

Social Innovation and Impact NOFO (Spring 2026)

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated May 14, 2026

What is the Social Innovation and Impact Seed Grant program?

The Social Innovation and Impact Seed Grant program, offered through the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN), provides seed funding for collaborative projects that address complex social challenges in Illinois. The program supports projects that translate research into practical community impact, build trusted partnerships, and create scalable or sustainable solutions.

What kinds of projects are eligible?

Eligible projects must focus on social innovation and impact in Illinois communities. Priority areas include:

- Education and workforce development
- Economic development and entrepreneurship
- Health and wellness
- Water, food, and agriculture
- Computing, data, and AI applications
- Environmental justice and sustainability
- Arts and humanities initiatives
- Social justice efforts
- Cross-disciplinary or emerging social innovation topics

Projects that demonstrate long-term engagement, community collaboration, and transformative impact are especially encouraged.

Who can apply?

Applications must include:

- A Lead PI from an IIN Hub
- Significant participation from at least two IIN Hubs
- At least one Co-PI from a second IIN Hub
- Collaboration with at least one Illinois community-based organization (CBO)

University of Illinois campuses are considered a single hub for this program and must partner with a non-University of Illinois hub.

Are community partnerships required?

Yes. Every project must include a community-based organization or community partner. Applicants must submit a Letter of Collaboration or Letter of Support from the partner organization describing:

- Shared enthusiasm for the project
- Roles and responsibilities
- Partnership history (if applicable)
- Financial or in-kind support arrangements

Projects with equitable and meaningful community partnerships are considered more competitive.

What qualifies as a community-based organization or community partner?

Community-based organizations (CBOs) do not need to be formal 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations in order to participate. Eligible community partners may include:

- Nonprofit organizations
- Community coalitions or advisory groups
- Chambers of commerce
- Laboratories or research institutions
- Municipal or regional collaboratives
- Other community-engaged entities working on issues relevant to the project

Organizations with their own 501(c)(3) status or operating under a fiscal agent are eligible. If an organization does not have either designation, applicants should include additional justification describing the importance of the organization's work and role in the project.

Applicants are not required to demonstrate a prior partnership history with the community organization, though existing relationships may strengthen the proposal. Community partners should be actively engaged collaborators in the project rather than simply service providers.

Can for-profit entities participate in projects?

Yes, for-profit entities may participate as collaborators, contributors, contractors, or sources of technical expertise; however, for-profit organizations cannot receive grant funding through this program.

If a for-profit entity contributes personnel time, software, hardware, expertise, or other resources, those contributions may be reflected as cost share or match using fair market value.

Can the same individual serve as both a contractor and representative of a collaborating LLC?

No. If an individual is the sole representative of a for-profit LLC participating in the project, that same individual should not also be separately compensated as an individual contractor on the same project, as this may create a conflict of interest concern.

What is the difference between a contractor, vendor, collaborator, and subawardee?

A subawardee (or sub-recipient) is a collaborating organization involved in the design, implementation, and execution of the overall project.

A contractor or vendor performs a specific service or task at the direction of the project team and is not involved in overall project design or leadership.

Community partners that are meaningfully involved in project development and implementation are generally expected to participate as collaborators or subawardees rather than as vendors.

How much funding is available?

Funding amounts depend on project length:

- Up to \$50,000 for one-year projects
- Up to \$100,000 for two-year projects

For the 2026 cycle, total available funding is expected to be approximately \$200,000, with 2–4 awards anticipated.

Is matching funding required?

Matching funds are strongly encouraged but not required.

Applicants may provide match through:

- Cash contributions
- Personnel time
- In-kind support
- Unrecovered indirect costs

A minimum 25% match is viewed favorably during proposal review.

Are in-kind contributions allowable as match or cost share?

Yes. In-kind contributions are allowable and may include donated time, services, software, hardware, meeting space, or other project-related support.

Applicants should use fair market value when estimating the value of in-kind contributions.

Can cost share be described narratively rather than formally tracked in the budget?

Yes. Cost share that is not formally tracked through institutional accounting systems may be described in the proposal narrative or budget justification.

Are unrecovered indirect costs allowable as match?

Yes. Unrecovered indirect costs are an acceptable form of matching contribution.

What expenses are not allowed?

The grant does not fund:

- Indirect costs
- Equipment purchases over \$5,000 with a useful life over one year
- Salaries or operational costs for for-profit entities participating in the project

Consultant costs may be allowed when justified.

How should software expenses be categorized in the budget?

Software licenses, subscriptions, and related digital tools should generally be categorized under materials and supplies unless they meet institutional equipment thresholds.

Is conference travel allowable for faculty and students?

Yes.

Conference registration fees should be included within travel expenses.

Is international travel allowable?

International travel is not explicitly prohibited; however, applicants should provide strong justification demonstrating how the travel directly supports project goals and benefits Illinois communities.

Are student wages or stipends allowable?

Yes. Student wages and stipends are generally allowable; however, compensation structures vary by institution.

Applicants should consult their institution's sponsored projects or grants office regarding:

- Hourly wage requirements
- Union rules or employment classifications

- Scholarship or stipend restrictions
- Institutional approval processes

Scholarships as a form of student compensation may be possible but are less common and subject to institutional policy.

What is the limit on requested funds for full-time employee salaries and benefits?

No more than 30% of the total project budget may be allocated toward full-time employee salaries and benefits across the entire project.

For example:

- For a one-year project requesting \$50,000, no more than \$15,000 may support full-time employee salaries and benefits.
- For a two-year project requesting \$100,000, no more than \$30,000 may support full-time employee salaries and benefits.

This limit applies collectively across the project and is not calculated per individual employee.

Student wages and stipends are not counted toward the 30% cap.

The definition of “full-time employee” is determined by the employing organization.

Can community partner employees receive salary support from the grant?

Yes. Salary support for community partner staff is allowable when the work is clearly justified and tied to project responsibilities, deliverables, and outcomes.

How should multi-institution budgets be structured?

Projects involving multiple institutions or organizations should clearly distinguish funding allocations by entity.

Applicants are encouraged to use separate columns within the provided budget template for:

- Each participating institution
- Community partners
- Cost share or matching contributions
- Overall totals

Separate budget tables are not required if funding allocations are clearly delineated.

Can the budget template be modified?

Applicants should generally maintain the provided budget template format to support consistent proposal review.

Adding columns to distinguish funding allocations by institution, partner organization, or cost share category is acceptable and encouraged for clarity.

Is there a required funding ratio among institutional and community partners?

No. There is no prescribed funding ratio among participating IIN Hubs, universities, or community partners.

However, proposals are expected to demonstrate:

- Meaningful and equitable participation from community partners
- Alignment between partner roles and budget allocations
- A clear relationship between project responsibilities, deliverables, and funding

Projects that describe community partners as central collaborators but allocate no resources or decision-making authority to them may be viewed less favorably.

How are community partners paid?

Community partners involved in project design and implementation are generally expected to receive support through a subaward or collaborative funding arrangement.

Honorariums are not considered an appropriate payment mechanism for collaborating community partners because they imply a one-time transactional relationship rather than a substantive project collaboration.

Are participant incentives allowable?

Yes. Incentives for project participants — such as gift cards, survey incentives, or training participation support — are allowable project expenses.

Community partners may distribute participant incentives on behalf of the project, and reasonable administrative costs associated with distribution may also be included.

How are funds distributed after award decisions are made?

Funding distribution depends on the type of participating organization.

- University of Illinois entities receive funding through internal funding transfers.
- External universities or organizations receive grants through sponsored projects processes.

- Lead institutions are responsible for managing associated subawards to community organizations or collaborators.

Even when funding is distributed through multiple mechanisms, the project is treated as a single collaborative award with shared reporting responsibilities.

Who is responsible for oversight of collaborative projects?

The Lead PI remains responsible for overall project oversight, including:

- Budget monitoring
- Coordination among collaborators
- Progress toward deliverables
- Oversight of external subawards or partner activities

How long can projects last?

Projects may run for either:

- One year, or
- Two years

Applicants must select one of these timelines; intermediate timelines (such as 18 months) are not permitted.

What deliverables and reporting requirements are expected?

Awardees are expected to:

- Submit technical progress reports every six months
- Submit a final report at project completion
- Present project outcomes to the SII Committee or at IIN events/showcases
- Acknowledge IIN support in publications and outcomes
- Report future funding, partnerships, or publications resulting from the project

For two-year projects, release of second-year funding is contingent upon satisfactory completion of required first-year reporting.

Are applicants required to attend IIN events or budget for travel?

Beyond required project presentations or reporting activities, participation in IIN conferences, showcases, or related events is generally optional.

Applicants may include travel funding for optional participation in IIN events if it meaningfully supports project goals.

What are reviewers looking for?

Applications are reviewed based on:

- Alignment with IIN principles and equity goals
- Relevance to social innovation themes
- Feasibility and scope of work
- Collaboration across hubs and regions
- Budget and matching funds
- Potential for future growth or external funding
- Meaningful community engagement
- Equity and inclusion considerations
- Sustainability and long-term impact
- Clear plans for organizational or community capacity-building

Projects using human-centered design, systems thinking, or participatory approaches are encouraged.

What makes a proposal competitive?

Strong proposals typically demonstrate:

- Clear alignment with IIN principles
- Collaboration across institutions and communities
- Meaningful community engagement
- Equity and inclusion considerations
- Potential for long-term sustainability or future funding
- Feasible scope and timeline
- Clear plans for organizational or community capacity-building
- Consistency between project goals, partner roles, and budget allocations

How much detail is expected in the project narrative?

Applicants should provide enough detail to clearly explain:

- The problem or challenge being addressed
- The proposed approach or intervention
- Evidence supporting the approach
- Partner roles and collaboration structure
- Expected outcomes and impact

Given the page limitations, applicants may use numbered citations or endnotes to conserve space.

Does the reference list count toward the page limit?

No. A separate reference list or bibliography may be submitted and does not count toward the two-page project description limit.

Can previously unfunded proposals be resubmitted?

Yes. Previously submitted but unfunded proposals may be resubmitted up to three times within a three-year period.

Can someone serve on multiple projects?

An individual may only serve as PI on one proposal per year, but there is no limit on participation as a Co-PI.

What is meant by a “seed” project?

A seed project is an early-stage concept that has not previously received funding from this program or the IIN Sustaining Illinois program.

The program is intended to help teams launch or test innovative ideas rather than support projects already in advanced implementation stages.

What types of projects have been funded previously?

Previously funded projects have included:

- AI tools for neurodivergent student learning
- AI-supported social connection for older adults
- Community documentaries on gun violence
- Civic engagement initiatives for marginalized youth
- African American heritage and public history projects
- Grant development and nonprofit capacity-building programs

When is the application deadline?

For the 2026 funding cycle:

- Application deadline: May 21, 2026
- Funding decisions announced: June 12, 2026

Where can applicants find additional guidance?

Applicants are strongly encouraged to review the Social Innovation Workbook and NOFO materials when developing proposals and structuring project plans.

For additional questions, please contact nyagoda@uillinois.edu and iincontact@uillinois.edu.

Resource links:

- [2025 IIN Social Innovation Workshop \(January 22, 2025\) - University of Illinois Springfield | Media Hub](#)
- [Social Innovation Workbook](#)