VI. Writing a Winning Fellowship Proposal/Application

A. Organization and Content of the Proposal

The fellowship proposal communicates the central mission of your project. You should take the time to develop a thoughtful, concise proposal. It is important to work with the sponsoring organization to develop the proposal. In writing the fellowship proposal you must:

- Organize the proposal in the way the fellowship provider outlines in the application materials.
- Clearly demonstrate the need for the project and your knowledge of the clients to be served.
- State both long-term and short-term goals that address the needs outlined in the proposal.
- Include legally oriented strategies with each of the goals.
- Clearly state the expected outcomes of the project.

B. Need for the Project

You must develop a project that addresses the specific, legally-related needs of a particular community. There are two critical components to this. First, your project must aid a specifically underserved client base. For example: disabled prisoners, asylum seekers, special education school children, and/or teenage domestic abuse victims, etc. Second, your project must fulfill a specific, legal need for your client base. For example: health care for the prisoners, due process for the asylum seekers, adequate educational support for the special ed. children, and/or protection orders for the teenage victims, etc.

With regard to actual writing, your proposal should specifically state the need for the proposed project and why it will take a lawyer to address that need. There are various issues that lawyers may want to address (e.g. global warming, prisoner re-entry, land use, gun control). A statement of need for a public interest fellowship, however, must be specific and selective. It should concentrate on the clients to be served and the issues those clients are facing. Also, unless the proposal is for a national project the statement of need should address a local community and its specific issues.

The statement of need must be concise and persuasive. It should be supported with facts and made compelling with stories and/or examples of why your project is necessary for its particular community. It must
demonstrate your knowledge of and commitment to, the clients or community to be served. A statement of need should paint a picture of the community and the issues involved, and it should help the funder understand those issues.

C. Goals and Strategies of the Project

The goals and strategies statement is often the most important part of the proposal. There are three major points with regard to stating your goals in a fellowship proposal:

* Your project goals should be concrete and realistic.
* Your project goals should directly address the issues outlined in the project proposal’s statement of need.
* Your stated goals should be both short term and long term.

Many fellowships last for two years so you will want to develop goals that can be achieved shortly after the project begins, and goals that will be addressed further along into the project. For example, you may decide that your project involves helping Latina immigrants in Chicago who are victims of domestic violence. Your short-term goals could be to educate Latina immigrants on their rights in the areas of domestic violence, custody and divorce, to help women fight for their rights in domestic relations court and to provide them with access to needed resources. Your long-term goal may be to fight governmental policies that disparately harm immigrant women in domestic violence cases. Note the specificity of this example and the concrete nature of its goals.

The project’s goals must include strategies by which they will be accomplished. There are two major points with regard to stating your project strategy:

* Stress legally related strategies in your fellowship proposal. It must be clear in the proposal that it is a lawyer, not a doctor or teacher, or even a social worker, needed for the project. Other skills such as social work and teaching can be part of the project, but most fellowship providers want to fund lawyers to address legal needs with legal strategies.
* The strategies must make sense for the community, for the organization with which you will be working, and for your own skill-set and values.
To achieve the goals outlined in the above example, you could set up community education workshops at neighborhood organizations that serve that community. Additionally, you could translate domestic violence materials from your host organization into Spanish and create new materials aimed at immigrant women. You could also help the women to file restraining orders and custody and divorce petitions. To help change the offending governmental policies you could set up meetings with community leaders and government officials. Finally, you may decide to use litigation against the government as a strategy to reach your long-term goal of policy change.

D. Impact and Outcomes of the Project

Your proposal must contain clearly articulated outcomes that are the direct result of the strategies you have outlined.

Fellowship providers want to fund projects that will have a positive impact on a community. Use the research you have done to demonstrate that the strategies chosen will lead to the positive impact you are seeking. Additionally, you can demonstrate the impact of your project by discussing similar strategies that have proven effective in another jurisdiction.

The outcomes you choose should be concrete, specific, and measurable. You should state the impact as positively and ambitiously as possible. Do not, however, promise outcomes that you will not be able to deliver. As in the other parts of your proposal, the statement of outcomes should concentrate on the clients or community to be served by your project. It must show an understanding the issues facing the clients and how the strategies you have outlined will positively affect their lives. Using the above example, you could state that a successful project would be one where new and better access is granted to immigrant women in custody and support courts and/or incidents of domestic violence are reportedly decreased.

E. Time-line

In addition to the needs, goals, strategies and outcomes, fellowship providers may also require you to propose a time line for the project. This time line should contain an outline of the goals and strategies broken down into months, quarters or whatever schedule the provider wants. It should show a period of training and acclimation in the beginning. Your time line should be ambitious about what you propose to accomplish during the fellowship without being unrealistic.

F. Other Materials Included in an Application

Applications for a postgraduate fellowship often require personal essays, letters of recommendation, a resume and some statement regarding the project from the host organization.
1. Personal Essays

Personal essays are a very important part of any fellowship proposal. The Independence Foundation and Equal Justice Works are two examples of fellowship providers that look very closely at these statements. Most providers ask for two essays or one essay in two parts. The issues addressed in these statements often concern your commitment and experience, and something more personal, such as your motivation. Here’s a template for drafting your personal essay:

- The statement of commitment and experience should discuss all the public interest related work you have done both paid and volunteer.
- It should address past experiences that are not related to the project and experiences that are directly related to the project’s goals.
- It should describe how your past experiences will help you to do the job you have proposed in the project.
- The personal statement should discuss your personal background and experiences, and any other relevant personal information that you do not cover in the rest of the application.
- Some fellowship applications (i.e. Skadden) ask the applicant to discuss other issues such as the relevance of public interest in contemporary society. This too should be personalized.

NOTE: These essays should say more about you than the project proposal, resume and other materials can say alone.

2. Letters of Recommendation

Like personal essays, letters of recommendation can be essential to a winning proposal. Some funders want a certain number of letters (two or three) and some funders want letters from specific people (past employer, faculty member). With regard to letters of recommendation please note:

- Your recommenders should be people who have viewed your work in some significant capacity.
- Likewise, your recommenders should be able to speak to your ability to carry out the project.
- Your recommenders should be ready to discuss the specific, relevant skills and qualities you possess, and why
you are the best person to execute the proposed project.

-Ask for recommendations as soon as possible. For example, ask for recommendations from your summer public interest employer before you leave for to return to school. It is helpful to give your recommenders a resume, a copy of the proposal and any other information that will inform them about your commitment, experience and ability to carry out the project.

**NOTE:** It is often a good idea to have a letter of recommendation from someone at the sponsoring organization, especially if you have worked with the organization in the past. Such a letter from a supervisor or other attorney at the sponsoring organization can be helpful in demonstrating that the organization believes you are the best person to carry out the proposed project. Some fellowship providers, like Equal Justice Works, require that one recommendation be from the sponsoring organization.

3. **Resume**

Your resume should detail your relevant public interest experience and be as complete as possible. This is one time when the standard one page legal resume does not apply. Make sure your resume discusses the type of experience that is important to public interest employers. Your involvement with volunteer groups and other activities, even if not legal, should be included to show both your experience and your commitment. It is important that the language used to describe your experience, whether public or private, concentrates on relevant legal skills and sensitivity to your client population or issue. *If you have not done the type of work that you are proposing to do with your project, try to use the language of your project to describe work you have done.* Speak in terms of skills and interests that are common between your past work and your proposed project, or of skills that can be transferable between your past work and your project. *Please have your resume reviewed by a member of your sponsor organization or by Career Planning and Professionalism or the Toll Public Interest Center prior to submission to the funding organization.*

4. **Host Organization Letter of Commitment**

Many fellowship applications require the host or sponsoring organization to write a letter of commitment or some other statement, separate from any letter of recommendation the organization may write. Organizations may be asked to describe:

- their history, mission and programs

- how the proposed project fits in with their mission and programs

- how it plans to provide training and supervision to the fellow (*This section should be as detailed as possible*).

- their experiences working with the fellowship candidate and what process the organization
went through in choosing the candidate for sponsorship

Make sure your host organization is clear about what it must address in a commitment letter or statement. Some organizations have had previous experience in sponsoring fellowship candidates, and thus, may know what needs to be done. If your organization does not have such experience, you will need to make sure the organization is clear on what is expected of it in the application process and beyond. This can be done by drafting a memo or letter to them outlining the funders expectations.

G. A Final Word on Writing

In writing the proposal and personal essays, you should be aware of your writing style.

- The language used should be positive. A proposal should not use tentative words like “hope” or “try” in describing the goals and strategies. Instead, it should use positive statements like “I will” or “this project will.”

- The language should be compelling and persuasive. It should make the project, the community, the issues and the goals visible to the reader. The language used should help the reader envision you doing the project.

- Whenever possible, use the funder’s own language in the fellowship proposal. In describing the project’s goals and strategies, you should include language that the funder has used to describe its goals, priorities and programs. It should echo the fellowship program description as much as possible.

- Take the time to carefully edit and proofread the proposal. It should be as concise as possible and free of errors. Enlist others to read your proposal and essays. These others include Career Planning and Professionalism, the Toll Public Interest Center, and your sponsor organization.