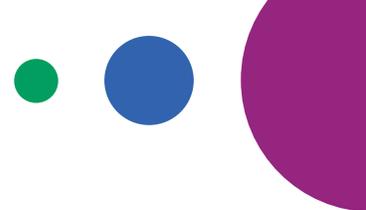


# Evaluation of Technical Assistance for Best Starts for Kids Funding Applicants

A Community-Oriented Public Health Practice Practicum Project

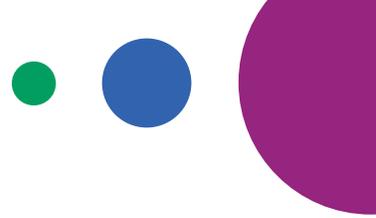
By Leika Suzumura for Best Starts for Kids  
In partnership with Megan McJennett and Sara Jaye Sanford





# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction & Background .....	2
Introduction .....	7
History of King County funding.....	7
Technical assistance.....	7
Goals of technical assistance .....	8
Purpose of this evaluation .....	8
Findings: What We Learned .....	10
Reach and impact of technical assistance .....	11
What worked well.....	11
Most used areas of technical assistance .....	15
Process Challenges.....	19
Challenges experienced by applicants.....	19
Challenges experienced by technical assistance providers.....	21
Overarching Recommendations.....	24
Limitations .....	25
Appendix A: Methods .....	26
Appendix B: Hours of Technical Assistance Provided by Strategy Area .....	28



# Acknowledgements

## Best Starts for Kids staff

Sheila Capestany  
Jsani Henry  
Vitoria Lin  
Megan McJennett  
Kristin Pace  
Marguerite Ro  
Sara Jaye Sanford  
Eva Wong

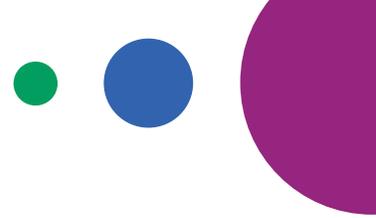
## Technical Assistance Providers

Bulle Consulting  
Emerging Design Consulting  
Roxanne Hood Lyons (RHL) Consulting  
Nonprofit Assistance Center  
Anna Raksany  
Verrenti Consulting

## Key Informant Interviewees

Austin Foundation  
Bridging Cultural Gaps  
The Imagine Institute  
Inspirational Workshops  
Journeymen Institute  
Somali Family Safety Task Force  
Southwest Youth and Family Services  
Villa Comunitaria (formerly South Park Information and Resource Center)  
Walk Away City Collaborative

University of Washington School of Public Health  
Community Oriented Public Health Practice program



# Executive Summary

## Introduction & Background

Best Starts for Kids is an innovative initiative to support King County families and children so that babies are born healthy, children thrive, and young people grow into happy, healthy adults. The Best Starts for Kids levy will generate approximately \$400 million over six years, investing an average of \$65 million every year to build strong communities, resilient families, and happy, healthy, safe, and thriving young people. A majority of these funds are directly invested into community organizations who are providing direct services to the community and promoting systems change that will build healthy communities, through Requests for Proposals (RFPs). Best Starts for Kids recognized that many organizations and the communities they serve have historically experienced barriers to accessing funding opportunities from government agencies such as King County. To address this, the team decided to provide free technical assistance to organizations applying for funds to remove barriers to applying for and accessing funding. King County contracted with six technical assistance providers who offered a wide range of skills, areas of expertise, and language abilities to meet the needs of community-based organizations. The goal of technical assistance was to eliminate the linguistic, cultural, and procedural barriers that might prevent qualified organizations from seeking government funding. See “Findings at a Glance” for a summary of technical assistance that was provided.

This evaluation was designed to answer specific questions about how well the process worked and what difference the technical assistance made in diversifying the applicant pool and improving access to funding opportunities for community organizations that have not historically been funded by King County. To answer these questions, we analyzed data about which organizations had received technical assistance and which were ultimately awarded funding; conducted a survey of organizations who had applied for Best Starts for Kids funding; and conducted

## FINDINGS AT A GLANCE

In total, 25 Requests for Proposals had technical assistance available between June 2017 and January 2019, and funds were awarded for over 400 programs. Roughly \$52.7M was distributed to community-based organizations in 2018, providing direct support to their communities.

### Requests for Proposals

- **25 total RFPs** were released with technical assistance available between June 2017 – January 2019
- **1016 applications** were submitted by **495 organizations**

### Technical Assistance

- **229 organizations** used **2,914 hours of technical assistance**
- **40% of organizations that received technical assistance** had never applied for King County funding before.
- **24% of organizations that received technical assistance on at least one successful application** had never applied for King County funding before.

interviews with representatives of nine organizations that had received technical assistance to support their applications for Best Starts for Kids funding. See Appendix A for details regarding methods.

---

### **Did technical assistance reach applicants who had not applied for King County funding before?**

- Among organizations that received technical assistance, 40% had never applied for King County funding before.
  - Among organizations that received technical assistance on at least one successful application, 24% had never applied for King County funding before.
  - Among survey respondents who received technical assistance, 69% identified as a small organization (less than \$1 million annual budget).
  - Providing free technical assistance helped to build or restore trust between King County and community-based organizations. Many organizations expressed gratitude to King County for providing the free technical assistance in an effort to reach small organizations. This intention to reach historically underfunded organizations helped these organizations rebuild trust in King County and its commitment to equity.
- 

### **Were applicants who received technical assistance more likely to be awarded funds than those who did not receive technical assistance?**

- 38% of organizations that received technical assistance were awarded funds for the specific application they received technical assistance for, while 62% of organizations that received technical assistance were awarded funds for at least one application. (These numbers are different because many organizations applied for multiple funding opportunities and used technical assistance for some but not all of their applications.)
  - 53% of organizations that did not receive technical assistance were awarded funds for at least one application, a rate 9% lower than among organizations that did receive technical assistance.
- 

### **How did technical assistance impact the organizations that used it? Did it demystify the process of applying for funding; improve confidence; or improve grant writing skills?**

- Organizations that received technical assistance built confidence through the draft review process, refining their writing skills, and clearly demonstrating how their programs were a good fit for the funding opportunity for which they applied.

## What areas of support and what qualities of the technical assistance providers were most helpful for the organizations that received technical assistance?

- **Determining whether the proposed program was a good fit for the funding opportunity:** 82% of survey respondents who received technical assistance indicated that “determining fit with RFP goals” was a very important service provided by the technical assistance providers.
- **Reviewing draft applications:** Once organizations felt confident that they were a good fit for the RFP, the second most used service was reviewing drafts of applications. Many small organizations don’t have grant writers and the staff who write proposals often lack the writing experience needed to clearly articulate how their program or services are a strong fit for the goals of an RFP. Technical assistance providers spent many hours helping organizations refine their responses to address the core purposes of the questions and fit within the character limits.
- **Clarifying questions in the RFPs:** Organizations were often confused about what the RFP questions were asking for and how to align their responses with the questions. Technical assistance was key in clarifying these questions.
- **Budget planning:** Small organizations often underbudgeted their staffing needs due to concern that asking for too much money would lower their chances of getting funded. Technical assistance providers offered guidance about building a budget that accurately reflected the true cost of implementing the services and support program success.
- **Navigating cultural norms:** A barrier for organizations was not wanting to “brag” in their applications, so technical assistance providers played a vital role in validating that it was appropriate to speak of their strengths and accomplishments in their applications.

---

## How could the process of providing technical assistance be improved, and what worked well that should be maintained?

- Overall, community-based organizations were satisfied with technical assistance. 88% of survey respondents who received technical assistance were satisfied with the support they received.
- Organizations appreciated transparency about the RFP process, including the requirement for all application reviewers to participate in a bias awareness workshop; providing the criteria that reviewers would use to score applications; and providing feedback when applicants did not receive funding.
- Organizations applying for Best Starts for Kids funding experienced the following challenges:
  - Many applicants didn’t know what kind of services “technical assistance” included and where to learn about these services.

- It was sometimes unclear to applicants who to reach out to regarding problems or questions related to the online application platform: technical assistance providers, county staff, or the online platform's helpdesk.
- Technical assistance providers helping Best Starts for Kids applicants experienced the following challenges:
  - Technical assistance providers were overloaded with last minute requests for the first RFP, so a policy was implemented requiring any interested applicants to reach out to technical assistance providers at least three days before the proposal due date.
  - Due to significant variation in how much technical assistance was requested by organizations for each RFP, it was challenging for technical assistance providers to plan their workloads. The actual number of hours worked was lower than anticipated for at least one technical assistance provider, which caused them to experience internal challenges in meeting their staffing needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on what we heard from technical assistance providers and organizations that received technical assistance, we suggest the following changes to the technical assistance process. Additionally, we recommend changes to the RFP process more broadly which will in turn improve or streamline the provision of technical assistance.

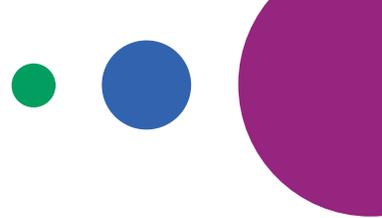
### To improve the RFP process:

- Be as transparent as possible about who will be reviewing applications by providing a list of who will be represented on the review panel (such as community members, county employees, school district employees, etc.). This would further increase transparency and build trust among applicants.
- Honor the timelines outlined in the RFPs. Ensure that dates for decision making are followed so organizations can plan their programming accordingly. Have clear communication if timelines cannot be upheld.
- Clarify RFP questions. For example, offer technical assistance providers and staff who have not been part of the RFP development an opportunity to review the questions and offer suggestions before they are finalized.
- Clearly state the point of contact for issues with the online application platform. Differentiate what the online platform helpdesk, technical assistance providers, or county staff can help with.
- Provide referrals to capacity building for applicants. Many applicants had needs for capacity building and organizational development outside the scope of technical assistance on their funding application. Creating a document that could be shared with organizations with referrals to resources could help facilitate their growth.

- Make applications due towards the end of the work week. This will help distribute the workload for technical assistance providers (and applicants) so that “crunch time” does not happen over the weekends, as is often the case when applications are due on Mondays.
- Be mindful of requiring partnerships and communicate clearly whether partnerships are required or allowed. If a partnership is required, be sure to allow enough time between when and RFP is released and when applications are due to allow organizations to work together.
- Continue to improve cultural relevance of application processes by exploring and incorporating culturally diverse ways of gathering application information and allowing for creativity in making the application process more culturally accessible.

### To improve technical assistance:

- Clearly communicate about the nature and availability of technical assistance services in all venues where an RFP is publicized. While information about technical assistance was provided in RFP documents, in blog posts announcing RFPs, and at information sessions, some applicants were still unaware of or unclear about technical assistance services.
- Create an internal communications system among technical assistance providers. While technical assistance providers worked well together to coordinate their services, their communication was developed ad-hoc and county support from the beginning could have helped streamline the process.
- Right-size technical assistance provider contracts. Use the information that is now available about how many hours of technical assistance have been used for various RFPs to estimate future needs.
- Develop consistent tracking tools so that technical assistance use and outcomes can be more easily monitored.



# Introduction

Best Starts for Kids strengthens families and communities so that babies are born healthy, children thrive and establish a strong foundation for life, and young people grow into happy, healthy adults. Best Starts focuses on promoting opportunities for kids to grow up healthy and happy, decreasing factors that prevent kids from establishing a strong foundation in life, and intervening early when kids and families need more support. Best Starts for Kids is designed to grow, adapt, and change with King County's rapidly changing communities.

King County voters approved this innovative initiative in 2015 to provide nearly \$400 million over 6 years in essential services and support for families and communities. Investments range from established programs that are delivering impact today to pilot projects that are laying the groundwork for future success. Best Starts is supporting more than 270 organizations across King County. The Best Starts initiative has become recognized as the most comprehensive investment in child development in the country. By listening to community needs and investing in community strengths, Best Starts is helping transform King County into a place where everyone can thrive.

## History of King County funding

King County has a long history of distributing public funds to community-based organizations through competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) processes. These proposals have supported a variety of critical services including behavioral health, housing, and early childhood development. The county recognizes that community-based organizations are well-equipped to provide relevant services to their communities. As King County continues to offer more funding opportunities for community-based organizations, it has become clear that the RFP process can be improved to reach more diverse applicants that reflect the many cultures, languages, and identities represented in our county.

## Technical assistance

The King County Council directed Best Starts for Kids to invest at least 1% of the overall funding in capacity building and technical assistance for community-based organizations. The Best Starts team decided to spend a portion of this investment to provide technical assistance to applicants to ensure the funding process was accessible to organizations that had not traditionally received public funds. One of Best Starts' goals is to reach organizations serving and led by their own communities, even if they have never previously applied for government funds. Six technical assistance providers were awarded contracts through a competitive Request for Qualifications process, offering a wide range of skills, areas of expertise, and language abilities. The purpose of technical assistance was to eliminate the linguistic, cultural, and procedural barriers that might prevent qualified organizations from seeking government funding. Technical assistance providers helped applicants determine if their programs were an appropriate fit for RFPs; helped them

navigate the proposal process; reviewed drafts; refined budgets; and supported applicants in authentically sharing their stories of success and impact.

## Goals of technical assistance

As part of the Best Starts for Kids Implementation Plan, the Best Starts team determined the following goals for technical assistance:

- Increase access to the RFP process for organizations that have not previously received funding from King County.
- Increase the number of funded organizations that reflect the communities they serve.
- Increase confidence and ability to apply for funding among organizations that have never applied for public funding before.

Applicants learned about technical assistance in a variety of ways. Community information sessions for each RFP included information about technical assistance providers, and each RFP included a description of technical assistance and how to access it. Posts on the Best Starts blog announcing each RFP included information about technical assistance, and the Best Starts website had a short video introducing the technical assistance providers along with descriptions of each provider. Many applicants had existing relationships with the technical assistance providers and learned of the free services directly from the providers. No limitations were put on who could access technical assistance, though providers were aware of the goal of engaging organizations that have not historically been funded through the county. Applicants were encouraged to reach out early for provider support and were required to contact technical assistance providers at least three days in advance of their proposal due date.

## Purpose of this evaluation

Many stakeholders want to know what impact technical assistance has had on achieving these goals, especially since King County has never offered technical assistance at this scale. The main purpose of this evaluation was to understand the impacts of technical assistance and to identify process improvements that could be made for future RFPs. Other King County departments, divisions, and levies have started to embrace this model of technical assistance to support organizations and want to know how to implement it effectively.

To evaluate the technical assistance, the Best Starts for Kids staff worked with a University of Washington Master of Public Health student to examine the process and outcomes of technical assistance and understand what worked well and what improvements could be made for future technical assistance. Recommendations are included based on feedback from applicants, technical assistance providers, and evaluators. Some findings don't include recommendations if no specific improvement was identified. The following questions formed the base of the evaluation. More information about the methods of this evaluation can be found in Appendix A.

## Outcomes

- Did technical assistance reach applicants who had not applied for King County funding before?
- How did technical assistance impact the organizations that used it? Did it demystify the process of applying for funding; improve confidence; or improve grant writing skills?
- Were applicants who received technical assistance more likely to be awarded funds than those who did not receive technical assistance?

## Process

- What areas of support and what qualities of the technical assistance providers were most helpful for the organizations that received technical assistance?
- How could the process of providing technical assistance be improved, and what worked well that should be maintained?

# Findings: What We Learned

There were 25 Requests for Proposals (RFPs) released between June 2017 – January 2019. RFPs were developed by different teams working on various strategies within the Best Starts initiative. For this reason, feedback from applicants regarding one RFP may not be applicable or relevant to all other RFPs. For example, the Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices in School Environments RFP required partnerships to apply, though almost all other RFPs did not.

**TABLE 1: Comparison of organizations and applications that did and did not receive technical assistance (TA)**

	Did not receive TA Number (Percent)	Received TA Number (Percent)
<b>OVERALL APPLICATIONS</b>		
Number of applications	<b>824</b>	<b>192</b>
Number of organizations that applied for funding	<b>352</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE</b>		
Hours of TA used	--	<b>2914</b>
Number of organizations that received TA (Includes those that did not submit applications)	--	<b>229</b>
<b>ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY OF FUNDING</b>		
Organizations that had not previously applied for KC funding	--	<b>92</b> (40% of those that received TA)
Organizations that had not previously applied for KC funding and received Best Starts funding for the application they received TA for	--	<b>13</b> (24% of those that were awarded funding for the application they received TA for)
<b>AWARDED FUNDING</b>		
Organizations funded for any BSK application	<b>186</b> (53% of applicants that didn't receive TA)	<b>88</b> (62% of applicants that did receive TA)
Organizations funded for the application they received TA for	--	<b>55</b> (38% of applicants that did receive TA)

**TA**= Technical Assistance  
**RFP** = Request for Proposal

**KC** = King County  
-- = Data not available or not applicable

**BSK** = Best Starts for Kids

## Reach and impact of technical assistance

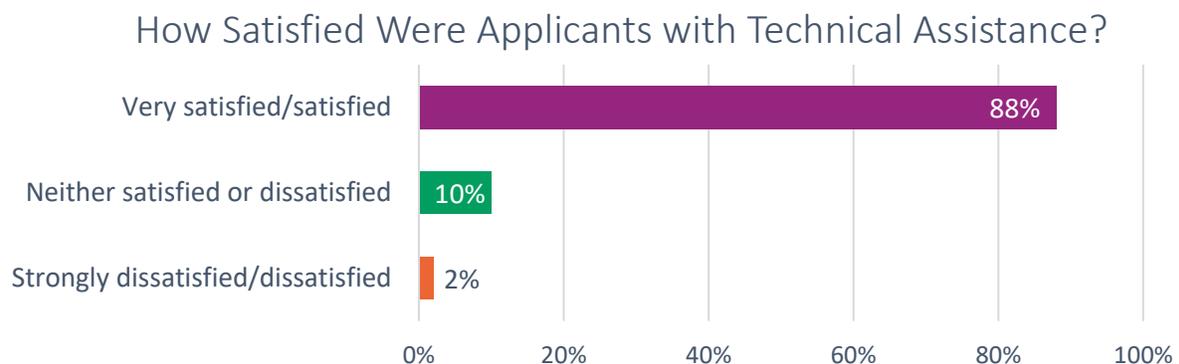
The quantitative findings described below suggest that organizations who had never applied for King County funding before did receive and benefit from technical assistance.

- 40% of organizations who used technical assistance had never applied for King County funds.
- 38% of organizations that received technical assistance received funding for the specific RFP they received technical assistance for.
- 24% of organizations that received technical assistance and were awarded funds for the specific RFP they received technical assistance for had not previously applied for King County funds.
- 69% of survey respondents who received technical assistance identified as a small organization (defined as having an annual budget of less than \$1 million).
- 62% of organizations that used technical assistance were awarded funding for at least one proposal, compared to 53% for organizations that did not receive technical assistance. (It is difficult to know to what extent this increase is a direct result of receiving technical assistance.)

Of the 229 organizations that used technical assistance, only 143 submitted an application. This is consistent with feedback from organizations and technical assistance providers that a key role of technical assistance was to help organizations determine whether their program was a good fit for the RFP. This benefits organizations by avoiding spending valuable time and resources to apply for funding their program may not be well suited for and by reducing the number of uncompetitive applications that review panels need to read and score.

## What worked well

Applicants had high satisfaction with the technical assistance, with 88% of survey respondents saying they were satisfied or very satisfied with the technical assistance they received. The following are the themes from the interviews and focus group with applicants and technical assistance providers about what worked well.

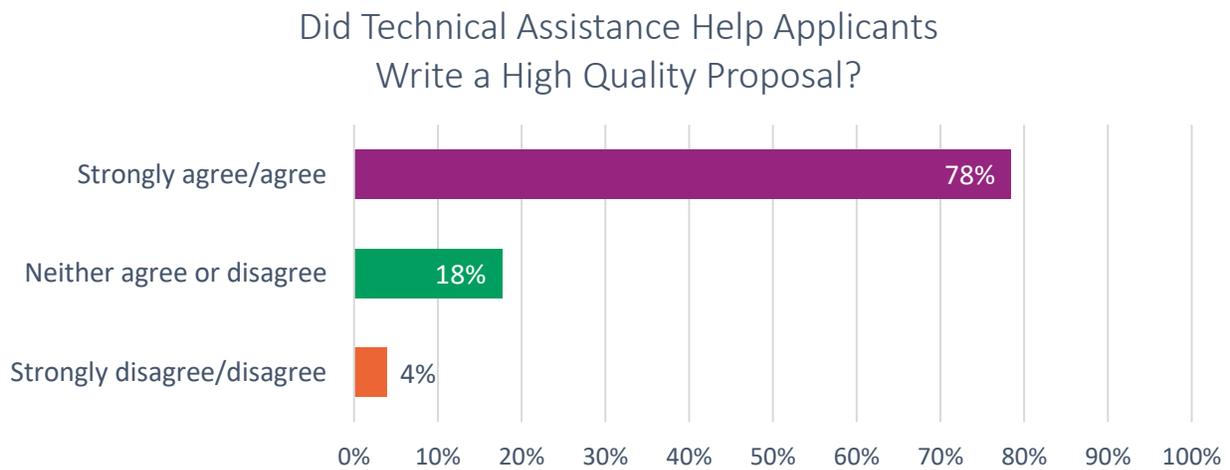
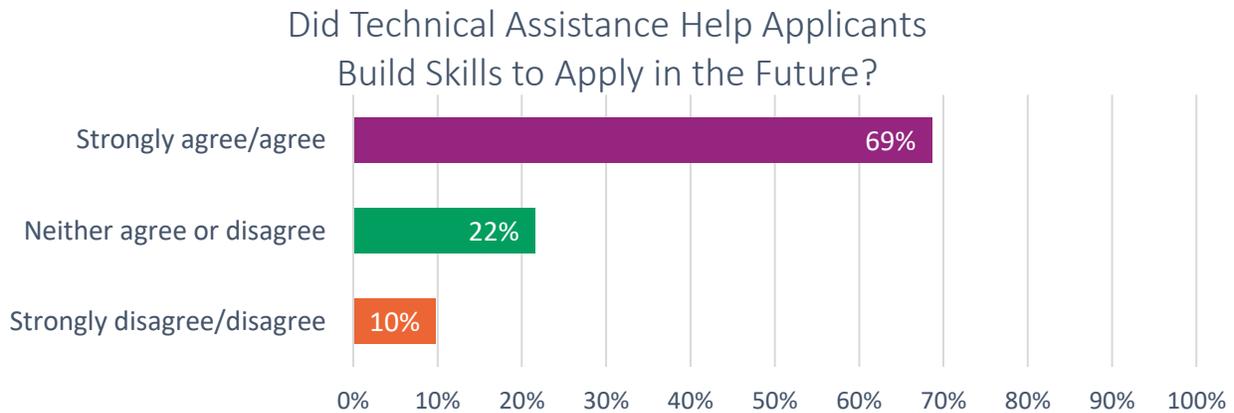


## Building confidence

69% of survey respondents said that technical assistance helped them build skills they can use in the future, and 79% felt the technical assistance helped them write a strong application. A common struggle for small organizations was feeling confident that their work in the community was aligned with the goals of the funding opportunities. Providers repeatedly said they needed to affirm the value of community-based organizations' work and how they were experts in serving their own communities. The providers were able to clarify when the work was aligned with the purpose and goals of specific RFPs, and how to clearly communicate that in their proposals.

“ A lot of time folks will just decide after they don't get [funded] once...that their work or their approach or their ability to put together a quality proposal isn't there so they're hesitant to go through the process again. And [the technical assistance provider] was good...to talk about how they are a strong organization for this type of work.”

— *Small organization*



## Repairing trust

Some organizations felt a lack of trust in King County to give a fair chance to small organizations, especially those led by the people of color, immigrants, and refugees. They felt the county had a history of funding large, white-led organizations and that it was not a good use of their time to apply for county funds. When the Best Starts for Kids RFPs started being released, these organizations felt a sense that their work was being recognized and valued. This helped them feel that the county had a genuine interest in their communities and was making a real effort to reach them by providing free technical assistance to support their ability to submit a competitive application.

“ We understood that big organizations were getting funded and that stopped us from pursuing [county funding]. It’s a lot of time to put into an application and seeing the pattern of grassroots organizations not getting funding, it really turned us off... The biggest fear is accessing the government system and how things work... [The technical assistance provider] would encourage us to apply, always say we are doing the work, and the government funds, why not give it a try.”

— *First time applicant*

## Accountability and transparency

Many organizations spoke highly of the effort the county was making to address equity in a tangible way by offering technical assistance and including smaller organizations and those led by their own communities. Organizations appreciated that contracts were for multiple years, giving them stability to establish the work and build capacity. The review process also felt more transparent to applicants because RFPs included the scoring criteria and county staff provided feedback (if requested) to organizations that were not awarded funds. Organizations viewed process changes like requiring all reviewers to attend a three-hour bias awareness workshop before reviewing applications and allowing applicants to share stories and testimonials to show impact as signs of accountability to Best Starts’ commitment to equity.

“ When Best Starts for Kids made a commitment for all reviewers to go through [the bias awareness workshop], the impact of a three-hour [workshop] has been more powerful than anything I’ve seen in my whole course of doing work in community because everyone is being held to needing to engage and demonstrate a level of accountability to that work.”

— *Technical assistance provider*

“ If it was not for BSK, I would not have felt comfortable going for larger funding. Large organizations don't have leverage over you [in the Best Starts’ process], because here you have a system with the review process through an equity lens. The review process looks at organizations in a fair manner. ”

— *First time applicant*

Not everyone agreed that the Best Starts for Kids RFP processes were accountable or transparent. One applicant was upset that the review process didn't honor the stated timeline and felt that the feedback they received about why they didn't get awarded funds was not meaningful. Other organizations wanted to know who (meaning individuals' names) would be on the panel to review their applications.

“ And the feedback... from the folks who reviewed it was extremely simple and, in my judgement, quite unhelpful to mount another effort later on. We tried to go to the county to get better feedback, but it was like 'it's done...that RFP is over, we're moving on.'”

— *Small organization*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Review panel transparency

Provide a list of who is represented on the panel to review applications (such as community members, county employees, school district employees, etc.). Applicants felt apprehensive about submitting and sharing their stories and strategies when they didn't know who was reviewing the applications. This would further increase transparency and build trust among applicants.

### Honor the stated timelines

Ensure that dates for decision making are followed so organizations can plan their programming accordingly. Have clear communication when timelines will not be upheld and when to expect new communication about awards.

## Technical assistance provider qualifications

Survey respondents ranked the following qualifications on a scale of one to five, with one being most important and five being least important. The following list reflects their rankings:

1. Knowledge of general public funding processes
2. Understanding of how institutional racism/discrimination has prevented organizations from receiving public funds and limited their capacity to grow and more fully meet community needs
3. Cultural competence and multilingual capability
4. Knowledge of the Best Starts strategy areas in which organizations are applying for funding
5. Demonstrated ability and experience providing support, coaching, and/or technical assistance to organizations

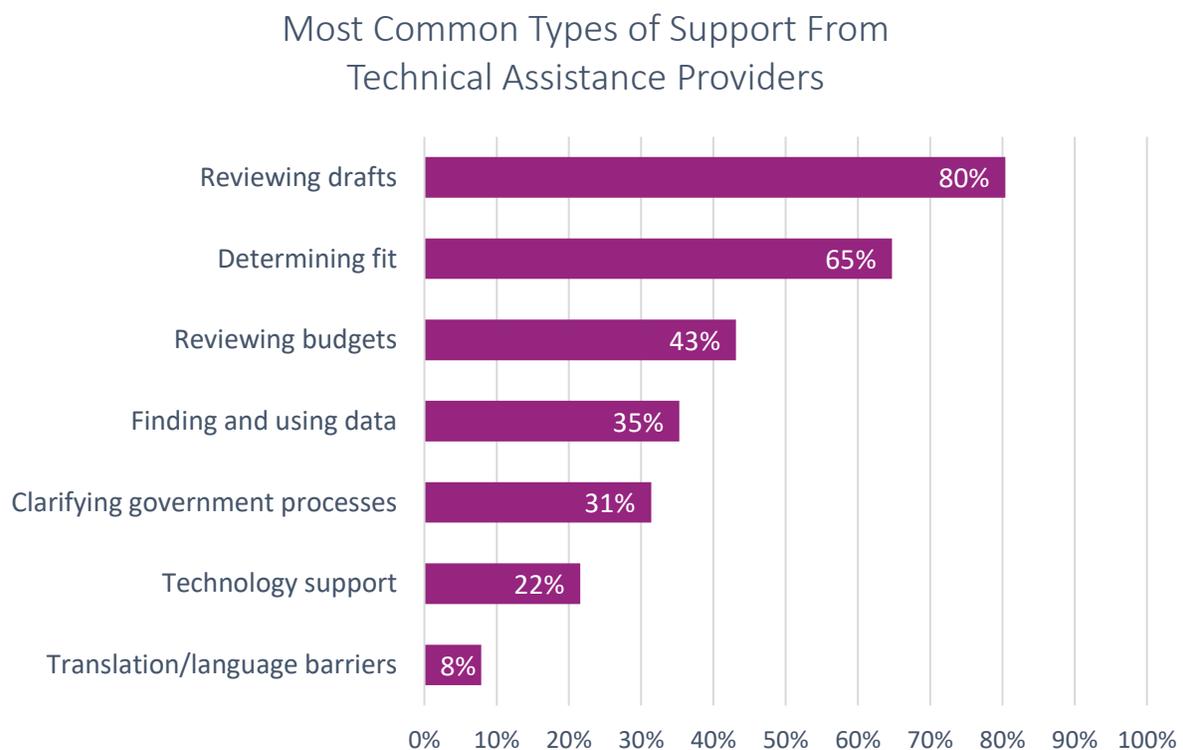
Additional assets that technical assistance providers brought were their personal experience in nonprofit organizations and in local government. This made their assistance particularly relevant because they had experience facing the challenges of working in nonprofits and writing grants. Both applicants and technical assistance providers valued building trusting relationships, which allowed for more effective working partnerships. Applicants could be more honest about their struggles and needs when they trusted the provider.

“ Even though we speak the language, government is a foreign language, even for American-born immigrants...[The technical assistance provider] was helpful because he was an immigrant himself and broke it down easy for us, in analogies. He was someone we [could] relate to. ”

— *First time applicant*

## Most used areas of technical assistance

Survey respondents identified which of the following types of support they received from technical assistance providers. Additional themes also emerged from focus groups and interviews and are further described below, including clarifying the questions in the RFPs that applicants were required to respond to and responding to broader capacity building needs.



## Clarifying questions and alignment with RFPs

Applicants emphasized the need for technical assistance providers to help answer questions, whether due to confusion about the overall purpose of the RFP or confusing application questions. Sometimes the questions were worded slightly differently in the RFP document than in the online grantmaking platform. It was common for applicants to be confused on what the core purpose of each question was and unsure of how to answer some questions in a meaningful way. Technical assistance providers were instrumental in clarifying what the Best Starts for Kids team was looking for because they had direct communication with the Best Starts team and met with them prior to each RFP's public release. 82% of survey respondents indicated that "determining fit with the RFP goals" was a very important service provided by the technical assistance, while 65% said that they had received this type of support.

“ The RFPs, there's been a lot worse, but it's hard to interpret what they're asking for. When you add on a confusing title, you need folks to help interpret what they're actually asking for and that's a benefit of having [technical assistance] as well. They get it and they can relay that to community groups.”

— *First time applicant*

## RECOMMENDATION

### Clarify questions

Make application questions as clear as possible and consider soliciting feedback from technical assistance providers to help ensure that questions are clear. Both applicants and providers felt it was important that providers understood the purpose and goal of each RFP so they could clarify what specific questions were asking for. Be consistent with how questions are worded in the RFP document and in the online platform. Each question should be clear about what the question is looking for and the corresponding criteria that will be used to score responses, with both provided in one place. Character limits should allow for adequate responses to complex or multi-part questions. Make it clear whether supporting documents can be uploaded, such as images, charts, and graphs.

“ A mundane challenge...is having to fit complex questions into the space allowed. Especially if there's really four sub-questions. People would have to cut and cut, some were like 'if I didn't have your help, I don't know how I would do this.'”

— *Technical assistance provider*

## Reviewing drafts

Survey respondents rated reviewing drafts as the most commonly received type of support (80%), and the second most important technical assistance service provided, with 78% considering it very important. Technical assistance providers pointed out where questions weren't fully answered, or how they could make a more compelling case by including data or stories. Applicants reported that the process of getting feedback on their drafts helped improve their writing skills and ability to articulate why they were well suited to do the work. Technical assistance providers noted that writing was difficult for people who were not confident or experienced in writing, or who spoke English as their second (or third, or fourth) language. Applicants and providers spent many hours honing the messages and getting the response to fit within the character count limit without losing the essence of the response.

“ [The technical assistance provider] really took time to really work through the grant...saying I need to add more or this doesn't connect to the question or this maybe goes better with this question. I had focused on the challenges and not as much on the brilliance, and that was something he pointed out, that they want to see this.”

— *First time applicant*

## Budgets

Adequate staffing costs was a major theme that emerged from the interviews and focus group. Many organizations struggled to right-size their budgets. Their draft budgets often underfunded what they needed to implement their proposed program. This was particularly common among smaller organizations that were building their capacity or were volunteer-led. They didn't feel comfortable asking for adequate funding for staffing and were concerned that asking for too much would make them unappealing in a competitive process. The technical assistance providers were instrumental in helping them move away from a survival mentality within their organization, to envisioning what a successfully staffed organization would look like, including compensation for the executive director. Some organizations were also confused about the 10% that was recommended to be dedicated to evaluation. Not all applicants understood what this meant, how to incorporate it into their budget plan, or more broadly, how to incorporate evaluation into their work plan.

“ I think [the technical assistance provider] was good at working with staff about the budgeting piece and not underestimating the value of their time or their approach...most people tend to try to come in at a lower price point to try to secure the grant and you shoot yourself in the foot because you're not able to support the costs you need to make it work well. So that was good, for BSK, that they're trying to improve funding and get the nonprofit out of that mindset of paying folks the bare minimum and just scraping by.”

— *Small organization*

## Capacity building

Capacity building consistently came up as a need, especially for the smaller organizations that dramatically increased their programming and budgets with Best Starts funding. Providers identified capacity needs around hiring staff for the first time, developing payroll systems, and generally operationalizing their systems to accommodate the growth they would experience with Best Starts investments. As this was outside of the role of technical assistance, providers referred applicants to other resources to access the support needed to build capacity. In July 2019, Best Starts launched their capacity building initiative to support all Best Starts-funded organizations.

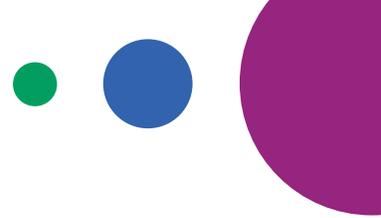
“ Operations is one of the biggest pieces for the small organizations. And understanding the government processes, like audits for example. They need to know there is a timeline that you can't destroy documents for seven years. You need to have all your books and papers in order. They need to have good systems.”

— *Technical assistance provider*

## RECOMMENDATION

### Have referrals to capacity building

Create a resource list of capacity building support to refer applicants to. For awarded organizations, identify early in the process which organizations need capacity building support so they can develop the infrastructure and systems needed to grow their organization with the Best Starts for Kids investments. This was identified by providers as a necessary step to ensure their growth and ability to successfully implement their programs if funded. It will be valuable to evaluate the capacity building initiative and develop tracking tools to collect relevant data.



# Process Challenges

This section distinguishes the distinct challenges experienced by the applicants and technical assistance providers.

## Challenges experienced by applicants

### Communication about technical assistance

The survey revealed that several applicants were not aware that technical assistance was available to them. Additionally, as a new opportunity, applicants may have heard or read that technical assistance was being offered but did not understand what it included or how it could benefit their application. There was confusion around the extent of technical assistance and what specific role the technical assistance provider could play.

“ I didn't fully understand how much technical assistance would be provided and to be honest, I didn't fully understand what the technical assistance consultant would actually do.”

— *Survey respondent*

### RECOMMENDATION

#### Clarify technical assistance services

Clearly communicate about the nature and availability of technical assistance services in all venues where an RFP is publicized. While information about technical assistance was provided in RFP documents, in blog posts announcing RFPs, and at information sessions, some applicants were still unaware of or unclear about technical assistance services. Providing a menu of services that describe what the technical assistance providers can do may help applicants understand what is available to them. If possible, make the technical assistance more widely publicized on the website and in outreach materials.

### Written applications

The technical assistance providers observed how difficult writing was for many applicants. Applicants could often explain their ideas clearly when talking to the technical assistance provider, but their written proposal left out details or didn't clearly connect the program to the goal of the RFP. The difficulty of writing a clear application was magnified for applicants for whom English was not their preferred language. An effort to address this was made by allowing videos for some RFPs, but this can also create equity issues because many organizations don't have videographers that

can edit video clips into something professional and may instead submit an unedited video recorded on a phone. As with written responses, this requires the reviewers to look beyond the surface for the content of what is being submitted.

“...[For] people that just aren't good at writing, it can help them in the draft process to get down to the nugget of what they want to say, [if] they're really general and it doesn't match what they say verbally. Sometimes writing isn't people's best skill.”

— *Technical assistance provider*

## Volunteer-led organizations

An interesting challenge that was recognized by the technical assistance providers was the fact that many of the small organizations that were applying for county funds for the first time were run on volunteer power. This often included an executive director who had many roles and likely worked for the nonprofit in addition to a full-time paid job. This forced them to prioritize their full-time work and writing an application for the nonprofit often got pushed to the last minute. Many smaller organizations don't have grant writers, forcing program staff to write grant proposals when writing may not be their strength. Rather, their best skills are often in community organizing and providing culturally relevant programs and services. As reflected in the budget section above, it was difficult for some applicants to determine how much to provide for staff time in the budgets, fearing that if they asked for enough to fund the hours they actually worked, it would diminish their chances of getting funded. This dynamic also brought out many more capacity building needs around payroll, auditing, and general operations that were often not happening in volunteer-led organizations (see above).

## Online application platform

Applicants were confused about who to reach out to regarding questions and issues related to the online application platform. Applicants were sometimes bounced between the technical assistance providers and Best Starts staff without getting clear direction on their question or issue. The online application platform crashed near the deadline for one of the RFPs, likely due to the large number of submissions coming in at once. Technical assistance providers noted that some organizations did not have access to computers at their office or home, requiring them to go to the library to log onto the online application platform, which severely limited the time they could spend on their online application.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Contact for online application platform

Clarify who applicants should reach out to when problems occur with online application platform and inform technical assistance providers about who to refer applicants to if they need help with issues related to the online application platform. Clearly differentiate what the online platform helpdesk, technical assistance providers, or county staff can help with.

# Challenges experienced by technical assistance providers

## Timing

The technical assistance providers received many requests for support very close to the deadline for submission during the first RFP. This prompted a requirement that applicants interested in receiving technical assistance reach out to providers at least three days before the proposal due date to allow for time to plan for and provide support to all interested applicants. This provided more time to give adequate attention to each application. Another challenge related to timing was that when applications were due on a Monday, it meant that providers (and applicants) were working heavily over the weekend to meet the deadline.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Designate all RFPs to be due later in the week

All providers unanimously suggested having applications due on a Friday rather than a Monday in order to generally support a better workflow.

## Applicants reaching out to multiple providers

While applicants were asked to reach out to only one technical assistance provider at a time (after the first RFP), at times some applicants reached out to more than one. This became confusing if the applicant was having a conversation with one provider and not communicating with the other provider about how they were making changes or shifting the idea of their application. While technical assistance providers worked well together to coordinate their services, their communication was developed ad-hoc and county support from the beginning could have helped streamline the process.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Clarify internal communications

Develop a system of internal communication for providers to check in with each other, manage workflow, and collaborate with the Best Starts staff to problem solve and improve processes.

## Staffing challenges

The technical assistance providers were contracted based on the anticipated number of hours of technical assistance they would provide throughout the year for multiple RFPs. There was significant variation in how much technical assistance was used across different RFPs. For example, over 900 hours of technical assistance were used for Stopping the School to Prison Pipeline proposals, compared to only 48 hours for Breastfeeding Support Services proposals. (See Appendix B for details.) This posed a unique challenge for technical assistance providers, who had to anticipate the number of hours they would be working for each proposal. There was also variation in the number of hours worked between providers, largely dependent on how many applicants reached out to them for technical assistance. This was based in part on the existing relationships the providers had with applicants and the level of support they were providing. One technical assistance provider gave feedback that their organization had hired new staff to provide much of the technical assistance for the contract with Best Starts for Kids, and even turned down work due to the anticipated amount of time that would be spent providing technical assistance. The actual number of hours they worked was far lower than what they anticipated and caused internal challenges in meeting their own needs.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Right-size technical assistance provider contracts

Estimate the amount of technical assistance each RFP will require based on the level of need each proposal had these past three years. Share these estimates with technical assistance providers to help them plan their workloads.

## Cultural norms

Technical assistance providers recognized that there was a cultural barrier for what felt to some applicants like “bragging” in the applications. In many cultures, humility is valued, and it is looked down upon to speak highly of one’s own work. When technical assistance providers asked applicants to speak about their strengths, they felt uncomfortable speaking about their work in that way. A refugee-led organization also brought up how it would be shameful to have their stories of fleeing unsafe environments and enduring horrific experiences in written form, read by reviewers they did not know. It was retraumatizing to share those stories, even if it meant that it highlighted their ability to persevere and build strength within their community.

“ Not bragging is a cultural quality that is stronger for some folks than others. You have to do that cheerleading to say ‘Now is the time to toot your own horn!’”

— *Technical assistance provider*

## RECOMMENDATION

### Continue to improve cultural relevance of application processes

Continue to explore and incorporate culturally diverse ways of gathering application information, in addition to a Western linear model. Technical assistance providers and many community-based organizations recognize that Best Starts for Kids has come a long way to be more inclusive in gathering applicant information by allowing stories and testimonials, for example. Yet there is still room to allow for more creativity in making the application process more culturally accessible.



# Overarching Recommendations

## Develop consistent tracking tools

King County will be able to measure the impact of technical assistance more effectively when data collection tools are developed early on and systematized. This includes asking all applicants to provide information on the size of their organization (for example, this evaluation defined small as having an annual budget of less than \$1 million) and its history of applying for King County funds and other grants so that Best Starts can measure whether all communities are being reached. The goal of increasing the number of funded organizations that reflect the communities they serve was not measured in this evaluation because it was unclear what this meant or how to collect the appropriate data without a relevant baseline. Clarifying what qualifications determine whether an organization reflects the community they serve will help measure this outcome. Having consistent ways of documenting the names of organizations and RFPs will improve the quality of information and avoid unnecessary duplication of data. Clarifying how data is tracked when awards are made will also make it easier to find current numbers of awards made and dollar amounts invested when requested. Some of this infrastructure is currently being developed by Best Starts staff.

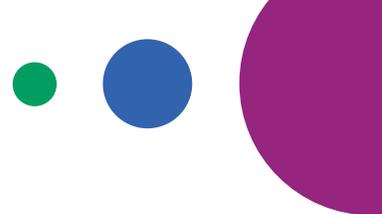
## Re-evaluate partnership development

Some RFPs required or encouraged applicants to have established partnerships with a letter of support from the partner to submit as part of their application. This was especially difficult with school districts, who did not have a designated person to reach out to at the district level. Getting a letter from the school principal was challenging if the applicant had built a relationship with another staff member such as a school counselor or nurse. For the school districts, they sometimes received multiple requests from community partners and may not have had the capacity to write various letters, let alone develop a process for how they would partner with organizations in a meaningful way. Youth Development Executives of King County offered free trainings specifically for the Out of School Time RFP for organizations to understand the steps to building a strong partnership while the RFP was open.

We recommend strategizing how partnerships can be developed in a meaningful way to leverage funds and capacity, while recognizing that community-based organizations are put in a position to compete for limited funds. One applicant suggested having a letter of support template for organizations to use, or resources around best practices for developing partnerships, particularly with schools, to help organizations navigate the process. More time may be needed when applicants have to build relationships with educational partners than when they are applying alone or with other community-based organizations.

“ I would say just creating those partnerships...was challenging because I wanted to potentially work with the school district, but that partnership would've taken me more time to establish. Just be clear about what proposals need partnerships and which ones don't.”

— *Small organization*



# Limitations

Several limitations impacted the extent to which this evaluation was able to determine whether technical assistance diversified the applicant pool.

## Missing Baseline Data

Because Best Starts for Kids is a new initiative and technical assistance was offered starting fairly early in the process, there was not a viable comparison group of applicants for similar funding that did not have access to technical assistance. Additionally, no previous data had been collected about organizations' size, geography, or grant-writing history. Though this was collected from organizations that received technical assistance, it was not collected from organizations that didn't receive technical assistance. There is no way to definitively determine whether providing free technical assistance to applicants increased the number of small organizations, the geographic diversity of organizations, or organizations applying for county funds for the first time.

## Data Not Self-Identified

Technical assistance providers reported whether the organizations they served had applied for grants or King County funding before. They reportedly did not gather this information systematically and may not have been able to accurately represent the actual number of organizations that were truly applying to county funding for the first time.

## Limited Representation

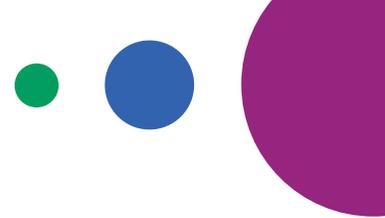
There was limited representation in interviews from organizations who did not receive funding from Best Starts for Kids (one out of eight interviewees). This allowed more limited understanding of the perspectives of organizations who may have been unsatisfied with the technical assistance process. Due to the survey and key informant interview participants being self-selected, we cannot be sure to what extent their views represented those of applicants overall.

## English Only

All data collection tools were provided in English, either in written or oral form. This limited who could engage and offer feedback, particularly among immigrant and refugee groups.

## Positionality Statement

The experiences and beliefs an evaluator has with respect to the subject, participants, and process of evaluation can influence how data is collected, perceived and interpreted. The primary author of this report, Leika Suzumura, works for a small nonprofit organization as a volunteer program manager and treasurer. She was also on the review panel for the Childcare Health Consultation RFP and participated in the required three-hour bias awareness workshop.



## APPENDIX A

# Methods

This evaluation was designed to answer the following questions with respect to the outcomes and process of providing free technical assistance to applicants:

### Outcomes

- Did technical assistance reach applicants who had not applied for King County funding before?
- How did technical assistance impact the organizations that used it? Did it demystify the process of applying for funding; improve confidence; or improve grant writing skills?
- Were applicants who received technical assistance more likely to be awarded funds than those who did not receive technical assistance?

### Process

- What areas of support and what qualities of the technical assistance providers were most helpful for the organizations that received technical assistance?
- How could the process of providing technical assistance be improved, and what worked well that should be maintained?

These overarching questions guided the development of data collection tools, which included an online survey distributed to all of Best Starts for Kids' community partners, key informant interviews with applicants, and a focus group with the technical assistance providers.

The online survey was open for four weeks between March 15 and April 12, 2019. All participants who filled out the survey were entered in a raffle to win one of three \$50 gift cards. The survey was available in English and was distributed through the Best Starts for Kids blog and sent to the email addresses of all organizations that received technical assistance. Participants were asked in the survey if they would be interested in following up with a 30-minute interview. Some of those who opted in left their email and were contacted to set up an interview time.

The purpose of the key informant interviews was to gather more in-depth information about the applicants' experience with the technical assistance, what services they used, and how they felt it impacted their ability to create a competitive application. Each interviewee was compensated with a \$50 gift card. An effort was made to interview a variety of organizations that represented different communities and included organizations that both did and did not receive funds. In total, eight key informants were interviewed, and all but one had received funding for the application for which technical assistance was provided.

The focus group was designed for the technical assistance providers to share their perspectives on the process and suggestions for improvement. The focus group was conducted on a Skype video call and providers were compensated for their time. Four of the six providers were present for the focus group, and the other two providers were interviewed individually.

The evaluators transcribed notes and identified and coded themes from the key informant interviews and focus group. Some themes were developed during the evaluation planning phase, while other themes emerged in the interviews. These themes are found in sections of this report: what worked well, most used areas of technical assistance, process challenges, and recommendations.



## APPENDIX B

# Hours of Technical Assistance Provided by Strategy Area

STRATEGY AREA	HOURS OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE
Basic Needs Resource Brokerage	5
Breastfeeding	48
Child Care Health Consultation	115
Communities of Opportunity	257
Developmental Screening and Referral Services Pilot	42
Home-based Services	135
Innovation Fund	202
Kaleidoscope Play and Learn	92
Out of School Time	125
Parent/Caregiver Education and Support	95
Stopping the School to Prison Pipeline	944
Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices	423
Vroom	52
Workforce Development	31
Youth Development	275
Youth Reengagement Centers	21
Total*	2914

\*Notes: This table includes technical assistance provided between June 2017 and January 2019. Total hours of technical assistance includes some time spent on internal communication and coordination.