



MHCRC Community Technology Grants Program Review

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Mt. Hood Cable Regulatory Commission (MHCRC) has operated the Community Technology Grants program for over 20 years, with a mission of supporting Multnomah County organizations' use of technology resources for public benefit. Following a review conducted in 2003 to assess impacts of the program from 1999-2003, MHCRC selected Pacific Research and Evaluation LLC, with support from women-owned small business Clarity Scientific LLC, to conduct a new review focusing on grants awarded from 2014-2018.

The evaluation questions that guided this review explore impacts on grantee organizations, partner organizations, and the individuals and communities served by the projects. The review also includes an examination of funding patterns and grantmaking processes to inform the strategic direction of the grant program moving forward. Evaluation questions fell into two distinct categories: those exploring program impact and those exploring funding patterns and MHCRC's grantmaking process.

Methods

A total of 41 grants were awarded between 2014-2018. Of these, two grants were cancelled at the request of the grantee organizations, in coordination with MHCRC; however, representatives from the two organizations with cancelled grants were still invited to participate in data collection efforts. Four organizations received more than one grant between 2014-2018, meaning grants were awarded to 37 unique grantee organizations. In effort to reach the goals MHCRC established for this review of the Community Technology Grant program, a range of data collection methods were utilized. **Document review** included analysis of project application narratives, status reports, and other supplemental documentation from a total of 39 grants (excluding the two cancelled grants). A **grantee survey** was sent via email to representatives of all 41 grants awarded. Respondents represented 20 total grants. **Grantee focus groups and interviews** were conducted with 16 participants representing a total of 17 grants. Finally, **MHCRC staff interviews** were conducted with two MHCRC staff and three commissioners.

Community Technology Grant Program Impacts

Review of program impacts focused on grantee successes, audiences reached, public benefit areas served, grantees' work to leverage additional funds, grantee organizational effectiveness, benefits and value of technology, and overall lessons learned.

Goals and Activities	Projects that were funded covered a diverse spectrum of goals and activities within broader Community Technology Grant program goals. Almost all grants included purchases of video and audio technology. A total of 30 grants (76.9%) set goals related to providing opportunities to gain experience with industry-standard equipment , and more than half (53.9%) aimed to provide educational opportunities . Others focused on career guidance, mentorship, and relationship building. The most common activities found in each grant application included film production (22 grants, or 56.4%) and creating community technology spaces (8 grants, or 20.5%).
Public Benefit Areas	In their grant application, a total of 48.7% (19 grantees) identified the primary public benefit area of their grant as reducing disparities . A further 33.3% (13 grantees) focused on improving service delivery . The remainder focused on improving community involvement or reducing cost of a service or function.

Project Success	Overall, projects were very successful at meeting stated goals. On the grantee survey, almost all respondents (18 of 20) agreed or strongly agreed that their project was successful . Furthermore, the research team’s qualitative analysis during document review revealed that a total of 35 grants (89.7%) fully met their stated project goals . The other four grants (10.3%) were determined to have partially met their stated project goals.
Community and Beneficiaries	Grants served a wide variety of audiences and communities, including numerous historically underrepresented and underserved groups. Two-thirds of grantee organizations stated on grant applications and status reports that their grants served Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) , and 22.2% of grants were specifically designed to serve people with limited English proficiency or people whose first language is not English. Grants served people from all age groups, with many focused on children and teens . Almost half of grants served people with low incomes .
Impact	During focus groups and interviews, grantees described how grant funds allowed them to initiate dedicated activities that gave communities space to be creative, see themselves represented in media, and invest long-term in communities . Others spoke about how grants empowered them to bring light to issues that are unique to the communities they serve, reaching communities in ways they otherwise may not have been able to.
Sustainability	Many grantee organizations have been able to successfully sustain their projects over time , even throughout challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Grantees described new funding sources, new grants that had been received based on the work performed with MHCRC-provided funds, and additional contributions of their own and other organizations to sustain projects over time. The most commonly reported barriers to sustaining project activities were the COVID-19 pandemic, funding, and staffing issues .

Funding Patterns and Grantmaking Processes

Review of funding patterns and the grantmaking process focused on advancing equity, MHCRC responsiveness, grantee match resources, technology as a tool to serve grantees’ missions, barriers, and trends over time since the previous report was published in 2003.

Advancing Equity	More than half of survey respondents (11 of 20, or 55.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that MHCRC incorporated equity into the grant awarding process in the 2014-2018 period, while the remainder did not recall or did not know. In focus groups, grantees discussed differences among experiences of organizations that received funding, focusing primarily on how smaller organizations in particular may be disadvantaged by the grantmaking process. MHCRC staff recognized an opportunity for continued advancement of equity in the grant application process.
MHCRC Responsiveness	While grantees regularly discussed the complexity of the application and reporting processes, they also frequently described the helpfulness and responsiveness of MHCRC staff . Several grantees discussed the disconnect between appearance and reality, describing how it was not clear until interacting with MHCRC staff how helpful, flexible, and supportive they would be in what is otherwise a complex system to understand and navigate.

<p>Match Resources</p>	<p>Grantee organizations were asked to contribute at least 50% of the total contribution required for project implementation. Grantees far exceeded matching requirements, with a total match of \$12,994,878.68. Only 2 of the 39 total grants did not meet the initial matching criteria of providing at least 50% of the required funding for the project, and one of those was because the project did not proceed past the pilot phase. MHCRC staff acknowledged that the match may have been a barrier to applicants, especially an organization’s ability to implement the project and the internal capacity the match would require from the organization.</p>
<p>Technology as a Tool for Grantees</p>	<p>Almost all survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that technology acquired using grant funds allowed them to better serve their community beneficiaries. However, navigating use of new technology, while exciting and beneficial for the communities they served, was also challenging for some grantees. Difficulties that grantees identified during focus groups and interviews ranged from restrictions in the grant program regarding how they connect the public to their content, the learning curve in managing equipment inventory, and administrative expertise needed for identifying appropriate technology.</p>
<p>Key Program Strengths</p>	<p>Overall, the research team’s assessment indicated a wide array of strengths in both the program and MHCRC’s grantmaking process. Grantees appreciate that MHCRC is a supportive partner who works with them to successfully achieve their goals. A common thread throughout all discussions was how kind, responsive, and adaptable staff at MHCRC were throughout the entirety of the grant process. Grantees felt MHCRC was invested in them.</p>
<p>Potential Barriers and Opportunities</p>	<p>MHCRC staff expressed a desire for more staff capacity throughout the grant implementation process, and MHCRC commissioners recognized that between 2014-2018, staff to support this work were limited and stretched thin. Restrictions from cable companies around how funds could be used were another consistent challenge cited by staff and commissioners. Grantees indicated that smaller organizations may not have been able to successfully apply, given matching and reporting requirements. Similarly, survey respondents desired a more simplified application and reporting process. Those organizations with smaller staff numbers, in particular, shared the challenges they faced in meeting demands of application and reporting requirements.</p>
<p>Progress Since 2003 Report</p>	<p>Comparison of reports covering 1999-2003 and 2014-2018 revealed many areas of substantial progress over the 15 years between reports, as well as some continuing trends and some areas that remain growth opportunities. First, there was a substantial increase in the number of awards and total amounts awarded since the previous evaluation, plus a striking increase in the matched funds provided by grantees and their partners. Second, there appears to be some evidence of a shift toward more work to reduce disparities by MHCRC and its grantees over time.</p> <p>Across both time periods, grantees expressed similar appreciation for MHCRC staff responsiveness and support, but also identified that the application and reporting requirements were daunting for some organizations. Across both time periods, grantees also voiced support for the creation of a learning community for grantees and/or interested community groups and organizations.</p>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the insights shared above, below are a range of recommendations for MHCRC to consider when planning for sustained activity through the Community Technology Grants program. The opportunities highlighted below are intended to build on and advance the grant program's impact on grantee organizations, communities served, and MHCRC as a grantmaking body. In considering recommendations, it is again important to note that several years have passed since the review period (i.e., 2014–2018), and many changes have already been made or begun by MHCRC staff. As such, some ongoing or planned changes may not be reflected in this retrospective report and the below recommendations.

Enhance Grantee Support Throughout Grant Lifecycle

- ◆ Grantees expressed barriers to both the application and reporting processes. Although the program has made efforts in recent years to reduce the application requirements, further review of the current application process could reduce the burden for grantees. In conducting such a review, MHCRC could consider involving input from current grantees to ensure that any changes made are based on the current application process. Staff noted that, although the MHCRC has revised the application process, the reporting process has not been revised in recent years. Revisiting the reporting process in an effort to streamline what is asked of grantees is recommended.
- ◆ Grantees commented on barriers related to training and staffing needed to implement the grants. Additional efforts to communicate these expectations to grantees in the application phase would be a valuable focus of future work. The MHCRC might also consider partnering with other grantmaking organizations to support the operational costs of the grant or provide grantees with a list of organizations that could partner in this way.
- ◆ Results of this report showed that one of the most substantial barriers to the grant program is the restrictions MHCRC must ask CT grantees to operate within, based on the requirements and regulations surrounding the funding stream. Grantees seemed to struggle with or not be aware of the restrictions and barriers within which MHCRC must operate. Enhanced transparency around laws that govern funding and how this creates certain limits to the use of funds may help grantees better understand the rationale for the current communication and reporting structure. Enhanced visibility of these limitations or boundaries from the start may also help motivate applicants to build relationships with community media centers or other similar organizations to best support learning, implementation, and management needs. There may also be potential to include the cable companies in discussions with grantees to increase transparency.

Foster Relationship-Building Across Grantees to Support Communities Served

- ◆ Grantees shared a desire to acquire additional knowledge in the early stages of grant application and project work, especially related to selecting and utilizing technology. To meet this need for training and additional support, MHCRC could build upon their connections with the community media centers and systematically inform grantees about how these organizations can support their learning needs.

- ◆ Grantees expressed a desire to connect with one another to learn about how different organizations are approaching the projects. We recommend the MHCRC consider a peer learning event where grantees can come together to share successes, barriers, and resources. While some connection among grantees took place even via virtual focus groups during data collection, an in-person event would be particularly desirable for grantees. Such an event may also provide an opportunity for grantees to create partnerships to support the operational side of the work.
- ◆ As shown in this report, great strides have been made toward advancing equity through the CT grant program. We recommend that MHCRC celebrate and articulate the ways in which equity is being woven into the grantmaking process so that all applicants feel fully aware of opportunities available to them. While many grantees noted great strides in how the application was highlighting equity in clearer ways, several indicated little awareness of practices to center this work. MHCRC staff have gone out of their way to craft unique opportunities, such as funding advances to support those smaller organizations that may not be able to carry project funding until reimbursement, pre-application support for technical assistance, and referrals for partnerships with community media centers. Making these better known may help applicants better articulate—and take advantage of—the equitable practices built into the grantmaking process.

Continue to Evolve the Community Technology Grants Program

- ◆ MHCRC staff, commissioners, and grantees are hopeful about the future of this grant program despite the limitations imposed by funding streams. This report clearly highlights the value of the grant program for grantee organizations, communities, and partner organizations. Continuing to seek out innovative opportunities and partnership to keep this important work going is likely to highly benefit community-based organizations and the wide variety of audiences that funded projects serve around Multnomah County and beyond.
- ◆ As MHCRC begins its upcoming strategic planning process, we recommend inviting and incorporating feedback from a range of grantee representatives from different communities, operational budgets, and organizational ages to help inform how CT grants and the MHCRC as a whole can continue to adapt to meet community needs respective to limitations around funding streams, funding use, and mindfulness toward the equity needs their organizations serve every day.
- ◆ A limitation noted in the methods section of this report is related to the retrospective nature of this research study. To facilitate MHCRC's ability to continue to periodically look back at the impacts of the program, we recommend incorporating formative evaluation methods into the current grant program. This could be achieved by conducting a brief survey in conjunction with an annual in-person event, if developed. Alternatively, or in addition to an annual event, a survey of grantees that could be provided at the end of each grant would provide an exceptional opportunity to gather feedback about progress towards goals, successes, challenges, and opportunities for additional support from the MHCRC.