

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF NORTHERN ILLINOIS GRANT GUIDELINES

2026 Community Grants Program



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Since 1953, the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois has awarded over \$90,000,000 in grants and scholarships to nonprofits and students, made possible by the generosity of CFNIL’s donors: individuals, families, and organizations committed to improving the region’s quality of life.

Community Grants is CFNIL’s largest and broadest grantmaking program. The annual cycle welcomes proposals from organizations serving the people and places of Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, and Winnebago Counties.

This document describes Community Grants Program eligibility, how to apply, and what kind of charitable activities are funded. Community Grants are made in eight Focus Areas**: Arts & Humanities; Basic Needs & Compassionate Support; Career Pathways; Complementary Education; Dignity & Respect; Health; Sustainable Communities; and Youth & Families.

Full details about the Community Grants Program may be found online at cfnil.org/community.

HOW TO APPLY

Applications must be submitted through CFNIL’s Web Portal by 5 p.m. on August 20, 2026. To learn how to register and apply using the Web Portal, visit cfnil.org/grant-resources. Funds for awarded grants will be available by the end of November; ensure funds are not needed until after December 1, 2026. Contact Lisa at edelang@cfnil.org or 779-210-8210 with questions.

2026 KEY DATES

Application Opens: June 23

Application Closes: August 20

Award Notification: By end of November

2024 COMMUNITY GRANTS AWARDS BY THE NUMBERS**

FOCUS AREA	ARTS & HUMANITIES	BASIC NEEDS & COMPASSIONATE SUPPORT	CAREER PATHWAYS	COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATION	DIGNITY & RESPECT	HEALTH	SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES	YOUTH & FAMILIES	TOTAL
# OF GRANTS	16	12	9	14	12	9	12	13	95
AVERAGE GRANT	\$10,761.94	\$13,020.32	\$38,798.41	\$27,695.46	\$11,814.07	\$13,130.78	\$15,430.81	\$22,660.23	\$18,183.11
RANGE OF AWARDS	\$4,500 - \$23,000	\$2,300 - \$31,280	\$5,000 - \$57,500	\$2,072.29 - \$80,000	\$3,618 - \$39,000	\$6,625 - \$33,321	\$3,100 - \$40,000	\$9,832 - \$75,000	\$2,072.29 - \$80,000
TOTAL AWARDED	\$172,191.02	\$156,243.88	\$271,525.89	\$387,736.45	\$141,768.83	\$118,177.05	\$185,169.67	\$294,583	\$1,727,395.79

** Allocations per focus area can and do shift; award stats are provided for general context and should not be considered prescriptive.

APPLICATION OVERVIEW

1. SUMMARY:

The basic information about your proposal, including its Focus Area.

2. PROPOSAL PLAN:

A detailed description of your activity.

3. COMMUNITY NEED:

Why the activity is needed and who it will serve.

4. PROPOSAL BUDGET:

A detailed proposal budget and narrative.

5. EVALUATION PLAN:

The activity's anticipated results and the plan to track and measure those results.

6. ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND:

General organizational information including financials for requests over \$10,000 and applicants who haven't applied to Community Grants in the past five years.

7. GRANT APPLICANT AGREEMENT:

The terms and conditions for applying for and administering a grant from CFNIL's Community Grants Program.

ELIGIBILITY & WHAT WE FUND

To be eligible to apply for funding from the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, an applicant must be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, a religious organization, a unit of government, or a public university/college.

The proposals must describe charitable activities that primarily, but not exclusively, benefit the residents of Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, or Winnebago Counties. The more you request, the greater scrutiny your proposal will receive. CFNIL uses a tiered application format based on the request amount. Applicants requesting over \$50,000 will submit a full application with audited financials. Applicants requesting \$10,001 to \$50,000 will submit a streamlined application with just the most recent 990. Applicants requesting less than \$10,000 will have the shortest application and no organizational financials are required. However, all applicants who haven't applied to Community Grants in the past five years must submit their two most recent 990s. CFNIL reserves the right to request additional financial information during the grant cycle if needed.

CFNIL will fund:

- Expenses that are directly related to the design and implementation of a proposal. Revenue and expenses related to the proposal must be itemized using the integrated budget form in the application.
- The purchase and installation of capital assets (i.e., assets that have a useful life greater than one year and which will be depreciated on the applicant's books).
- Wages for staff or contractors to the extent that the request is appropriate to the proposal's scope and implementation.
- Indirect costs that do not exceed 15% of the amount being requested in the proposal. Indirect costs are defined as expenses that cannot be easily attributed to the funded charitable activity but are essential to the operation of the grantee. Examples include utilities, insurance, general administrative support, and the portion of a building that is used to support the general operations of the organization. Applicants are encouraged to include 15% of their request amount to cover indirect costs.

CFNIL does not fund charitable activities that promote a religion or require participation in a religious activity as a condition for receiving services. Grants may be made to faith-based organizations for non-religious purposes.

The CFNIL Community Grants program will not fund proposals for fundraisers; general operations; endowment building; large-scale capital campaigns*; budget deficits; individuals; for-profit organizations; partisan political activities; or proposals that discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, age, national/ethnic origin, political beliefs, veteran's status, disability, or any other factor prohibited by applicable law.

**CFNIL may fund a capital project if the request amount comprises at least 25% of the total cost.*

FOCUS AREAS

CFNIL accepts proposals in eight Focus Areas:

ARTS & HUMANITIES

- Increase the number, type, and quality of arts, crafts, and cultural experiences and educational opportunities.
- Promote access to high-quality arts & cultural experiences, especially those that represent our community's diverse culture.
- Celebrate the region's history and preserve its historical integrity.

BASIC NEEDS & COMPASSIONATE SUPPORT

- Serve the basic needs of individuals and families, such as food, clothing, and temporary shelter.
- Alleviate suffering and provide hope and aid to individuals and families.

CAREER PATHWAYS

- Promote post-secondary readiness and attainment through academic support, mentorship, and soft skill development.
- Increase student access to and engagement with career information and their related academic pathways.
- Define the region's workforce needs and develop a skilled workforce through job training, internships, apprenticeships, and other educational opportunities.
- Foster collaboration among educators, employers, and workforce/economic development entities.

COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATION

- Strengthen educational opportunities for all ages within the region.
- Increase the capacity, infrastructure, and educational quality of schools and school-approved programs.
- Provide more learning hours, reinforce classroom instruction, and advance student development.
- Support before-and after-school, summer school, and enrichment programs with an academic focus.

DIGNITY & RESPECT

- Promote dignity and respect for all in our region.
- Support, protect, and enhance the lives of vulnerable populations, including but not limited to older adults and victims of violence and exploitation.
- Provide services to persons with disabilities, especially activities that promote inclusion for people with developmental disabilities.

HEALTH

- Promote public health and general wellness.
- Improve the quality of and access to physical and mental health services.
- Conduct research to promote the health and well-being of our community.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

- Promote economic activity, strong neighborhoods, and public safety.
- Preserve and enhance our community's built environment and ensure quality, affordable, and permanent housing.
- Preserve our natural environment and increase the region's understanding and appreciation of the environment, including animal welfare.
- Increase the capacity and infrastructure of our non-profit and public sector.

YOUTH & FAMILIES

- Provide pathways to self-sufficiency for individuals and families.
- Strengthen families by providing access to vital services, caregiver education, and other support.
- Support the emotional, physical, social, and character development of youth through mentorship, life skills training, and other programming.

TYPES OF PROPOSALS

Application questions will vary depending on the type of proposal submitted:

TYPE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
EVENT	The duration of the charitable activity is less than a week.	Weekend-long concert or one-day block party.
PROJECT	The duration of the charitable activity has a beginning and ending date, and lasts between one week and three years.	A summer-long camp or a two-year archiving initiative.
PROGRAM	The duration of the charitable activity is ongoing.	A year-round health facility. All proposals related to annual educational activities, i.e. after- or summer-school programs.
CAPITAL/COMMODITY	Purchasing equipment or a commodity, or making a minor capital improvement to serve or further the ability to serve clients. If the purchase is part of a larger charitable activity, such as books for a reading program, choose Event/ Project/ Program as appropriate. NOT eligible for multi-year grants.	Van to transport clients; food for pantry; school backpacks for at-risk youth; ADA compliant bathroom remodel.

GRANT REQUIREMENTS

Applicants:

- Must have been in active service to the public for at least one year as of December 1st of the year in which they are applying. For religious organizations, units of government, and public universities/schools, active service begins on the date that the organization was established. For 501(c) 3 organizations, active service begins on the “Effective Date” found in an organization’s IRS Determination letter.
- Must be current on all interim and final reports for grants from CFNIL’s Community Grants Program. If the organization is currently being funded with a CFNIL grant and a final report is not yet due, the organization must submit an interim report. Visit cfnil.org/grant-resources
- Must complete a Pre-Authorization Form if you are working with or within a school district or providing services to school districts, such as field trips. This form is embedded within the grant application and will be completed and submitted as part of the application process. The form asks for detailed information about the partnership between the applicant and the district, specifically the district’s role in designing the charitable activity and allocating resources toward its completion. If you are working with or providing services for multiple school districts, enter information for the school district that you work with the most.
- May submit no more than two unique proposals. For the purposes of this limit, organizations and their corresponding foundations will be treated as one entity even if they have separate EIN numbers.
- Must have developed formal partnerships with local organizations if the applicant has not served CFNIL’s service area within the past five years.
- Must propose a charitable activity that falls within the scope of the applicant organization’s mission.
- May be prompted to clarify their proposal or submit omitted documents up to one week before the deadline. Staff will not seek clarification or the submission of omitted documents within one week of the deadline.

PROPOSAL REVIEW

CFNIL is committed to a fair and objective proposal review process.

Volunteer community members review and recommend grant proposals for approval by the CFNIL Board of Trustees. CFNIL Trustees, volunteers, and staff adhere to carefully considered conflict of interest and confidentiality policies throughout the review and approval process. Due to the volume of proposals considered, CFNIL cannot routinely meet with grant applicants as a part of the review process. CFNIL may meet with any applicant when a review committee has determined that a meeting or a site visit will facilitate the review process.

Grant award decisions are final. CFNIL Trustees, volunteers, and staff are prohibited from discussing the details of committee deliberations with any grant applicant. To learn more visit cfnil.org/grant-resources and look for the “Proposal Review Guidelines” section.

GET IN TOUCH!

CFNIL staff are here to help. We rely on your feedback to guide our grantmaking process and welcome your questions or comments. While it is not appropriate (or, in many cases, helpful!) for us to offer specific guidance on the design or implementation of your proposed activities, we are happy to clarify any aspect of our application, these guidelines, or other aspects of the Community Grants Program process. Don’t struggle -- just call!



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