



RITEI Braided Funding Guide: Developing a Strategy and Approach

AT A GLANCE

This guide was developed to support direct service organizations in their efforts to engage a braided funding model to sustain programming. The guide explores various funding opportunities, how they interact with one another, potential challenges, and suggestions for navigating those challenges.

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Through RITEI, Jobs for the Future (JFF) partnered with national organizations to provide expertise and technical assistance to funded sites. These organizations supported the project by offering specific data, sharing case studies from other successful work, and providing insight into the contexts that affected RITEI sites' abilities to serve their communities.

- The AFL-CIO Working for America Institute (WAI) supports RITEI through connections to sites with local, state, and federal union organizations, resources to support workers' rights, and strategic support concerning programmatic sustainability.
- The National Association of Workforce Boards supports RITEI by identifying strategies to support sites and their local workforce development boards on employer engagement efforts, partnership development, and programmatic sustainability.
- The Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) provides technical and career readiness training through the CompTIA Tech Career Academy Hybrid+ training program toward CompTIA A+ certification.

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org

About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We routinely reevaluate our efforts as usage evolves. info.jff.org/language-matters

About RITEI

The Rapid IT Training & Employment Initiative, supported by an H-1B One Workforce grant and led by JFF, connects unemployed and underemployed workers to jobs in IT and provides incumbent workers with the training they need to move on to positions that require more advanced skills. Learn more about RITEI [here](#).

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Executive Summary

This guide was developed by Jobs for the Future (JFF) as a resource for community-based organizations, community colleges, and other workforce development program providers to explore sustainable funding options to support community-based programming. Staff time and capacity to create this guide were funded by the Department of Labor's H1-B grant through JFF's Rapid IT Training and Employment Initiative (RITEI). While this guide was initially intended for RITEI partners, many organizations and institutions can apply the content more generally.

Braided funding looks different for each organization. This guide is not an exhaustive resource but a starting point for internal conversations, capacity building, sustainability planning, and scaling.

As you explore this guide, JFF encourages you to keep an open mind, think creatively, engage relevant stakeholders, and be intentional with your planning processes. This guide offers mechanisms to achieve these goals.

Introduction

Braided funding refers to a strategic approach to support a single project or program by combining multiple funding streams, which often have complementary goals and objectives but distinct reporting requirements. Pursuing multiple funding sources for one project can increase sustainability, depending on the streams' timelines, and flexibility, particularly when combining government and private dollars.

This approach lets organizations access a broader pool of resources, expertise, and perspectives. Braided funding can lead to more comprehensive and impactful initiatives, as each funder contributes its unique strengths and resources. It also provides flexibility, preparing organizations for changes in funding availability and/or agency priorities. Braided funding helps initiatives remain adaptable to evolving circumstances.

Using This Braided Funding Guide

This guide is designed for programmatic staff members and leaders exploring funding sources and how to engage with braided funding. This guide is not meant to support grant writing efforts but rather to approach the question of funding from a programmatic and strategic lens.¹

The guide first explores topics relevant to all funding sources, such as forming partnerships and preparing application documents. Later, specific types of funding sources, including federal, state, local, and philanthropic, are detailed, including how to best apply these funds and navigate potential challenges.

Considering Braided Funding

This section considers pieces of project planning applicable regardless of funding streams but particularly important when considering a braided funding approach. Crafting a successful and sustainable braided funding model requires attention to detail, strong relationships, and a commitment to clear communication.

Reviewing the different types of funding and considering how to approach braiding involves many nuanced details. Refer to the questions below to catalyze internal conversations and inform your next steps.

1. Who from your organization should be involved in this process? How will information flow internally? How will these decisions be documented?
2. What pieces of the existing program will be sustained? What needs to be funded? How does your organization serve a high-need issue with a strong solution?
3. What might need to be redesigned or changed? How did you learn these changes were needed?
4. How can your organization clearly and meaningfully tell the story of why your program is needed, and why you are best situated to be successful?
5. What resources and/or partnerships could strengthen your proposal? What is the value proposition for using these resources and/or partnerships? What steps may be needed to institutionalize these partnerships?

Examples of Braided Funding

These examples illustrate how an organization may braid funding to support a specific initiative.

1. Youth empowerment program: A community organization seeks to address youth unemployment, substance abuse, and education disparities in a neighborhood. To achieve comprehensive results, they braid funds from multiple federal agencies with philanthropic support:
 - [U.S. Department of Labor](#) for job training and placement programs.²
 - [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#) for substance abuse prevention and treatment services.³

- Local community foundation grant to support youth mentoring programs.
2. Rural health care access: A rural health clinic aims to improve health care access in systemically underserved areas. It combines funding from various federal agencies:
- [Health Resources and Services Administration](#) for primary care services.⁴
 - [Federal Communications Commission](#) for broadband infrastructure to support telehealth.⁵
 - State Department of Health grant for health education.

Building Capacity for Braided Funding

Assessing Your Strengths and Risks

Whenever you consider a new funding opportunity, you should confer with all relevant stakeholders within the organization to identify the strengths of the program you seek to sustain, determine any potential risks or restrictions, and ensure buy-in.⁶ You should review financial and programmatic reporting for current funders as part of your assessment. Programmatic staff, compliance, and accounting teams share the tasks involved in reporting, assessing your program status, and finding opportunities to seek additional funding.

Another piece to consider when building a funding timeline or exploring a new funding stream is developing the cadence and key metrics of an evaluation plan to measure the impact and effectiveness of your initiative. These data can be used to attract ongoing funding and help drive decision-making regarding which funding is best to pursue to advance the most impactful programs or partnerships. Particularly when braiding government dollars, it's important to keep detailed resource usage records to avoid disallowed costs and potentially “double counting” outcomes. A clear evaluation plan will include the data being collected and hypotheses being tested and articulate any project-level funding limitations that should be considered when pursuing opportunities to braid funding.

Regardless of how you develop data collection and reporting processes within your organization, it is important to document how and when decisions were made to ensure no institutional knowledge is lost during staff changes. Developing an internal documentation process fosters a culture of learning and transparency. Building these mechanisms can also be great practice for documenting success

stories during the life of a grant for use in reporting, future proposals, and/or marketing. Sharing these successes can attract additional support and demonstrate the value of collaboration.

Planning to Pursue Funding

As program teams pursue funding, we encourage close collaboration with the organization's development and financial teams, which will be excellent resources in sourcing funding and proposal development. JFF recommends working closely with your financial team to ensure that funding streams are discretely maintained for purposes of compliance, spend-down, and reporting.

Timing is a key component. Braiding different funding sources with staggered timelines can ensure a program remains funded beyond one grant's end date. For example, a government grant may end July 31, but a private source may continue through December 31. Attending local workforce board meetings and engaging local networks can provide insight into funding cadences, particularly how to use available Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) resources to support your program.

The federal fiscal year runs October 1 to September 30, so funding opportunities tend to be released in the fall and spring. Philanthropic or private funding sources do not usually follow the same fiscal year calendar as government agencies. This means funding opportunities may occur at any time of the year, making it important to stay connected with local, regional, and national grantmaking entities that support the programs you plan to sustain.

Development teams often maintain an application calendar, including a comprehensive calendar of application and reporting deadlines for all funding sources. Maintaining this calendar can facilitate communication across departments and track reporting and spend-down goals.

Planning for Partnerships

Braiding funding often relies on partnering with other organizations to use their complementary expertise and resources. Including partners in a project, particularly one employing braided funding, can support sustainability efforts, expand the project's visibility and impact, and increase capacity across partners.

Engaging partners in braided funding can also more equitably distribute responsibilities—including project management, fiscal reporting, and data consistency—and ensure participants have all the services they need to achieve their desired outcomes. Strategizing with partners is practical when an organization may not be eligible as the prime applicant or requires additional support (for example, a fiscal agent) but may be able to offer a strong component or adjacent service that drives the goal of a collective proposal. In these situations, often the lead applicant serves as facilitator. This may also

include forming an advisory group with representatives from participating organizations to collaborate on building the proposal and implementing the project. Depending on the application scope, this advisory group could include other community-based organizations, education providers, and/or employers.

In some cases, particularly collaborative proposals, partnerships should consider which organization is counting which outcomes toward which deliverables and if they can be counted toward other funding sources' deliverables. You can discuss how participant outcomes will be counted and reported with advisory group members and other stakeholders.

Funders often want to see proof of partnership and collaboration among participating or supporting organizations when you submit proposals. This can manifest as memoranda of understanding (MOUs), sometimes referred to as partnership agreements, or more informal letters of support. Developing a template to use with new partners and a process for updating existing MOUs will save time and energy when compiling requirements for proposals. These agreements clarify partners' expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, ownership of any deliverables created during the partnership, and financial commitments. Partnerships may result in specific documentation that can be considered assets for your organization. JFF recommends working with in-house or pro bono legal counsel to prepare and review any such documents.

While less formal, documenting other processes can also strengthen collaborative efforts between partners and ensure braided funding methods remain clear and in compliance with funder regulations. This can include forming data-sharing agreements and reporting templates to standardize data collection and reporting to multiple funders. Creating an internal process, including budget templates and financial audits, can lessen the administrative burden of internal staff members when compiling a proposal.

Planning for Communications

Braided funding relies on open and transparent communication between program and development staff and between your organization and external partners. Capturing the ways of communicating that work best and other tailored best practices can strengthen future braided funding efforts. This commitment to continuous learning can also be applied to staying up to date about changes in funding opportunities and regulations for all types of funding discussed in this guide.

When working with partner organizations to braid funding, you may need additional infrastructure to support clear communication streams, align goals, and maintain the spirit of open collaboration. For example, it is crucial to establish effective communication channels among funders, project partners, and stakeholders. Regular meetings and updates help to maintain transparency and ensure

everyone is on the same page. It is also important to name the primary applicant among the partners on a project, depending on the type of funding, organizational capacity, and other considerations, and who will be responsible for project management. Maintaining these relationships with partners, funders, government officials, and other agency representatives helps your organization stay top of mind for future opportunities and ensures you receive updates with any policy changes that may affect funding.

Types of Funding Streams

Braided funding practices look different for each organization and can involve various funding sources. This section explores the categories of federal, state, and local government and philanthropic funds. When engaging with this section, consider different potential funders and who may be best positioned to fund your organization or program based on your progress, needs, and future plans.

You can combine different funders playing distinct roles to support your goals, so long as you understand each type of funding and utilize it correctly. For example, private or philanthropic funders often support more local, programmatic efforts that can then demonstrate success to be used to apply for future public funding, be it state, federal, or local.

Each section includes potential challenges to consider and offers insights into successfully approaching those challenges.

Federal Funding

If you are looking to fund a proven program model that has been implemented with previous successes or a model that requires significant funding for success, then federal funding may be a good fit. Similarly, if your goal is to scale a successful model that has been piloted, a collaborative application for federal funding may make sense.

Depending on the context, you can also effectively braid federal funding with other sources. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, funding available through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) was deployed and combined with other funding sources across the country. Staying up to date with opportunities like ARPA funding or other acts like the [CHIPs and Science Act](#) can be a great way to engage with targeted government dollars.⁷

Federal funding is typically issued in two ways—grants and contracts. The government uses grants to award funding that achieves a particular aim or addresses a national issue or challenge (for

example, training individuals for high-demand technology jobs, and researching effective supportive service strategies for youth who have a record or have been incarcerated). Grants generally give the recipient discretion in how this aim is achieved. In contrast, the government uses contracts to procure services or goods that directly benefit the government (for example, JFF received a contract to provide technical assistance to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Building Pathways for Infrastructure Jobs program grantees). Activities within a contract are highly prescribed, and the contractor has less flexibility in how to execute the work compared to a grant. Importantly, the structure of the funding within a grant or contract will have implications for staffing, strategic approach, technological structure for data tracking, and other work components.

Potential Challenges

Federal funding can be among the most challenging sources to secure and manage, for a variety of reasons. The application of dollars may carry restrictions, with financial compliance a key component of managing federal dollars. This can require substantial fiscal capacity and, in the case of grants secured with partners, can involve reviewing sub-grantee or partner financial reports in addition to those of your organization. Reporting can be onerous, and to meet the reporting requirements, your organization may need to utilize a database or system separate from one you use for other grants, which may result in duplicative data entry and more staff time. For example, one grant might require deliverable data to be uploaded into the U.S. Department of Labor Salesforce, and another grant may use the Workforce Integrated Performance System (WIPS) for reporting; in both cases, these reporting tools are typically used in addition to the internal mechanism used to track progress on a day-to-day basis.

Some funding has cost-sharing requirements regarding the percentage of labor hours or other expenses that can be charged directly to the grant and another percentage that must be charged to another budget line item or hosting institution. This type of reporting requires oversight on a granular level. Furthermore, if the project receiving the funds generates revenue, you must expend revenue dollars before federal dollars. An example might be a state Small Business Development Center (SBDC) that offers a schedule of courses for a fee. The SBDC must demonstrate that revenue from the course fees was expended before touching federal Small Business Administration (SBA) dollars each month when reporting revenue.

Ideas to Source Federal Funding

- Identify relevant federal agencies: Determine which federal agencies align with your project’s mission and goals. Education and training are funded by multiple federal agencies, including the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#), the [U.S. Department of Education](#), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ([HUD](#)), among others.⁸
- Federal grant databases: Utilize federal grant databases such as [Grants.gov](#) and [SAM.gov](#) to search for grant opportunities that match your project’s focus.⁹

State Funding

Navigating state government funding streams relies on relationships and understanding the local context. Spending time exploring state priorities from the governor's office, workforce boards, and other state government offices is crucial when pursuing state-level funding. Linking how the program you seek to fund supports these goals will strengthen your application.

State funding is a great opportunity to showcase coalition-building efforts, either as the prime applicant or as a collaborator. State funding acts as the bridge between federal and local or private funds, since it is often less competitive than federal funds and may have simpler data and fiscal reporting requirements but is not as simple to secure and manage as local dollars tend to be. This funding often focuses on amplifying existing programs' reach into a community and ensuring local resources are used efficiently.

Potential Challenges

A central potential challenge when engaging with state funding is navigating related politics. It's important to understand what is being funded, which organizations are in favor, and how your work can connect to and augment other related efforts in the same community. Depending on your state's size, you may face increased competition, given the smaller pool of funding for eligible applicants compared to federal funding.

Ideas to Source State Funding

- State government resources: Explore your state's official website for information on grant programs, funding opportunities, and relevant agencies. Note that some federal sources are administered at the state level, such as some [WIOA funding](#) and [SNAP E&T Funding](#).¹⁰
- State-specific grant databases or portals: Check for state-specific grant databases or portals that list available funding opportunities. Some states have their own grant search tools.
- Contact state agencies: Reach out to relevant state agencies or departments aligning with your project's goals. Request guidance on available funding sources and application procedures. Note that agency staff members will not be able to share much information while they actively solicit proposals. Reach out to get to know them when you're not developing a proposal for a specific request for proposals (RFPs).

Local Government Funding

Local funding (from a city, county, or other government agency) is like state funding, in that it often focuses on coalition building, and like private dollars, in that it can prove an idea's fit for a particular place or population. Local government funding especially focuses on relationships. Get to know the

people who manage the funds, become familiar with the priorities of the mayor or other elected officials, and identify ways your program can further their goals.

Potential Challenges

Local funding may not be consistently available, particularly funds funneled through the state or county, such as Community Development Block Grants through HUD. Depending on the source, funding may be associated with a particular area using zip codes or other identifiers, which can create logistical challenges. Also, as with all forms of government funding, it requires greater fiscal and administrative capacity for reporting and data collection than for private funding, though less than for federal.

Ideas To Source Local Funding

- **Local government resources:** Visit the websites of your local city or county government for information on local grant programs and initiatives. This includes local workforce development boards, which are responsible for WIOA funding.
- **Networking and collaboration:** Attend local meetings, conferences, and networking events to connect with potential local funders and collaborators. Local folks will likely be able to help connect the dots for potential partnerships, collaborative applications, etc.

Private/Philanthropic Funding

Private, or philanthropic, funding sources usually offer more flexibility than government sources and can be an excellent resource to fill in programmatic gaps or pilot a new program. Private dollars are especially helpful for an organization just getting started or an established organization offering a new type of program looking to prove an idea's efficacy. Once a program has proven successful, you can use its outcomes to secure other funding sources discussed in this guide. It is also important to explore how private dollars can supplement other funding sources, particularly to cover disallowable costs under government programs (that is, client incentives, food, etc.). Private funders can include small local foundations or the charitable giving efforts of large national corporations.

Potential Challenges

Generally, private or philanthropic funders do not offer an RFP or request for quote. Most private funders have websites that broadly describe what they seek to fund and specify application requirements. Often, larger national funders are more specific than local foundations in explaining what they seek to fund. This allows for higher levels of creativity but also requires careful program planning to create a logical path from your goals to expected outcomes. Private funders generally offer shorter application timelines and, in the case of local foundations, usually offer smaller amounts of funding than government sources.

Ideas to Source Private/Philanthropic Funding

- Identify private funders: Research private corporations and businesses with a history of funding projects or causes related to your mission and in your geographic area.
- Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs: Explore CSR programs of corporations that align with your project's goals. These often support community-based initiatives.
- Private foundations: Identify private foundations, including local community foundations and large national foundations, that match your project's objectives.
- Venture philanthropy: Investigate venture philanthropy organizations that provide not only funds but also expertise to drive social impact.
- Grantmaker databases: Utilize databases like the [Foundation Directory](#) to identify potential philanthropic funders whose mission and/or geographic area of interest aligns with yours.¹¹
- Community foundations: Research community foundations in your area, as they often provide grants to support local projects.

Conclusion

A commitment to continuous learning is key to maintaining a successful braided funding plan. Working with partners and internal stakeholders to explore the effectiveness of your braided funding approach, collecting feedback from those stakeholders and other participants, and thoughtfully incorporating those lessons into your processes can strengthen your braided funding approach and overall program. In addition, creating a collaborative proposal is a great way to engage your existing networks, build and strengthen partnerships, and identify stakeholders with like-minded goals who may participate in future projects.

Braided funding can be a powerful approach to address complex challenges by employing the expertise and resources of multiple agencies and funders. By following these best practices and fostering effective collaboration, organizations can maximize the impact of their initiatives while successfully navigating the complexities of braided funding.

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Endnotes

¹For more grant-writing resources: [The Grantsmanship Center](https://www.tgci.com) (“Get Funding. Create Change.” The Grantsmanship Center, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.tgci.com>); [Grant Professionals Association – Foundation Center](https://ggpa.org/resources/proposal-writing) (“Resource Guide: Proposal Writing – The Foundation Center,” Grant Professionals Association: Georgia Chapter, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://ggpa.org/resources/proposal-writing>).

²“Department of Labor Grants,” U.S. Department of Labor, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.dol.gov/grants>.

³“Grants,” Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.samhsa.gov/grants>.

⁴“Grants,” Health Resources and Services Administration, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.hrsa.gov/grants>.

⁵“FCC,” Federal Communications Commission, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.fcc.gov>.

⁶ Using a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis tool is helpful. Find templates here: [Free and editable SWOT analysis templates | Canva](https://www.canva.com/graphs/templates/swot-analysis) (“SWOT Analysis Templates,” Canva, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.canva.com/graphs/templates/swot-analysis>).

⁷ “H.R.4346 - Chips and Science Act,” Congress.gov, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/4346>.

⁸ “U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,” Hhs.gov, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.hhs.gov>; “U.S. Department of Education,” Ed.gov, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.ed.gov>; “U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development,” [Hud.gov](https://www.hud.gov), accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.hud.gov>.

⁹ “Your Team. Your Workspace.,” Grants.gov, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://grants.gov>; “SAM.gov,” [SAM.gov](https://sam.gov), accessed January 4, 2024, <https://sam.gov/content/home>.

¹⁰ “Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act,” U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>; “SNAP Employment and Training,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap-et>.

¹¹ “Foundation Directory,” Candid, accessed January 4, 2024, <https://fconline.foundationcenter.org>.