

**William Penn Foundation**

Request for Proposals

# Increasing Census Participation

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## Introduction

The William Penn Foundation (WPF) has a long history of investing in efforts to improve quality of life for residents of the Philadelphia region. The Foundation’s Democracy & Civic Initiatives program was created to support collective and collaborative action toward a more engaged, participatory city and state. A full description of the Democracy & Civic Initiatives program, its goals, and all of its objectives can be found on the Foundation’s website. This specific Request for Proposals (RFP) was created to help organizations to advance the following objective:

**In 2030, decennial census self-response rate increases by 1.5 percentage points statewide and 4.0 percentage points in Philadelphia.**

We have supported efforts to achieve a complete and accurate census count for more than 50 years. We've made grants to organizations that encourage and help Philadelphians and people across the state to provide the information needed for an accurate count of all residents.

The Foundation recognizes that there are many ways that organizations and communities can contribute to advancing this objective. With that understanding, this RFP imposes few limitations on the approach that applicants may take. However, by the end of the grant term, projects should result in complete and implementable plans to increase participation in the census count.

Regardless of the approach, all applicants should describe a compelling explanation for how their proposed work will advance the objective above. The specific criteria that will be used to assess all proposals can be found on pages 7 and 8 of this document.

### **Why is the Foundation using a Request for Proposals to advance this objective?**

The Foundation has chosen to advance this objective using a Request for Proposals for several reasons. First, we believe that stakeholders across the region have a great deal of expertise and experience that can be supported to make progress on an objective that we heard was important to communities in our region. We want to hear about the impactful projects that are underway or could get underway and need funding. Second, we want to be as transparent as possible about the opportunity for non-profit organizations in the region to secure funding for work to advance this objective.

**WPF is excited to partner with 2 other foundations to advance this objective. Along with WPF, Heinz Endowments has provided lead support. Additional support has been provided by HealthSpark Foundation. By collaborating on this RFP, these funders have increased the total amount of funding available to support planning for the 2030 Census and have simplified the application and reporting process for grantees.**

# Background

Through the Democracy and Civic Initiatives program, WPF seeks to build trust and participation, particularly among underrepresented communities, in Pennsylvania’s democratic processes. Increasing participation in the 2030 census count helps the state to secure its fair share of resources and representation for the next decade.

The United States Constitution requires a census, every ten years, to count all persons in the United States. This population count serves as the basis for sharing political power among the states, with the number of congressional representatives assigned (or “apportioned”) to each state based on the updated count. Census counts also guide electoral redistricting and distribution of a large portion of federal funding.

New research from the Project on Government Oversight shows that more than \$2.24 trillion dollars of federal funds were divided among the states based on census data in the 2023 fiscal year.<sup>1</sup> In Pennsylvania, 371 federal programs use census data to distribute over \$94 billion in federal spending, the vast majority of it through Medicaid, Medicare, and other health-related spending.<sup>2</sup> Additional census-guided federal funding supports the state’s infrastructure, education, economic development, and housing.

However, we face tremendous challenges to achieve a full count in the 2030 census. As in 2020, the logistical hurdles of a nationwide data operation, budget and staffing concerns at the Census Bureau, community concerns about data security, and widespread distrust of government make it difficult to achieve an accurate count. Furthermore, some groups of people have been historically undercounted by the Census Bureau, including Black or African American people, Hispanic or Latino/a people, children ages 0-4, renters, and men ages 18-49.<sup>3</sup>

Thoughtful planning and coordinated statewide collaboration can help communities to overcome these barriers and historic inaccuracies. Together, we can boost our state’s self-response rate. When people self-respond to the census – by filling out the census questionnaire themselves on behalf of their household – rather than relying on the Census Bureau to follow up, the data are more accurate, leading to a fairer distribution of resources and representation.

**In 2020, Pennsylvania’s overall census self-response rate was 69.6%. Self-response rates in Pennsylvania counties ranged from a high of 79.5% in Bucks County to a low of 26.8% in Forest County.<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> [Moulton, S., & Luong, J. \(2025, October 28\). Census Matters: Why an Accurate Count is Essential to Funding Our Communities. Project on Government Oversight.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Project on Government Oversight. \(2025\). Justice served: Census Matters: Census-Guided Funding in Pennsylvania.](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Stempowski, D. \(2023, November 7\). Counting Every Voice: Understanding Hard-to-Count and Historically Undercounted Populations. Census Bureau.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [CUNY Mapping Service at the Center for Urban Research, CUNY Graduate Center. \(2020\). Census 2020 Hard to Count Map.](#)

# Opportunity Overview

WPF and our co-funder partners seek to support efforts to advance community-driven, place-based planning processes. We expect the plans created with grant support will guide census-related education, outreach, communications, and get-out-the-count activities in Pennsylvania through 2030.

We are requesting proposals for **up to 18 months of funding**. The appropriate project term will depend on the context in which you are working, including early plan development that may or may not already be complete. At the end of the grant period, organizations should have a complete and implementable plan that can be used in the years leading up to and through the 2030 census. A “complete and implementable plan” created with support from this planning grant will include, at minimum:

- a goal for what will be accomplished by the end of the 2030 census
- a timeline outlining phases of the work and activities to be undertaken
- roles and responsibilities of key partners
- strategies for stakeholder and community engagement
- a full picture of the resources (budget and staff/volunteer capacity) necessary to implement the plan
- process or operational questions about the census surfaced during planning

The Foundation recognizes that plans can be produced using a variety of tactics or approaches. Applicants may request support for one or multiple components of the planning process (e.g. outreach and education, community engagement, research and data analysis, message testing, technical assistance, consultant support, etc.). In describing the proposed work, all submitted proposals should:

- define the geographic area and/or demographic group for which the applicant(s) intends to increase census self-response rates, and the number of people to be reached,
- describe the elements and anticipated goal of the plan that will be completed by the end of the grant term,
- explain how the applicant(s) will coordinate with local, county, and/or statewide partners, including government agencies (as applicable),
- describe the process that will lead to creation of the plan.

All proposals that meet the criteria described on pages 7-8 are encouraged. After reviewing proposals, WPF and its co-funders will conduct site visits and gather additional information from a limited number of organizations.

Organizations that propose projects in partnership with other applicants will be considered on their individual merits. However, the Foundation and its partners recognize that the work necessary to make significant progress on the objective will be complex and encourages organizations to include partnerships that leverage complementary strengths, resources, and expertise.

WPF has **\$1.275 million available** to advance this objective through this RFP. The maximum amount that a single organization may request is \$50,000. A coalition of two or more organizations and/or government entities applying together on a single proposal may request up to \$100,000.

Proposed projects must occur in Pennsylvania. During the grant term, there will be opportunities to coordinate planning with other local efforts and with Keystone Counts, the statewide campaign for a complete and accurate census count through state census convenings.

## Eligibility

Applicants must be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as 501(c)3 public charities or operate under a public charity fiduciary. Public charities include community-based organizations, schools and educational institutions, and other types of public-serving groups. Government entities are also eligible to apply.

**Before you apply**, please review the questions below. If you can confidently answer “yes” to the questions, this funding opportunity may be relevant to you. If you respond “no” to any of the questions, this opportunity is not a good match for your project, and you should not apply.

Is your project:		YES	NO
Proposing a community-driven planning process focused on increasing census self-response rates?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focused exclusively on a clearly defined geographic area and/or demographic group in the state of Pennsylvania?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Engaging with relevant partners seeking to improve census counts?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going to produce a complete and implementable plan by the end of the grant term?		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please also review all of the criteria on the following pages and make sure that your program aligns with those.

# Review Criteria

Proposals will be judged on the criteria below. **Applicants should address these criteria in their narrative responses to the application questions.**

Alignment with Objective			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
Project activities and goals are unrelated to the defined objective.	Project activities and goals may advance the defined objective, but connection is vague.	Project will make a clear but indirect contribution to advancing the defined objective.	Project will make a clear and direct contribution to advancing the defined objective.
Inclusive Approach			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No plan to prioritize underrepresented communities. No apparent community engagement.	Limited efforts to prioritize underrepresented communities. Sporadic or cursory engagement of relevant community members.	Project prioritizes access and creates opportunities for underrepresented communities. Meaningful engagement of relevant community members in project planning, goal-setting and implementation.	Underrepresented communities are leaders in project planning, goal-setting, and implementation.
Organizational Capacity			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No evidence of plan, timeline, resources, staffing, or partnerships necessary to achieve project's goals; no prior relevant experience with proposed work.	Some elements of project plan and resources are in place, but plan to fill gaps is vague or nonexistent.	Project has a realistic plan and timeline; some resources, staffing, and partnerships are in place, with a clear plan to fill remaining gaps.	Evidence of credible, realistic plan, timeline, resources, and staffing to achieve the project's goals; history of successful implementation of similar work.
Collaboration and Partnerships			
Absent	Emergent	Developing	Strong
No identified partners or plans for collaboration.	Intended partners are identified but there are no clear commitments to collaborate that would strengthen the work.	Some committed partners and a clear plan to build new partnerships that will address gaps in perspective and expertise.	Evidence of commitment to collaborate from partners who will strengthen the work through diverse perspectives and expertise.

## Additional expectations and considerations:

<b>Project Deliverable</b>	Proposed work must produce a complete and implementable plan by the end of the grant term.
<b>Coordination with Similar Efforts</b>	Projects should demonstrate coordination with other relevant planning processes and avoid duplication of efforts.
<b>Prior Experience</b>	Proposals should describe the organization/coalition’s prior experience conducting Complete Count activities; those with relevant prior experience will be given preference.
<b>Historically Undercounted and Hard-to-Count Populations</b>	Proposals that seek to reach historically undercounted and hard-to-count populations will be most competitive. <sup>5</sup>
<b>Established Relationships</b>	The most competitive proposals will have established relationships and a history of successful engagement with the communities the applicant intends to reach.
<b>Compensation for Partners and Community Members</b>	Partner organizations and community participants should be appropriately compensated for their roles and contributions within the scope of the overall project budget.
<b>Budget</b>	The requested budget is reasonable for the proposed activities and the stated results.
<b>Geography</b>	We expect to fund projects in a range of geographies in Pennsylvania, including rural communities.

<sup>5</sup> Please review the Census Bureau’s definitions of historically undercounted and hard-to-count populations: [Stempowski, D. \(2023, November 7\). Counting Every Voice: Understanding Hard-to-Count and Historically Undercounted Populations. Census Bureau.](#)

# Learning and Insights

Grantees will be expected to complete a brief written report each year describing how they have made progress toward the objective above and what they have learned during the year.

In addition, organizations funded through this RFP will be convened in a Learning Community to build networks among those advancing a common objective, to share learning and best practices, and to identify ways in which progress could be enhanced. Grantees will help to determine the frequency, content, and specific goals of the Learning Community. The overhead funding included with any awarded grants is, in part, meant to help subsidize staff participation in the Learning Community.



## Webinar

Interested organizations are invited to participate in an optional informational webinar on **Tuesday, March 24, 2026 at 1:00PM ET.**

Register for the webinar at <https://lu.ma/williampenfoundation>

# Budget

Project budgets should cover up to 18 months of funding. Project budgets should be all-inclusive, including any regrants to partner organizations or fees to consultants. This information can be provided in the proposal narrative.

Except in rare circumstances, total funding from WPF should not exceed 25% of a participating organization's operating budget. All aspects of project development and execution, including planning, design, materials, community engagement, staffing, professional development, and implementation are eligible for funding.

## Proposals that Include Advocacy and Lobbying

The Foundation recognizes that advocacy can sometimes be a useful tactic to advance certain objectives. Advocacy takes many forms and sometimes includes activities that the Internal Revenue Service defines as lobbying. (See Application Guidelines for Advocacy Projects for general information on the IRS lobbying rules.) The Foundation is open to proposals that include advocacy and/or lobbying as part of the project and may fund projects that include lobbying so long as certain requirements are met.

Applications that include advocacy or lobbying must:

1. Show in the budget submitted by the applicant that the amount requested from the Foundation is less than 80% of the total project budget.
2. Identify the proportion of the total project budget, if any, that may support activities defined as lobbying under the IRS rules (the “lobbying percentage”). (You will see a specific question about this on the budget template.)
3. Show that the applicant has funding commitments that will cover a minimum of 20% of the total project budget for at least the first year of the proposed grant period. In-kind contributions cannot be counted toward this portion of the budget. (Organizations will be expected to demonstrate funding commitments for at least 20% of the budget for all years of the grant period, but we recognize that it may take additional time to secure those commitments.)
4. If the lobbying percentage is more than 20% of the project budget, the applicant must show that they have committed funds that exceed that lobbying percentage.

In no cases can WPF earmark funds for lobbying activities, nor can Foundation funds be used to support or oppose any candidate for public office, for voter registration efforts, or for any partisan purposes.

# Application Process

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions in the eligibility section above and meet the stated criteria, the application process begins by completing a proposal on our online submission system at <https://wfp.my.site.com/grantee>.

Submit your application **by 5:00PM ET on Thursday, April 23, 2026**. A WPF team will review all proposals and will notify applicants if they have been selected to move forward in the review process. **To download a working copy of the application to draft responses, please [click here](#).**

**Selected organizations** will take part in a site visit with WPF staff so that the Foundation and our co-funders can learn more about applicants’ work. WPF will lead the proposal review and selection process in collaboration with our co-funding partners and maintain open communication with applicants regarding subsequent steps in the application process. Site visits will be approximately 90 minutes to two hours in duration. We ask that organizations use this time to introduce key staff working on the proposed project, to show us where the work will take place, and to elevate the voices of the potential beneficiaries of the proposed project. Based on a combination of the written materials and the learning from the site visit, **a final slate of organizations** will be recommended to the WPF Board.

*This request or any subsequent response does not commit William Penn Foundation or the responding organization to any future funding or engagement. If you have any questions, contact **Jessica Richards, Program Director for Democracy and Civic Initiatives** at [jrichards@williampennfoundation.org](mailto:jrichards@williampennfoundation.org).*

# Timeline

## March 18, 2026

Proposal submission period opens.

## March 24, 2026

Informational Webinar (see page 9)

## April 23, 2026

Proposals due by 5:00PM ET

## May 7-11, 2026

Select applicants notified that their proposals have been chosen for further consideration and a site visit. Other applicants will be notified that their proposals are not advancing in the process.

## May 11-June 12, 2026

Site visits conducted by WPF staff with selected applicants.

## July 31, 2026

WPF Board review selected proposals.

## August 2026

Project implementation can begin.