

Department of State
Public Notice

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Request for Statements of Interest:
DRL Internet Freedom Annual Program Statement

I. Requested Objectives for Statements of Interest

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) announces a Request for Statements of Interest (RSOI) from organizations interested in submitting Statements of Interest (SOI) for programs that support Internet Freedom. In support of the U.S. International Strategy for Cyberspace, DRL's goal is to protect the open, interoperable, secure, and reliable Internet by promoting fundamental freedoms, human rights, and the free flow of information online through integrated support to civil society for **technology, digital safety, policy and advocacy, and applied research** programs. DRL invites organizations interested in potential funding to submit SOI applications outlining program concepts that reflect this goal.

PLEASE NOTE: DRL strongly encourages applicants to immediately access [SAMS Domestic](#) or www.grants.gov in order to obtain a username and password. For instructions on how to register with SAMS Domestic for the first time, please refer to the Proposal Submission Instructions for Statements of Interest at: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/275402.pdf>.

The submission of a SOI is the first step in a two-part process. Applicants must first submit a SOI, which is a concise, 3-page concept note designed to clearly communicate a program idea and its objectives before the development of a full proposal application. The purpose of the SOI process is to allow applicants the opportunity to submit program ideas for DRL to evaluate prior to requiring the development of full proposal applications. Upon review of eligible SOIs, DRL will invite selected applicants to expand their ideas into full proposal applications.

Overview:

Priority Regions:

SOIs focused globally or focused on any region will be considered. Applications should prioritize work in Internet-repressive environments.

SOIs regarding technology development should have clear regional human rights use-cases and deployment strategies for the target region(s). SOIs focused on digital safety, advocacy, and research should also have region- or population-specific goals and priorities that are informed by clear field knowledge and expertise.

Internet Freedom Funding Themes:

SOIs **must** address one or more of the Internet Freedom Funding Themes: **technology, digital safety, policy and advocacy, and applied research**. Each of the Funding Themes is described in detail below. Applications that do not address the Funding Themes will not be considered competitive.

Areas of Focus:

Within each of the Internet freedom funding themes, DRL has identified “Areas of Focus.” *SOIs do **not** need to fit into one of these areas to be considered.* They are provided solely to indicate a subset of areas of interest for consideration. Applications that do not address one or more of these “areas of focus” will **not** be penalized nor disqualified from the competitive process.

Funding Theme #1: Technology: Uncensored and Secure Access to the Global Internet –

Development of and support for desktop and mobile technologies that counter censorship and/or enable secure communications. These tools should be tailored to the needs of human rights defenders and the acute and diverse threats they face. The tool design and deployment should be informed by user-centered design that is focused on these communities, and these tools should be supported on the platforms (desktop, mobile, etc.) that these communities most use. Projects may include but are not limited to:

- *Development of new technologies* for defeating censorship, for maintaining availability of information, for secure communications, for privacy protection, and online services, such as email and website hosting, with robust defenses against hacking and other attacks.
- *Improvements to proven technologies* including distribution, expansion, adaptation, and/or localization of proven anti-censorship or secure communication technologies; and improvement of usability and user interfaces to enable broader populations of users to adopt such tools.
- *Re-usable libraries or protocols* to provide the underlying software components that may be used by anti-censorship and secure communication tools.
- *Development of critical infrastructure* to support an open, interoperable, reliable, and secure internet by increasing privacy by design and raising the cost of censorship.

Areas of Focus:

- Scalable and sustainable next-generation anti-censorship and secure communication technologies, especially for platforms that generally have less support for anti-censorship and secure communication.
- Next-generation malware detection and mitigation systems.
- Alternative production and sustainability models for anti-censorship tools, such as white-label and branded content apps.
- Development and implementation of alternative methods for distributing software applications in closed or repressive Internet contexts.
- Development and implementation of protocols and critical infrastructure to support an open, interoperable, reliable, and secure Internet.

Funding Theme #2: Digital Safety – Support, training, and information resources that contribute to greater digital safety for users in Internet-repressive societies, including civil society, human rights defenders, journalists, and other vulnerable populations. Projects may include but are not limited to:

- *Digital safety skills development* for civil society through trainings, organizational security audits, mentorship, local leadership development, peer learning, and guided practice approaches employing adult learning pedagogies.
- *Emergency support* to respond to urgent cases and to prevent future digital attacks, including harassment and violence against individuals in retribution for their online activities.
- *Resource development and information dissemination* to targeted communities, or the general public, to raise awareness of digital threats, encourage best practices, and respond to sudden threats to Internet freedom.

Areas of Focus:

- Development of tailored digital safety resources and training methodologies for vulnerable populations, such as journalists and independent media, in places where they are threatened.
- Holistic and proactive training and skill-building programs that build digital safety capacity in conjunction with physical security and psychosocial care.
- Programs to build the capacity of local digital safety trainers and foster regional training networks and training opportunities.
- Programs to establish or strengthen emergency response mechanisms by integrating and sharing cyber threat intelligence analysis and research through networks and Cyber Incident and Emergency Response Teams.
- Broad public awareness campaigns to promote digital hygiene and increase the adoption of digital safety tools and practices in highly repressive environments.
- Initiatives that promote and raise awareness on the safe and secure use of social media for human rights defenders, journalists, and other targeted communities.
- Projects that develop, expand, and implement both proven and innovative support resources and methodologies to Hong Kong, Mexico and/or other countries across Latin America and the Caribbean.

Funding Theme #3: Policy and Advocacy – National, regional, and international policy and advocacy efforts that empower civil society to counter restrictive Internet laws and support policies to promote Internet freedom in countries where the government has adopted, or is considering adopting, laws or policies that restrict human rights online. Projects may include but are not limited to:

- *Local capacity-building* programs to support the development of non-U.S. based civil society organizations to advocate for human rights online.
- *Regional coalition-building* efforts to expand networks, increase coordination, and develop regional standards to support policies that protect and promote Internet freedom.
- *International engagement* opportunities to increase civil society participation in international policy dialogues to support multi-stakeholder engagement and promote Internet freedom at key international fora.

Areas of Focus:

- Initiatives to mainstream Internet freedom and online human rights standards into regional and international cyber policy-making processes and dialogues.
- Initiatives to institutionalize Internet policy training and expertise in local law firms, legal institutions, and law schools.
- Initiatives to enhance coordination and exchanges between policy advocates and technologists.
- Advocacy targeting technology companies and developers, addressing the privacy, freedom of expression, and freedom of association rights of vulnerable groups using new technologies.
- Programs that integrate stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of critical infrastructure and secure protocols into policy advocacy efforts. Advocacy efforts should promote the adoption of infrastructure and protocols that inherently protect user privacy and raise the cost of censorship, especially in international standards-setting bodies.
- Advocacy efforts to integrate human right considerations into the development of policies related to emerging technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence).

Funding Theme #4: Applied Research – Research efforts to inform and benefit Internet freedom globally. Research should address technological and political developments affecting Internet freedom. Projects may include but are not limited to:

- *Real-time monitoring and analysis* of both technical and policy threats to Internet freedom. Global assessments of Internet freedom threats, opportunities, and trends.
- *Policy research and legal analysis* to increase awareness of Internet policy trends and enhance targeted national, regional, or international advocacy efforts.

Areas of Focus:

- Cyber-threat intelligence collection and analysis, including data forensics, and information sharing to support human rights defenders and civil society.
- Assessments of technological best practices and the current state of play of anti-censorship and secure communication tools and techniques to inform the Internet freedom technical community and improve approaches to anti-censorship and secure communication.
- Online censorship analysis that aggregates and lists blocked items, terms, or websites, for the purposes of censorship tracking, and potential content re-introduction.
- Assessments of the political, legal or regulatory, and technical factors that enable and Internet shutdowns or throttling in various contexts and recommendations for responding to, mitigating, and preventing shutdowns.
- Assessments of the human rights implications and impacts of—as well as considerations that should inform—emerging technologies, including but not limited to artificial intelligence (AI) and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies.

Key Program Considerations:

The following list of program considerations is provided as a guide to help applicants develop responsive, robust program proposals.

- Preference will be given to **open source technologies** with practical deployment and sustainability plans. These technologies are inherently more transparent and re-usable.
- Consistent with DRL's venture-capital style approach to Internet freedom, projects should have a model for long-term **sustainability** beyond the life of the grant.
- DRL encourages applicants to foster **collaborative partnerships**, especially with local organization(s) in target countries and/or regions, where applicable. Where appropriate, applicants are invited to form consortia for submitting a combined proposal, but the primary organization that is developing and deploying the anti-censorship technology must be the lead ("prime") applicant.
- DRL strives to ensure its programs advance the rights and uphold the dignity of the most **at-risk and vulnerable populations**.

Projects should aim to have impact that leads to democratic reforms, and should have the potential for sustainability beyond DRL resources. DRL's preference is to avoid duplicating past efforts by supporting new and creative approaches. This does not exclude from consideration projects that improve upon or expand existing successful projects in a new and complementary way.

To maximize the impact and sustainability of the award(s) that result(s) from this SOI/NOFO, DRL reserves the right to execute a non-competitive continuation amendment(s). Any non-competitive continuation is contingent on performance and **availability of funds**. A non-competitive continuation is not guaranteed; the Department of State reserves the right to exercise or not exercise the option to issue non-competitive continuation amendment(s).

Activities that are **not** typically considered competitive include, but are not limited to:

- Academic research with no immediate application; theoretical exploration of technology and/or security issues;
- Purchases of bulk hardware or bulk licenses for commercial encryption or technology products;
- Technology and tools that dictate or suggest specific content;
- Technology development without a clear human rights use case in an Internet repressive environment, or without a clear threat model and understanding of adversarial efforts;
- Alternative communications technologies or systems that do not utilize Internet protocols or infrastructure, and are not devised to provide access to censored Internet content;
- Study tours, scholarships or exchange projects;
- Projects that focus on expansion of Internet infrastructure, commercial law or economic development;
- Projects that focus on a single country rather than a regional or global approach;
- Stand-alone public awareness campaigns and/or public awareness campaigns not directly tied to one of the four funding categories listed above;

- Projects not sufficiently connected to real-world impact of improving Internet freedom environments in any country or region; and,
- Activities that go beyond an organization's demonstrated competence, or without clear evidence of the ability of the applicant to achieve the stated impact.

II. Eligibility Information

Organizations submitting SOIs must meet the following criteria:

- Be a U.S.- or foreign-based non-profit/non-governmental organization (NGO), or a public international organization; or
- Be a private, public, or state institution of higher education; or
- Be a for-profit organization or business (noting there are restrictions on payment of fees and/or profits under grants and cooperative agreements, including those outlined in 48 CFR 30, "Cost Accounting Standards Administration", and 48 CFR 31, "Contract Cost Principles and Procedures"); and
- Have existing, or the capacity to develop, active partnerships with thematic or in-country partners, entities, and relevant stakeholders including private sector partner and NGOs; and
- Have demonstrable experience administering successful and preferably similar programs. DRL reserves the right to request additional background information on organizations that do not have previous experience administering federal awards. These applicants may be subject to limited funding on a pilot basis.

Applicants may **form consortia** and submit a combined SOI. However, one organization should be designated as the lead applicant with the other members as sub-award partners.

DRL's preference is to work with non-profit entities; however, there may be occasions when a for-profit entity is best suited. For-profit entities should be aware that its application may be subject to additional review following the panel selection process, and that the Department of State generally prohibits profit under its assistance awards to for-profit or commercial organizations. Profit is defined as any amount in excess of allowable direct and indirect costs. The allowability of costs incurred by commercial organizations is determined in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) at 48 CFR 30, Cost Accounting Standards Administration, and 48 CFR 31 Contract Cost Principles and Procedures. Program income earned by the recipient must be deducted from the program's total allowable costs in determining the net allowable costs on which the federal share of costs is based.

DRL is committed to an anti-discrimination policy in all of its programs and activities. DRL welcomes SOI submissions irrespective of race, ethnicity, color, creed, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other status.

No entity listed on the Excluded Parties List System in the [System for Award Management \(SAM\)](#) is eligible for any assistance or can participate in any activities under an award in accordance with the OMB guidelines at 2 CFR 180 that implement Executive Orders 12549 (3 CFR 1986 Comp., p. 189) and 12689 (3 CFR 1989 Comp., p. 235), "Debarment and Suspension."

Additionally, no entity listed on the EPLS can participate in any activities under an award. All applicants are strongly encouraged to review the EPLS in SAM to ensure that no ineligible entity is included.

Organizations are not required to have a valid Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) number—formerly referred to as a DUNS (Data Universal Numbering System) number—and an active SAM.gov registration to apply for this solicitation through SAMS Domestic. **However, if a SOI is approved, these will need to be obtained before an organization is able to submit a full application. Therefore, we recommend starting the process of obtaining a SAM.gov registration as soon as possible.** Please note that there is no cost associated with UEI or SAM.gov registration.

III. Application Requirements, Deadlines, and Technical Eligibility

All SOIs must conform to DRL's posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in September 2018, available at <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions-proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/>.

Complete SOI submissions **must** include the following:

1. Completed and signed SF-424 and SF424B, as directed on SAMS Domestic or Grants.gov (please refer to DRL's PSI for SOIs for guidance on completing the SF-424); and,
2. Program Statement (not to exceed three [3] pages in Microsoft Word) that includes:
 - a) A table listing:
 - i. Name of the organization;
 - ii. The target country/countries;
 - iii. The total amount of funding requested from DRL, total amount of cost-share (if any), and total program amount (DRL funds + cost-share); and,
 - iv. Program length;
 - b) A synopsis of the program, including a brief statement on how the program will have a demonstrated impact and engage relevant stakeholders. The SOI should identify local partners as appropriate;
 - c) A concise breakdown explicitly identifying the program's objectives and the activities and expected results that contribute to each objective; and,
 - d) A brief description of the applicant(s) that demonstrates the applicant(s) expertise and capacity to implement the program and manage a U.S. government award.

There will be **two deadlines** for submission of SOIs – **November 9, 2020 and March 5, 2021**. An organization may submit **no more than two (2) SOIs per deadline**. Organizations that submit applications to the first deadline may also submit applications to the second deadline, regardless of the outcome of their previous applications(s).

SOIs that request less than \$500,000 or more than \$3,000,000 may be deemed technically ineligible. DRL reserves the right to award more or less than the funds requested, including estimated individual award floor and ceiling amounts, under such circumstances as it may deem to be in the best interest of the U.S. government. DRL Internet freedom programs typically run for 1-3 years. On average, successful applicants receive funding about 9 months from the SOI submission date.

Technically eligible SOIs are those which:

1) Arrive electronically via SAMS Domestic or Grants.gov by **11:59 p.m. ET on Monday, November 9, 2020 and Friday, March 5, 2021 under the announcement titled “DRL Internet Freedom Annual Program Statement” funding opportunity number “SFOP0007420”;**

2) Are in English;

3) Heed all instructions and do not violate any of the guidelines stated in this solicitation and the PSI for Statements of Interest.

For all SOI documents please ensure:

- 1) All pages are numbered;
- 2) All documents are formatted to 8 ½ x 11 paper; and,
- 3) All documents are single-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman font, with 1-inch margins. Captions and footnotes may be 10-point Times New Roman font. Font sizes in charts and tables can be reformatted to fit within one page width.

Grants.gov and SAMS Domestic automatically log the date and time a submission is made, and the Department of State will use this information to determine whether it has been submitted on time. Late submissions are neither reviewed nor considered unless the DRL point of contact listed in section VI is contacted prior to the deadline and is provided with evidence of a system error caused by www.grants.gov or [SAMS Domestic \(https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com\)](https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com) that is outside of the applicant’s control and is the sole reason for a late submission. Applicants should not expect a notification upon DRL receiving their SOI. It is the sole responsibility of the applicant to ensure that all material submitted in the SOI package is complete, accurate, and current. DRL will **not** accept SOIs submitted via email, fax, the postal system, delivery companies, or couriers. DRL strongly encourages all applicants to submit SOIs before Friday, March 5, 2021 to ensure that the SOI has been received and is complete.

IV. Review and Selection Process

The Department’s Office of Acquisitions Management (AQM) will determine technical eligibility for all SOI submissions. All technically eligible SOIs will then be reviewed against the same four criteria by a DRL Review Panel: quality of program idea, inclusivity of

marginalized populations, program planning, and ability to achieve objectives/institutional capacity. Additionally, the Panel will evaluate how the SOI meets the solicitation request, U.S. foreign policy goals, and DRL's overall priority needs. Panelists review each SOI individually against the evaluation criteria, not against competing SOIs. To ensure all SOIs receive a balanced evaluation, the DRL Review Panel will review the first page of the SOI up to the page limit and no further. All Panelists must sign non-disclosure agreements and conflict of interest agreements.

In most cases, the DRL Review Panel includes representatives from DRL policy and program offices. Once a SOI is approved, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposal applications based on their SOIs. Unless directed otherwise by the organization, DRL may also refer SOIs for possible consideration in other U.S. government related funding opportunities.

The Panel may provide conditions and/or recommendations on SOIs to enhance the proposed program, which must be addressed by the organization in the full proposal application. To ensure effective use of limited DRL funds, conditions and recommendations may include requests to increase, decrease, clarify, and/or justify costs and program activities.

DRL's Front Office reserves the right to make a final determination regarding all funding matters, pending funding availability.

Review Criteria

Quality of Program Idea

SOIs should be responsive to the program framework and policy objectives identified in the country/regional context, and should exhibit originality, substance, precision, and relevance to DRL's mission of promoting human rights and democracy. Projects should have the potential to have an immediate impact leading to long-term sustainable reforms. DRL prefers new approaches that do not duplicate efforts by other entities. This does not exclude from consideration projects that improve upon or expand existing successful projects in a new and complementary way. In countries where similar activities are already taking place, an explanation should be provided as to how new activities will not duplicate or merely add to existing activities and how these efforts will be coordinated. Proposals that promote creative approaches to recognized ongoing challenges are highly encouraged. DRL prioritizes project proposals with inclusive approaches for advancing these rights.

Addressing Barriers to Equal Participation

DRL strives to ensure its projects advance the rights and uphold the dignity of all persons. As the USG's lead bureau dedicated to promoting democratic governance, DRL requests a programming approach dedicated to strengthening inclusive societies as a necessary pillar of strong democracies. Violence targeting any members of society undermines collective security and threatens democracy. DRL supports program models that assess and address the barriers to access created by violence and discrimination targeting individuals and groups based on their religion, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Applicants should describe how programming

affects all of its beneficiaries, including support that specifically targets communities under threat of violence and discrimination. This approach should be an integral part of both the concept and explicit design of all proposed project activities and objectives. Strong proposals will provide specific analysis, measures, and corresponding targets as appropriate. Stakeholders shall identify the difference between opportunities and barriers to access and design programs that do not perpetuate these inequalities but rather enhance programmatic impact by including all people in society. The goal of this approach is to bring communities and those in power together in support of stable and secure societies.

Program Planning

A strong SOI will include a clear articulation of how the proposed program activities and expected results (both outputs and outcomes) contribute to specific program objectives and the overall program goal. Objectives should be ambitious, yet measurable, results-focused, and achievable in a reasonable time frame.

Ability to Achieve Objectives/Institutional Capacity

SOIs should address how the program will engage relevant stakeholders and should identify local partners as appropriate. If local partners are identified, applicants should describe the division of labor among the applicant and any local partners. SOIs should demonstrate the organization's expertise and previous experience in administering programs, preferably similar programs targeting the requested program area or similarly challenging environments.

For additional guidance, please see DRL's posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in September 2018, available at <https://www.state.gov/key-topics-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/open-solicitations-and-proposal-submission-instructions/proposal-submission-instructions-psi-for-statements-of-interest-updated-september-2018/>.

V. Additional Information

DRL will not consider SOIs that reflect any type of support for any member, affiliate, or representative of a designated terrorist organization.

DRL may ask successful applicant(s) to incorporate coordination of an implementer and stakeholder meeting into the Scope of Work of the final project. DRL will discuss this possibility with particular applicant(s) during the proposal negotiation phase.

Project activities that directly benefit foreign militaries or paramilitary groups or individuals will not be considered for DRL funding given purpose limitations on funding.

Restrictions may apply to any proposed assistance to police or other law enforcement. Among these, pursuant to section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (FAA), no assistance may be furnished to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country when there is credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights. In

accordance with the requirements of section 620M of the FAA, also known as the Leahy law, program beneficiaries or participants from a foreign government's security forces may need to be vetted by the Department before the provision of any assistance.

Organizations should be aware that DRL understands that some information contained in SOIs may be considered sensitive or proprietary and will make appropriate efforts to protect such information. However, organizations are advised that DRL cannot guarantee that such information will not be disclosed, including pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or other similar statutes.

Organizations should also be aware that if ultimately selected for an award, the Uniform Administrative Requirements, Cost Principles and Audit Requirements for Federal Awards set forth in 2 CFR Chapter 200 (Sub-Chapters A through F) shall apply to all non-Federal entities, except for assistance awards to Individuals and Foreign Public Entities. Please note that as of December 26, 2014, 2 CFR 200 (Sub-Chapters A through E) now applies to foreign organizations, and Sub-Chapters A through D shall apply to all for-profit entities. The applicant/recipient of the award and any sub-recipient under the award must comply with all applicable terms and conditions, in addition to the assurance and certifications made part of the Notice of Award. The Department's Standard Terms and Conditions can be viewed on DRL's Resources page at: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/p/c72333.htm>.

The information in this solicitation and DRL's PSI for SOIs, as updated in September 2018, is binding and may not be modified by any DRL representative. **Explanatory information provided by DRL that contradicts this language will not be binding.** Issuance of the solicitation and negotiation of SOIs or applications does not constitute an award commitment on the part of the U.S. government. DRL reserves the right to reduce, revise, or increase proposal budgets in accordance with the needs of the program evaluation requirements.

This solicitation will appear on www.grants.gov, [SAMS Domestic \(https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com\)](https://mygrants.servicenowservices.com) and DRL's website <https://www.state.gov/statements-of-interest-requests-for-proposals-and-notices-of-funding-opportunity/>.

Background Information on DRL and DRL Funding

DRL has the mission of promoting democracy and protecting human rights globally. DRL supports programs that uphold democratic principles, support and strengthen democratic institutions, promote human rights, prevent atrocities, combat and prevent violent extremism, and build civil society around the world. DRL typically focuses its work in countries with egregious human rights violations, where democracy and human rights advocates are under pressure, and where governments are undemocratic or in transition.

Additional background information on DRL and the human rights report can be found on <https://www.state.gov/reports-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/>.

VI. Contact Information

SAMS Domestic Help Desk:

For assistance with SAMS Domestic accounts and technical issues related to the system, please contact the ILMS help desk by phone at 1-888-313-4567 (toll charges for international callers) or through the Self Service online portal that can be accessed from <https://afsitsm.servicenowservices.com/ilms/>. Customer Support is available 24/7/365.

Grants.gov Helpdesk:

For assistance with Grants.gov accounts and technical issues related to using the system, please call the Contact Center at 1-800-518-4726 or email support@grants.gov. The Contact Center is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, except federal holidays.

See <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/snow-dismissal-procedures/federal-holidays/> for a list of federal holidays.

For technical questions related to this solicitation, please contact InternetFreedom@state.gov.

With the exception of technical submission questions, during the solicitation period U.S. Department of State staff in Washington and overseas shall not discuss this competition until the entire review process has been completed and rejection and approval letters have been transmitted.