

2026 GRANT MAKING GUIDELINES

NEW IN 2026

Beginning in 2026, the Lake County Community Foundation (LCCF) is implementing several important updates to our grantmaking process. These changes are designed to enhance stability, coordination and responsiveness in how we support our nonprofit partners and the broader Lake County community.

- **New Two-Year Grants:** Starting in 2026, all Growing Communities funding will be two-year general operating grants—we anticipate awarding six to seven grants. This approach is designed to provide greater stability and flexibility for nonprofits serving our community. *Note: Two-year grants will only be available within the Growing Communities priority area. Additional details can be found on page 3.*
- **All Grantmaking Now Occurs in the Spring:** Beginning in 2026, **all funding proposals across LCCF's priority areas**—Growing Communities, Early Childhood Education, Animal Welfare, Capacity Building and Leadership Development—will now be **reviewed and awarded during a single annual Spring Cycle**.

Since the 2025 Animal Welfare and Leadership Development grants were disbursed in November 2025, we will not reopen these priority areas in Spring 2026. Instead, they will reopen in Spring 2027. While it may seem like we are skipping these priority areas, this is simply a six-month delay to align with our spendable balance requirements.

- **Community Response Grants:** To remain adaptable to the evolving needs of the Lake County nonprofit sector, the Foundation is committed to flexible and responsive grantmaking that addresses emerging community priorities and challenges. Within the Spring Cycle, the Foundation will provide three to four one-year Community Response Grants. **These grants are by invitation only and availability is contingent on available financial resources.** Additional details can be found on page 3.
- **Relaunch of the Capacity Building Priority Area:** LCCF is relaunching the Capacity Building priority area in Spring 2026 to further strengthen the infrastructure and sustainability of local nonprofit organizations. Additional details can be found on page 4.

While we don't plan to disburse Leadership Development grants in 2026, if you have an idea during this time, please connect with us to chat.



PROGRAM & COMMUNITY INVESTMENT STRATEGY

In 2022, LCCF implemented a [Program & Community Investment Strategy](#) to guide the Foundation's work and priorities over the coming years. The strategy is guided by the principles of [trust-based philanthropy](#), [equity](#) and [addressing root causes](#). Much of what we have historically funded falls within this framework. In our grantmaking, we will prioritize applications that align with one or more of the three pillars of [Economic Justice](#), [Community Ownership](#) and [Rapid Community Response](#).

LCCF recognizes the important contributions of grassroots community-based organizations, particularly their lived experience and deep community knowledge. We define grassroots organizations as those located within the community and led by individuals connected to the issues they address. These organizations play a key role across the sector and LCCF commits to ensuring their inclusivity in our grantmaking and processes.



The chart below indicates where our funding opportunities fall within these pillars:

ECONOMIC JUSTICE	COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP	RAPID COMMUNITY RESPONSE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing Communities priority area (ex: safe & affordable housing, workforce development, projects that decrease economic disparities, etc.) • Early Childhood Education priority area • Small Business Growth Initiative (SBGI) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing Communities priority area (community organizing, public policy initiatives, initiatives that create knowledge, resources and enthusiasm for a community issue, or ideas that help people reimagine their community) • Capacity Building priority area • Community Strength Funding Initiative • Leadership Development priority area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing Communities priority area (food, emergency shelter, healthcare, mental health, youth support, immigrant support, legal services, etc.) • Lake County Crisis Relief grants

NEW! Growing Communities Priority Area Two-Year Grants**PROPOSALS CONSIDERED: \$5,000-\$20,000****AVAILABLE FUNDS: APPROXIMATELY \$200,000 (LIKELY 6-7 GRANTS)****Funding Amount:** Up to \$60,000 total; up to \$30,000 per year (disbursed in Spring 2026 and Spring 2027)**Duration:** Two years**Renewal:** Organizations may receive two consecutive two-year grant awards (4 years of funding), then must take a required rest cycle.**About This Opportunity**

Two-Year grants allow nonprofits to:

- Focus on strategic growth and program stability
- Plan ahead with greater financial predictability
- Build stronger capacity and deeper community impact

Eligibility Criteria

Applicants must:

- Be a 501(c)(3) nonprofit or fiscally sponsored project
- Direct service or advocacy response to a demonstrated urgent or unmet need
- Activities must be responsive, timely and community-informed

Please note that LCCF reserves the right to withhold the second year's grant award based on leadership & financial concerns or if the organization falls out of good standing with the IRS or the Illinois Attorney General's Charitable Trust Bureau.

Funding Priorities

We believe that to create a thriving Lake County, everyone needs equitable access to:

- Affordable, nutritious food
- Affordable, comprehensive health care (including mental health)
- Safe and affordable housing
- Education and workforce opportunities
- Immigration and legal support services

LCCF will prioritize grants that:

- Are led by grassroots, community-based organizations as defined on page 2
- Address barriers to access of services and benefits for our neighbors in Lake County
- Address otherwise unmet basic needs as the only service provider in the area

NEW! Community Response Grants**PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE GRANTS ARE BY INVITATION ONLY.****PROPOSALS CONSIDERED: \$5,000-\$30,000****AVAILABLE FUNDS: CONTINGENT ON FINANCIAL RESOURCES AVAILABLE (LIKELY 3-4 GRANTS)****Duration:** One year**About This Opportunity:** LCCF recognizes that our grantmaking must be agile and responsive to our county's immediate and evolving community needs. These invitation-only grants provide flexible, timely support for urgent challenges faced by the community. Guided by our staff's deep understanding, built

through close relationships with local nonprofits and ongoing awareness of pressing issues, the Community Response grants empower nonprofit partners to address critical needs as they arise. For more information about the Community Response Grants, visit [here](#).

Early Childhood Education Priority Area Grants

PROPOSALS CONSIDERED: \$5,000-\$10,000

AVAILABLE FUNDS: APPROXIMATELY \$20,000 (LIKELY 2 GRANTS)

Duration: One year

About This Opportunity: This priority area does not require a letter of inquiry process. Organizations that promote early childhood education (prenatal-age 5) are invited to apply for grants made through the Lake County Early Childhood Education Fund. This restricted fund was established in 2010 with the purpose of promoting early childhood education across Lake County.

Grant funds are prioritized for work that:

- Supports new and innovative approaches to provide early childhood education
- Addresses barriers to access of early childhood education opportunities for Lake County residents
- Addresses otherwise unmet needs as the only service provider in the area

RELAUNCHED! Nonprofit Capacity Building Priority Area Grants

PROPOSALS CONSIDERED: \$1,000-\$5,000

AVAILABLE FUNDS: APPROXIMATELY \$75,000 (LIKELY 15 GRANTS)

Duration: One year

About This Opportunity: LCCF is excited to relaunch the Capacity Building priority area for Spring 2026 to help nonprofits build their internal capacity so they can better serve the community. At LCCF, we recognize that capacity-building grants are a critical tool in supporting nonprofit sustainability, efficiency and growth. Read more about this priority area [here](#).

These grants are intended to support one-time organizational costs and expenses; no recurring salaries, fees, or ongoing costs will be considered. Receiving a capacity building grant does not preclude your organization from applying for or receiving funding in the Growing Communities priority area—you may apply for and receive grants in both priority areas.

2026 GRANT CYCLE PROCESS AND TIMELINE

The **Growing Communities priority area requires a letter of inquiry**, which will be available on the LCCF grant portal. LCCF will review submitted LOIs and invite select organizations to submit full proposals.

The Early Childhood Education and Capacity Building priority areas do not include an LOI and instead require a full application. Please see the dates below.

2026-2028 GROWING COMMUNITIES PRIORITY AREA

This timeline reflects the two-year grants

YEAR 1

January 12, 2026	Spring Cycle opens; LOI for Growing Communities priority area opens
January 30, 2026	LOI for the Growing Communities priority area due
February 27, 2026	Organizations are invited to submit a full application
March 27, 2026	Full applications due
April – mid-May 2026	Foundation's due diligence process
May 13-14, 2026	Grant awards are determined by the LCCF Board of Directors and grant recipients are notified
Late May – early June 2026	Grant awards disbursed

YEAR 2 – GRANT PERIOD FROM JUNE 2027 TO JUNE 2028

April 2027	Meet with individual nonprofits for annual check in; document adjustments if necessary; no new grant application due
June 2027	Second grant disbursed
June 30, 2028	End of multi-year grant period; written report due via grant portal

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING PRIORITY AREAS

January 12, 2026	Spring Cycle opens; applications for Capacity Building and Early Childhood Education are available on the grant portal
February 27, 2026	Application for Capacity Building and Early Childhood Education due by 5 p.m. via portal
April – mid-May 2026	Foundation's due diligence process
May 13-14, 2026	Grant awards are determined by the LCCF Board of Directors and recipients are notified
Late May – early June 2026	Grant awards disbursed
June 30, 2027	Final grant report due by 5 p.m. via portal

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION

All grant requests must be submitted via LCCF's Foundant grant portal for review by Foundation staff, the LCCF Grants and Community Outreach Committee and the Board of Directors. Applications will be evaluated using the following criteria:

- Request aligns with the Foundation's [mission and values](#) and with its strategic pillars of [Economic Justice](#), [Community Ownership](#) and [Rapid Community Response](#).
- Request responds to a high-priority need based on current Lake County-specific data.
- The applicant's staff, leadership and board are reflective of the community it serves. If not, the organization is taking meaningful steps to prioritize and support diversity and equity.
- Applicants either have their own diversity statement or will adopt the Foundation's [Diversity Statement](#) if there is not one in place.
- Strong, documented partnerships currently in place.
- Request has the potential to leverage other resources or donor support.
- Illustrates how the proposed work will advance the organization's mission or achieve meaningful community outcomes over the next three years, with progress expectations scaled appropriately to the level of investment.
- Cost-effective delivery of direct services or advocacy.
- Likelihood of success and a track record of provider(s)/partners in achieving outcomes.
- Strong methods for tracking outcomes.

Like the nonprofits we serve, LCCF is on a journey toward becoming a more equitable institution. We welcome the opportunity to join in conversation with you and offer support in your organization's efforts to move this critical work forward. Please read more about how LCCF can support your organization in racial equity work [here](#).

ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS

The Foundation considers applications from organizations that demonstrate success and sustainability with program goals and outcomes.

Eligible organizations are:

- Nonprofit agencies with evidence of tax-exempt status under [Section 501 \(c\)\(3\) of the Internal Revenue Code](#) or those using a 501 (c)(3) fiscal agent
- Eligible applicants **MUST** be in good standing with the IRS and the Illinois Charitable Trust Bureau.
- Located within and/or primarily serving residents of Lake County, except for regional, statewide or national projects or research that may benefit a substantial portion of Lake County residents
- Non-discriminatory in the hiring of staff or in providing services on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, national origin or ability

FUNDING LIMITATIONS

Grants **will not** be made for the following:

- Scholarships
- Individuals
- Sectarian purposes (programs that promote or require a religious doctrine)
- Support of single-disease oriented research, treatment or care
- The sole purpose of writing, publishing, producing or distributing audio, visual or printed material, except in the case of capacity building grants
- The sole purpose of conducting conferences, festivals, exhibitions or meetings
- Reducing operating deficits or liquidating existing debt
- Capital improvements/campaigns
- Endowment campaigns
- Political campaigns
- Sponsorship of events/fundraisers
- Memberships/dues

ABOUT THE LAKE COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

MISSION

The mission of The Lake County Community Foundation is to improve the quality of life for residents of the county by providing civic leadership, promoting collective philanthropy and partnering with our grant recipients.

VALUES

LCCF, honoring a century-old tradition of community philanthropy, awards grants to nonprofit organizations that are addressing the most pressing needs of residents in our county. As a community leader and steward of donor resources, the Foundation believes that large-scale social change requires broad, cross-sector coordination versus isolated intervention. Recognizing that successful grant-making is rooted in clearly articulated values.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The Foundation believes that the diversity of our community is a fundamental strength of our region. Our mission to improve the quality of life for the most vulnerable residents of Lake County is best fulfilled when we embrace diversity as a value and a practice. We define diversity to include (but not limited to) age, disability status, economic circumstance, ethnicity, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation.

LCCF requires all applicants to either have an adopted diversity statement or to adopt the Foundation's Diversity Statement if there is not one in place. Additionally, the Foundation asks that applicants provide demographic data on board and staff as well as clients/beneficiaries of the projects. The Foundation believes that the board and staff composition of grant recipients should reflect the diversity and demographics of the community being served and include diversity among its leadership at the board and senior staff levels to ensure variation of perspective across all decision-making levels. For this reason, the Foundation does take into consideration the demographic make-up of the board, staff and clients of a grant applicant as an important evaluation criterion.

Questions about the Foundation's grant making or application process may be directed to Quetzali at Quetzali@lakecountycf.org.