

Tips for Preparing an FY2026 NEA Application

The latest Grants to Organizations guidelines (for fiscal year 2026) are now available on the National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) website. To be fully prepared for the application process, read the guidelines very carefully, check out the list of Frequently Asked Questions, familiarize yourself with the reporting requirements in advance, and be in touch with NEA staff. Here are the League's tips for preparing an FY2026 NEA application, which includes an overview of guideline changes and important reminders, as well as suggestions on where to find more complete information.

OF INTEREST TO THE NEA

The NEA is particularly interested in projects that:

- Enable artists, arts workers, and arts organizations to thrive, including projects that:
 - Build organizational capacity and provide leadership development;
 - Provide direct compensation to artists, makers, art collectives, and/or arts workers for their participation;
 - Lead to a better understanding of and response to opportunities and risks that may impact organizational effectiveness and artists' livelihoods (e.g., national emergencies, natural disasters, emergent technology, etc.);
 - Support existing and new technology-centered creative practices across all artistic disciplines and forms, including work that explores or reflects on the impacts of artificial intelligence (AI) in ways that are consistent with valuing human artistry and improve the public's awareness of understanding of the responsible use of AI; and
 - Include investment in an organization's capacity to serve the public by providing access, training, and other resources to engage with digital technologies.
- Celebrate the nation's history, civic life, and community connection including projects that:
 - Celebrate the nation's wide range of creativity by honoring the semiquincentennial of the United States of America (America 250). Projects may engage communities in dialogue about the past, present, and future of our nation—including activities that examine the work of American artists, develop public art recognizing the country's milestone; and explore a wide range of narratives related to freedom and unity through the arts.
 - Use artistic and creative practices to support individuals and groups in telling their story to foster mutual understanding; and
 - Engage in arts and cultural practices to overcome social isolation or loneliness
- Support the health and well-being of people and communities through the arts, including projects that:
 - Facilitate cross-sector collaborations between the arts and other disciplines, sectors, and industries to strengthen a community's civic infrastructure; and
 - Foster belonging and social connection as a means toward improved health and wellbeing.
- Originate from or are in collaboration with the following constituencies encouraged by White House Executive Orders: [Historically Black Colleges and Universities \(HBCUs\)](#), [Tribal Colleges and Universities](#), [American Indian and Alaska Native tribes](#), [Predominantly Black Institutions](#), [Hispanic Serving Institutions](#), Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, and Organizations that support the independence and lifelong inclusion of people with disabilities.

GRANTS FOR ARTS PROJECTS

Grants for Arts Projects (GAP) provides funding, over two funding cycles, for public engagement with the arts and arts education, for the integration of the arts with strategies promoting the health and well-being of people and communities, and for the improvement of overall capacity and capabilities within the arts sector. [Grants for Arts Projects \(GAP\)](#) guidelines contain descriptions of the types of projects the NEA supports. Take time to

review carefully the information corresponding to the artistic discipline under which you will apply. The NEA has reorganized GAP program details and instructions so that prospective applicants can review two primary documents: all prospective GAP applicants across disciplines should begin with [GAP Grant Program Details](#) to learn about allowable activities and costs, eligibility, cost sharing information, and so on. Next, application instructions are available by discipline and these include specific directions, requirements, and characteristics of competitive proposals. **Project types and competitive attributes are updated each year, so take time to read the GAP instructions for each possible discipline through which your project could apply in order to determine the best fit.**

Most orchestras typically apply under the [Music](#) discipline, and the “Project Types” section of the instructions will help you determine whether your planned project is eligible for support. The NEA seeks to support Music projects that have potential regional, national, or field-wide significance and is particularly interested in collaborative projects and innovative strategies as well as the commissioning and performance of new American works. Applications must be project-based and not for an entire season of programming; the NEA does not fund seasonal or general operating support. Grants for Arts Projects applicants may request cost share/matching grants ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000 (a minimum 1:1 non-federal cost share/match is required).

The GAP [Arts Education](#) discipline is specifically geared toward pre-K-12 students, educators and artists who support them, and schools and communities that serve them. Projects submitted to Arts Education must incorporate robust measures to assess student and/or teacher learning in arts education. Assessment of student learning should align with state or national arts standards. If the target audience is intergenerational, a project does not include robust student assessment, or a youth program is focused more on exposure or appreciation of the arts, the NEA advises applicants to submit under another discipline that closely matches project activities rather than Arts Education. There is a wealth of information contained in the Arts Education application instructions, and several orchestras have secured grants in this discipline.

GRANTS FOR ARTS PROJECTS Application Timeline

	Grants for Arts Projects (GAP1): February 13, 2025	Grants for Arts Projects (GAP2): July 10, 2025
Several weeks ahead of the first deadline: register with Login.gov, System for Award Management (SAM) at Sam.gov, and Grants.gov or renew/verify these registrations		
Step 1: Grants.gov submission deadline. Part 1 of Application: <i>Application for Federal Domestic Assistance/Short Organization Form</i> . (Note this will be distinct between GAP1 and GAP2)	February 13, 2025 by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time	July 11, 2025 by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time
Step 2: Submit Grant Application Form and Materials to NEA Applicant Portal	February 19-26, 2025 by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time	July 15-23, 2025 by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time
Earliest notification date:	November 2025	April 2026
Work begins no earlier than:	January 1, 2026	June 1, 2026

NOTE: NO “ADDITIONAL APPLICATION” EXCEPTION FOR GAP MEDIA ARTS:

As of the FY25 July GAP2 Cycle, Media Arts projects are no longer an exception to the single application rule. Organizations may submit only one application to the FY 2026 Grants for Arts Projects program with limited exceptions as noted below in the Application Rules, Resources, and Reminders section. Whereas in the past an organization had been able to receive a GAP1 or GAP2 award for a Music project, for example, as well as an additional one for Media Arts during the same fiscal year, this is no longer the case and an organization with two such projects may now only submit one for consideration.

CHALLENGE AMERICA

Challenge America offers \$10,000 grant support primarily to small organizations for projects in all artistic disciplines that extend the reach of the arts to populations that are underserved (agency policy defines this as those whose opportunities to experience the arts are limited relative to: **geography, ethnicity, economics, or disability**. At least one of these characteristics must be evident in the proposed project). Grants require a cost share/match of \$10,000 consisting of cash and/or in-kind contributions. Total project costs must be at least \$20,000 or greater.

[Challenge America](#) also updates its guidelines every year. Previous Challenge America applicants and grantees **are eligible** to apply for FY2026 Challenge America funding, as long as they were not recommended for FY2023, FY2024, or FY2025 funding in Grants for Arts Projects, Research Grants in the Arts, or Our Town. First-time NEA applicants and Challenge America grantees of any year are eligible to apply. The prior limit on consecutive years of receiving Challenge America grants now applies only to applicants that were recommended for FY23, 24, or 25 funding in GAP, Research Grants, or Our Town—such applicants may not apply for FY2026 Challenge America support. See the [Applicant Eligibility](#) section of the Challenge America webpage for more information.

CHALLENGE AMERICA Application Timeline

	Challenge America: April 24, 2025
Several weeks ahead of the first deadline: register with Login.gov , System for Award Management (SAM) at Sam.gov , and Grants.gov or renew/verify these registrations	
Step 1: Grants.gov submission deadline. Part 1 of Application: Application for <i>Federal Domestic Assistance/Short Organization Form</i> .	April 24, 2025 by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time
Step 2: Submit Grant Application Form and Materials to NEA Applicant Portal	April 29-May 13, 2025 by 11:59 p.m., Eastern Time
Notification date:	November 2025
Work begins no earlier than:	January 1, 2026

APPLICATION RULES, RESOURCES, AND REMINDERS

Grants for Arts Projects and Challenge America applications are reviewed on the basis of two criteria: artistic excellence and artistic merit, with elements corresponding to each grant program. The [GAP Review Criteria](#) and [Challenge America Review Criteria](#) each contain definitions clarifying what the agency means by artistic excellence and how it evaluates artistic merit (such as “the qualifications of the project’s personnel” for GAP,

“potential to make quality arts or cultural resources more widely available” for Challenge America, and “evidence of direct compensation to artists, art collectives, and/or art workers” for both grant programs) that will be worth reading. Organizations may submit **only one application in a calendar year** to the agency: either in the Grants for Arts Projects or Challenge America categories, but not both. There are [limited exceptions](#) to this rule:

- A parent organization may apply on its own and then again on behalf of an eligible separately identifiable independent component. Consult with [Arts Endowment staff](#) to verify eligibility. Programs and projects of organizations do not qualify as independent components.
- Our Town and Research: Grants in the Arts are not subject to the single application rule, but the request must be for a distinctly different project or distinctly different phase of the same project with a different period of performance and costs.

The NEA has posted [GAP Applicant Resources](#) and [Challenge America Applicant Resources](#) that may be especially useful for [first-time applicants](#) but are worth a review by seasoned applicants and those who have not applied in some time. An [FY2026 Grants for Arts Projects Guidelines Webinar](#) will take place on Wednesday, January 8, 2025 at 3:00pm Eastern. Challenge America applicants should register for the [FY2026 Challenge America Guidelines Webinar](#) taking place on February 27, 2025 at 3:00pm Eastern. Additional discipline-specific webinars and informal “office hours” style Q&A sessions may also be available; visit [arts.gov/events](#) for more details and to register.

THREE Required Registrations: Before applying, your organization must create and maintain up-to-date registrations with [Login.gov](#), the System for Award Management (SAM) at [SAM.gov](#), and [Grants.gov](#). Registering and maintaining these accounts is always FREE. Because these registrations can take **several weeks** to finalize, begin this process early! All three registrations must be active to submit your application, so it is recommended to finalize your registrations well before the application deadline in case any issues arise. Be aware that [SAM validation is returning to Grants.gov](#). For the past five years during the pandemic, Grants.gov had not validated applicants’ SAM registration in the Part 1 portion but this is no longer the case and SAM *must* be active.

Failure to comply with these requirements may result in your inability to submit your application. See the “How to Apply” section of the GAP and Challenge America webpages for more details.

- Login.gov posts information in their [Help Center](#), or use their [online form](#) to submit a question.
- SAM.gov Federal Service Desk: Call 1-866-606-8220 or find information at [SAM Help](#).
- The Grants.gov Contact Center is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. (Phone: 1-800-518-4726, email: support@grants.gov, or consult the information at [Support](#))
- **The Arts Endowment will not accept late applications.**

Civil Rights Laws and Policies: In the federal-funding context, a focus on a particular group or demographic may be permissible, but exclusion is not. This extends to hiring practices, artist selection processes, and audience engagement. Your application should make it clear that project activities are not exclusionary. Please review the [Assurance of Compliance](#), as well as [NEA Civil Rights guidance](#) on the NEA website, including this archived webinar: [Things to Know Before You Apply: Federal Civil Rights and Your Grants Application](#).

Accessibility: Federal regulations require that all NEA-funded projects be accessible to people with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities may be artists, performers, audiences, visitors, teaching artists, students, staff, and volunteers. Funded activities should be held in a physically accessible venue, and program access and effective communication should be provided for participants and audience members with disabilities. If your project is

recommended for funding, you will be asked to provide [detailed information](#) describing how you will make your project physically and programmatically accessible to people with disabilities.

Contact NEA Staff - Early!

NEA program staff is extremely helpful and willing to answer your questions! Consider being in touch with an NEA specialist, **well before the grant deadline nears**, to talk through your plans for an application or to seek comments regarding previous applications to the NEA. Whether or not your project was funded, comments will strengthen your next application. Also, please note that after you've consulted with NEA staff, it is acceptable to submit a new, improved application for a project which has been declined in a previous application.

The following NEA music staff may be contacted: [Court Burns](#), Music Specialist (Organizations A-L), 202 682 5590 or for Organizations M-Z email music@arts.gov. For questions relating to Arts Education, please contact [Denise Brandenburg](#), 202 682 5044. For Media Arts, contact [Avril Claytor](#), 202-682-5028 or [Emma Bartley](#), 202-682-5591. For Challenge America, contact challengeamerica@arts.gov, 202-682-5700.

Extra Advice from NEA Panelists and Staff

When NEA panelists meet to review grant applications, the League asks NEA staff for any extra tips for orchestras preparing applications. During grant review sessions, panelists are unanimous in one request to all applicant organizations, large and small: **Read the guidelines carefully and all the way through.**

Panelists and staff also offer the following:

- NEA grants are awarded only for specific projects. Attempts to disguise requests for general operating support as projects are easily detected.
- **Work samples are crucial for evaluating the artistic quality of your project.** Pay very careful attention to the quality of your work samples, particularly audio and video recordings, and make sure the samples reinforce the objective stated in your project. Check the guidelines and adhere to the suggested length.
- When designing a project, if you choose to submit a collaborative one, think creatively about potential long-term partnerships with community organizations and be sure to make clear the collaboration is not just a one-shot relationship that will end after completion of the project.
- When describing your project activities, be sure to identify a **clear, singular, defined goal** for the project, and outline concrete steps that will be taken to reach the goal. A project *need not be new* to the applicant organization to qualify for a grant but will earn more serious attention if it is clearly integrated into your organization's mission. Review your project description against the guidelines for Grants for Arts Projects or for Challenge America, respectively.
- Artistic excellence and artistic merit are the only criteria used in the review of grant applications, though it's worth noting that "creative process" is included in defining artistic excellence. When describing artistic excellence as it relates to an arts education project, explain the quality of artists and educators and how this could impact the arts learning experience. When describing artistic merit, describe the potential of the project to broaden access to the arts, expand and diversify audiences, or strengthen communities through the arts.
- For applications including a commissioning request, whenever possible, include opportunities for the commissioned work to be performed in multiple venues and for varying audiences.
- In the financial section of the web form, be certain to answer all questions as completely as possible, including the question regarding the organization's fiscal health. Do not leave that section blank. If the orchestra has a deficit, provide a detailed explanation of plans to address it.
- Write as clearly and succinctly as possible. Do not use acronyms or initials unless they are well known.
- Spell-check your written material in advance, and have it proof-read. Panelists feel failure to submit carefully prepared applications indicates potential carelessness in the execution of your project.