



Overview of CARES Act Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)

May 20, 2020

CSBG Background

Community Services Block Grants (CSBG) are administered by the federal Department of Health and Human Services (Office of Community Services within the Administration for Children and Families) and provide federal funds to states, territories, and tribes for distribution to local agencies to support a wide range of community-based activities to reduce poverty. These include activities to help families and individuals achieve self-sufficiency, find and retain meaningful employment, attain an adequate education, make better use of available income, obtain adequate housing, and achieve greater participation in community affairs. Local agencies, generally known as Community Action Agencies (CAAs), are the primary grantees. Funds are allocated to states with at least 90% of funding going to eligible entities (CAAs) in accordance with the formula in CSBG State Plan. Unlike most block grants, states have minimal authority to direct how grantees use funds, creating opportunity for communities to drive usage of funds to meet community needs.

CSBG funds are used for activities designed to have a "measurable and potentially major impact on causes of poverty." The law envisions a wide variety of activities undertaken on behalf of low-income families and individuals, including those who are welfare recipients, homeless, migrant or seasonal farm workers, or elderly. According to the Congressional Research Service, local entities spent their CSBG funds in FY2015 for a wide variety of activities, including emergency services (17%); activities to promote self-sufficiency (17%); activities to promote linkages among community groups and other government or private organizations (13%); education-related activities (12%); employment-related activities (13%); housing-related services (9%); nutrition services (7%); income management (6%); health services (3%); and other activities.

CARES Act CSBG Provisions

The CARES Act provided \$1 billion to CSBG (the regular appropriation for FY19 was \$725 million) and authorizes states to revise the income limit for eligibility ceiling **from 125 to 200 percent of the federal poverty level** for CSBG services furnished during fiscal years 2020 and 2021, including services furnished with the state's regular CSBG appropriations during those years.

How Might CSBG Funds be Used to Address the "Pair of ACEs"?

Using CSBG and other resources, eligible entities can support families in accessing local, state, and federal relief, including exercising the inherent block grant flexibility to address emergency needs identified at the community level. Specifically, CSBG can be used for the following purposes:

- CSBG funding can be used for a range of programs and services to alleviate material hardships related to the pandemic including, but not limited to, rental payments, energy/water bill payments, food, hygiene products, cleaning supplies, home delivered meals, childcare, and fulfillment of other basic needs;
- Provide comprehensive case management and emergency services to vulnerable families and individuals;
- Partnering with local school districts and families to ensure that children and their family members have access to food during periods in which schools are closed and that students have access to technology for distance learning, including purchase of tablets and internet service; and

- Access to essential facilities. CSBG funds may be used for costs associated with the health and safety of facilities, such as costs for sanitation, gloves, and cleaning services, and CSBG funds may also be used to make facilities usable and accessible during the public health emergency.

Note that States and grantees have substantial discretion in defining the procedures for determining if an individual or family meets the eligibility requirements for CSBG, including the timeframes for review and necessary documentation appropriate to the services or strategies being implemented.

Given CSBG's flexibility, as well as its statutory directive to support innovation, CAAs could potentially support a broad array of support during the pandemic. It is important for communities to be creative and listen to community members in determining priorities.

Levers to Influence CDBG Expenditures in Community

The work of CAAs is generally driven by a Community Needs Assessment. However, during times of emergency, funds and programming can be rapidly redirected to meet immediate community needs. BCR network sites can assist CAAs in identifying unmet and urgent community needs and using CSBG funds to fill existing gaps.

Each CAA is governed by a board of directors (notably at least one-third of members must be representatives of the low-income community and another third of the board members must be local elected officials or their representatives). Identifying and working through CAA leadership and/or Board contacts is a good initial step.



Additional Resources

- Office of Community Services COVID Guidance:
 - <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/resource/csbg-im-2020-157-immediate-guidance-on-covid-19-response>
 - <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ocs/resource/csbg-im-2020-158-cares-act-supplemental-administrative-guidance>
- Community Action Partnership COVID-19 Guidance: https://communityactionpartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Partnership-Message-to-Network-3-19-20_final.pdf
- CSBG Overviews:
 - <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL32872.pdf>
 - https://www.caplaw.org/resources/publicationdocuments/CAPLAW_CAALeadersLegalGuide_ChapterTwo.pdf
- CSBG to Support Two Generation Approaches to Poverty: <https://nascsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Final-Governors-and-CSBG.pdf>