to report on the use of grant funds. Upon grant award, NWCUF and the recipient credit union(s) will enter into a grant agreement with mutually agreed upon project deliverables. There will be reporting requirements throughout the grant period that will be submitted to NWCUF. Failure to meet project deliverables or to comply with other grant agreement articles could influence future grant decisions by NWCUF.

Engagement with NWCUF and Other Grantees

Every credit union receiving a grant from NWCUF will be expected to participate in check-in meetings with NWCUF staff. Additionally, it may be beneficial from time to time for all grantees, and possibly partners, to discuss best practices, challenges, and progress toward project deliverables as a collective group. For this purpose, NWCUF will coordinate in-person, video, and/or phone meetings and grantees will be strongly encouraged to participate.

NWCUF recognizes this rural access grantee cohort will be serving very different and diverse population segments and will therefore be taking unique approaches to address the needs of their individual communities. However, NWCUF believes there is great value in collectively sharing and discussing these approaches to create new connections and further the impact of the Rural Access Initiative across the Northwest. NWCUF may also identify professional development opportunities that will benefit the collective work of all grantees and require participation from credit unions in these trainings.

Also, to further showcase the great work Northwest credit unions, NWCUF may ask you to share about your project with other credit unions, at NWCUA events, or with the NWCUA Advocacy team to share with legislators. We will work with credit unions on opportunities to share out about their work through Anthem and other outlets.

Resources

Below are some resources to support you in creating your plans. Please feel free to reach out to Program Director, Claire Hendrix, if you would like any additional information or assistance with your proposal.

- Rural Resources
 - [USDA](#): Rural Development Initiatives
 - Federal Reserve Report: [Bank Branch Access in Rural Communities](#)
 - Aspen Institute: [Rural Hubs](#)
 - [Rural Health Information Hub](#)
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resources
 - CU Management: [Next Step for Credit Unions](#)
 - Filene Research Institute: [Center for DEI](#)
- Grant Writing Resources
 - University of Wisconsin – Madison: [Planning and Writing a Grant Proposal](#)
 - University of Kansas – Community Toolbox: [Writing a Grant](#)

Questions

NWCUF is committed to ensuring that every interested NWCUA member credit union has the support they need to join us in addressing financial access challenges in our Northwest rural communities. We are here as a resource for your credit union as you explore this opportunity, so please do not hesitate to reach out. If you have questions, need additional information or resources, we encourage you to contact NWCUF Program Director, Claire Hendrix at chendrix@nwcua.org or (208) 515-4476.

[Apply for a Planning Grant](#)