THE ILLINOIS RESTORE, REINVEST, AND RENEW (R3) GRANT PROGRAM: EXAMINING GRANT APPLICANT FEEDBACK

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Abstract: The Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act legalized adult-use cannabis in Illinois on January 1, 2020. In addition to limiting enforcement and prosecution of cannabis-related offenses and providing a source of state revenue, the Act established the Restore, Reinvest, and Renew grant program (R3). Administered by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (ICJIA), R3 directs a significant portion of cannabis revenue toward building equity in communities that have been ravaged by violence and disproportionately impacted by historical criminal justice system overuse and economic disinvestment. This brief report highlights results of a feedback survey provided to R3 grant program applicants regarding their application experiences. Overall, survey respondents appeared satisfied with the process and offered recommendations to consider for improving future grant application cycles.

Introduction

On June 25, 2019, Illinois joined the growing list of states that legalized adult recreational cannabis use through statute 410 ILCS 705, signed into law by Illinois Governor Pritzker.[1] The legalization of adult recreational cannabis use through the Illinois Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act (the Act) included the intent of establishing an equitable legal cannabis industry, as well as repairing some of the harms done by economic disinvestment and historical overuse of criminal justice responses in communities. Part of these reparations included using cannabis tax revenue to make positive change through reinvestment in communities via grant funds. To ensure eligible communities are able to access the funding, the grant process should not be overly cumbersome or prohibitive. Grant making entities should examine efforts to ease the grant application process for community applicants.[2]

Background

The Illinois Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act (the Act) went into effect on January 1, 2020, and allowed adults ages 21 and older to legally purchase recreational cannabis from licensed dispensaries in the state. It also permitted arrest and conviction record expungements for minor violations of the Cannabis Control Act. Further, the Act enabled law enforcement to shift focus from enforcing cannabis laws to addressing violent and property crimes; earmarked cannabis tax revenue for education, substance abuse prevention, and treatment; and allocated public resources for community investment. The Act also established the Restore, Reinvest, and Renew program (R3), which seeks to:

- Directly address the impact of economic disinvestment, violence, and the historical overuse of criminal justice responses to community and individual needs by providing resources to support local design and control of community-based responses to these impacts.
- Substantially reduce the total amount of gun violence and concentrated poverty in the state.
- Protect communities from gun violence through targeted investments and intervention programs.
- Promote employment infrastructure.

ICJIA, in conjunction with the R3 Board and the Justice, Equity, and Opportunity Initiative (established within the Lieutenant Governor's Office), was tasked with determining areas within the state that were eligible for funding (also referred to as R3 zones).[3] Researchers identified the eligible areas using community-level data on gun injury, child poverty, unemployment, and state prison commitments and returns, combined with disproportionately impacted areas previously identified by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. ICJIA is required to recalculate eligibility data every four years.

R3 grants support programs in five areas, as indicated by the Act: economic development, violence prevention services, reentry services, youth development, and civil legal aid. ICJIA administers R3 program grants and worked to develop and announce notices of funding opportunity for service delivery and assessment/planning grants. Eligible applicants included nonprofits, local governments, faith-based organizations, businesses, and other community or

neighborhood organizations. Applicants could apply as single organizations or as part of a collaboration. Applications for R3 grant funds were due July 20, 2020.

Geography requirements were an important aspect of eligibility for the R3 program. Organizations were required to demonstrate their proposed programs and activities would serve their designated R3 zones. Priority was given to organizations located within an R3 zone and organizations in which a majority of employees lived within an R3 zone. The R3 Board voted to divide Illinois into 12 regions, with total funding allocation percentages in each region as follows: Central (5.1%), Collar (9.7%), Cook-Chicago Northern (5.7%), Cook-Chicago Southern (28.3%), Cook-Chicago Western (13.1%), Cook-Suburban (15.3%), Northeast Central (6.1%), Northern (5.1%), Northwest (1.7%), Northwest Central (2.2%), South Central (5.9%), and Southern (1.9%).[4] Applicants could submit one application for each region where services would be provided.

Throughout the application period, ICJIA offered technical assistance to applicants by answering questions, putting together [frequently asked questions](#), and offering a grant and Grant Accountability and Transparency Act[5] (GATA) workshop. The GATA workshop was designed to help ease the application process for agencies in need of grant funding and was offered multiple times throughout the grant period. Participants learned how to pre-qualify for state grants, where to look for available grants, what goes into a winning grant application, and general application submission guidelines and requirements.

ICJIA also conducted research examining the application process. To understand how applicants experienced the application process and improve the R3 grant program, ICJIA asked applicants to complete a voluntary, anonymous online survey. This survey was designed to answer the following research questions:

- Were applicants satisfied with the application process?
- How difficult did applicants find the grant application process to be?
- What technical assistance did applicants receive?
- Were applicants satisfied with the technical assistance received?
- Why did organizations submit an application, but no notice of intent (a voluntary submission prior to the grant due date that indicates interest in the grant)?
- What optional grant application activities did applicants participate in and why or why not?
- What parts of the R3 grant application process went well and what parts could be improved?

Methodology

Procedure and Sample

The R3 grant application submission period was from May 18, 2020, to July 20, 2020. After submitting a grant application via email, ICJIA grant staff sent applicants a link to a feedback survey in the confirmation email. This confirmation email was sent as soon as possible after the

application was received. Grant staff offered no follow-up emails reminding applicants to complete the survey.

ICJIA received 398 grant applications, which included applications from agencies applying in multiple funding regions and/or for an assessment and planning grant in addition to a program implementation grant. ICJIA researchers received 91 total responses to the feedback survey. Researchers removed eight incomplete responses, resulting in a total of 83 complete survey responses (a response rate of 21%).

Materials

The feedback survey contained both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. In the survey, we asked grant applicants for feedback on different parts of the application process (e.g., submitting a Notice of Intent, meeting the state grant requirements under GATA), assistance received during the application process, perceptions of the R3 website, and other areas. The feedback survey was created and administered with the online survey tool Qualtrics. The survey contained 21 questions and took roughly four minutes to complete. ICJIA's Institutional Review Board deemed this project not research, as determined by federal guidelines.

Analysis

I conducted quantitative analyses of survey responses, including descriptive statistics and crosstabulations, in SPSS. I conducted qualitative analysis by coding open-text responses in Microsoft Excel. Responses were coded into themes and subthemes based on commonalities in the content of text responses, as well as the different steps known to be involved in submitting an R3 grant application. Unclear responses were reviewed by a second researcher and codes were based on consensus.

Limitations

The current study had some limitations. First, only 21% of all R3 grant applicants completed the survey. Since this survey utilized a non-random sampling strategy, the generalizability of the findings applies only to those who responded to the survey. The experiences and views of those who responded to the survey could significantly differ from the experiences and views of those who did not respond. Second, the accuracy of responses may have been affected by the respondents' ability to recall specific details about the application process. Finally, respondent feedback was limited to their experiences during the period leading up to submission of their grant applications; feedback does not represent views on interactions or activities that occurred after that period (e.g., funding decisions).
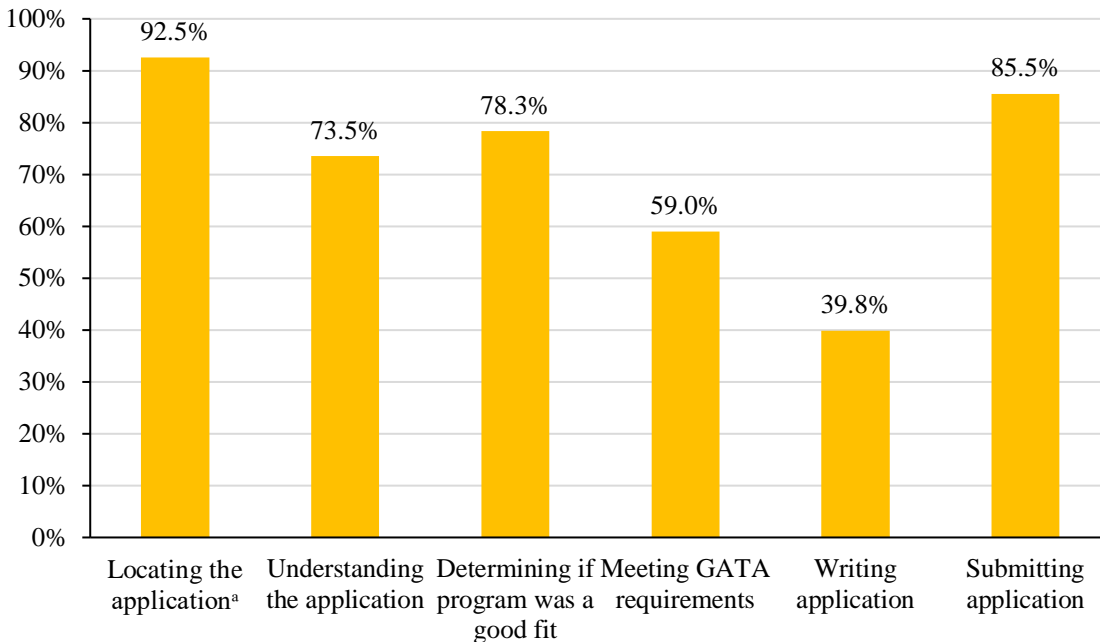
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Findings

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Application Process

The majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the process of applying for the R3 grant. Specifically, 89% of respondents ($n = 74$) indicated they were either extremely or

somewhat satisfied with the process.[6] Forty-two respondents (50.6%) indicated the application process was slightly, moderately, or extremely easy and 34 respondents (40.9%) indicated that they felt the application process was slightly, moderately, or extremely difficult. The majority of respondents indicated that most of the steps in the application process were at least slightly easy (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Percentage of Respondents Indicating the Application Process was Slightly, Moderately, or Extremely Easy, by Step (n=83)

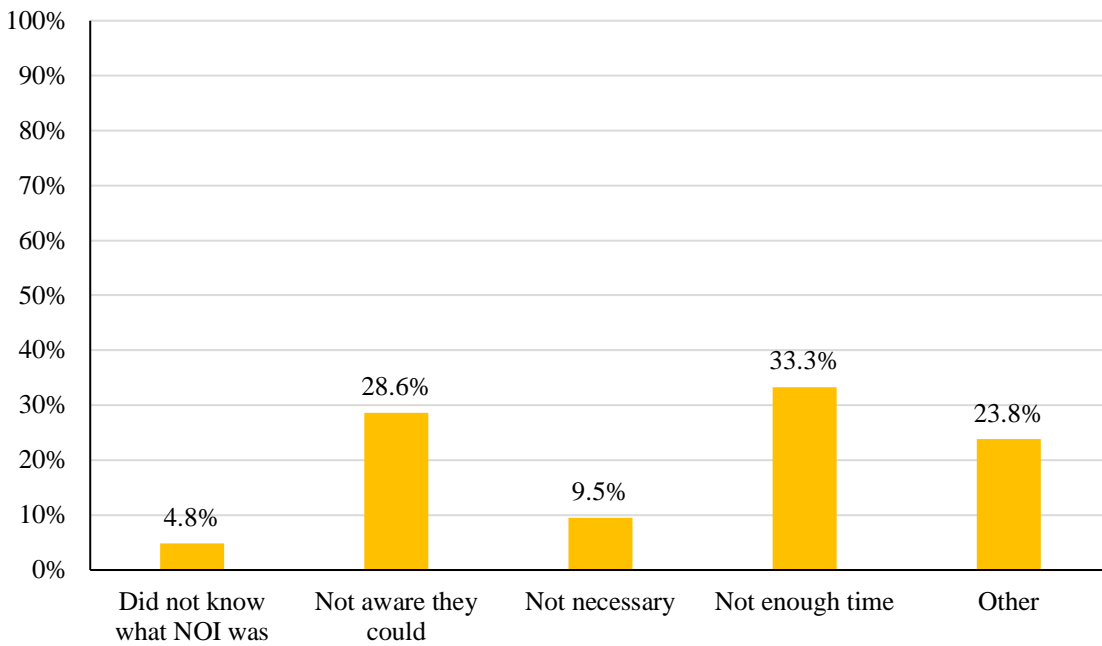*Note.* ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.
[a] n = 81

As seen in Figure 1, over 75% of respondents indicated that determining if their proposed program was a good fit for the grant, locating the application, and submitting their applications, was either slightly, moderately, or extremely easy. On the other hand, almost 45% of respondents indicated that writing the application was slightly, moderately, or extremely difficult, suggesting that it was one of the more difficult aspects of the application process.

Furthermore, 73.5% of respondents (n=61) indicated that they submitted a Notice of Intent (a voluntary submission prior to the grant due date that indicates interest in the grant). Most applicants that did not submit a Notice of Intent indicated there was not enough time for them to submit one (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Respondent Reasons for Not Submitting a Notice of Intent (n=21)

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.

Help with Grant Application Process

Applicants were asked if they had received any help from ICJIA staff on several application steps. Table 1 indicates the responses.

Table 1

Help Received from ICJIA Staff, by Type (n=83)

Statement	*n*	*%*
Locating grant application form	1	1.2
Understanding grant application form	11	13.3
Determining if the program was a good fit	9	10.8
Meeting GATA (state grant) requirements	1	1.2
Writing the grant	3	3.6
Submitting the grant application	7	8.4
Something else not listed	13	15.7
Not applicable; did not receive help	50	60.2
No response	3	3.6

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses. Percentages may not add up to 100%, as applicants could select more than one response
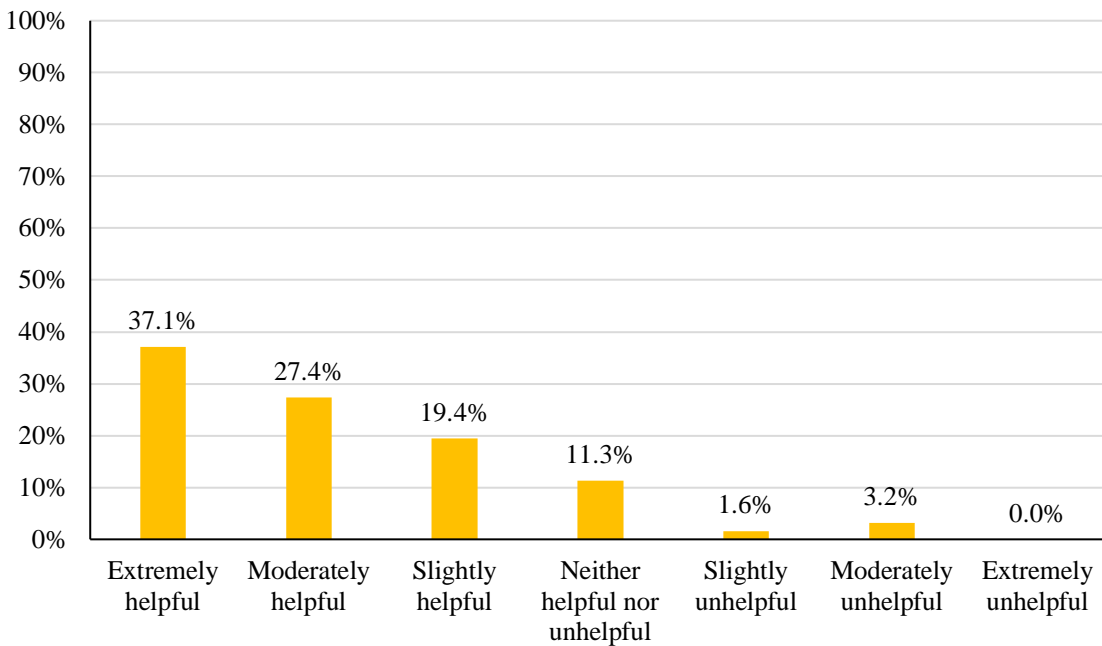
R3 applicants were directed to send questions to an Illinois.gov email address. Questions and answers were posted weekly on a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page of the R3 website. Several applicants left comments in the survey regarding the questions they submitted and the FAQ portion of the website. Thirty-eight respondents (45.8%) indicated that they reached out to ICJIA staff to ask additional questions. Of the 38 respondents that that received help, 34 (89%) indicated that the responses from ICJIA staff were slightly, moderately, or extremely helpful. Most respondents (n=23) indicated that the ICJIA staff were "extremely helpful."

Grantee Training

Sixty-three individuals (75.9%) indicated they attended the ICJIA Grant and GATA Technical Assistance Workshop. Twelve of the 20 individuals that did not attend a workshop (60%) indicated that they were unaware of them. Figure 3 shows survey participant responses on the GATA workshop's levels of helpfulness.

Figure 3

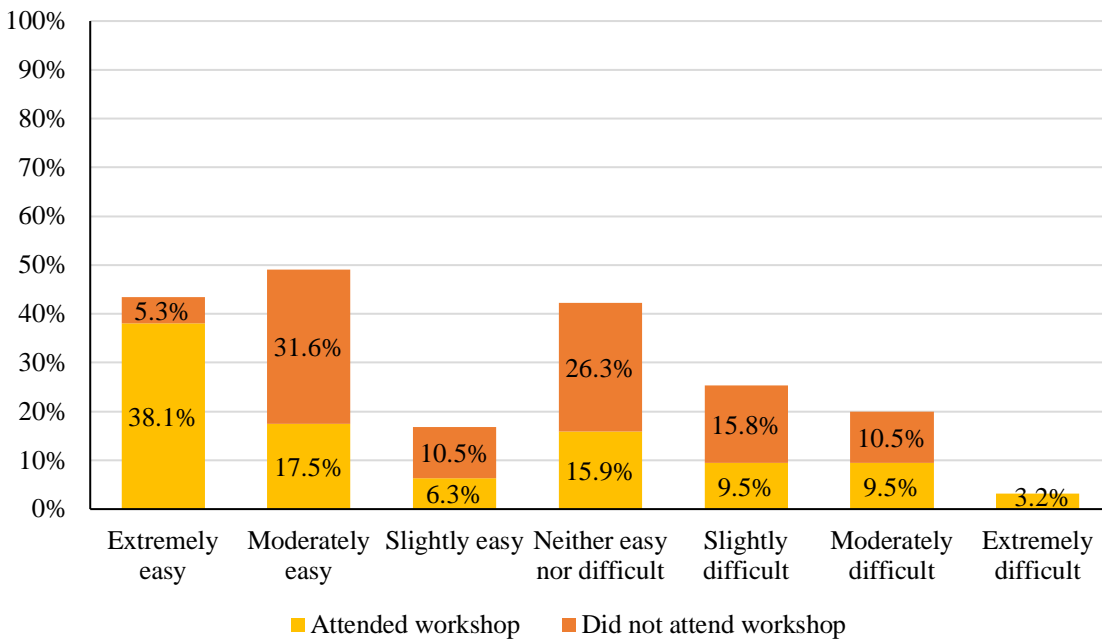*Respondent GATA Workshop Helpfulness Ratings (n=62)*

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.

Those who attended the workshop were slightly less likely to report that meeting GATA requirements and writing the grant application were difficult. Just 22.2% of those that attended the GATA workshop later indicated meeting GATA requirements were extremely, moderately, or slightly difficult. In comparison, 26.3% of those who did not attend the workshop reported difficulty (Figure 4). The median response of those who attended the GATA workshop was "Moderately easy," while the median response for those who did not attend the GATA workshop was "Neither easy nor difficult."

Figure 4

Respondent Ratings on Ease of Meeting GATA Requirements (n=82)

Bar chart legend: Attended workshop, Did not attend workshop

Categories (x-axis): Extremely easy, Moderately easy, Slightly easy, Neither easy nor difficult, Slightly difficult, Moderately difficult, Extremely difficult

Values:
- Extremely easy: 38.1% (attended), 5.3% (did not attend)
- Moderately easy: 17.5% (attended), 31.6% (did not attend)
- Slightly easy: 6.3% (attended), 10.5% (did not attend)
- Neither easy nor difficult: 15.9% (attended), 26.3% (did not attend)
- Slightly difficult: 9.5% (attended), 15.8% (did not attend)
- Moderately difficult: 9.5% (attended), 10.5% (did not attend)
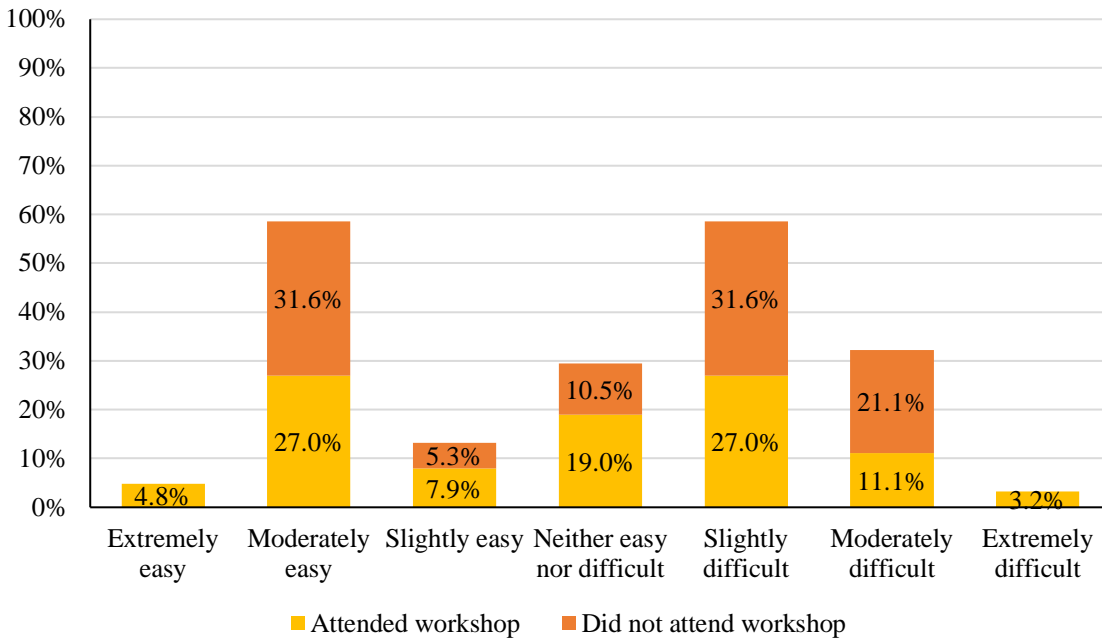- Extremely difficult: 3.2% (did not attend)

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.

Additionally, 41.3% of those that attended the workshop later indicated that writing the grant application was extremely, moderately, or slightly difficult, as compared to 52.7% of those that did not attend the workshop (Figure 5). The median response among those who attended the GATA workshop was "Neither easy nor difficult" while the median response among those who did not attend the GATA workshop was "Slightly difficult."

Figure 5

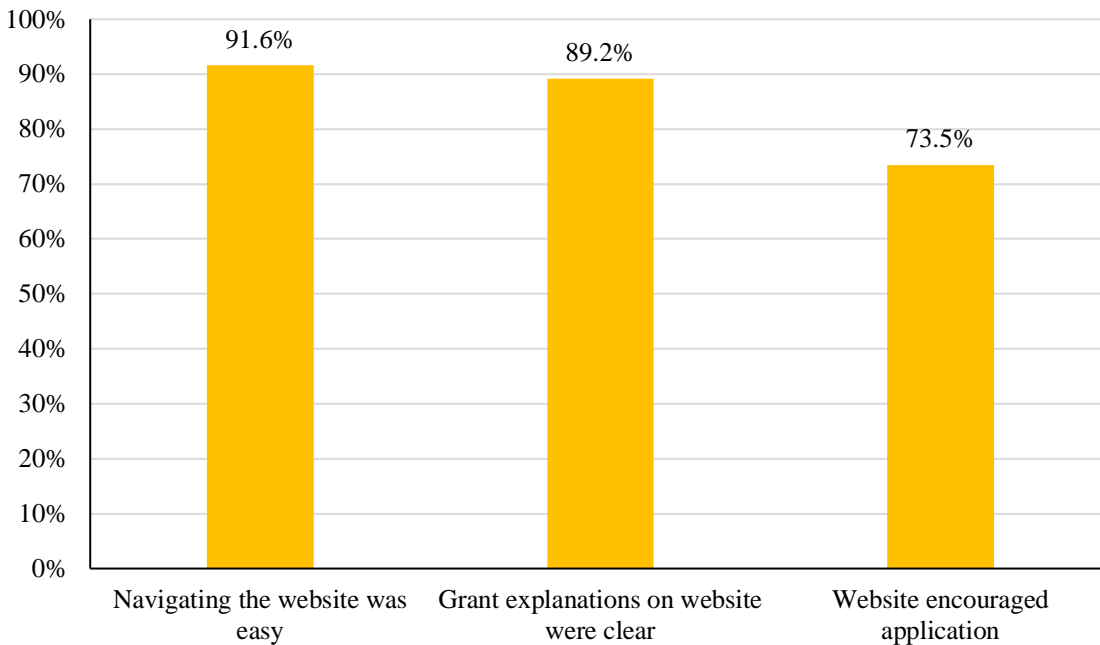*Respondent Ratings on Ease of Writing Grant Application (n=82)*

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.

Use of R3 Program Website

All respondents indicated they had visited the R3 website. Of the 80 respondents that answered all parts of the question, 79 indicated that the R3 website was slightly, moderately, or extremely helpful. Figure 6 highlights respondents' agreement with statements about the R3 website.

Figure 6

Respondent R3 Website Approval Ratings (n=83)

Note. ICJIA R3 Grant Application Survey responses.

Qualitative Feedback from Applicants

Respondents were asked in an open-ended question to provide additional comments or feedback, as needed. Forty respondents (48.2%) left additional comments spanning multiple topics.

The Grant Application Process

Some respondents commented on the process of locating documents and reference material required in the application process. One applicant noted difficulties finding a webinar on ICJIA's YouTube page.

Some applicants indicated they would have liked additional clarification on certain aspects of the application. Clarification was requested on:

- The difference between partnerships and formal collaborations.
- Grant verbiage used in the application.
- Objectives and performance measures.
- How to write a budget.
- Geography requirements.

One applicant noted, "the application and instructions were extremely difficult to understand." Another noted the "learning curve" for understanding the application was too great. Several

applicants referred to reaching out to ICJIA for help or utilizing the FAQs to better understand the application Most comments indicated a positive experience.

Meeting Program Requirements

Geography requirements were an important aspect of determining applicant eligibility. In the application, applicants were asked whether their organizations were located in an R3 zone (areas deemed as eligible for R3 funding), what R3 zones their programs intended to serve, and if at least 50% of their employees resided in an R3 zone. Eight applicants reported challenges in using the R3 zone map, with some noting difficulties in understanding the instructions and manipulating the map.

R3 funds were designated for programming in civil legal aid, violence prevention, youth development, economic development, and reentry. Applicants were encouraged to apply, as long as their organization provided at least one of these services in an R3-eligible area. While this was intentionally broad, two applicants noted the definition was somewhat of a hindrance. One noted that they were unsure what programs could or could not be funded.

Meeting GATA Requirements

One applicant indicated that the instructions on GATA were unclear; three other applicants indicated that the GATA process was difficult, with one stating that it was the "most difficult aspect of the entire application process."

Grant Writing Process

Several applicants reported liking the format of the application; however, others had difficulties with formatting. These difficulties included meeting page counts and adding signatures to the document. Four applicants indicated that they had difficulties with the budget template. One applicant stated the budget template "was extremely difficult to use." There appeared to be mixed feelings on writing the narrative portion of the application. One applicant wrote, "crafting the R3 narrative was the part that made the most sense." Two applicants reported the questions in the application felt repetitive.

Grant Application Submission

To submit the application, applicants were asked to email their documents to a designated email address, with a recommendation to submit the application 72 hours ahead of the deadline date to ensure successful submission.[7] Several applicants noted that they liked the email submission process; however, some noted waiting on the confirmation email from ICJIA was stressful. One applicant noted they submitted their application multiple times before receiving confirmation. Another applicant reported they did not send certain required documents in with their application due to unclear submission instructions. Two applicants noted the recommendation to submit the application 72 hours in advance of the deadline was confusing as it made it seem the application was due sooner than it was.

R3 Grant Focus

The Justice, Equity, and Opportunity Initiative and ICJIA worked to ensure an equitable R3 grant process and several applicants alluded to this focus in their final comments. Three applicants mentioned that they were applying for grants for the first time and several others indicated that they appreciated the focus on smaller organizations and traditionally underserved communities. Several applicants indicated appreciation for the opportunity to apply for this grant.

Discussion and Conclusion

The R3 grant program is a first-time funding opportunity authorized by the Illinois Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act signed into law on June 25, 2019. The grant program, administered by ICJIA, funds programming in economic development, violence prevention services, reentry services, youth development, and civil legal aid and encourages grant applicants from historically underfunded areas and organizations to apply for funding. Survey results indicate R3 grant applicants were satisfied overall with the R3 application process; however, quantitative results indicate some respondents experienced difficulty with writing the application, meeting GATA requirements, and understanding the application.

For future years of R3 funding, R3 program administrators should consider the following recommendations to help ensure the grant program is successful in meeting its goals.

Enhance Application Instructions in Future Grant Cycles

Applicants were able to submit questions to ICJIA staff during the grant application period, and roughly 40% of respondents indicated that they reached out to ICJIA staff with questions about the process. While these questions were posted online on the FAQ page, these questions can now be incorporated into the original instructions provided to applicants for future grant cycles, especially where staff received multiple questions asking the same thing.

Encourage Attendance at State Grant Workshops

Nearly 25% of respondents indicated they had not attended a GATA workshop offered by ICJIA. Survey responses suggested that attending the workshop helped applicants to meet GATA requirements and write the application. Therefore, attempts should be made to further encourage workshop attendance among applicants and potential applicants for the opportunity to interact with grant administration staff and obtain application assistance.

Continue to Examine the R3 Grant Process

Equity is a central focus of the R3 grant program and despite receiving mostly positive survey feedback, it is essential for program administrators to also acknowledge feedback from applicants who shared negative experiences and consider why their experiences were different. R3 grant program administrators should continue to collect and consider feedback from applicants to learn from negative experiences, measure improvements to the R3 grant application process, and compare the R3 program's unique approach to processes used by other grant programs.

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[1] Drug Policy Alliance. (n.d.). *Marijuana legislation and regulation.* https://drugpolicy.org/issues/marijuana-legalization-and-regulation.

[2] Collins, B. K., & Gerber, B. J. (2008). Taken for granted? Managing for social equity in grant programs. *Public Administration Review, 68*(6), 1128-1141. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2008.00960.x.

[3] Areas eligible to apply for R3 program grants were identified via an analysis of community-level data on gun injury, child poverty, unemployment, and state prison commitments and returns, combined with Disproportionately Impacted Areas identified by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). This document outlines the criteria and data sources used to define eligible areas, analyzed by census tract in Illinois. Identified R3-eligible areas were required to meet all criteria listed in Part I (gun injury hospitalization rate of > 9.1 per 10,000 residents or gun injury death rate of > 1.6 per 10,000 residents, greater than 8.3% unemployment rate, greater than 25.4% of children under six years-old living at or below 100% of the federal poverty line, AND greater than 70.6 prison commitments per 10,000 residents *or* greater than 36.3 prison returns per 10,000 residents) *or* Part 2 (defined as a Disproportionately Impacted Area by DCEO). For more information see: https://r3.illinois.gov/eligibility.
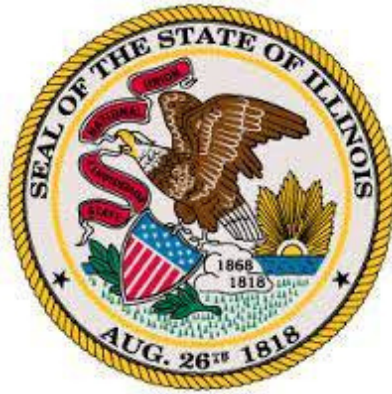
[4] Available funding percentages were designated for each region by dividing the summed population of eligible R3 zones within a region by the total summed population across all eligible R3 zones.

[5] GATA requires the adoption of federal rules to ensure a coordinated, transparent process for efficient oversight of grant recipient selection and monitoring. Before applying for an ICJIA administered grant, applicants are encouraged to pre-qualify which includes obtaining a Data Universal Numbering System number, registering with the System for Award Management, applying for/updating/verifying their agency Employer Identification Number, creating a Grants.gov account, and registering in the Illinois GATA Grantee Portal. Applicants are also encouraged to make sure their agency is in good standing with the Illinois Secretary of State and their agency is not excluded from receiving federal grants, is not on the Illinois Stop Payment list, and is not on the Department of Healthcare and Family Services Provider Sanctions list. For more information, refer to: https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/GATA/Pages/default.aspx and https://icjia.illinois.gov/gata/.

[6] All percentages in this report are based on a total of 83 responses unless otherwise noted.

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[7] Submission instructions stated to sign, date, and scan the Application into a PDF document. Documents were to be emailed to a specified email address, based on the application type. Documents to be submitted included: PDF version of Application (signed and dated), word version of Application, word version of Program Narrative, excel version of Budget, signed and dated Letters of Support and Memorandums of Understanding if applying as a collaborative, and determination letter of 501(c)(3) status from the IRS or equivalent documentation (if a nonprofit organization with 501(c)(3) status).

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