Research report on the formation of a universal grants management system and application portal in other states

By: Emma Regan, UVM student ('24) and legislative intern to Representative Jonathan Williams (Barre City) during the 2024 session
With any questions or concerns, please reach out to reganemma20@gmail.com any time in the future.

Purpose

This report presents initial investigations into which states have established universal grants management systems, and how they accomplished it. It is designed to be scaffolding to draft a bill directing the creation of a universal grant database and application portal for Vermont grants awarded by state agencies. By highlighting case studies of certain states that have achieved this, my hope is that Vermont can implement similar changes in our own state.

I hope this report reaches the Vermont League of Cities and Towns and the Regional Planning Commissions, whom I understand have been advocating for more state support to small municipalities in their grant research and application processes. Together with Vermont small businesses and nonprofits, I hope they might continue to advocate for a system that would make the grant life cycle more efficient across the state. I hope that Legislative Counsel finds the language of bills from other states useful in drafting their own. I also hope that the House and Senate Government Operations Committees may find it useful for reference if they decide to work on such a bill.

Lastly, recent bill H. 702 (2024) established a Working Group on State Grant Processes designed to investigate late payments and the inequities of the reimbursement model in current grant processes in Vermont. I hope this research will complement their research on how to make the state grant process better in Vermont.

Significance (please see testimonies attached at the embedded links)

H. 140, an act relating to requirements for State-funded grants, was originally proposed in 2023 to address these problems, but the committee dropped its provisions directing the establishment of a universal database for all state funded grants and a universal application process. The argument, from Denise Reilly-Hughes of the Agency of Digital Services, and Sarah Clark and Jordan Black-Deegan from the Agency of Administration, was that a universal database would be redundant to a basic search on the vt.gov website, and that the agencies do not have the resources to make a database that would have to be manually maintained. They reiterated that the state already has general policy and standards for both state and federal awards, as well as templates, pre-award eligibility, single audit review, and grant payments.

In the 2024 legislative session, the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations heard testimony from many witnesses of different backgrounds (for example the state sheriff's department, nonprofits, small businesses, municipal government representatives), on

their difficulties in engaging with state funded grants. They spoke on their experiences in applying for grants, finding the process to be complicated, lengthy, and a drain on resources. This is in part because the metrics, standards, formulas, requirements, and reporting for different applications across different agencies are variable. They further described that sometimes, the grant money that they needed was not available for weeks or even months after being awarded (these issues are intended to be addressed in H. 702).[1] **The conclusion is that small towns, small nonprofits, or other small businesses who are in need of and eligible for state dollars do not have the resources to research and apply for grants when the process is this complicated. They do not have the manpower hours or money available to engage effectively in the grant application process and are further frustrated by delays even after grants are awarded. This ultimately hinders the durability of their business model and their capacity for growth.**

Those witnesses expressed support for H. 140 and any measure meant to ease the grant application process. Weiwei Wang, Co Founder and Executive Director of the Vermont Professionals of Color Network in particular, spoke on her experience owning a small business with 5.5 employees; she reflected that creating and writing a proposal is expensive, requiring a lot of hours of research, writing, and follow through, for something that is not even guaranteed. Sheriff Mark Anderson of the Vermont Sheriffs' Association mentioned how much easier it is to apply for federal grants using grants.gov, which is a more streamlined and centralized process. Ted Brady of the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, spoke in favor of this bill and anything that works towards supporting a standardized grant application; he lamented that towns don't have to jump through so many hoops for the same thing every time, though he appreciates the administrative complexities that Sarah Clark spoke on. Others who testified to the same effect in the House Committee on Government Operations include: Emma Paradis of Common Good Vermont (additional testimony here), Allison Mindel of the VT Foodbank, Nicole Miller of Vermont Afterschool, and Julia Bond of Good Samaritan Haven (please refer to their testimony attached at the embedded links).

This is the reality that many Vermonters are facing. Grants.gov, originally part of George Bush's President's Management Agenda (see page 24-25) in 2002, was a part of the federal administration's eGov initiative to bring the government online. The project was under the jurisdiction of the Office of Management and Budget. Grants.gov is designed to make it "faster, easier and more cost effective for grant applicants to electronically interact with federal grant-making agencies." The site makes it easier to research and find federal grant opportunities, and then simplifies the grant application process to save applicants costs, time, and hassle.

---

[1] Belan Antensaye, Programs Director, Vermont Health Equity Initiative, on 2/13/24 astonished the committee by explaining how in 2021 during the height of the pandemic, during the massive campaign to get everyone vaccinated, often employees were using their own money to make up for state funds that never came through. She said that while it was a situation that none of them wanted to be in, for them it was beyond just the job and personal risk; there was a large personal stake and people were really connected to the meaningful life saving work they were doing. Regardless, the reimbursement model simply is not working efficiently for Vermonters, and the delays or changing rules are often very costly, both financially and in the breakdown of trust within communities, which is especially debilitating to BIPOC communities.

<u>Case studies:</u>

The rest of this report highlights the solutions that several other states have taken towards mitigating the same issues. These states identified the inefficiencies in their own grant awarding processes, and initiated various versions of a statewide grants management system, which would streamline the entire grants process: from research available grants, to applying for multiple grants across state agencies, to accepting and having the money awarded, to reporting and accountability afterwards. The following case studies include, where available, the state legislature bills that direct the establishment of a universal grants management system, how they work for both grantors and grantees, and where to find all of the research on it, so that future advocates and legislators can point to successful examples.

California

Find an official summary of the California Grants Portal idea, implementation, and impact here.

The bill: In 2019, the California legislature passed the Grant Information Act of 2019 (find the text of the bill here). This act required the State Library System to form a website that held all the information on state grants, with a function for each state agency to input their grants through a simple online form. The act required the participation of state agencies in inputting their grants. Lastly, the act required that the State Libraries to report annually on how the portal is working. The date of enforcement was July 1, 2020 and they did not get an appropriation for this project. The State Libraries were aided by the CA Government Operations Agency and the Department of Information Technology. In a separate bill, the legislature specified what information had to be published about grant award recipients afterwards.

How it works: Each agency will direct their grants editor to create an account on the grants database website, and once their account is verified, the agency has a dashboard where they can submit new grant opportunities through an online form and keep track of the existing ones as applications come in.

The portal has many user-friendly features, including the option to post forecasted opportunities, save-to-finish-later functions, the ability to publish post-award data (also required by CA law). The database has a helpful support page and glossary to help the grants editors navigate the process. There is a statistics dashboard that automatically gathers data so both the public and the legislature can understand how grants are working in the state.

For grant applicants, anyone can subscribe to get email alerts when a new grant opportunity is posted. Each grant posted has a 'Resources' box that provides contact information and other details to get support during the application process. The limitation is that each application process is still specific to each agency; there is not a universal application.

For further research and contact information:
- CAGrantsPortal@library.ca.gov for more info
- https://data.ca.gov/dataset/california-grants-portal

New York:

Find an official summary of the Grants Reform Initiative here and the current SFS system here.

From 2011-2015, the Andrew Cuomo administration undertook the Grants Reform Initiative to standardize state grant making process and application. **In 2012, the state budget included appropriations for a working group named the Grants Reform Team, which together with the Governor's Office for Nonprofit Coordination, was charged with shortcomings and potential solutions for the state's grants management system**. The working group observed that there were too many late payments or approvals by agencies, high administrative costs, and a lot of confusing and/or redundant steps for grant applicants that were prohibitive. These are all challenges that Vermont has also faced in its own grant process.

The Grants Reform Team, after identifying these shortcomings, researched and recommended an "off-the-shelf" solution (they selected Agate software) to meet NY's detailed specifications. Each state agency then selected a lead to participate in training led by the the Grants Reform Team to help them undergo the mandatory change of uploading their grants online. Then they tested it, standardized the state's grant contract, and defined pre-qualification standards, and launched it.

In 2023-2024, the state grant database transitioned from the Grant Gateway portal to the Statewide Financial System (SFS), in order to better integrate state government with the grant applications and subsequent awards. January 16, 2024 was the official transition date. The SFS system is a more user friendly experience and is designed to streamline the entire grants process: you can search for, apply for, communicate about, and receive grants through the same portal (any agency interacting with the State of New York already uses this portal for other business, not just for grants). The Office of Information Technology Services continues to oversee the management of this portal (VT equivalent is the Agency of Digital Services; see VT's ADS strategic plan here)

SFS has a prequalification application for grant applicants to speed up the process of apply to multiple grants, and there is a website with helpful videos and virtual training sessions to help users navigate the grants process. The NY state website additionally has resources to support state agencies. Like CA, the SFS portal has an option to email updates to subscribers when there is a new grant opportunity posted.

For further research and contact information:
- Why/how of the transition to SFS in 2024
- grantsreform@its.ny.gov
    - Previously grantsgateway@its.ny.gov
- All the information the videos/trainings available for vendors

North Carolina:

The National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) published a report on North Carolina's grants management efforts here.

Origins: The North Carolina Department of Transportation had maintained a grant management system since 2010. In 2021, the state underwent a major transformation, moving their grants system to the Enterprise Grantor Management System from SAP. The timing of this upgrade was important; during the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government was funneling a lot of money through the states. Now, grants are processed through the North Carolina Grants Management System (NCGMS), overseen by the North Carolina Department of Information Technology and the Office of State Budget and Management.

The Bill:
It directs the Office of Budget and Management to adopt rules for the uniform administration of grants across the state, but not specifically a complete database. **The database was an initiative on the part of the State Chief Information Officer.**
- The administration of state grants: Statute G.S. 143C-6-23 Administration of state grants
- the Administrative Rules: 09 NCAC 03M

How it works:
State agencies are required to register all of their assistance programs and awards with the Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM). Each agency has an account with a username and password, after having submitted a form authorizing their access to the database.
North Carolina Grants Management System requires agencies to upload their grants. Grant applicants simply have to go to the nc.gov grants management list to apply; each application is specific to the agency.
The North Carolina Grants Management System has provided better transparency, improved customer service, paperless communication, improved user experience, reduced processing times, more complete submissions, minimization of errors in payments, and statewide standardization and simplification.
They provide a help guide and other helpful support FAQs for state agencies. Additionally, the OSBM provides guidance on overseeing compliance and keeps a list of non-compliant grant recipients, updated weekly, so they might have funding suspended. Lastly, The state also provides a reporting tool, so you can see who is receiving the most state grant dollars.

For further research and contact information:
- Grants-OSBM@osbm.nc.gov

Maryland:

Background: Currently, it appears that the Maryland state government has simply one or two people manually entering grants information, to an incomplete or outdated List of grants available in the state. Any agency can submit the title of an URL to a grant, and submissions are reviewed by the Governor's Grants Office, at which point they are posted on that list. This is a low maintenance, low administrative cost way to manage a list of grants, but it is not mandatory for agencies to submit, nor is there a single centralized website.

However, the state passed a bill in 2020 to commission a working group to report on the grants process in the state and identify solutions to it.

The bill: Grant Applications and Reporting – Uniform Forms and Requirements: see bill here The bill established the Maryland Efficient Grant Application (MEGA) Council, who will report to the Governor's Grants Office and the Department of Budget and Management. Each grant-making agency must appoint a Chief Accountability Officer to serve as liaison to the council. They will submit a report by July 1, 2024. Updates on the progress of the council can be found here.

Pennsylvania: Band Aid Solutions

Several agencies in the state have their own separate websites for grants available. For example, the Dept of Environmental Protection grant application portal is powered by Keystone Logic. However, there is no mandatory uniformity in the state.

Additionally, the PA House of Representatives Democratic Caucus compiles a Grant and Resource Directory. For example, the 2020-2021, the 17th Edition is published here.

Conclusions and suggestions

Generally speaking, many states have initiated a transition to a statewide grants management system after either

a) directing a particular agency (Agency of Administration, Operations, Grants Management, Digital Services for examples), or entity (State Libraries) to create or contract a specific, fully functioning grants management system

b) establishing a Working Group to investigate and report on the inefficiencies of the grant processes in the state, and to further identify solutions or other recommendations to the legislature on how to enact changes; those reports can then be used as a launching point for further legislation

California, New York, and North Carolina all have successful examples of a statewide grants management system. Maryland is currently in the process of investigating how to form one in their state. I hope that this report, and its references to other states' bills or Working Groups, will serve as a jumping-off point for the recently commissioned Working Group on State Grant Processes, which is directed to "identify system improvements that would simplify grant application and reporting processes."

The transition will be labor intensive and frustrating for state agencies. This initiative will likely require appropriations to initiate a Working Group or direct legislation, to complete the project, and to support the transition process before it becomes self-sustaining. (New York State in particular still has many live websites helping grantors and grantees navigate the transition in their system at the beginning of 2024.)

Municipal administrators and other small businesses or nonprofits deserve better support from the state government in order to access the funding they need to accomplish their missions.

Further research

Please see below a list of other states who have universal statewide grants management systems, to direct further research on how states have implemented them. Upon initial searches, these states also have statewide grants management systems, but I did not include any further research.

I also recommend the National Association of Chief Information Officers webpage (NASCIO), which has many helpful resources.

An interesting article from Route Fifty, **What every state and local CIO should know about grant management,** also summarizes the problems in state grants management and how states can address it. "CIOs must find the right GMS to fit within their existing IT infrastructure and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems -- without getting locked-in to a model that will prevent future digital transformation." **They also reference a Market Guide for State and Local Management Solutions (find it here;** several states below have mentioned Keystone Logic, Agate, ECivis, WebGrants, as the software they contracted for solutions).

I have noted several user-friendly feature details that seem to be very popular among grant applicants in these grants management systems, including a compare/contrast button,

ability to subscribe to updates when new grants are posted, support pages/FAQs/glossaries available to support grantors, applicants, and grantees.

Additional list of other States with versions of a statewide grants management system:

Alabama: statewide grants management website [here](#)

Arizona: outsources by using ECivis portal [here](#)

Colorado: Grants Administration Implementation & Navigation System [here](#) and [here](#)

Delaware: Portal opening by 2025, more info [here](#)

Idaho: seems to have a portal [here](#), no easy info on how it works

Illinois: Grant Accountability and Transparency Act, in the works but can find it [here](#)

Iowa: statewide grants administration [here](#) and portal [here](#)

Massachusetts: uses Agate software since 2022, like North Carolina, more info [here](#)

Minnesota: more uniform statewide, more info [here](#)

Mississippi: central statewide, more info [here](#)

Montana: portals by agency

Nevada: Assembly Bill 445 of the 2021 legislative session to procure a statewide Grant Management System (GMS), find more info [here](#) and [here](#)

North Dakota: statewide central portal, WebGrants, more info [here](#) and [here](#)

Ohio: statewide central portal, more info [here](#) and [here](#)

Oklahoma: OK grant exchange, found [here](#)

Oregon: statewide portal found [here](#), may not be required for all agencies to participate

Rhode Island: launched with ECivis in 2022, more info [here](#)

Utah: seems to have a universal portal [here](#), but no additional information

West Virginia: statewide website, more info [here](#)

Wyoming: seems to have a [portal](#), but no additional information

States without a universal grants management system

Alaska: seems to be by agency

Arkansas: seems to be by agency

Connecticut: seems to be by agency

Florida: some agencies but not all on this portal [here](#)

Georgia: like Arizona, using ECivic and opening soon, but only for one Department in the state, more info [here](#)

Hawaii: seems to be by agency or by theme

Indiana: seems to be by agency

Kansas: portal existing, but currently only caters for some agencies, find it [here](#)

Kentucky: portal existing, but only caters to some agencies

Louisiana: portals existing, but one for each agency

Maine: per agency

Michigan: portals by agency

Missouri: by agency

Nebraska: by agency

New Hampshire: by agency

New Jersey: by agency, but does provide some uniform guidance, more info [here](#)

New Mexico: by agency

South Carolina: portals by agency

South Dakota: portals by agency

Tennessee: Grants Finding Resources found [here](#), more info here, administered monthly by the Office of Planning

Texas: has a portal [here](#), but does not require grants smaller than $25,000 to be posted, more info [here](#)

Virginia: a [portal](#) for state agencies to find federal grants… otherwise within the state, portals by agency

Washington: a 2011 [investigation](#), but no statewide portal

Wisconsin: portals by agency