

UNITED WAY OF OLMSTED COUNTY

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

April 2024

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UNITED WAY OF OLMSTED COUNTY 2024 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

United Way of Olmsted County is a community change organization that fights for the education, health, and financial stability of every person in our community. Southeast Minnesota is a community with tremendous diversity, natural beauty, caring neighbors, and a strong economy. But too often, there are people in Southeast Minnesota who are left behind and don't share in the vitality. Many in our community experience an unacceptable income gap; geographic and socio-economic segregation; personal and collective isolation; and gross inequities along racial and ethnic lines.

United Way fights to erase divisions, bridge divides, and right inequities. We work to connect people with resources that change lives and transform our community. We operate programs and shared resources that support the community, such as our 211 information and referral service and our Get Connected volunteer portal. We work collaboratively with partners from many organizations and walks of life to create systems level change and implement solutions that elevate our community more than any single program or organization could. We provide financial, technical, and volunteer support for programs that make a difference.

At United Way, we LIVE UNITED with the change-makers, risk-takers, and problem-solvers to create a community where all people can thrive.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While Minnesota and Olmsted County consistently report high voter turnout, some parts of our community still face barriers to full participation in civic engagement beyond just casting a vote.

United Way of Olmsted County knows communities hold the solutions to the obstacles they face. As such, culturally specific organizations (CSOs) play a critical role in empowering their communities to participate in civic life. These organizations are ideally situated to understand the cultural norms, beliefs, and traditions of the people they serve; effectively engage community members; interpret and remove barriers that impede access to services; and bridge norms between communities and institutions.

United Way of Olmsted County's Civic Engagement RFP is designed to build the capacity of Olmsted County and Winona County's CSOs to advocate for self-determined solutions to the challenges their communities face by supporting civic engagement.

We are issuing this Request for Proposals to establish partnerships and offer financial support for civic engagement activities. We will prioritize proposals from agencies serving and led by Black, Indigenous, people of color, people with disabilities, and immigrant/refugee communities. Proposals from other communities disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement are also eligible and encouraged to apply.

*For eligibility requirements and partner expectations, refer to page 8.

UNITED WAY FOCUS AREA: THRIVING COMMUNITIES THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Why Civic Engagement?

UWOC envisions a community where everyone has what they need to thrive. Currently, Olmsted County performs well in a variety of quality-of-life indicators, but some communities don't share in the prosperity. Research demonstrates that communities with strong and diversified investments in civic engagement opportunities see positive outcomes on their residents' health and wellbeing. In fact, there is an average 3 year gap in life-expectancy between those counties with the highest level of structural racism and civic divestment and those with noticeably fewer barriers to participation.¹ While it has long been established that those who are disenfranchised from engaging in civic processes miss out on the benefits of feeling connected to one's community and economic input into the local ecosystem, we are beginning to understand the measurable impact on their mental and physical health.

Access to community building or civic engagement activities allows people to build social capital and trust in their neighbors and community leaders. Strengthening social cohesion in turn leads to less neighborhood violence, greater economic opportunities, and influence to enact positive community change.²

When most people think about civic participation and engagement, they think of voting. In the 2020 General Election, Minnesota had the highest voter turnout out of any state in the nation at 79%.³ However, there are many forms of civic engagement.⁴ It may look like serving in a local leadership capacity in your neighborhood association, meeting with your city council member, or hosting a town hall. People who participate in civic life through voting, contacting elected officials, or writing letters to the editor have considerable influence on our community.

Barriers to Civic Engagement

The ease by which people can participate in such civic engagement activities varies based on a number of factors. For example, community members who are settling in Olmsted County from another country may face a learning curve to understanding how our local political and governmental systems operate. They may also face barriers to learning those practices depending on their proficiency in the English language. For example, attending county, city, or school board meetings is a way to understand how those institutions operate and what they have jurisdiction over. Beyond attending public meetings, community members can apply or be appointed to local boards and commissions under the umbrella of local institutions (City, County, School District). Cultural, language, and transportation access barriers can keep people from being able to attend or participate in such meetings. Many of those meetings were not accessible unless attended in person and may be held at times and locations that may be inaccessible or inconvenient for many people.


Olmsted County community members of color and foreign-born community members report feeling disconnected from their communities at higher rates than their white, US born counterparts.⁵ One way to ensure people have what they need and build more equitable systems is for community members to advocate for their own community's needs and opportunities for growth. Early in 2024, UWOC hosted a series of convenings on the topic of civic engagement in collaboration with community groups. Several of these events addressed BIPOC communities in civic leadership roles. From this series of conversations, many areas of learning emerged. Namely, for communities who have been systemically divested from, civic leadership and engagement appears difficult to navigate and unapproachable. However, there is also a strong desire from many BIPOC community members to learn more about local government, civic participation, and how to best mobilize education and action efforts.

Grant Opportunity

Connecting resources and skill-building opportunities to communities develops individuals' innate capacity to advocate for themselves and their network. For example, hosting a panel or forum for current elected officials to share information and answer constituent questions is an excellent way for community members to stay informed. Too often, however, these types of events don't consider key questions like: Is the event held in an accessible and a welcoming environment for all people? Are there interpreters available for both language and cultural interpretation? Those outside of a particular cultural community may not know what types of things to consider to appropriately address these issues.

For another example, people can support civic engagement by helping their family, friends, and neighbors register to vote. Voting practices and policies differ state by state, making voter education challenging. In 2023, it was signed into law that in Minnesota, people who were previously incarcerated can vote regardless of probation, parole, or work release status. While this is a historic change, decades in the making for those touched by the carceral system, this law is being challenged in the state supreme court less than one year later.⁶ Unless you're a part of a community that has been touched by incarceration, these nuances may be unknown to you.

When it comes to the best messengers and skill-builders, it is clear that members of historically marginalized communities are in the best position to design civic engagement activities for their own communities. Building community power, voice, and capacity will result in local systems that reflect the needs and aspirations of everyone in our community.



As part of our larger commitment to creating a community where all people can thrive, we are investing in culturally specific organizations (CSOs) to build community power, influence, and social capital.

As communities know and research verifies, CSOs play a vital role in communities' wellbeing.⁷ Studies indicate that people of color, Native Americans, and immigrants often prefer to interact with organizations that reflect their own culture and traditions.⁸ However, these organizations are less likely than their mainstream counterparts to receive grant funding and tend to be smaller in size.⁹ This underinvestment in CSOs is an effect and a symptom of the historical and ongoing marginalization of BIPOC and other minoritized groups.

UWOC aims to strengthen systems and cultivate leaders to build a community where all people can thrive. This investment in civic engagement in communities disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement seeks to model those goals. These grants are intended to provide resources and skill-build opportunities to strengthen our systems to work for everyone.

GRANT DETAILS AND REQUIREMENTS

Anticipated Investments:

We anticipate a total investment of \$15,000 in Civic Engagement grants to organizations that serve and are led by people from communities disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement. One \$5,000 award is available in Olmsted County and two \$5,000 awards are available in Winona County. Grants are intended to support programs and activities that have the goal of increasing civic participation in historically marginalized communities. All activities must be non-partisan.

The following are examples of non-partisan activity:

- Provide education on roles and responsibilities of elected offices and education on candidates
- Provide education on civic engagement and voting processes broadly
- Host community forums
- Conduct skill-building trainings to engage community members in civic activities
- Write letters to the editor
- Help register people who are eligible to vote
- Support youth in community leadership development such as participating on student council or in other youth-led advocacy activities
- Providing trauma-informed education to build community engagement and resilience
- Facilitating intergenerational mentorship opportunities

Activities may not include persuasion to support any particular candidate or party. Should an activity violate this non-partisanship requirement, funds must be returned, and your agency or fiscal host agency's tax-exempt status may be in jeopardy.

For more examples of the types of programs we are looking to fund, please review our [2022 Civic Engagement Report](#) to read about some of our past partners.

For more information on what are appropriate non-partisan activities for non-profits, please review either of the following resources from the MN Council of Nonprofits: [Staying Nonpartisan—Permissible Elections Activities Checklist](#) and [What Nonprofit Staff Can Say about the Elections](#).

The award amount is anticipated to be \$5,000. Funds will be disbursed in June.

ELIGIBILITY - KEY PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

To be considered eligible, agencies must meet the following criteria:

- Serve primarily low-income (185% FPL) residents of Olmsted County or Winona County
- Primarily serve a single target population that has been historically marginalized. The single target population's lived experience is central to the organization's mission as shown through a staff AND board primarily made up of the single target population. (50% of the board and 50% of the staff identify as the target population which your organization serves)
- Be an eligible nonprofit agency

Eligible nonprofit agencies include:

- Agencies designated as a 501(c)3
- Faith-based organizations, provided they can demonstrate that there will be no explicitly faith-related content included in their programming and that there are no discriminatory restrictions on service recipients
- Unincorporated community groups, provided they can document their relationship with a proper fiscal sponsor.

Funding will not be provided for:

- Individuals
- For-profit entities
- Political campaigns, candidates, parties, or partisan activities
- Programming that includes theological functions or requires religious participation.

For the purposes of this proposal, we are defining Culturally Specific Organizations (CSOs) as non-profit or community-based organizations that serve and are led by people from communities disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement. We will prioritize proposals from agencies serving and led by Black, Indigenous, people of color, people with disabilities, immigrant, and refugee communities. Proposals from other communities disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement are also eligible to apply.

To be considered a CSO eligible for a Civic Engagement grant, organizations must meet **all three** of the following criteria:

- Primarily serve a single target population that has been historically marginalized; at least 50% of total number of people you serve share a common identity which has been disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement.
- That single target population's lived experience is central to the organization's mission as shown through program design and general organizational activities
- Organizational leadership is representative of the experience of the single target population; at least 50% of staff and 50% of the Board of Directors identify as the target population.

We welcome questions and open dialogue with potential partners. If you'd like to discuss your proposal or are wondering if this grant opportunity is a good fit for your agency, please contact Sierra Verdin at Sierrav@uwolmsted.org or 507-535-5504.

Expectations

Civic Engagement partners will be expected to:

- Meet at least twice as a cohort of funded agencies to build community together, and discuss activities, successes, and areas for improvement.
- Provide a brief report on how funds were used to build capacity for their community to participate in civic engagement activities
 - Reports may be provided either in writing or in a feedback conversation with United Way staff. Reports must be completed by December 31, 2024.

A [sample partner agreement](#) for recipients of one-time grants can be found on our website.

PROPOSAL AND REVIEW PROCESS

Timeline

- Proposals due May 15, 2024
- Awards announced to partners no later than May 24, 2024
- Funds disbursed no later than June 20, 2024

Proposal Review Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated by United Way of Olmsted County staff and community volunteers. Reviewers will look for evidence of the following:

- Organization serves and is led by people from a community disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement
- Proposed program or activities demonstrate strong impact or potential impact on civic engagement
- Agency demonstrates capacity to effectively engage their identified community

Financial Statements

In accordance with United Way of Olmsted County policy, applicants for one-time awards of \$20,000 or less are required to submit a program budget and the organization's most recent annual financial statement before board approval of funding.

There are additional restrictions to one-time award recipients that receive more than 2 one-time awards within a single UWOC fiscal period.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I submit an application?

Proposals are accepted through United Way of Olmsted County's online grants portal. The grants portal works best in Google Chrome.

In your web browser, type in "Applying for UWOC Grants" to learn more about our funding priorities. To submit a proposal, click on "Complete Your Online Application" to access the most up-to-date listing of funding opportunities. Select the opportunity that interests you and click on "apply". You'll be asked to log in or create a new user account in order to access the proposal materials.

For technical support with the proposal process, you may contact Zeni Aly, Community Impact Administrative Assistant, at 507-287-7877 or ZeniA@uwolmsted.org.

My organization operates a program that already receives United Way funding through a different funding area. Can I submit a proposal to this RFP as well?

Yes. The purpose of this RFP is to increase participation in civic engagement activities for communities who disproportionately face barriers to doing so. Civic Engagement grants are independent of other United Way of Olmsted County funding.

I represent a faith-based organization / unincorporated group. Is my organization eligible?

- Faith-based organizations are eligible, provided they can demonstrate that no religious participation is required in their programming and that there are no discriminatory restrictions on service recipients.
- Unincorporated community groups are eligible, provided they can document their relationship with a proper fiscal sponsor.
- Individuals and for-profit entities are not eligible to receive United Way funding.

How can I make sure my proposal is as strong as possible?

Please review the eligibility (page 8) and review criteria (page 9) outlined in this Request for Proposals, as well as our complete evaluation rubric available on our website ([Civic Engagement Rubric](#)).

Our team is eager to assist you if you have questions about your proposal or are experiencing technical difficulties with your application. For technical support with the proposal process, or to schedule a time to meet with our team to discuss a proposal idea, you may contact Sierra Verdin, Grants Coordinator, at Sierrav@uwolmsted.org or (507) 535-5504.

What is the award amount?

We intend to support 2 agencies at \$5,000 each in Winona County and 1 agency at \$5,000 in Olmsted County.

Can I save and edit my progress on the online proposal?

Yes. Our online grants portal requires a login to be created, which allows you to create, save, edit, and submit your proposal online. Go to our [Grants](#) webpage and click “Complete Your Online Application”.

When can I expect to hear back from you?

You should expect to receive an automated notification that your proposal has been received shortly after submitting it. If you believe you’ve successfully submitted your proposal but you haven’t received an acknowledgement, please contact Zeni Aly (ZeniA@uwolmsted.org or 507-287-7877) for assistance. After submission, you should anticipate hearing about the status of your proposal by May 24, 2024.

APPENDIX—PROPOSAL QUESTIONS

We have included the proposal questions here for your reference. All proposals should be submitted online through United Way's grants portal as described above. We are accepting multiple forms of application for this RFP: Written text application, pre-recorded video (up to 10 minutes), and live conversation (up to 20 minutes). There is no preference for the form you submit.

1. Describe your organization's mission and programs/activities (1-2 paragraphs)

2. Please describe the primary community you serve. Civic Engagement grants are designed for organizations that primarily serve a single target population that has been historically marginalized. To be eligible for this grant, at least 50% of the individuals you serve should share a common identity which has been disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement. (please see our RFP for full eligibility guidelines). (1-2 paragraphs)

3. Out of all of the clients your organization served last year, what percentage of individuals you served are a part of that primary community?

4. Do at least 50% of staff and 50% of the Board of Directors identify as your organization's target population as described above? Civic Engagement grants are designed for organizations that are led by people from the communities they serve. (please see our RFP for full eligibility guidelines).

5. Please briefly describe how the community you serve has been impacted by barriers to civic engagement. (1-2 paragraphs)

6. Please describe the proposed activities and how they will increase your community's participation in civic engagement. (1-2 paragraphs)

7. Please attach the following:

1. Your program budget with full revenue and expense details (Please see our [Budget Help](#) page for guidance)
2. Contact list for your Board of Directors, including phone numbers and email addresses (for fiscal host and sponsoree if applicable)

If recommended for a grant award, you will be asked to submit the following additional documents by May 30th, 2024:

1. Your organization's most recent financial statement
2. Most recent 990 (or that of fiscal sponsor)
3. IRS determination letter (or that of fiscal sponsor)
4. Most recent audit (for organizations with annual revenues over \$750,000)
5. Letter documenting fiscal sponsor agreement (for sponsored agencies)

APPENDIX—EVALUATION RUBRIC

Criteria	Exceptional alignment may look like:
<p>1. Agency serves and is led by a population disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collects and shares participant demographics - Programming is tailored to communities served - Agency is designed to serve Black, Indigenous, people of color, people with disabilities, immigrant, refugee communities, or other historically marginalized communities. - At least 50% of participants are share a common identity (the target population) which has been disproportionately impacted by barriers to civic engagement - At least 50% of staff identify as the target population - At least 50% of board identify as the target population
<p>2. Activities show impact or potential impact in increasing participation in civic engagement by breaking down barriers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearly explains key barriers to civic engagement facing community and proposed activities address identified barriers - Proposed activities increase capacity of community to participate in civic life - <u>Proposed activities include examples listed in RFP:</u> - Provide education on roles and responsibilities of elected offices and education on candidates - Provide education on civic engagement and voting processes - Host non-partisan community forums - Conduct skill-building trainings to engage community members in civic activities - Write letters to the editor educating readers on a topic of importance - Help register people who are eligible to vote
<p>3. Agency demonstrates capacity to execute community engagement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agency has led community mobilization activities before with identified audience - Agency demonstrates holding strong relationships with community members, leaders, and key cultural institutions

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