E-Grants Data Workshop Minutes

July 18, 2002

Introduction

Mr. Charles Havekost, E-Grant Program Manager, called the workshop to order at 9:35 A.M. He welcomed attendees and stressed the importance of grant application data elements in the successful completion of the E-Grants initiative. He reminded the attendees that the workshop was by invitation and that their role in adopting a strategy for defining the application data elements by October 2002 was a key role that lay at the crux of a web-based application submission module.

Ms. Janet Thomas, the workshop facilitator, discussed her role as facilitator and encouraged participation by all attendees. She provided administrative and procedural information under which the workshop would be conducted.

E-Grants Application Data Strategy

Mr. Havekost told the attendees that the workshop was a strategy workshop and that its purpose was to look at the big picture and to avoid low level discussions of each data element. He reviewed the background of the E-Grants initiative and said that the kickoff meeting in February had resulted in a statement of vision, goals, and objectives. One of these objectives was to provide a mechanism for on-line submission of grant applications by October 2003. An interim objective to meet this deadline is to determine the data elements that will be collected. The deadline for this interim objective is October 2002. He stressed the importance of these calendar events saying the calendar dates have given structure to the E-Grants activities. He noted that all objectives and calendar dates have been met and that this workshop would lay the groundwork for achieving the October 2002 definition of data elements. He said that the E-Grants initiative was on an 18 - 24 month calendar and that two major concepts were at work for defining data elements - standards and policies.

Standards give rigor to the grant application business process. The Federal Demonstration Partnership (FDP) has been highly vocal regarding the importance of using standards for the grant application. Standards provide a basis for third party development and for system-to-system interfaces. Standards can not be changed at the whim of federal grant program offices. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI), Accredited Standards Committee X12 has established a grant application standard, the ANSI X12 Transaction Set 194. Mr. Havekost stressed that the 194 exists and is generally endorsed by a large community of grant applicants. He also stressed that standards require time to change and that they had a process and calendar of their own for making changes. Changing the 194 data elements would require several months and put attainment of the October 2002 deadline for data elements in jeopardy.

Policies also exist for collecting federal grant application data. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has approved Standard Form 424 and its associated forms, SF424a, SF424b, SF 424c and SF424d, as the Federal Grant Application. Just as it takes time to change standards, it also would take a lengthy and involved process to change the SF424. The changes would have to be vetted with the federal agencies followed by a period for public comment. Mr. Havekost used the FedBizOpps vetting process as an example of the process and time line for changing federal policy.

Mr. Havekost also told the group that a cold, rational look indicates that much of the discretionary grant application data is common across agencies. However, there will always be some level of agency-specific data that is required by legislative or regulatory mandates. E-Grants will collect a common "core" set of data plus a mechanism to collect agency-specific data elements. The intent is to define the core data elements but at the same time permit agency-specific data collection, resulting in an application process that will be flexible enough that no agency has a basis to opt out.

The E-Grants initiative and the grant application process includes the concept of an organizational registry where grant-recipient organizations can enter and store the data elements that describe the organization and provide information used in the grant application. It is not feasible, nor cost effective, for E-Grants to start a new registry when the Central Contractor Registry/Business Partner Network (BPN) is an existing resource that can meet this requirement. One commonly used corporate and organizational identifier is the Data Universal Numbering System (DUNS) issued and managed by Dun and Bradstreet. The BPN uses the DUNS as its identifier; OMB wants a mechanism to identify grant recipients and is moving toward requiring DUNS. E-Grants will use the BPN and will embody the DUNS policy. There are about 196,000 organizations now registered with the BPN, and a fast investigation indicates that many of the larger federal grant recipients are already registered there. In summing it up, Mr. Havekost said that

- Both the 194 and 424 exist.
- E-Grants needs to use the 194.
- The 424 data elements are in the 194.
- DUNS is in the 194.

Therefore the E-Grants Program Management Office (PMO)'s proposed strategy is to establish the "core" as the SF424 plus DUNS as defined in the 194 transaction set. Other data needed by the agencies will be collected as agency-specific data elements by the October 2003 grant application submission mechanism.

In closing, Mr. Havekost stated that attendees must remember that the October 2003 data strategy will be Version 1. Subsequent releases of the data requirements will refine and perfect the methodology. Most importantly, the recommended strategy provides an approach that avoids calendar crushers. The approach also offers economies of scale that will permit the preparation of system-to-system interfaces and encourage third party participation. If flaws in the core are found, that is, agency requirements that the core does not address, they can be circumvented by the use of agency-specific data elements. The strategy focuses on data elements and will give transparency to the data elements that agencies are collecting beyond the approved SF424 information. It is vitally important that attendees give their support, experience and expertise to the discussion of "collecting the core".

Data Element Specifications and Agency-Specific Data Elements

Ms. Diana King, E-Grants Team, opened her presentation by reviewing the materials in the workshop handouts. Attendees were encouraged to closely study the handouts in the package after the meeting. The main table in the handout details the "core" data elements. Also included in the handouts is a listing data elements in the 194 that are not in the core. The core listing shows the 194 data element name, the SF424 name, a brief description of the data element, the box number of the SF424, the data element type, length, whether an element is required, and whether duplicates are allowed. The second table is approximately the same in format but omits the SF424 information. Attendees were encouraged to study, after the meeting, the information regarding whether the data element is required or not, whether duplicates are permitted, and the length of the data field.

Ms. King discussed a data model for collecting grant application information. A government-wide collection would include the core data elements, budgets, project narratives and attachments. Then agency-specific data in a common format would be collected as follows:
cross-agency data (such as research-related information on human or animal subjects),

- agency-specific,
- program-specific, and
- solicitation-specific.

She indicated that OMB has expressed a willingness to work with agencies for data elements that are needed to meet legislative or regulatory requirements. She said that a comparison of data elements in the core with the data elements contained in a sample of agency application forms indicates the core meets all the requirements of Education but does not collect 183 data elements collected by the Department of

Housing and Urban Development. Other agencies fall between Education and HUD with 29 National Institutes of Health and 12 Department of Transportation data elements not included in the core. These numbers are based on a sample of a specific form from the identified agencies, and may not be indicative of all the grant applications from that agency.

Ms. King spoke on how agencies can participate in the process and assist in the success of the proposed strategy. She encouraged attendees to closely review the core data element specifications (required, duplicates, length, and definitions). She asked that agencies share their concerns with the PMO by sending issues to Egrants@hhs.gov. If there are "show stoppers," agencies should notify the PMO as soon as possible and prior to the Partners' Meeting on July 31st. Other suggestions for implementation are welcomed. An internal deadline calls for a pilot application module to be available in March, and agencies that can provide their agency-specific data elements earlier may have those data elements shown as part of the pilot.

The agency participants should anticipate the following agency activities related to the E-Grants initiative:

- Comparison of agency forms to the core
  Agencies should identify any elements not in the core. They should confirm that these requirements have OMB approval and if they are due to statutory or regulatory requirements. Agencies should also determine whether their requirement is cross-agency or specific to the agency, program or announcement.

- Identification and consolidation of application packages
  Agencies should identify which CFDAs use which forms and elements. Where possible data elements should be consolidated and streamlined.

- Review of common format.
  The PMO will develop, by August, a common format for collecting agency-specific data elements. Agencies will be asked to fill out tables in this common format for agency-specific data to be implemented in the E-Grants storefront.

Ms. King encouraged attendees to get in showstoppers as soon as possible. She further asked for volunteers to assist in establishing the common format for submitting agency-specific data elements. In closing, Ms. King opened the workshop to questions.

Questions and Answers

1. If an agency already has OMB approval for a data element, must they re-apply?
OMB approves the use of collection instruments, usually a form or set of forms, as opposed to data elements. So the data elements included on an approved collection instrument would not have to be re-approved.

2. Is the DUNS + 4 in the 194?
Yes. It is data element 102, entitled Organization DUNS, in the IAEGC data dictionary.

3. What is the significance of core/non-core?
The Core data will be collected for all discretionary grant applications for all agencies. Non-core will be the responsibility of the agency to identify to E-Grants for use on a particular application.

4. Will all 26 grant making agencies be permitted to identify agency-specific data elements?
Yes

5. Who has the lead for cross-agency data elements in the first release?
This was originally a P.L. 106-107 process. To meet the October 2003 deadline we may rely on agencies come together independently and identify and obtain approval from OMB on cross-agency data elements.

6. Will alternative forms other than the SF424 be considered?
The SF-424 has been defined as the core. The agencies will need to identify their agency-specific data elements several months prior to 10/1/03 if they are to be included in the E-Grants initial deployment. A common format for defining agency-specific data elements will be provided to the agencies in August 2002.

7. Will applicants see the agency-specific data elements directly on their screens?
Yes. First, an applicant will be able to access FedBizOpps and CFDA via E-Grants to review grant opportunities (FIND). Once they are prepared to apply for a specific opportunity (APPLY), they will be able to enter both core and agency-specific data elements. The agency-specific data elements will be those identified by the agency.

8. How will agencies retrieve data from the grant application submission software?
An Agency Toolkit will be developed and provided to agencies that contain detailed guidance on how to retrieve data from the E-Grants Trusted Broker.

9. What is the timeline for submitting agency-specific data elements?
To be determined, but no later than July 2003 in order to participate in the October 2003, deployment.

10. Will CCR/BPN data elements be used to pre-populate applications?
Yes, to the maximum extent possible.

11. How can construction data elements be added to the 194?
There will soon be a public comment period for the 194, and this can become a forum for adding construction data elements. Also, the IAGEC website contains an Electronic Grants Data Dictionary Policy and Procedures, which identifies how changes and/or additions can be made to the 194 transaction set.

12. What about security, digital signatures, firewall and authentication issues?
These are important issues that are being carefully considered, but are separate from the discussion of the core. These will be addressed in more detail as work continues on the E-Grants development and implementation.

13. Will the core be vetted to the grant making agencies?
No, this workshop, the strategy, and future agency activities will constitute the vetting process. It is important to remember that the SF424 data set has OMB approval and was reviewed and cleared and by all agencies when it was established. The OMB approval process required for the collection of non-core data will continue.

14. Can you assure agencies that their agency-specific data elements will be included?
Yes, with the proviso that the data elements are OMB approved and they are appropriately defined to E-Grants.

15. Will agency-specific data elements be in the March pilot?
Yes, at least some. Agencies that do their homework early have a better chance of being included in the pilot.

16. How can 26 sets of agency-specific data elements be consolidated into one common interface?
The envisioned approach allows for the use of codes and tables, behind the scenes, that should accommodate the definition of agency-specific data elements as necessary. This will be a primary consideration as E-Grants proceeds through the development phase. E-Grants encourages agencies to standardize their data elements, amongst themselves and across agencies (e.g., construction, human subjects).

17. Will the March pilot be for federal observation or open to the public?

The specifics about the pilot are yet to be defined. It seems most appropriate that the participants of the pilot will be carefully selected, and that the pilot will be focused on participants that will provide effective and timely feedback.

18. FEMA has grants that continue into future years, such as rents to states. Post award reporting contributes to the following year application process. What about monitoring and closeout?
The Post-Award Working Group is looking into reporting and closeout. These functions will not be included in Version 1, but they will be considered for inclusion in later versions.

19. Some program offices get information from sources other than the application. How will this be accommodated?
Provision can be made for taking in attachments at a later date.

20. How will information regarding agency-specific data be disseminated to the applicants?
Agencies may specify a URL where detailed agency-specific information is available.

21. What if a data element is optional in the core, but required for an agency?
Such data elements can be included as mandatory in agency-specific data elements.

Next Steps
During the course of the workshop, several key dates were discussed. The following table identifies these dates:

Who	When	What	Comment
Agency participants	Now, but no later than Partner's Meeting, July 31, 2002	Notify PMO of any show-stoppers	Send to Egrants@hhs.gov
Agency participants	August 1, 2002	Agency comments and suggestions on strategy or implementation due.	Send to Egrants@hhs.gov
PMO	August 2002	Propose common format for agency-specific data. Distribute to agency participants.	
PMO	October 2002	Complete the definition of the data elements to be collected by E-Grants.	
PMO	March 2003 (PMO-internal target date)	PMO application pilot with selected agency-specific data elements available.	
Agency participants	July 2003 (Note – July is a tentative date. The actual date is TBD and may be earlier).	Final date by which agencies must have submitted agency-specific data elements for inclusion in October 2003 deployment.	
PMO, Agency participants	October 2003	PMO scheduled to release E-Grants, Version 1.	