**USDA REGIONAL FOOD BUSINESS CENTERS PROGRAM**

**PROJECT NARRATIVE GUIDE**

**Instructions:** This document is to be used as a guide to help prepare applications for the USDA Regional Food Business Centers Program. Submission of the project narrative template is MANDATORY. All sections in the project narrative template must be completed. Applicants must review the applicable Request for Applications (RFA). The Project Narrative must comply with the specific instructions, format, and content defined in Section 4.2.4 of the RFA.

The project narrative must be typed and single-spaced in an 11-point font and must not exceed fifteen (15) 8.5 x 11 pages (excluding pre-existing form content). For example, if the form is 10 pages before you begin entering your project narrative information, your form may be up to 25 pages in length when completed (10 original pages + 15 pages of applicant content). DO NOT modify the margins of the Project Narrative form. Narrative forms over the page limit will not be considered and may cause the disqualification of your application. Supporting materials, such as resumes, letters of commitment from partner organizations, negotiated indirect cost rate agreements, and accounting system and financial capability forms can be submitted as attachments and do not count towards the 15-page limit.

You must submit the Project Narrative form as a PDF and attach to the Grants.gov application package using the “Project Narrative Attachment Form” found within the application package. **Handwritten applications or applications submitted in MS Word will not be accepted.** Prior to submitting the application to Grants.gov, please make sure no tracked changes or mark-up edits and comments are visible.
1. **Applicant Organization**

This section must be the same as Box 8 of the SF-424. All applications to lead a Regional Food Center must come from an eligible entity (“the applicant”) representing a partnership and must be physically based in the region. A partnership is an agreement among three or more eligible entities representing at least two of the eligible entity types. The applicant must be the organization in the partnership that is responsible for receiving and managing the award. Applicants must meet the eligibility requirements as described in Section 3.1 of the RFA to be awarded a cooperative agreement.

2. **Authorized Organization Representative (AOR)**

This section must match Box 21 of the SF-424. The AOR is the individual who is authorized to sign any document on behalf of the organization. This is the member of the organization that authorizes the submission of the application to Grants.gov on behalf of a company organization or institution. It is highly recommended that the AOR be different from the project coordinator or person designated by the organization to direct the project or activities being supported under the cooperative agreement.

3. **Project Coordinator or Director**

This person should be a different individual than the Authorized Organization Representative (AOR). This is a member of the organization that is dedicated to managing and executing key objectives of the proposed business center.

4. **Lead Entity Type**

Select the entity type that best represents the applicant organization. Section 3.1 of the RFA describes each entity type.

5. **Partnership Entity Type**

Select the entity type that best represents the partnership(s) organization. All applicants and the eligible entities that make up the partnership must have a physical presence within, and have a history of serving, the region for which they are applying to serve as a Regional Food Center, and must be domestic entities owned and operated within the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the United States Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands or Indian tribal lands in the geographic regions of the United States. Section 3.1 of the RFA describes each entity type. Section 4.2.5 of the RFA details letter of commitment requirements.

6. **Geographic Region and Priority Area(s)**

This section must list states within the geographic region your proposal is supporting. For the purposes of this program, a geographic region is defined as reaching all, or part, of at least three states or territories or a 400-mile radius. While desired, regions do not need to be geographically
contiguous. For example, multiple states and/or territories with similar needs, such as locations outside the lower 48 states, may propose a region serving noncontiguous areas of the United States or territories. Section 1.4 of the RFA provides details on regions and priority area(s).

Applicants must define priority areas that they will serve within their proposed region that would classify as high need, underserved communities that were particularly affected by the pandemic. This section should include specific data showing why the region and priority areas were chosen. Applications should describe the degree of historic economic distress experienced in the project region, including the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

7. **Does the Geographic Region Include:**

This section should select which High Priority Areas your application plans to serve if applicable.

8. **Project Title**

This section must match Box 15 of the SF-424. Provide a descriptive title that summarizes the main idea(s) of your project. The title should be “Regional Food Center” that identifies the region or states names. The title should also be concise and clearly describe the content and purpose of your project. If selected for funding, the title of your project and the executive summary will be made publicly available on our website. The title should be limited to 200 characters.

9. **Requested USDA Regional Food Business Centers Funds**

This section must match Line 18a of the SF-424. This is the total amount of federal funds the applicant is requesting. The amount of funds requested must not be less than the minimum amount or exceed the maximum award amount. See section 2.5 on the RFA.

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The executive summary is the first impression of the project and is the opportunity to capture the reviewer’s attention. It must describe the project’s needs, purpose, goals, and expected outcomes. The executive summary must: 1) be no more than 250 words 2) be written in plain language for the general public to understand 3) use sentences; no bullets 4) briefly describe intended beneficiaries 5) briefly describe any subawards and 6) briefly describe established partnerships and outreach activities. We recommend writing the summary after the rest of the proposal has been completed or close to being done. The executive summary will be published on our website for public view. This summary should be the same as the one provided on the Project Abstract Summary form.

**GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS**

Describes the project’s proposed geographic region and priority area(s), why it is the most appropriate place and boundary for a Regional Food Center, the impact that the region would experience due to the
geographic focus, and justification for the priority areas and their potential market connections within the region. Answering this question, you should describe the applicant and partners’ prior history, collaborative efforts, commitment, and track record demonstrating why the lead entity and individual partners are well-equipped to serve the selected region. You must articulate the reason behind the selected geographic region and demonstrate how the proposed plan will leverage existing assets and develop new assets to support the region’s food systems. This section should use data to identify and show the degree of historic economic distress experienced in the project region, in particular the priority high needs areas within the region, including the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. *Note on Tribal Center:* The Tribal Center’s region is “national” in focus and should frame Indian Country food systems nationally and how the applicant/partnership intends to leverage resources in a culturally appropriate manner.

**ALIGNMENT AND INTENT**

Clearly and concisely describe the project’s proposed work to serve as a cornerstone in the development of the local and regional supply chains, including coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building support to small and mid-sized food and farm businesses, with the goal of creating a more resilient, diverse, and competitive food system. Provide a clear, well-conceived, and suitable Work Plan that describes how the applicant partners will achieve the goals and activities outlined in the RFA. This section should align with the goals and activities described in the RFA and the sustainability section and provide a history of collaboration and engagement among partners to ensure high levels of participation or provides a clear and concise plan for how such engagement will occur. Describe plans for coordination, communication, data sharing, and reporting across the region, and with other USDA Regional Food Business Centers, USDA, and other stakeholder groups.

Have you submitted this project to another federal funding program? ☐ Yes ☐ No

**SUSTAINABILITY**

Describe how the work, including partnerships, will be sustained beyond the cooperative agreement’s period of performance (without federal funds) and/or how the project will lay the foundation for future resilience in the region after the project ends. This could include but is not limited to describing how the Regional Food Center plans to leverage and build on existing organizations, assets, and efforts to build capacity for this work within the region for future impact. The application should detail plans to collaborate with other federal, state, regional, tribal, and local initiatives that support complementary efforts, including the whole-of-government Rural Partners Network led by USDA, to provide sustained support for the region.

**PARTNERS AND EXPERTISE**

Key Staff (Applicant Personnel and External Partner/Collaborators)

List all key project staff, including applicant personnel and external project partners and collaborators
(see Section 3.1 in the RFA for definitions) that comprise the Project Team, their role in the project, their relevant experience, qualifications, expertise, and past successes in developing and operating projects similar to those to be conducted under this project. The applicant must be the organization in the partnership that is responsible for receiving and managing the award (see Section 4.2.5 in the RFA). Additionally, this section should include a one-page resume or summary of relevant experience and/or qualifications for each of the participants listed. Feel free to add additional rows as needed.

Partner List

Individually list the name of the organization, the type of organization and the exact role of each organization that will have a partnership agreement with the applicant. Feel free to add additional rows as needed. Applicants must provide letters of commitment (not letters of support) from all project partners at the time of application.

Applications must show a substantial, effective, and diverse array of relevant partners, including organizations operated by historically underserved groups and individuals, to accomplish the agreement’s goals and objectives and meet the needs of the intended beneficiaries.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Applicants must demonstrate experience in food and agriculture business development services and an ability to support the wide-ranging needs of stakeholders in the region, including providing market development and value chain/supply chain coordination. Clearly outline past efforts and planned strategies to reach historically underserved populations, racial minorities, and women, as well as past experience which demonstrates cultural competencies to achieve such objectives within the region. Applicants must demonstrate how their project design meaningfully involves and serves historically underserved businesses and communities and is committed to engaging potential beneficiaries as active participants in Regional Food Center activities. You must identify potential challenges to partner recruitment and engagement, and achievement of goals or outcomes, and describes possible strategies to address the challenges. The application should demonstrate evidence of consultation with and involvement of underserved individuals prior to or during the creation of the proposal.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Applicants must describe a monitoring and evaluation plan that identifies potential feedback mechanisms and metrics that measure the results of project activities and will meet USDA’s evaluation requirements, including submitting the required semi-annual report which will collect metrics on the objectives outlined in Section 1.2 of the RFA. The metrics must consider equity and diversity for technical assistance providers, businesses served, and subrecipients, along with coordinating with USDA to align metrics and reporting with other Federal equity-focused efforts. Explain the methods, systems, and infrastructure that will be used to collect and compile data and reports from partners and subawards. Explain how the proposed metrics consider equity and diversity for technical assistance
providers, businesses served, and subrecipients. The applicant must describe plans for coordination, communication, appropriate data sharing and necessary systems to monitor and collect evaluation data.

**FISCAL PLAN AND FINANCIAL CONTROLS**

Applicants must complete the Budget and Justification section described below. Provide a clear description for each line item and ensure that your budget is consistent with the size and scope of the agreement. In addition, please describe the lead applicant’s fiscal management plan including the commitment from the organizational leadership, the key staff who will be responsible for managing the financial systems, the expertise and experience of the Project Team necessary to successfully manage the funds and implement the project, and a demonstrated successful financial audit history of the applicant. The applicant must also demonstrate the ability to manage the financial, reporting, and evaluation burdens of a large number of subagreements.

**BUDGET AND JUSTIFICATION**

The budget must show the total cost for the project and describe how category costs listed in the budget are derived. The budget justification must provide **enough detail** for reviewers to easily understand how costs were determined and how they relate to the project objectives and expected outcomes. The budget must show a relationship between work planned and performed to the costs incurred.

Define the percentage of funds that will be used for administration, coordination, technical assistance, and capacity building. All four sections should add up to 100%. The Budget summary should list how much in federal funds each line item will equal. The total budget should include both direct and indirect funds. Refer to RFA Section 4.6, the Program Specific Terms and Conditions, and the AMS General Terms and Conditions for more information on allowable and unallowable expenses.

**Personnel**

List each person from the applicant organization who has a substantive role or will perform work directly for the project and the amount of the request. Personnel salaries should be reasonable for the services rendered, conform to the established written policy of your organization, and consistently apply to both federal and non-federal activities. Personnel costs do not include the cost for the services of consultants and contractors. Those should be listed in the contractual section. Personnel salaries are considered reasonable to the extent that is consistent with what is paid for similar work within the organization or comparable to the labor market in which the organization competes for the kind of employees involved. The [U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov) contains wage data available by area and occupation that can be used as the basis for your personnel salary. Refer to [2 CFR § 200.430](https://www.cfr.gov) for more information.

**Fringe Benefits**

The fringe benefits are allowances and services provided by employers to their employees as compensation in addition to regular salaries and wages. Fringe benefits include, but are not limited to
the cost of leave, employee insurance, pension, and unemployment benefits. Provide the fringe benefit rates for each of the project’s salaried employees listed above. The costs of fringe benefits should be reasonable and in line with the established policies of your organization. If the fringe is higher than 35% you must provide a justification. Refer to 2 CFR § 200.431 for more information.

**Travel**

Travel costs are the expenses for transportation, lodging, subsistence, and related items incurred by employees who are in travel status on official business of the non-federal entity. Such costs may be charged on an actual cost basis, on a per diem or mileage basis in lieu of actual costs incurred, or on a combination of the two, provided the method used is applied to an entire trip and not to selected days of the trip and results in charges consistent with those normally allowed in like circumstances in accordance with non-federal entity's written travel reimbursement policies. Travel must be integral to the purpose of the project, necessary for the individual(s) from the applicant organization participating in the project and cost must be reasonable and consistent with the organization’s travel policies.

Explain the purpose of each Trip Request. Travel costs do not include the cost for travel of consultants or contractors, which should be included in the contractual category. Please note that travel costs are limited to those allowed by formal organizational policy and for employees working directly on the project and in the case of air travel, project participants must use the lowest reasonable commercial airfares. For recipient organizations that have no formal travel policy and for-profit recipients, allowable travel costs may not exceed those established by the Federal Travel Regulations, issued by GSA, including the maximum per diem and subsistence rates prescribed in those regulations. This information is available at [http://www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov).

Refer to 2 CFR § 200.475 for more information.

**Equipment**

Describe and justify any general or special purpose equipment to be rented or purchased under the cooperative agreement. Equipment purchases that support producer access to new markets and/or benefit local and regional supply chains are generally allowable as special purpose equipment, for both Regional Food Centers and subrecipients. Special purpose equipment in subawards purchases may include transportation, processing, aggregation, or storage investments; value chain/supply chain innovation or upgrades, including equipment or technology upgrades or investments to support process adaptations; and product development, packaging, and marketing of agricultural products.

Equipment must be necessary for the research, scientific, or other technical activities of the cooperative agreement. It may not be otherwise reasonably available and accessible and must be acquired in accordance with organizational practices. Purchases over $5,000 must be approved and the purchased equipment monitored by AMS, as required by 2 CFR § 200.313. Regional Food Center funds may not be used for construction and property acquisition, per uniform guidance on federal financial assistance. All AMS awards are subject to the terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations described in the Program Specific and AMS General Terms and Conditions.

If funded, applicants must maintain records and perform a physical inventory every two years of the
equipment acquired with grant funds. The equipment also includes accessories necessary to make the equipment operational. Items with a unit cost of less than $5,000 should be categorized as supplies, pursuant to 2 CFR Part 200. Refer to 2 CFR § 200.313, RFA section 4.6.1, and the Program Specific Terms and Conditions for more information.

Supplies

Supplies mean all tangible personal property other than those listed under the equipment section. List the materials, supplies, and fabricated parts costing less than $5,000 per unit and describe concisely how they will support the purpose and goal of the proposal. Refer to 2 CFR § 200.314 for more information.

Contractual

Contractual and subaward services are to be carried out by an individual or organization, other than the applicant, in the form of a procurement relationship. This includes contractual, consultant, and subaward agreements that are an integral part of the completion of the project. Contractual/consultant costs are expenses associated with purchasing goods and/or procuring services. The applicant should provide a preference for acquisition of goods, products, and services produced in the United States, per 2 CFR § 200.322. A subaward is an award provided by the non–federal entity to a subrecipient for the subrecipient to carry out part of a federal award received by the non-federal entity. If there is more than one contractor or consultant or subaward, each must be described separately. Applicant must provide a concise description of the scope of work or services to be provided. The organization must award contracts or subawards only to responsible contractors or individuals that can perform successfully under the terms and conditions of the proposed agreement. The applicant and NOT AMS is responsible for the settlement of all contractual or subaward issues such as disputed, protests, and claims unless it is primarily a federal concern. AMS reserves the right to request organization procurements policies and final executed contracts at any time. Refer to 2 CFR§ 200.317 through 2 CFR § 200.327 for more information.

Other

Include any expenses not covered in any of the previous budget categories. Be sure to break down costs into cost/unit. Expenses in this section include but are not limited to, meetings and conferences, communications, rental expenses, advertisements, publication costs, participant support costs, and data collection. Applicant must describe how the items listed fit the project activities.

Indirect

Indirect costs (also known as “facilities and administrative costs”—defined at 2 CFR §200.1) are those costs incurred for a common or joint purpose benefitting more than one cost objective, and not readily assignable to the cost objectives specifically benefitted, without effort disproportionate to the results achieved. For more details on indirect costs, refer to Section 4.6.3 of the RFA. If no indirect cost is requested leave blank. Refer to 2 CFR § 200.414 for more information. Applicants who have a Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate (NICRA) approved by a cognizant agency must submit a copy of the approved NICRA with their application.
As stated in Section 704 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, USDA may not use funds appropriated by this Act to pay nonprofit institutions indirect cost rates of more than 10% of the total direct cost of cooperative agreements. All applicants may include all direct costs, salaries, wages, applicable fringe benefits, materials, supplies, services, travel, and up to the first $25,000 of each subaward in the base. Applicants may only charge indirect costs on the first $25,000 of each subaward. As described in 2 CFR § 200.403, costs must be consistently charged as either indirect or direct costs, but may not be double charged or inconsistently charged as both. Subrecipients may charge indirect costs for the full amount of the subaward. All applicants who charge the rate of 10 percent must use the MTDC as the base. MTDC are defined in 2 CFR § 200.1 as all direct salaries and wages, applicable fringe benefits, materials and supplies, services, travel, and up to the first $25,000 of each subaward (regardless of the period of performance of the subawards under the award). MTDCs exclude equipment, capital expenditures, charges for patient care, rental costs, tuition remission, scholarships and fellowships, participant support costs, and the portion of each subaward in excess of $25,000. Other items may be excluded only when necessary to avoid a serious inequity in the distribution of indirect costs, and with the approval of the cognizant agency for indirect costs. All AMS awards are subject to the terms and conditions, cost principles, and other considerations described in the Program Specific Terms and Conditions.

Eligible entities may propose direct costs for outreach, education, application evaluation & processing, and system improvements to properly implement the program.

Program Income

Program income is gross income earned by a recipient or subrecipient under a cooperative agreement—directly generated by award-supported activity or earned only because of the cooperative agreement during the period of performance. Program income includes, but is not limited to, income from fees for services performed; the sale of commodities or items fabricated under an award (this includes items sold at cost if the cost of producing the item was funded in whole or partially with grant funds); registration fees for conferences, etc. AMS authorizes the use of program income through the additive method as described in 2 CFR § 200.307(e)(2). Any program income generated during the period of performance must be used to further the objectives of the project. If the project is expected to generate income as part of the award activities, you must include the estimated amount and explain how it will be reinvested in the project. If awarded, you will have to record any program income and report to AMS using the Federal Financial Report (SF-425). Refer to 2 CFR § 200.307 for more information.