COREY O'CONNOR
MAYOR

ERIC SLOAN
DIRECTOR

CITY OF PITTSBURGH
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS & RECREATION
CITY-COUNTY BUILDING

Food Justice Fund
Grassroots Grants and Garden Mini-grants
2026 Guidelines

Introduction

The City of Pittsburgh's Food Justice Fund Grassroots Grants support community-led projects equitably increasing access to healthy food. Projects may distribute free food/meals, support urban-agriculture, or offer educational programming according to these guidelines. Each of these strategies – free food distribution, urban-agriculture, and culturally-relevant education - can strengthen food security, public health, and a resilient local food system, especially when led by communities historically excluded from access to resources or decision making about their food access.

Grassroots Grants awards will range between $7,500 and $25,000. Garden Mini-grants will range between one-thousand and three-thousand dollars.
The City expects to select awardees in 2026 for projects to be carried out in 2027.
Note that eligibility guidelines and selection criteria have changed since 2025. View up to date information and sign up for email alerts at bit.ly/PGHFJF.
All applications will be submitted through an online form on the City's engage page at bit.ly/PGHFJF
Interested applicants are encouraged to ask questions using the FAQ form at bit.ly/PGHFJF

Eligible Applicants – Who can apply?

Applicants must be either a 501c3 non-profit or represented by a fiscal sponsor, and meet the requirements listed below.
The City cannot provide direct financial assistance to for-profit businesses. Applicants are encouraged to purchase goods and services from local businesses, growers, and food producers.
501c3 non-profit applicants must:

- Be located within the City of Pittsburgh municipal boundary
- Have an annual operating budget of $500,000 or less in their most recent fiscal year
- Have a board of directors, written bylaws, and demonstrated capacity to accurately document all expenses and activities
- Be in good standing with the IRS, the State of Pennsylvania, and the City of Pittsburgh

414 GRANT STREET | CITY-COUNTY BUILDING, Suite 459--FOURTH FLOOR | Pittsburgh, PA 15219
412-255-2362 | Fax 412-255-2368

Requirements for applicants represented by a fiscal sponsor

- Fiscal sponsors must be a 501c3 located in Allegheny County, have a board of directors, written bylaws, and the demonstrated capacity to accurately document all expenses and activities, and be in good standing with the IRS, the State of Pennsylvania, and the City of Pittsburgh. Fiscal Sponsors may have operating budgets of any size.
- Fiscal sponsors assume full legal and financial responsibility for the project and must ensure compliance with all applicable laws, including that all funds are used for tax-exempt purposes
- Fiscal sponsors may sponsor more than one project through separate grant applications. Do not combine multiple fiscally sponsored projects into a single application
- Applicants must provide a copy of the fiscal sponsorship agreement signed by all parties by the time of application
- All parties other than the 501c3 fiscal sponsor must be located or reside within the City of Pittsburgh municipal boundary
- Grant funds may not be used to support for-profit enterprises or generate private profit. Incidental cost-recovery fees are permitted only if revenue is reinvested into the public-purpose project and no profits are distributed to individuals.
- Have an annual operating budget of $500,000 or less in their most recent fiscal year

Eligible Activities – What kinds of projects can this fund?

Projects must provide one or more of these public benefits:

- Distributing free food or meals
- Increasing long-term capacity or service quality of programs distributing free food or meals
- Improving opportunities to participate in urban-agriculture on community farms/gardens through site improvements, maintenance and operations, or community engagement
- Increasing the long-term capacity of community farms/gardens to grow food or benefit the public
- Offering hands-on educational programming connected to a specific community farm/garden
- Offering educational programming related to food or nutrition, and not connected to a community farm/garden

General Requirements

- Projects must define clear deliverables providing services or direct benefits to the public, and plan for reporting on progress, completion, and impact of these deliverables. All expenses must be clearly connected to these deliverables. These are not general operating grants.
- All services and benefits of the project must be provided within the City of Pittsburgh. All project activities must take place in 2027. All project goals must be defined as things that can be accomplished in 2027.
- Awardees must document all expenses and activities, and maintain records for future auditing. Awardees must also provide information required by the grants program for reporting on activities and impact.
- Project budgets must be between $7,500 and $25,000, and any additional funds needed must be secured by the time of application
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate viability, that the project can definitely be implemented if awarded FJF grant funding. All necessary resources, partnerships, and additional funding needed must already be secured by the time of application

- The primary purpose of the grant-funded project's deliverables cannot be fundraising, retail sales, or revenue generating activity. Incidental cost-recovery fees are permitted only if revenue is reinvested into the public-purpose project.
- Awardees must be able to obtain and maintain insurance coverage consistent with City of Pittsburgh requirements for the duration of the project. At a minimum, awardees must carry: Commercial General Liability Insurance with limits of not less than $100,000 per occurrence / $500,000 aggregate; Automobile Liability Insurance (if vehicles are used in connection with the project), including hired and non-owned autos, with limits of $100,000 combined single limit; and Workers' Compensation Insurance as required by Pennsylvania law (or a valid exemption for sole proprietors with no employees).
    - The City of Pittsburgh must be named as an Additional Insured on the General Liability policy.
    - Applicants are not required to submit proof of insurance at the time of application, but must confirm their ability to obtain required coverage if awarded. Certificates of Insurance must be provided prior to execution of a grant agreement, and coverage must be maintained throughout the project period.
- All project activities must benefit the public.
- Awardees must acknowledge city funding in public promotion, contribute to City media coverage (e.g., "Made possible with support from FJF Grassroots Grants," including a quote for the website and a photo, etc.).
- Only one grant application will be accepted from each applicant organization or fiscally sponsored project. Organizations or individuals may be subcontracted as vendors providing goods or services on an unlimited number of separate grant applications.
- The City may require modifications to deliverables, reporting plans, or budgets after applications are received.
- Projects requiring access to city-owned facilities or partnerships with city-run programs must already have approval from the appropriate department by the time of application. This grant application form is not a way to initiate inquiries about potential partnerships with the City.

Food Distribution Requirements

- Can include small upgrades that enable food distribution activities, e.g.: Installing shelving for food storage, storage cabinets, weather protection for distribution tables, minor electrical work to power a refrigerator, lighting improvements for safety at distribution sites
- The primary purpose of distributing free food or meals should be addressing food security for communities of higher need. However, means-testing or income-verification of individual recipients is not required.
- All food distributions must take place within Pittsburgh city limits.
- Applicants must have confirmed access to necessary facilities, such as kitchens for preparing meals, by the time of application.
- Projects may subcontract businesses or other organizations to prepare food for distribution.
- Funds may be used for food vouchers redeemable at farmers markets. For this program, farmers market means a series of events with at least three separate farmer-vendors selling produce, meat, dairy, or other products they've produced themselves. Food vouchers cannot be limited to a single specific vendor.
- The following activities are generally not eligible under food distribution projects:
    - Retail sale of food, including grocery or prepared food sales
    - Restaurant, catering, or food business operations not primarily providing free food

- Subscription-based or fee-based food access programs (except nominal cost-recovery clearly reinvested)
- Food distribution limited to private membership groups rather than the general public
- Events where food is incidental and not the primary purpose of addressing food access
- Procurement of food primarily for resale or fundraising purposes
- Use of funds to purchase and/or distribute grocery gift cards or other gift cards

Urban-Agriculture Requirements

- This program defines community farms/gardens as sites that grow food with the primary purpose of benefiting communities and ways for volunteers to participate collectively or on allotments
- Farm/garden sites for Grassroots Grants must be located in under-reported, low-income, or moderate-income census tracts View the map of census tract income levels at bit.ly/PGHFJF Garden Mini-grant sites may be located in any census tract within Pittsburgh city limits.
- Can include modest infrastructure improvements, e.g.: raised garden beds, soil improvements, composting bins, irrigation lines, tool sheds, greenhouses, or fencing to protect crops. Must have written permission from landowner at time of application. Gardens located on City-owned property must independently obtain written permission from the relevant department by time of application
- Projects with activities on Adopt-A-Lot sites must have a current AAL lease by the time of application and maintain their lease throughout the grant period. Receiving FJF grant funding does not change the terms or requirements of the Adopt-A-Lot program, and all questions about Adopt-A-Lot should be directed to the Department of City Planning at oss@pittsburghpa.gov.
- FJF grant applicants renewing their AAL lease or applying for a new AAL lease must submit all necessary AAL documents to the Department of City Planning at least one month prior to the FJF grant application deadline, and should inform the Department of City Planning that they intend to apply for FJF so that DCP can prioritize their AAL documents.
- The following activities are generally not eligible under urban agriculture projects:
    - Agricultural production primarily for commercial sale or private profit
    - Private gardens or growing spaces not accessible to or benefiting the broader community
    - Landscaping or beautification projects without a clear food production or community benefit component
    - Large-scale farming operations not structured as community-based or volunteer-supported
    - Projects where participation is restricted or fee-based without a clear public benefit
    - Use of funds primarily for business startup costs for for-profit farming enterprises

FJF Garden Mini-grants

This is an option for community gardens highly engaged with their neighborhood that only need a smaller budget to make an impact. Applicants may only apply for a Garden Mini-grant or the Grassroots Grant, not both. All FJF guidelines still apply, with the following changes:

- Project budgets must be between one-thousand dollars and three-thousand dollars
- Garden sites may be located in any census tract within city limits, but funding selections will prioritize low-income and under-reported census tracts.

- Expenses can only include supplies, equipment, building materials, or site improvements capacity, such as installing fencing or building raised beds. Supplies and equipment must be directly related to growing food or site maintenance. Expenses cannot include events programming. Expenses cannot include staff time, but may include professional services payments for labor for site improvements, such as paying someone to build raised beds.
- The site must have been active as a community garden in 2024.
- Garden Mini-grant applications will be evaluated using a different set of criteria than the regular FJF Grassroots Grants. The evaluation criteria for FJF Garden Mini-grants are:
- Income status of census tract – Low-income/under-reported 3 points, moderate-income 2 points, high-income 1 point
- Benefits to surrounding neighborhood or other communities
- Community engagement
- Increase in garden capacity
- Strong potential for garden to continue in 2028

Educational Programming Requirements

- Must define specific events or event series that will be made possible by the FJF grant funds.
- Must be offered to public free of charge and publicly-advertised
- Expenses cannot include payments to participants. Expenses may include providing resources that support people's ability to participate, such as bus passes or ride-share service costs, serving meals at workshops, or on-site childcare.
- Applicants must have confirmed access to any necessary partnerships or specialized facilities needed for their educational programming, such as a kitchen for a cooking class, by the time of application. Educational programming located on community farms/gardens must provide written permission from the landowner by the time of application. Educational programming that will only require access to facilities that are readily available anytime, such as a meeting room at a library, may choose to confirm exact locations after funding is awarded.
- If awarded, must be able to report date, location, number of attendees, summary of topics/goals, and how it was advertised
- The following activities are generally not eligible under educational programming:
    - Programs that charge admission or participation fees beyond nominal cost-recovery
    - General wellness, fitness, or health programming not clearly tied to food, nutrition, or urban agriculture
    - One-time events without a defined educational component or measurable outcomes
    - Programming primarily serving a closed group rather than the general public
    - Marketing, promotional events, or brand-building activities for an organization or business
    - Religious instruction or programming with a primary religious purpose
    - Repairs or renovations to facilities

Capital Improvements (e.g., repairs and renovations) Increasing Food Distribution Capacity

- Must be for a discrete project with clear purpose of increasing capacity or service quality for programs distributing free food or meals. For example, replacing a one-step entrance to a food pantry with a wheelchair ramp or adding a handwashing sink to a food prep area
- Applicant must already operate free food or meal distribution program during at least six months since January, 2025
- Project must be reasonably expected to result in free food distribution within six months of completion

- Completing this discrete project must make food distribution possible without requiring additional repair or renovation projects before operating food distributions.
- Grant funds must provide majority of estimated budget needed for project completion
- Applicant must have capacity to implement project on reimbursement basis

Ineligible Expenses

The following list of expenses are not eligible. Items not listed may also be ineligible for funding, and the City will make the final determination about eligibility. Applicants are encouraged to ask questions before the application deadline.

- Direct financial assistance to for-profit businesses
- Major capital purchases or infrastructure (e.g., construction or major renovation of buildings, HVAC system replacement, large paved infrastructure including parking lots, purchase of large commercial kitchen equipment, real estate acquisition – as opposed to equipment directly tied to food distribution (e.g., coolers, shelving, refrigerators)
- Purchasing vehicles
- Purchasing land or real-estate
- Payments to individuals other than wages or payments for professional services.
- Partisan or lobbying activity
- Fundraising or retail activities
- Religious programming
- Payment of debts, fines, or legal costs

Grassroots Grants Evaluation Criteria A committee of City staff will evaluate Grassroots Grants applications using these scoring criteria.	3 Points	2 Points	1 Point	0 Points (Not addressed at all)
Community Needs	Primarily serves one or more communities of higher need within the city, such as food-insecure seniors/children, unhoused people, or a low-income neighborhood without access to fresh food markets		Does not describe serving a community of higher need within the city, such as food-insecure seniors/children or a neighborhood without access to nutritious food markets	
Community Benefits	Demonstrates significant benefit to community served and clearly describes how project goals benefit that community		Only minimal benefit to community served, or it is unclear how project goals/activities relate to intended benefits	
Building Capacity	Significantly increases organization's long-term capacity to serve residents beyond the grant period, with strong potential to continue similar programming		Describes some increase in capacity beyond grant period, but increase is minimal or likely not to continue	
Community Leadership	Project staff/volunteer leaders are highly engaged with strong relationships to community served, and community serve d is involved in decision making		Project staff/ volunteer leaders are only minimally engaged with community served, and community served is not involved in decision making	
Community Engagement	Plans for equitable, culturally-relevant, and effective community engagement to improve participation and access to benefits		Plans for outreach and community engagement activities do not support program goals, or they create increased barriers in accessing project participation or benefits	

Feasibility/ Capacity	Clearly demonstrates strong capacity to achieve project goals, including specific details about access to necessary resources		Project goals clearly exceed organization's capacity, or application does not address plans for key necessary resources	
Clear Goals/ Deliverables	All goals/deliverables are measurable or verifiable, and provide clear expectations of what the project will accomplish		Deliverables do not provide clear expectations of what this specific project will accomplish with grant funds, goals are not measurable or verifiable	
Reporting Plan	Reporting plans will provide all actionable info needed for monitoring progress and completion of deliverables, and informing the public about the project's impact		Attempted reporting plan for all deliverables, but plans do not fully address progress, completion, and impact of all deliverables, or are not aligned with project goals/deliverables	