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SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
Civil Grand Jury

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CORE: The Needs of The Community Equitably Distributed

A Model of Transparency

Summary

The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury reviewed the operational functions, processes and implementation of CORE (Collective of Results and Evidence-based) Investments awards to non-profit organizations throughout Santa Cruz County. CORE was established in 2015 to achieve equitable health and well-being in Santa Cruz County, using a results-based, collective impact approach that is responsive to the community needs. The focus was to create a more equitable and unbiased approach to awarding funds. Prior to CORE the County would hold public hearings for any organization or agency to present their case as to why they should be awarded funds. This series of actions was a very subjective process. This investigation was to determine if there were any inefficiencies, waste, or abuse in the current process and if there were any areas for process improvement. It is the Grand Jury's belief that the CORE process is being administered with integrity, transparency, and to create equity of opportunity for all applicants. Through research, the Jury found that significant time and resources were spent to communicate with and to support all potential applicants.

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Background

The County and City of Santa Cruz seek to fund community-based organizations to provide evidence-based safety net services that will collectively impact the well-being of the community's most vulnerable people. As a result of this, Requests for Proposal (RFP) are solicited and three-year contracts are awarded in support of a new model termed "Collective of Results and Evidence-Based" Investments, also known as CORE Investments. In 2022 a total of 128 applications representing 78 organizations were received across all four funding tiers, representing all CORE conditions, with a total of \$15,179,382 worth of requests.^[1] The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury wanted to understand how the distribution process worked and how it was determined which organizations qualify for a grant or not.

Scope and Methodology

The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury reviewed the complete award process of CORE and how the parameters around the RFP and application sequence worked for each prospective organization. It was important to understand the scoring criteria and how funding size of an organization was determined, Small, Medium or Large Tier. The Jury wanted to understand if there is a fair and equitable distribution of funds, based on the application request and if each organization had an equal opportunity to capture an award.

The following areas were reviewed:^[2]

- RFP Process
- Application Review & Process Understanding
- Application Scoring Review
- Panel Scoring Approach
- Panel Review and Scoring Process
- Funding Tier Determination
- Panel Funding Recommendations

Investigation

The RFP process is a three year contract term. It allows increases to the base funding, including folding in the Set Aside Fund allocation, which is used as a reserve for organizations if they fall short on the services they are providing. The resulting \$4,799,000 in base County funding is available for awards. The City of Santa Cruz funding of \$1,080,000 added to the base, provides a total of roughly \$5,879,000 available funds to awarded grantees.^[1] There is a tiered funding approach of small, medium, and large awards, with an additional, larger Targeted Impact award. A fair and equitable process is central to CORE investments and desired by applicant organizations. It's understood grants of all sizes would be driven by community needs, as defined, and articulated by the applicants. Also, the selection staff used discretion to recommend awards up to no more than ten percent variance from applicants' proposed budgets.

A total of 128 applications representing 78 organizations were received across all four funding tiers, representing all CORE conditions, with a total of \$15,179,382 worth of requests. Highlights of the applications are below, with further description of the application included in "Summary of Proposals/Applicant Profile".

- Twenty-two agencies submitted multiple applications, with 12 submitting 2, and 10 submitting 3 or more.
- Forty-seven percent of applicants were from new organizations (have never received CORE funding), representing 42 percent of total applications.
- While all CORE conditions were represented, the majority of the proposals were in the areas of Health and Wellness (36) and Stable, Affordable Housing & Shelter (23).
- Along the continuum of evidence-based practices, most proposals, sixty-seven percent utilized evidence-based programs, followed by twenty-four percent utilizing an effective practice.

The review panel approach was guided by the RFP. Review panels were organized by funding tier and CORE Condition, and 58 individuals participated as panelists. Panelists were assigned to panels based on their connection to the CORE Conditions of the proposals and demographics striving for locally representative, diverse panels. Seventy-six percent of panelists stated lived experience within one of the CORE conditions. Ninety-one percent of panelists stated professional experience with one or more of the CORE conditions. Eighty-six percent of the panelists live in Santa Cruz County, twenty-one percent of the panelists were Latinx, with a total of thirty-one percent Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. All panelists completed a survey, and conflict of interest and confidentiality statements.

A scoring rubric was developed for each tier, and proposals were scored based on the criteria of the tier for which the organization applied. Training on the CORE RFP and scoring matrix was provided to all panelists. Nineteen review panels were created according to CORE Conditions, at least three panelists reviewed each application according to the scoring matrix. Panels were reconvened to discuss discrepancies in

scores and a total of 34 reconvening meetings of 1–3 hours each were held across all panels for a total of approximately 63 hours worth of discussion. The average panelist score for each proposal was used to rank applications within each tier.

Funding Recommendations

Funding recommendations are based on the score and rank of proposals within each tier and the dollar amounts available. The mix of proposed awards is different from the current list of CORE recipients; however, the geographic distribution and populations served are comparable to what is currently funded. The recommended awards across all CORE Conditions reflect the spread of proposals that were received across the CORE conditions, with largest proportions going to Health and Wellness (thirty-one percent) and Thriving Families (thirty-two percent).

The geographic distribution of recommended awards closely mirrors the geographic distribution of all proposals received, and the geographic distribution of current CORE Funding. The percentage of funding targeting seniors (thirty-two percent) is comparable to the percentage of current CORE funding supporting seniors, and also reflects the county population of seniors under two-hundred percent of the Federal Poverty Level. The distribution of recommended awards by race/ethnicity closely matches the distribution of people living below two-hundred percent of the Federal Poverty Level, with fifty percent of the funding going towards people who are Latinx. Distribution of recommended awards across the tiers demonstrates progressively higher levels of evidence-based practices within the higher tiers of funding. All levels of results and evidence-based practices on the Continuum of Results and Evidence are utilized by recommended awardees.

Conclusion

The Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury is delighted to report that the Santa Cruz County CORE (Collective of Results and Evidence Based Investments) program provides fair and equitable distribution of funds to the many deserving non-profit organizations throughout the County. This process has removed any specter of bias and allows all potential organizations an even playing field. Their approach is completely transparent, from the application process, all the way through to the funded awards. The equity-centered approach clearly sets Santa Cruz County apart from any other counties in the region. It provides very clear parameters of how the process works and how each organization can benefit. The Grand Jury applauds the County and City officials and community members for their continued dedication and looks forward to the further evolution of CORE.

Findings

- F1.** Funds are focused on improving conditions of well-being for community members experiencing the greatest challenges and barriers in the County.
- F2.** A hybrid approach is administered to support both broad-based service programs and smaller “Targeted Impact” models.
- F3.** There is good diversity of eligible applicants: Non-profit 501(c)(3) agencies, federally recognized tribal entities, and public education agencies.
- F4.** The program is well coordinated, with County and City staff partnering to review and award for all tiers. The City focused their funding on programs serving primarily City residents.
- F5.** A clear outline of the RFP is available to the applicants, with an understanding of the awards process and the tier level they fall under.
- F6.** The County and City provides a comprehensive review of the process which allows the applicants an opportunity to ask questions of clarity if needed.

Commendations

- C1.** The CORE program is commended for being unbiased. Applicants for Small, Medium, and Large tiers are asked to select an “equity dimension” (i.e., race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) that best describes how equity is defined in the proposed project or program. Since the Targeted Impact tier is focused on racial equity, a question is included in that specific application on any additional equity dimensions the proposal will address. It is not required to focus on an additional dimension, and it will not be scored. This aspect provides a very even playing field for all applicants applying and there is no room for any bias in the process.
- C2.** The CORE program is commended for accommodating applicants of diverse size equitably. All applicants are encouraged to be as specific as possible when articulating their activities, populations served, and program outcomes. Details on activities (strategies) are relevant in the Small tier while higher tier applications are to emphasize outcomes. This allows inclusion no matter what size your organization and focuses on the central objective of helping the broader community with the most impactful services.
- C3.** Since funding is awarded at the same amount for each year of the 3-year grant term, applicants are able to consider how this may impact the services throughout the 3-year term. CORE does a good job of ensuring that the services being funded remain intact and the impacted communities receive the needed support throughout the duration of the funded programs. We could not find any evidence of mishandling of the funds or programs being removed within this 3-year period.

Invited Responses

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Findings</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Respond Within/ Respond By</i>
Director of Human Services Santa Cruz County	F1 – F6		90 Days August 16, 2023
Chief Administrative Officer Santa Cruz County	F1 – F6		90 Days August 16, 2023

Glossary of Terms

CORE: The “Collective of Results and Evidence-based” investments model.

CORE Conditions: Elements of a thriving, healthy community. Every CORE Investments application must designate one primary CORE Condition the program seeks to achieve from among eight options: 1. Health and Wellness 2. Lifelong Learning and Education 3. Economic Security & Mobility 4. Thriving Families 5. Community Connectedness 6. Healthy Environments 7. Safe & Just Community 8. Stable, Affordable Housing & Shelter.

Equity: Fairness or justice in the way people are treated, specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism. A program built on equity will address the needs of specific populations most likely to be affected by inequities by providing resources and opportunities such that they may thrive alongside other residents in the county.

Fiscal Year: For this application a Fiscal Year (FY) is the period between July and June, thus FY 2022–2023 would be July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023.

HSD: Human Services Department.

Impact Area: The specific result that you want to achieve or contribute to in the CORE Conditions. This can include short-term (1–3 years), medium-term (3–4 years), and long-term (5+ years) impacts. The full list of impact areas organized by CORE Condition can be found at datasharescc.org. Other commonly used terms: Goal, Result.

Needs: Resources or conditions which are absent or insufficient for a particular group or community yet are necessary to thrive.

Population: A group of people.

Program or Project: An organized effort to implement a set of services with a specific purpose, for a specific population, with dedicated staff, policies, and procedures. Other commonly used terms: Services, Plans.

Program Implementation: The way that a program’s resources (staff, materials, other assets) are used to carry out services and activities.

Program Outcomes: The measurable changes expected as a direct result of a program’s strategies and implementation. Different outcomes may be expected in the short-, medium- or long-term phases of a program.

RFP: Request for Proposal.

Services: The activities or actions carried out on behalf of a program. Other commonly used terms: Activities.

CORE Primary Principles & Definitions

CORE Values^[3]

Equity—Uncover the root causes of inequities and disrupt individual, organizational, and systemic practices and structures that perpetuate inequities in opportunities and outcomes.

Compassion—Ground our work with each other and the community in a human-centered, empathic approach to ensure that all can reach their potential.

Voice—Seek out, listen, and respond to the perspectives of those most affected by current and historical adversities and inequities.

Inclusion—Create authentic opportunities for people with diverse backgrounds and life experiences to share their perspectives and co-create solutions.

Collaboration—Work across sectors and organizational boundaries for the common good and contribute our individual talents and resources to achieve collective impact.

Transparency—Openly share our data, results, successes, and challenges to build trust, foster dialogue, and create a countywide culture of continuous improvement.

Innovation—Encourage creative strategies and approaches to solve the complex, inter-related social, economic and environmental challenges that undermine equitable health and well-being.

Accountability—Hold ourselves responsible for setting shared goals and measurable outcomes, investing public and private resources efficiently and effectively in data-driven, evidence-based and evidence-informed programs and practices, evaluating our efforts and progress, and demonstrating our collective impact.

CORE Conditions for Health & Well-Being^[4]

Health and Wellness: Optimal physical, mental, social-emotional, behavioral, and spiritual health across the lifespan.

Lifelong Learning & Education: High-quality education and learning opportunities from birth to the end of life.

Economic Security & Mobility: Stable employment, livable wages, food security, ability to afford basic needs, wealth accumulation, and prosperity.

Thriving Families: Safe, nurturing relationships and environments that promote optimal health and wellbeing of all family members across generations.

Community Connectedness: A sense of belonging, diverse and inclusive neighborhoods and institutions, vibrant arts and cultural life, and civic engagement.

Healthy Environments: Clean, safe, resilient natural environment and a built environment and infrastructure that support health and well-being.

A Safe and Just Community: Fair, humane approaches to ensuring personal, public, and workplace safety that foster trust, respect, and dignity.

Stable, Affordable Housing & Shelter: An adequate supply of housing and shelter that is safe, healthy, affordable, and accessible.

Sources

References

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Site Visits

Human Services Department, County of Santa Cruz
County of Santa Cruz
Health Services Agency
Human Services Department Archives

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