U.S. Department of Justice
Office on Violence Against Women

Office on Violence Against Women Peer Review Guidelines

REVISED OCT. 2026

U.S. Department of Justice
OVW
Office on Violence Against Women
Working Together to End the Violence

Overview of the Office on Violence Against Women and Discretionary Grant Programs

Purpose of the Guidelines

The Office on Violence Against Women ("OVW") has prepared this guidebook to provide a general understanding of our grant application review process and a detailed overview of peer review. The role of the peer reviewer is critical. Your expertise will impact communities across the country as they work to address domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. As a peer reviewer, you will have a role in assisting OVW in determining which communities and organizations have access to the limited grant dollars administered by OVW.

What is OVW Peer Review?

Peer review is the technical and programmatic evaluation of grant applications by a group of subject matter experts (SMEs) qualified in a particular area related to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. As such, the peer review process provides an objective and independent review of applications. Every year OVW, through its peer review process, convenes panels comprised of experts in domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, and other relevant fields, to evaluate grant applications based on the programmatic requirements and specifications outlined in the program Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO).

SMEs are required to identify strengths and areas for improvement in applications and score them based on a set of criteria outlined in the grant program's NOFO. Peer review recommendations are advisory in nature but are critical in assisting OVW in its funding decisions.

Peer review offers the opportunity to provide a valuable public service in advising OVW on the strengths and areas of improvement of grant applications. OVW peer reviewers will receive a monetary honorarium in the amount of $200 to read and score each application and meet other OVW peer review requirements. In addition, the experience of serving on a peer review panel provides reviewers with nonmonetary benefits and the opportunity to gain professional experience by:

- ☐ Helping to shape federal programs and positively impact communities and organizations that are awarded grants.
- ☐ Helping communities and organizations around the country strengthen applications to improve their chances of receiving funding in the future.

Who is an OVW Peer Reviewer?

The vast majority of OVW peer reviewers are survivors and active practitioners or recent retirees from relevant domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking professions. OVW does not use professional peer reviewers because it is our goal to have applications reviewed by individuals with current, on-the-ground experience and knowledge of both the challenges and best practices in addressing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking.

Potential peer reviewers may include survivors, victim advocates, judges, prosecutors, law enforcement, legal assistance providers, providers from other community-based and faith-based organizations, and others with expertise on violence against women issues or other expertise relevant to a specific OVW grant program. OVW may also seek reviewers with substantive knowledge in working with Tribal communities, college and university communities, rural areas, urban areas, and those working with persons with disabilities or persons over 50 years of age.

Note: Individuals whose salary is 100% funded by an OVW grant program must take annual leave or unpaid leave to participate in OVW peer review.

An Overview of the Grant Application Review Process

OVW conducts three stages of application review: 1. Basic Minimum Requirement Review (BMR); 2. Peer Review; and 3. Programmatic Review. This section will provide a brief overview of each.

An eligible entity is responsible for submitting a completed application in accordance with the requirements outlined in the program's NOFO. Generally, OVW will not contact applicants regarding missing or incomplete parts of applications prior to peer review unless otherwise stated in the NOFO. The timely submission of applications and all required attachments is necessary for OVW to meet its award announcement deadlines.

Once submitted, all applications will be subject to BMR, a review process based on the criteria outlined in the program's NOFO. OVW conducts BMR on all applications prior to peer review. The BMR process evaluates whether the applications received are complete and eligible to receive funding under the grant program. BMR is a short process and does not involve a substantive analysis of the application content. The BMR process helps OVW to determine whether the application should be forwarded to peer review.

After the peer review process is complete, OVW conducts programmatic review. During the programmatic review process, OVW reviews the highest-ranking applications to assess the following areas: 1) project scope; 2) office priority/program special interest areas; 3) activities that compromise victim safety; 4) unallowable and out of scope activities; 5) duplication of federal funding; 6) program specific considerations; and 7) past performance for previously funded applicants.

Confidentiality Policy

Peer reviewers, OVW staff, and the peer review contractor must maintain complete confidentiality of all reviewer identities, application materials, comments, and deliberations. The use of super intelligence (SI) to review applications and provide substantive comments is prohibited. Peer reviewers are not permitted to upload any part of an application into or create reviewer comments in an SI platform or large language model such as ChatGPT, etc.

Conflict of Interest Policy

In order to mitigate the number of conflicts of interest, OVW requires all potential peer reviewers to fill out the "Save the Date" notice indicating their availability and identifying any conflicts of interest by answering a few questions prior to being selected as a peer reviewer. **An OVW program will not allow an individual who has a pending application with that specific grant program to serve as a peer reviewer. This includes not just individuals who are employed by an applicant entity, but also consultants, subrecipients, contractors, memorandum of understanding partners, and anyone situated to gain financially from a submitted application for that fiscal year**. Additionally, potential reviewers will also need to disclose if there are any applicants for that grant program for which they might have a personal conflict (e.g., a family member or friend's organization is applying). An individual with such a relationship is considered to have a conflict of interest and cannot serve as a peer reviewer for the grant program in which they have an existing personal conflict. **If you become aware of a potential conflict of interest during the peer review process, you must notify the OVW Peer Review Point of Contact immediately.**

In rare instances in which OVW requires select expertise to effectively evaluate a grant application, the OVW Peer Review Point of Contact may seek approval from the OVW Director on a case-by-case basis to waive a conflict of interest. In such an instance, the OVW Program Unit must document that a waiver is necessary because the need for the reviewer's services outweighs the potential for a conflict of interest. In the event the OVW Director grants the waiver, the reviewer will not be permitted to serve on the panel assigned to review the application with a potential conflict. Please see below for more information about the role of a peer reviewer.

PEER REVIEW PROCESS

OVW conducts two types of peer review: external and internal. External peer review utilizes reviewers outside of the federal government and internal utilizes federal staff, including OVW staff, as reviewers. OVW primarily conducts external peer reviews, which may take place online, in person, or in a hybrid format. Online reviews offer greater cost efficiency, broaden the pool of potential reviewers, and automatically capture reviewer comments. In contrast, in-person reviews—which have been OVW's standard for much of the past decade—can foster richer dialogue among reviewers, leading to more detailed and nuanced assessments. A hybrid format is an emerging and successful approach which blends the benefits of online and in-person reviews.

FY 2026 Peer Review Format

OVW will conduct online peer reviews for all programs which consist of reviewers evaluating and scoring grant applications remotely. Prior to the review, all selected reviewers must participate in a reviewer orientation that consists of both recorded and live sessions. Reviewers will have a designated reading period to evaluate all assigned applications. At the end of the reading period reviewers must submit their initial scores and comments by the established program deadline. OVW will examine reviewer's scores and comments to determine whether a follow up call or meeting is needed to discuss score variances between reviewers before final scores and comments are submitted.

Peer review will be conducted within the DOJ Justice Grants (JustGrants or JGS) System. As such, reviewers will utilize the system to:

- Register in DIAMND, in order to gain access to the JustGrants peer review portal
- Access assigned applications for review
- Utilize a web-based peer reviewer scoring form to evaluate applications
- Make adjustments to their scores, if needed, after discussion with OVW staff
- Draft and finalize their comments to substantiate scores assessed during the review

Score Variance Calls or Meetings: OVW will examine each panel member's initial scores to determine whether there is a 10 point variance. If so, OVW will either reach out to individual reviewers or will convene a short virtual meeting to discuss the reason for the variance. After which, individual reviewers' scores may be adjusted to reflect a final score and comments, which will be used for the final average and compiled comments of the panel.

The Role of the Peer Reviewer

Selected peer reviewers are expected to dedicate sufficient time to participate in the orientation, thoroughly review assigned applications, and meet all peer review process obligations and deadlines. Reviewers should avoid scheduling professional or personal commitments during the designated peer review period. Please note that OVW may reduce reviewer compensation or remove a reviewer from participation due to significant failure to complete scoring obligations, adhere to review expectations, and meet established deadlines. Rushed or incomplete reviews compromise the fairness of the process and negatively affect applicants, fellow reviewers, and OVW staff. Incomplete or late submissions will impact a reviewer's future opportunities to participate in OVW peer review.

A. Mandatory Peer Review Orientation

All reviewers must attend a virtual peer review orientation, which will consist of both pre-recorded and live sessions. During these recorded and live sessions, OVW staff will review the NOFO, program requirements, and scoring form, as well as explain the peer review process. OVW will also provide an overview of roles and responsibilities of the peer reviewers, OVW staff, and the peer review contractor. OVW will provide reviewers with a scoring form that reflects the NOFO criteria on which to record their scores, strengths, and areas for improvement.

B. Reviewing the NOFO and Scoring Form

The NOFO describes the grant program, eligibility requirements, required certifications, the program's statutory purposes and priority areas, and information on how to apply.

NOFOs include the required scoring criteria and the percentage allocation for each section of the application. Peer reviewers should thoroughly review the relevant discretionary program NOFO and web-based scoring form to understand the evaluation criteria before assessing applications. Since the web-based Peer Reviewer Rating Form mirrors the NOFO's scoring criteria, reviewers must pay close attention to those details throughout the review process.

C. Compliance with Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Policy

Peer reviewers should be cognizant at all times of OVW's policies, described above, concerning confidentiality and conflicts of interest. Reviewers must maintain the confidentiality of the peer review process and refrain from sharing any information about the applications assigned to their panel and any discussion about the applications. This includes discussing applications in any public area. Should a peer review panel member receive a request for application materials, recommendations, information regarding the review process in general, or about a specific application, the reviewer must notify the designated OVW Peer Review Point of Contact and the peer review contractor immediately. **In addition, during the review of their assigned applications, a reviewer may become aware of possible conflicts of interest and/or issues that may call into question their impartiality or objectivity regarding an application. In order to address the conflict in a timely fashion, reviewers must immediately bring the conflict to the attention of an OVW staff member or the peer review contractual staff for resolution prior to the submission deadline for initial scores and comments.** The OVW Peer Review POC will determine if the issue identified rises to the level of a possible conflict of interest. If the issue identified rises to the level of an actual conflict of interest or creates an appearance of partiality, the OVW Peer Review POC will reassign the reviewer or the application to another panel.

Peer reviewers must adhere to the confidentiality policy, contained in the non-disclosure agreement, found in the reviewer's welcome packet. Peer reviewers are required to review and sign/initial the non-disclosure agreement (NDA) and conflicts of interest (COI) forms by the established program deadline and prior to reading and scoring any applications. Peer reviewers who do not submit required forms by the established deadline may lose the opportunity to participate as a peer reviewer and will receive a deduction in honorarium.

D. Reading Applications

Peer reviewers are typically assigned 8-10 applications and given a designated reading period to complete individual evaluations. Each application should be assessed based on the criteria outlined in the NOFO and the web-based scoring form. In general, applications should be evaluated independently and not compared to one another, however, under the Technical Assistance Initiative, different considerations may apply. Reviewers should allocate sufficient time to carefully read, evaluate, and score each application. OVW staff will be available during the reading

period (during business hours) to answer questions regarding the NOFO or the scoring form.

Note: Reviewers that fail to complete the review of applications and submit the scoring forms by the established program deadline will receive a deduction in honorarium.

Peer reviewers should give equal consideration to secular and non-secular applicants and project partners. No applicant will be discriminated against on the basis of its religious character or affiliation, religious name, or the religious composition of its board of directors or persons working in the organization. Applicants of faith-based organizations should retain their independence and do not need to modify their religious identity (e.g., removing religious symbols) to receive OVW funding. In addition, any inherently religious activities must be separated from grant funded activities.

Applications are scored on how well the applicant responds to each NOFO section and the criteria listed within that section. Reviewers assess the quality of the response to the criteria in the NOFO. When reading an application, it is important to recognize that many organizations do not have access to professional grant writers - so while the writing may not be polished, the project could still be strong and worthy of careful consideration. Responses to each criterion must appear in the designated section based on the NOFO; providing a response in a section other than the section designated for that specific response may result in point deductions. Each section is reviewed and scored independently. However, when rating the budget, reviewers must evaluate it in relation to the proposal narrative. The MOU or similar document(s) are not scored; however, it should be reviewed in relation to the proposal narrative. Peer reviewers should provide detailed notes regarding the applicant's responsiveness to the criteria on the scoring form.

Reviewers play a critical role in ensuring funding decisions support communities across the country. Reviewers have been selected for their experience or expertise on a particular topic. A reviewer's ability to prepare clear, detailed and substantive comments about an application is essential to the process. Since there are no consensus meetings, reviewers must document all comments about the applications to justify their scores. Do not leave a comment section blank. Notes should include page numbers from applications whenever possible, as this will assist OVW with examining score variances between reviewers. All comments on the web-based Peer Reviewer Rating Form must directly reflect the NOFO's scoring criteria. OVW will refer to individual Peer Reviewer Rating Forms when clarifying reviewer comments or responding to applicant inquiries. Additionally, reviewers should avoid including opinions and information not contained in the application when scoring applications. Please note that reviewer comments serve the dual purposes of informing OVW's funding decisions and giving applicants constructive feedback. The (anonymized) comments may be returned to the applicant with notification of OVW's funding decision.

Tips for more Effective Application Comments

When developing strengths and areas of improvement, consider the following strategy: 1) Assume that any application that does not receive a perfect score may not be funded, even if scored very high, since scores from other panels are unknown. 2) Given this assumption, what would it take to give that application a perfect score? Since there are no discussions on

applications, reviewer comments are critical to helping applicants understand the elements of the application that need improvement for future submissions. Use that as the foundation for the comments.

Tips for Preparing Comments:

1. Write comments in complete sentences that are constructive and respectful. Cite page numbers when describing strengths and areas for improvement to help applicants understand the feedback.

2. Avoid using general comments (e.g. "The application should follow the prompts in the NOFO"). Be as specific and detailed as possible. Cite specifics in the application and explain why something was noted as a strength or area of improvement. Focus on what would help the applicant to improve their proposal.

3. Identify where the application contradicts the intent or requirements of the NOFO.

4. Ensure comments reflect an evaluation of the application as a whole or a particular section of the application. When citing a strength or area for improvement, describe what a more effective approach or practice might be.

5. Confirm that all comments are accurate and fair. Ensure the comments are not based on any biases or outside information not included in the application. If you identify any inaccuracy, revise them in the scoring form.

6. Ensure comments are supported by the numerical score assigned to that section. If needed, adjust the score or revise the comments to ensure they are aligned with each other.

7. When reviewing an application's budget, verify that the budget aligns with the program narrative and the NOFO's requirements. Budgets should not include unrelated, out-of-scope, or unallowable expenses. Consider whether items are essential and reasonable for the success of the project, while recognizing that cost of living and service delivery costs vary across the country. Note: Don't focus on calculations as a complete budget review will be conducted by OVW.

After Peer Review

In order to maintain the integrity and confidentiality of the peer review process, reviewers should not reference the specific OVW program(s) they reviewed applications for or the specific applications they reviewed. However, they may divulge their participation generally, e.g., stating on a resume that they served as an OVW peer reviewer.

OVW's Role After Peer Review is Conducted

As mentioned previously, while critical to the process, the peer reviewer's role is advisory in nature. In addition to the peer review scores, OVW considers several factors when making funding decisions, including past performance of grantees, geographic diversity, populations to be served, statutory mandates, and other agency priorities.

Applicants who are not recommended for funding will typically be notified by October 1st of the fiscal year in which the application was submitted unless there is a delay in the grant awarding cycle. In accordance with OVW policy, applicants will not be told the scores assigned to their applications. However, applicants may request a copy of the panel's compiled comments outlining strengths and areas for improvement.

APPENDIX A

- Conflict of Interest Checklist
- Non-Disclosure Agreement
- Adherence to Timeline Agreement

DISCLOSURE OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

CONFLICT OF INTEREST CHECKLIST

It is the policy of the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) that a peer reviewer shall not participate in the review of any application when he or she has a real or potential conflict of interest. Please INITIAL BESIDE EACH conflict of interest situation confirming that you DO NOT have the specified conflict of interest.

_ I have not been, nor will I be, directly involved in this project or any other project (e.g., as a current or past advisory board member, board of directors, consultant, collaborator, or conference speaker whose expenses would be paid from the grant).

_ I am not employed by the same institution or organization as the applicant, nor was I employed there within the past year.

_ I have not collaborated with the applicant within the past year on work related to the proposal.

_ I am not now nor have I been under consideration within the last year for a position at the applicant's organization or institution.

_ I have not served in an official capacity with the applicant's organization within the past year.

_ My organization does not have members or closely affiliated officials (e.g., board of trustee's members) who serve in an official capacity with the applicant's organization or institution.

_ I do not have a familial or current/former romantic relationship with any individuals employed by the applicant or any of the partnering organizations on the project.

_ I have not had professional or personal relationships with the project director, or other key personnel identified in the application, including as a student, thesis advisor, or postdoctoral advisor.

_ The applicant and I are not known to be either close friends or open antagonists.

_ I do not have an application under review by OVW within the same grant program that I am reviewing.

_ I have never conducted a formal program process or outcome evaluation of the assigned applications.

_ I have not provided substantial technical assistance to any of the applicants assigned to my panel.

_ I am not reviewing any applications submitted from a jurisdiction located within my primary state of residence or employment or submitted by a Tribe of which I am a member.

Your signature on this document indicates that each application will be reviewed and scored impartially with no biases, either for or against, and based only on the merits and guidelines outlined in the grant program NOFO.

I certify that I have no conflicts of interest in performing the assigned task(s). I have informed OVW Staff or the Contractor of any prior knowledge or interest in any documents or information pertinent to this assignment.

Please identify any proposal(s) of conflict:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Legal Name (Printed)

_____

Signature Date

_____ _____

Program Name Panel Number

_____ _____

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

I agree to treat as absolutely confidential all application materials, names of all applicants, comments, deliberations, and scores. I will not provide any information before, during, or after the review to anyone outside of OVW or the Contractor staff. If I am contacted for information about the applications, an applicant, or the Peer Review process, I will immediately notify **Ms. Jessica Neal**, OVW's Peer Review Contracting Officer's Representative (COR), at **202-514-0398**. I understand that failure to comply with this policy will result in my removal from the OVW Peer Review Consultant Pool.

These provisions are consistent with and do not supersede, conflict with, or otherwise alter the employee obligations, rights, or liabilities created by existing statute or Executive Order relating to: (1) classified information; (2) communications to Congress; (3) the reporting to an Inspector General or the Office of Special Counsel of a violation of any law, rule, or regulation, or mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety; or (4) any other whistleblower protection. The definitions, requirements, obligations, rights, sanctions, and liabilities created by controlling Executive Orders and statutory provisions are incorporated into this agreement and are controlling. 5 U.S.C. § 2302(b)(l3)(A).

_____ _____

Signature Date

ADHERENCE TO TIMELINE

I agree to complete all tasks per the dates referenced in the Assignment of Task letter. If requirements and schedules are not met, this contract is subject to cancellation, with reduced or withheld payment for services.

I have reviewed this contract agreement, and my signature affixed below is evidence that I agree to perform the assigned task(s) according to the specifications outlined in this letter.

_____ _____

Signature Date

APPENDIX B

- Guidelines for Peer Reviewers of Applications From Faith-Based and Community Organizations

- Summary of DOJ's Equal Treatment Regulation (28 C.F.R. Part 38)

United States Department of Justice
Office on Violence Against Women

Guidelines for Peer Reviewers of Applications
From Faith-Based and Community Organizations

In scoring grant applications, OVW's peer reviewers will treat faith-based and other community organizations ("FBCOs") equally, regardless of their religious mission or lack thereof. Listed below are guidelines to help you meet this requirement:

- An eligible applicant or grantee must not be discriminated for or against on the basis of: 1) its religious character or affiliations, 2) religious name, 3) religious mission statement, 4) the religious composition of its board of directors, or 5) persons working in the organization.

- Use the same scoring criteria for both faith-based and secular nonprofit organizations. Give the grant applications of faith-based organizations equal consideration to those of secular nonprofit and for-profit grant applicants.

- Among faith-based applicants, do not favor or disfavor an application based on the particular faith or denomination of the applicant.

- Do not assume anything about an applicant's qualifications from that fact that the applicant is or is not faith-based. Indeed, do not assume anything beyond what is written. You should not give an applicant the benefit of the doubt, or assume the worst, based on information or presumptions you have about the applicant, its religious beliefs, or its religious activities.

- Assume that a faith-based applicant will abide by all the rules of OVW and DOJ. This includes the requirement that grantees serve all eligible beneficiaries, regardless of their religion or their interest or disinterest in participating in the religious activities of the applicant. In other words, unless you have evidence in the proposal that the applicant will not obey these rules, do not assume that they will not obey them just because the applicant is faith-based in character or evangelistic in mission.

- Be honest about your ability to be objective in scoring a proposal from a particular religion, sect or denomination, or from a group with an atheistic or agnostic philosophy. Treat such a bias as you must any other conflict of interest: immediately notify OVW and decline to score that proposal.

- Where a program calls for or gives points for collaborations with non-government organizations, remember that the latter includes FBCOs. The same amount of credit or number of points should be given to applications showing such collaborations regardless of whether they involve faith-based or secular organizations.

- Previous grantees should not be favored over first-time or previously unsuccessful applicants. Scoring may be based in part on demonstrated capacity to meet program goals. But that capacity can exist in an applicant that has not previously sought public funds.

Summary of USDOJ's Equal Treatment Regulation
28 C.F.R. Part 38

It is DOJ policy that faith-based and other community organizations that statutorily qualify as eligible applicants under DOJ programs are invited and encouraged to apply for assistance awards to fund eligible grant activities. Faith-based and other community organizations will be considered for awards on the same basis as other eligible applicants and, if they receive assistance awards, will be treated on an equal basis with all other grantees in the administration of such awards. No eligible applicant or grantee will be discriminated for or against on the basis of its religious character or affiliation, religious name, or the religious composition of its board of directors or persons working in the organization. Programs funded by DOJ are not permitted to discriminate in the provision of services on the basis of a beneficiary's religion.

For the full text of the Regulation see 28 C.F.R. Part 38.