



Spring 2026 Grant Cycle

Pilot Program replacing written grant applications with Zoom conversations

Survey results from Grantee Partners and Board/Grant Committee members

Background: Six years ago, the VNA Foundation replaced written grant reports with Zoom conversations, touching base with our grantee partners “face to face” to discuss findings from the previous grant period. In Spring of 2026, VNA Foundation tried this Zoom-based approach with the grant application process itself. Between January and March, 2026, the VNA Foundation and its grantee partners participated in 42 Zoom sessions to take the place of written Spring 2026 grant applications. As a result, the foundation awarded 43 grants totaling \$600,000. We surveyed our grantee partners and our Board/Grants Committee members to assess their experience with the new process.

SURVEY RESULTS- GRANTEE PARTNERS

Engagement with the Survey: HIGH

- 55 Responses from 85 individuals invited to participate (65% overall response rate), representing 42 organizations surveyed (average of 1.3 responses per organization). Of the 42 organizations surveyed, 40 were returning grantees from Spring 2025 cycle, and were receiving communications about this pilot program since Fall, 2025. Two organizations were NOT funded in Spring 2025 and were brought into the process later, in Spring 2026- their survey responses reflect less familiarity with the expectations of the program (referred to as “new applicants” in this analysis).
 - **Takeaway- high rate of response, appreciative of the chance to provide feedback**
- 48/55 responders wrote additional comments when given the option to provide more feedback, with 45 comments being positive and 3 suggesting areas for improvement.
 - **Takeaway- eager to share feedback, most of which was favorable**
- 37/55 responders volunteered to include their names and contact information.
 - **Takeaway- more than 2/3 of responders felt no need for anonymity- indicates trust.**

Question 1- What did you like about the Zoom grant application process?

- **93% (51 responses): Allowed for more dialogue/interaction with the funder:** valued the opportunity for meaningful conversations with the funder.
- **92% (50 responses): Saved time and effort in application paperwork:** appreciated the streamlined process, including reduced character counts, uploads, and proofreading.
- **78% (43 responses): Multiple participants from the organization could share perspectives:** liked the collaborative aspect of the process.
- **22% (12 responses): Other (please specify):** provided additional feedback, including appreciation for meaningful dialogue, relationship building, trust-based approaches, and the ability to communicate their mission authentically.

Question 2- What did you NOT like about the Zoom grant application process?

- **83% (40 responses): None of the above:** indicated no problems with the process.
- **7.3% (4 responses): Length of conversation was not long enough to share everything:** felt the conversation duration was too short.
- **5% (3 responses): Did not feel adequately prepared by the foundation for what to expect in the process:** expressed concerns about insufficient preparation. Note: at least 2 of these responders were “new” applicants (2 orgs out of 42 were new)
- **1.8% (1 response): Prefer the traditional method of written applications:** One individual out of 55 respondents preferred the traditional written application process.

Major Themes in Additional Feedback

*We received **48 individual responses**, with **45 positive** and **3 offering suggested changes** for the future. Respondents overwhelmingly value the Zoom-based grant application process for its relational, efficient, and trust-centered approach. They describe the conversations as **more personal and authentic** than written applications, allowing them to **convey nuance, context, and emotion** that are difficult to express on paper, and allowed them to **have other team members present** for the conversation. Many highlight the **reduced administrative burden** and the **respect shown for nonprofit time**, reinforcing the VNA Foundation’s reputation for trust-based philanthropy. The **presence of VNAF board members** is repeatedly cited as meaningful and helped to strengthen the relationship with VNAF. A few respondents offered **constructive suggestions for change**. These included **simplifying or clarifying instructions** in advance (new applicant), offering **optional or hybrid formats**—especially for new applicants—and allowing applicants to **submit materials ahead of time**. A simple **follow-up form for data** was also suggested. Overall, the feedback reflects **strong enthusiasm for the model**, with suggestions aimed at fine-tuning rather than changing the core strength inherent within the new process. Direct quotes from the survey tell the story.*

1. Deep Appreciation for the Conversational, Personal Format

Many respondents emphasized how meaningful it was to have a real dialogue rather than a written submission. They described the process as more authentic, relational, and aligned with trust-based philanthropy. **This theme is by far the strongest and most consistent across responses.**

- *“I appreciated the dialogue, interactions and honesty and feedback.”*
- *“It created a more personal and conversational space to discuss our work...”*
- *“It allowed us to share information...on a more personal level.”*
- *“It is such a rewarding experience to engage in conversation with a funder...clarify information immediately.”*
- *“Much easier to talk about our program plans than to explain it within a set character count.”*

2. Reduced Administrative Burden and Time Savings

Respondents repeatedly noted that the Zoom format was easier, faster, and less burdensome than traditional written applications. This was framed as a major benefit, especially for small nonprofits with limited staff capacity.

- *“Less time consuming.”*
- *“It allowed us to focus more on the substance of our work...rather than on formatting and paperwork.”*
- *“Thanks for...making the application process so quick and efficient.”*

3. Stronger Relationships and Trust

Many respondents described the process as reinforcing trust, partnership, and the VNA Foundation's reputation for relational philanthropy. This theme highlights how the format supports deeper connection and transparency.

- *"I feel very secure in sharing sensitive information because of the relationship that has been built over time..."*
- *"I appreciate the trust you have for the grantees..."*
- *"The VNA Foundation...has ALWAYS been a leader in trust-based philanthropy."*

4. Value of Board Member Participation

Respondents consistently appreciated having trustees present and engaged. This was seen as a sign of respect and genuine interest.

- *"I liked having board members participate."*
- *"Thank you for including a Board member and not making the convo feel rushed!"*
- *"Loved the opportunity to interact and engage with Foundation leadership (staff and trustees)."*

5. Opportunity for Richer, More Nuanced Storytelling

Many respondents said the format allowed them to convey complexity, emotion, and context that written applications cannot capture. This theme reinforces the value of real-time interaction.

- *"Dialogue is less rigid...allow for addressing the gray aspects of supporting people in the community."*
- *"I felt like I was better able to tell our story...This process allowed the emotion...to be put on display."*
- *"We think about something differently or with more clarity...collaboration and conversation makes everything we do better."*

Grantee Suggestions and Areas for Improvement

Desire for Optional or Hybrid Models (2 comments)

- *"Perhaps you could make it optional or have a hybrid option...the opportunity for a conversation and providing additional context in written form." "More clarity can be conveyed in a written format...if we were a new applicant it would not feel adequate to fully express our programs and impact."*

Request for Clearer Instructions and Pre/Post-Call Materials (2 comments)

- *"I felt confused about what to expect due to numerous emails...Is there a way to simplify the directions?" (from a new applicant)*
- *"It might have been better to ask that any presentation materials be submitted in advance." (Note: VNAF did not ask for any presentation materials, though one applicant wished to share a powerpoint)*

A Few Notes on Timing (2 comments, said the same thing)

- *"We took longer than 30 minutes for the conversation with questions."*

SURVEY RESULTS- VNA FOUNDATION BOARD AND GRANTS COMMITTEE

The VNA Foundation's Board consists of 11 people, and all 11 participated in multiple Zoom application sessions throughout the Spring 2026 Grant cycle. One additional non-Board member participated as part of the Grants Committee. All 12 members of the Board/Grants Committee were surveyed after the Spring Grant cycle to comment on their experience with this new approach. We received 12 survey responses out of 12 invited to participate. All 11 Board members and 1 Grantmaking Committee member completed a survey to provide feedback on this pilot program of Zoom-based grant applications.

What did you like about the Zoom grant application process? (choose all that apply)

Saved our grant partners time and effort in application paperwork	91.67%	11 responses
Helped me feel more connected to the "people" behind the nonprofits	91.67%	11 responses
Illustrated nonprofits' programs more clearly than written descriptions	58.33%	7 responses
Other (please specify)	16.67%	2 responses

Quotes from Board and Grant Committee members:

- *"I think the grantees felt freer and less encumbered by the forms. I think they told us more about their challenges and thoughts about future plans and less "telling us what we wanted to hear in order to approve funding."*
- *"One more way that I have felt engaged as a board member."*

What did you not like about the Zoom grant application process? (choose all that apply)

None of the above	66.67%	8 responses
Draft application did not contain enough information to prepare me for the Zoom	8.33%	1 response
Wanted more opportunities to ask questions of the applicants during conversations	0.00%	0
Would have liked more financial detail	0.00%	0
Prefer the traditional method of written applications	8.33%	1 response
Other (please specify)	25.00%	3 responses

Quotes from Board and Grant Committee members:

- *"Theoretically the format could allow more input from other members of the grantees team. Usually a spokesperson does 90% of the speaking."*
- *"having several back to back zooms was overwhelming and became harder to distinguish between organizations"*
- *"I wonder if not scheduling them back to back would allow for more time to ruminate on each discussion."*

Additional Feedback from VNAF Board and Grant Committee members

- *"It also gave us a better understanding of the programs and the staff of the various organizations as the visit became more open."*
- *"I thought it was excellent!"*
- *"In general I liked it and I think the grantees did as well."*
- *"I enjoyed hearing directly from the people doing the work and understanding at a deeper level the challenges they face."*
- *"Grant partners disclosed information in virtual meetings which may not have been shared on the application, e.g., upcoming staff promotions, challenges, changes in their organization and communicated detailed gaps in their organization for our Board to understand. Grant partnerships appeared at ease and willing to speak candidly, providing improved knowledge to the Foundation when making decisions."*
- *"It gave Board members an opportunity to connect with the organizations we support. We could see "face to face", the passion, dedication and enthusiasm of the non-profits we support. They had the opportunity to share their successes with us as well as their difficulties and concerns. The "face to face interaction" meant so much more than just the words of a grant request."*
- *"This year's process felt more personal and collegial."*
- *"It was clear how appreciative the grantees were of this new method of applying for grants without the usual time-consuming and impersonal nature of the traditional process. Diana and Joanne were stellar as usual!"*

Takeaways from VNAF Board/Committee Feedback

- Most liked the format for its more personal and conversational tone, room for emotion and real-time questions
- Leave more time between Zoom sessions
- Delegate Board/Committee members to ask the application questions (not just staff)
- Create an opportunity for all Grantmaking Committee members to meet as a group toward the end of the process, to discuss their grant recommendations and ask questions of other review teams before voting

NEXT STEPS FOR VNA FOUNDATION- Survey Results are In... Now What?

- **SHARE RESULTS WITH GRANTEES**, ensuring that the survey data aligns with their impressions of the process and enlisting further feedback, if any.
- **SHARE RESULTS WITH OTHER FUNDERS**, encouraging them to consider employing a similar process in their own grantmaking and offering to serve as a resource for tips and insight
- **CONVENE** a small group of grantee partners as a focus group to advise on future Zoom-based processes, considering which elements of the application would be helpful to submit in writing beforehand and which answers would be better left to conversation (hybrid) and timing for that.
- **COMMUNICATE** plans for future Zoom-based processes clearly, and indicate when a grant process will need to be more traditional due to its nature (special initiatives).