The Grant Progress Assessment Program: Looking Back on Success and Moving Forward

Several people contributed to this article, including Patricia Kashtan, Jolene Hernon and Beth Pearsall.

The NIJ program helped educate grantees on how to properly administer their grants.

Every year, NIJ awards several hundred grants totaling millions of dollars to state and local laboratories to help them improve their ability to conduct accurate and timely forensic testing.

As administrator of the funds, NIJ must monitor and assess how the laboratories spend these taxpayer dollars and then report to Congress on what it finds. To help accomplish its monitoring goals, in 2005 NIJ instituted a program to ensure that grantees (i.e., the laboratories) were correctly documenting their efforts and spending funds according to congressional and NIJ guidelines.

The Grant Progress Assessment program provided free, external assessments to grant recipients from mid-2005 to 2011. During that time, the Grant Progress Assessment staff examined more than 2,300 awards worth a total of more than $1 billion.

When NIJ suspended the program in September 2011 due to budget constraints, all the players — NIJ, assessors and laboratories — agreed that the program had been a great success. This article documents the lessons learned.

Goals of the Grant Progress Assessment Program

The program's purpose was twofold:

- To assist NIJ in its administrative oversight of forensic science awards
- To educate grantees on proper grant administration

The program gave NIJ a comprehensive overview of the awards process as well as in-depth data about grantee performance. In addition, it gave the laboratories objective, professional feedback about how they managed their funds. Through the assessments, laboratories came to better understand the program's requirements and special conditions. Over time, laboratory staff were able to identify potential issues and resolve them before they became problems. They also improved their ability to identify successes that they could use to secure future funding.

NIJ used the Grant Progress Assessment program to monitor several kinds of forensic science grants:

- Forensic DNA Backlog Reduction Program
- Capacity Enhancement Program
- Convicted Offender and/or Arrestee DNA Backlog Reduction Program
- Solving Cold Cases with DNA
- Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program

How the Program Worked

On a set two-year cycle, a trained assessor or team of assessors — many of them DNA laboratory managers themselves — visited each laboratory that had an open forensic science grant.

Using a checklist, the assessors reviewed the status of the laboratory's grant and assessed the grantee's use of federal funds to increase the laboratory's capabilities and capacities — all at no cost to the agencies. Generally, the assessors spent two to five days onsite with the laboratory staff.

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The checklist included everything from budgets to performance measurement data to deliverables.

Assessment Led to Education

The assessments were conducted primarily to ensure that federal funds were used appropriately, but they had the added benefit of teaching grantees — many of whom had never received federal funding — how to understand and comply with the rigorous requirements of their award.

When the Grant Progress Assessment program began, the assessors reported that they were as much educators as evaluators. During initial site visits, they often found records in disarray, and subsequently they spent a large portion of the visit showing grantees how to set up procedures for documenting, organizing and reporting the data required for grant compliance. As one NIJ staffer explained, "You get the quality you inspect, not the quality you expect."

Common findings from the early years of the Grant Progress Assessment program included the following:

- Incorrect information on the grant and the financial point of contact
- Late progress and financial reports
- Purchases that had been made outside of the proposed timeline

Resources for Managing Laboratory Grants

A number of resources are available to help laboratories continue to comply with the terms of their grant and ensure that public funds are spent in a fiscally responsible manner. These resources are described below:

For active grantees:

- *Grant Management System User Guide:* Provides step-by-step instructions and screenshots to help grantees manage their funds in compliance with federal requirements and deadlines. Visit http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/training/pdfs/gmsissues.pdf.
- Grants Financial Management Online Training Module: Offers 24 training modules on the basics of federal grants management, including financial management systems, administrative rules, subawards, reporting requirements, financial monitoring and audit requirements, and award closeout. Visit http://gfm.webfirst.com.

For the general public:

- *Office of Justice Programs Financial Guide:* The primary reference manual for award recipients. Contains compilations of laws, rules and regulations that affect the financial and administrative management of awards. Visit http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/financialguide/index.htm.
- NIJ Solicitations: Contains information about applying for and managing funding from NIJ. Visit http://www.nij.gov/funding/welcome.htm.

- Unallowable expenditures
- Lack of financial control when it came to commingling of funds
- Expenditures from a category not in the approved budget or made without prior approval
- Activity in the progress reports that was not consistent with the proposal

(For more on assessment findings, see sidebar, "Typical Assessment Findings," on this page.)

By the second or third year that they visited laboratories, assessors began seeing a dramatic improvement in reporting and compliance. Grantees were more organized; they had proper systems in place. They knew what questions the assessors were going to ask — for instance, about the validity of equipment purchases or whether agency asset numbers and serial numbers matched — and were ready with the answers and supporting documentation. As the program advanced, its impact became even more apparent — adverse findings became fewer and fewer and compliance became the norm.

Lessons Learned

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned by participating grantees was: Be organized!

- Keep copies of application documents.
- Keep receipts and documents related to purchases, including why the purchase was needed.
- Organize files.
- Follow instructions for reporting performance metrics.
- Perform frequent self-checks to ensure that procedures and activities continue to comply with NIJ's rigorous guidelines.

Typical Assessment Findings

These are actual findings discovered and reported by Grant Progress Assessment assessors and reported to NIJ:

- Grant funds were being used to support activity that did not reflect the goals outlined in the proposal.
- No progress had been made in producing deliverables 18 months into the award.
- Grant-funded equipment was not being used.
- The grantee's records did not separate cases worked with grant funds and those worked with regular salary funds.
- The maximum daily rate provided to contractors exceeded the maximum allowable daily rate of $450.
- The number of cases reviewed listed in progress reports counted the same cases for different project periods.
- The grantee used funds for a conference unrelated to DNA backlog analysis.
- Funds in the consultants/contract budget category were encumbered prior to the award start date.
- The grantee issued a sole source purchase order before receiving approval.
- The grantee used funds from the consultant category, which had a zero budget.

As for NIJ, a significant discovery from the Grant Progress Assessment program was that what was often thought by assessors to be a commonplace answer to a question was not always the commonplace answer in the mind of the grantee. During site visits, assessors played a critical role in bridging the gap in perceptions between the two sides.

The formalized review process introduced by the Grant Progress Assessment program helped both NIJ and grant recipients achieve their goals of ensuring that grants were being used to achieve the goals and objectives set out by Congress: Improve the capacity of crime laboratories to solve crimes.

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For more information:

- Learn more about how the Grant Progress Assessment program worked at http://www.nij.gov/topics/forensics/lab-operations/capacity/grant-progress-assessments/welcome.htm.