

Department of State
Public Notice

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Request for Statements of Interest: DRL Increasing Access to Information in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea)

I. Requested Objectives for Statements of Interest

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) seeks Statements of Interest (SOI) from organizations interested in implementing programs to increase the free flow of objective, independent information into, out of, and within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea).

PLEASE NOTE: Applicants should immediately access [MyGrants](#) or www.grants.gov to set up a username and password. For instructions on how to register with MyGrants for the first time, please refer to the Proposal Submission Instructions for Statements of Interest at: <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/programs-and-grants/>.

The SOI process, which is a two-step process, allows applicants to submit program ideas for DRL to evaluate before requiring a full proposal. As a first step, applicants must submit a brief, three-page concept note that clearly explains a program idea and its objectives before developing a full proposal application. After reviewing eligible SOIs, DRL will invite selected applicants to expand on their program ideas by submitting a full proposal application. Full proposals will go through a second review before funding recommendations are submitted to the DRL Assistant Secretary for approval, depending on funding availability.

This solicitation includes two (2) categories under which applicants may submit SOIs. **Each organization may submit a maximum of two (2) SOIs, limited to one per category. Organizations must clearly identify the category to which the SOI is responding on the first page of the SOI.** If a category is not clearly identified, the SOI may be deemed technically ineligible and not forwarded to the review panel for consideration.

All SOIs must be grounded in 'Do No Harm' principles. For DRL, this means that applicants demonstrate a strong understanding of the current operating environment and describe measures that may be taken to mitigate risks to project implementation, staff, and beneficiaries, including Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA)¹ policies and enforcement mechanisms or standard operating procedures (SOPs). Applicants must also demonstrate an ability to localize project activities by leveraging the expertise of North Korean human rights organizations, activists, and defector communities.

¹ Additional information on Do No Harm and PSEA can be found in DRL's Proposal Submission Instructions, available at: <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/programs-and-grants/>

SUPPORTING FREEDOM OF INFORMATION. Projects under this category must support the following objective: North Koreans have improved understanding of democracy, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, including increased awareness of how their individual rights and freedoms are inhibited by the DPRK government. Projects that do not include content dissemination activities will not be deemed competitive. Project activities may include:

- Creating or curating content on concepts or themes of democracy, human rights, including fundamental freedoms; practical guidance on safeguarding against digital threats and surveillance; analysis of domestic and international developments; and/or highlighting the comparative lack of rights and freedoms in the DPRK through the experiences and stories of North Korean defectors and escapees living in democratic societies. All new content must be tailored to North Korean audiences and developed to foster critical thinking and gradual changes in perceptions and/or encourage discourse among trusted contacts on individual rights and freedoms. Competitive applications will propose new or curated content in line with the categories under the “Human Rights and Accountability” RSOI.
- Supporting timely, fact-based, and independent local reporting on political and social developments, including human rights abuses, in the DPRK.
- Increasing access to objective, independent information among North Korean audiences through safe, secure, and proven approaches, such as radio broadcast transmissions or other tested methods. Applicants must clearly demonstrate existing capacity and experience to carry out activities safely and effectively.
- Cultivating a new generation of content creators, particularly among the North Korean defector community, by strengthening their technical content creation skills and operational sustainability. Such efforts must include small grants to individuals or nascent content creation organizations.

All proposed activities under this category **must** be led by or include consultation and/or engagement with the North Korean defector and escapee community as experts or partners. Such engagement could include conducting defector-led feedback mechanisms; sub-granting or sub-contracting to defector content creators; and/or including defector-made content in curation efforts. SOIs that do not include this requirement may be deemed technically ineligible.

Competitive SOIs under this category will:

- Describe activities or partnerships to deliver any produced or curated content to North Korean audiences and explain why the applicant is confident in the safety and success of the proposed dissemination approach. SOIs that do not include dissemination activities or partnerships will not be deemed competitive.
- Identify which audience group(s) would be targeted through content creation, curation, and dissemination efforts. Clearly explain why the selected groups would be interested in the proposed content and whether the proposed content would be considered sufficiently beneficial and/or safe for redistribution among North Korean audiences.

- Describe how proposed content topics or themes complement the proposed media format, taking into account how North Koreans may alter their media consumption habits in response to the risks associated with different mediums, methods for access, and topics or themes.

DIVERSIFYING MECHANISMS FOR INFORMATION ACCESS. Projects under this category must support the following objective: North Koreans have a greater diversity of proven context-specific and secure mechanisms through which they can safely and reliably access and/or share objective, independent information. Projects that only include research activities will not be deemed competitive. Project activities may include:

- Supporting efforts to circumvent existing tactics or technologies used by the DPRK government to inhibit access to outside information. Applicants may propose ways to leverage, improve, and/or amplify hardware and/or software solutions that are new or already used by North Koreans; however, any proposed technologies, programs, and/or applications must have been identified or verified as still active and/or relevant to the DPRK context within the last two years.
- Scaling up or improving tailored, proven technologies to facilitate the free flow of information into, out of, and within North Korea. This may include technologies to securely and safely communicate, share, or consume information and/or external media content. Applicants must clearly justify the proposed technical approach and claims; articulate whether the proposed technology is demand-driven and applicable within the DPRK's information control environment; and demonstrate existing capacity and experience to carry out the project safely.

All proposed projects under this category **must** include partnership with South Korean organizations, entities, or individuals, including those representing the North Korean defector community. Partnerships could include sub-grants or sub-contracts to organizations, consultancies with individuals, focus groups and/or feedback mechanisms with North Korean defectors or other experts, or other means of engagement. Explanations of partnerships must exemplify that the primary applicant has the context-specific knowledge, expertise, and relationships to implement a tailored, safe approach. SOIs that do not include this requirement may be deemed technically ineligible.

Competitive SOIs under this category will:

- Describe activities or partnerships to deliver the proposed technologies, mechanisms, programs, and/or applications to end users. SOIs that do not include dissemination activities (e.g., projects solely focused on research) or partnerships will not be deemed competitive.
- Clearly explain why the applicant is confident that the proposed technology, mechanism, program, and/or application will be effective, safe, and relevant for the DPRK context. Explanations should cite research or testing data to support claims.

Applicants may contact DRL-EAP-Programs@state.gov for guidance on how to share sensitive information, such as partner names or specific dissemination routes.

All programs should aim to have impact that leads to reforms and the potential for sustainability beyond DRL resources. Programs should be driven by local needs and led by local communities to the extent possible.

DRL will entertain applications for continuation grants funded under these awards beyond the initial budget period on a non-competitive basis subject to availability of funds, satisfactory progress of the program, and a determination that continued funding would be in the best interest of the U.S. Department of State.

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

- Activities that repeat or significantly overlap with existing activities without providing a clear, additional benefit to program beneficiaries;
- Provision of humanitarian aid;
- English language instruction;
- Purely academic exchanges or fellowships;
- External exchanges or fellowships lasting longer than six months;
- Activities conducted outside the target country that are not clearly connected to local initiatives and impact, or are not necessary due to security concerns;
- Theoretical studies of human rights or democracy issues, including programs focused mainly on research and evaluation without training or capacity-building for local civil society;
- Micro-loans or similar small business development initiatives.

II. Eligibility Information

The following organizations are eligible to apply:

- Foreign-based non-profit organizations/nongovernment organizations (NGO);
- U.S.-based non-profit organizations/NGOs with or without 501(c)(3) status;
- Public International Organizations;
- Private, public, or state institutions of higher education;
- For-profit organizations or businesses.

Applicants should have, or be able to develop, active partnerships with thematic or local partners, entities, and relevant stakeholders, including private sector partners and NGOs. Applicants should also have **proven experience** in managing successful and preferably similar projects. DRL encourages applications from foreign-based NGOs located in the regions or countries relevant to this Request for Statements of Interest (RSOI).

Applicants may **form consortia** to combine different expertise into one comprehensive proposal. However, only one organization can be designated as the prime applicant, while the remaining organizations must be designated as partners or sub-awardees. The prime applicant

must meet the eligibility criteria listed above. DRL may ask for more background information from applicants without previous federal grant experience, and these applicants might receive limited funding on a trial basis.

DRL is committed to an **anti-discrimination** policy in all its programs and activities. DRL welcomes applications regardless of race, ethnicity, color, creed, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other status. DRL looks for applications that show the recipient does not discriminate against any beneficiaries when implementing a potential award. This means not withholding, negatively affecting, or denying equitable access to the benefits of the award based on any factor not stated in the award. This includes race, color, religion, sex (including gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, and pregnancy), national origin, disability, age, genetic information, marital status, parental status, political affiliation, or veteran status. The recipient should insert this provision, including this paragraph, in all sub-grants and contracts under a potential award.

Any applicant listed on the Excluded Parties List System in the [System for Award Management \(SAM.gov\)](https://www.sam.gov) (www.sam.gov) or who has a current debt to the U.S. government is not eligible to apply for an assistance award, according to OMB guidelines at 2 CFR 180 that implement Executive Orders 12549 and 12689, “Debarment and Suspension.” Additionally, no entity or person listed on the Excluded Parties List System in SAM.gov can take part in any activities under an award. All applicants are strongly encouraged to review the Excluded Parties List System in SAM.gov to make sure no ineligible entity or person is included in their application.

Organizations do not need a Unique Entity Identifier (UEI) or an active SAM.gov registration to apply for this solicitation in MyGrants. **However, if a SOI is approved, they will need to get these before submitting a full application. Therefore, we recommend starting the process of obtaining a UEI and 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 follow DRL’s posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in December 2024, available at <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/programs-and-grants/>.

Complete SOI submissions **must** include:

1. Completed and signed **SF-424** and **SF-424B** forms, as directed on MyGrants or Grants.gov (refer to DRL’s PSI for SOIs for guidance on completing the SF-424); and,
2. A **program statement** (no more than three pages in Microsoft Word) that includes:
 - A table listing:
 - Name of the organization;
 - Target country/countries;
 - Total amount of funding requested from DRL, total amount of cost-share (if any), and total program amount (DRL funds + cost-share); and,

- Program length;
- A brief summary of the program, including how it will have a demonstrated impact and engage relevant stakeholders. Identify local partners if appropriate.
- A clear breakdown of the program's objectives, activities, and expected results for each objective.
- A brief description of the applicant(s) that shows their expertise and ability to implement the program and manage a U.S. government award.

Primary applicants can submit two (2) SOIs in response to the RSOI, limited to one per category. If an applicant chooses to submit more than one application, they must demonstrate that each application is competitive and unique. **SOIs that request less than \$100,000 or more than \$1,000,000 may be deemed technically ineligible.**

Technically eligible SOIs must:

- 1) Be submitted electronically via MyGrants or Grants.gov by **11:59 PM EST on January 10th, 2025 under the announcement titled "DRL Increasing Access to Information in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea)," funding opportunity number DFOP0017067;**
- 2) Be in English; and,
- 3) Follow all instructions and not break any guidelines stated in this solicitation and the PSI for Statements of Interest.

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 Calibri font, with 1-inch margins.

DRL is not responsible for disqualification due to applicants not being registered before the due date, system errors in MyGrants or Grants.gov, or other errors in the application process. Applicants must save a screenshot of the checklist showing all documents submitted in case any document fails to upload successfully. DRL encourages organizations to **submit applications during normal business hours** (Monday – Friday, 9:00 AM-5:00 PM EST).

IV. Review and Selection Process

The warranted Grants Officer will determine technical eligibility for all applications. A review panel will evaluate all eligible SOIs based on the same criteria: quality of program idea, program planning/ability to achieve objectives, institution's record and capacity, and addressing barriers to equal participation. DRL may also take into consideration the balance of the current portfolio of active projects, including geographic or thematic diversity, if needed.

In most cases, the DRL review panel includes representatives from DRL policy and program offices. All panelists must sign non-disclosure agreements and conflicts of interest agreements.

Once a SOI is approved, selected applicants will be invited to submit full proposal applications based on their SOIs. Unless directed otherwise by the applicant, DRL may also refer SOIs for possible consideration in other U.S. government funding opportunities.

DRL's review panel may give conditions and recommendations on SOIs to improve the proposed program. These must be addressed in a full proposal application. To use DRL funds effectively, conditions and recommendations may include requests to increase, decrease, clarify, or justify costs and program activities. DRL's Front Office has the final determination on all funding decisions, depending on the availability of funds.

Review Criteria

Quality of Program Idea

SOIs should align with the program framework and policy objectives in the NOFO; be suitable for the country/region; and show originality, substance, precision, and relevance to DRL's mission of promoting human rights and democracy. Programs should aim for immediate impact leading to long-term, sustainable reforms. DRL prefers new approaches that do not duplicate efforts but will consider programs that improve or expand existing successful programs in a new way. In countries where similar activities are already happening, explain how new activities will not duplicate or just add to existing ones and how these efforts will be coordinated. Proposals that offer creative solutions to ongoing challenges are encouraged. DRL prioritizes programs with inclusive approaches for advancing these rights.

Addressing Barriers to Equal Participation

DRL aims to advance the rights and dignity of all persons. As the U.S. government's lead bureau dedicated to promoting democratic governance, DRL requests program approaches dedicated to strengthening inclusive societies as a necessary pillar of strong democracies. Discrimination, violence, inequity, and inequality targeting any members of society undermines collective security and threatens democracy. DRL prioritizes programs that assess and address barriers to access for individuals and groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, income, geography, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. The proposal should show how the program will further engagement in underserved communities and with individuals from these communities. This approach should be included in the program concept and design, as well as in implementation of all proposed activities, objectives, and monitoring. Strong proposals will provide specific analysis, measures, and targets to 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 more stable and secure societies.

Program Planning

A strong SOI will show how the proposed activities contribute to the overall program goal and objectives, with each activity included. Objectives should be ambitious yet measurable, results-focused, and achievable within a reasonable timeframe.

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 prime applicant and any local partners.

Institution's Record and Capacity

DRL will consider the past performance of prior recipients and the demonstrated potential of new applicants. SOIs should show a record of successful democracy and human rights programs, responsible fiscal management, and compliance with reporting requirements. Programs should have potential for continued funding beyond DRL resources.

For additional guidance, please see DRL's posted Proposal Submission Instructions (PSI) for Statements of Interest, as updated in December 2024, available at <https://www.state.gov/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/programs-and-grants/>.

V. Additional Information

DRL will not consider SOIs that include support for any member, affiliate, or representative of a designated terrorist organization. For more information, refer to the list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>
Program activities that directly benefit foreign militaries or paramilitary groups or individuals will not be considered for DRL funding due to funding restrictions.

According to Department of State policy on terrorism, applicants are advised that successful passing of a vetting process to evaluate the risk that funds may benefit terrorists or their supporters is a condition for receiving an award. If selected for an award, applicants will need to provide information required by DS Form 4184, Risk Analysis Information about their company and its principal personnel. Vetting information is also required for all sub-award performance on assistance awards identified by the Department of State as having a risk of terrorist financing. Vetting information may also be requested for program beneficiaries and participants. Failure to provide the requested information or to pass the vetting process may result in the proposal being rejected.

The Leahy Law prohibits Department of State foreign assistance funds from supporting foreign security force units if the Secretary of State has credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights. Per [22 USC §2378d\(a\) \(2017\)](#), "No assistance shall be furnished under this chapter [FOREIGN ASSISTANCE] or the Arms Export Control Act [22 USC 2751 et seq.] to any unit of the security forces of a foreign country if the Secretary of State has credible information that such unit has committed a gross violation of human rights." 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 provided through this funding opportunity 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. If a proposed grant or cooperative agreement will provide assistance to foreign security forces or personnel, compliance with the Leahy Law is required.

Applicants 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, applicants 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, DRL requires all recipients of foreign assistance funding to comply with all applicable Department and Federal laws and regulations, including but not limited to the [Guidance for Grants and Agreements in Title 2 of the Code of Federal Regulations](#) (2 CFR), as updated in the Federal Register's 89 FR 30046 on April 22, 2024, and the [U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE STANDARD TERMS AND CONDITIONS](#).

The information in this RSOI and "Proposal Submission Instructions for Statements of Interest" is binding. Explanatory information provided by DRL that contradicts this language will not be binding.

Issuance of this RSOI does not constitute an award commitment on the part of the U.S. government, nor does it commit the U.S. government to pay for costs incurred in the preparation and submission of proposals. Further, the U.S. government reserves the right to reject any or all proposals received.

Background Information on DRL and DRL Funding

Background information on DRL and its programs can be found on <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-civilian-security-democracy-and-human-rights/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/>.

VI. Contact Information

For **technical submission questions** related to this NOFO, please contact DRL-EAP-Programs@state.gov.

Except for technical submission questions, during the RSOI period U.S. Department of State staff in Washington and overseas shall not discuss this competition with applicants until the entire proposal review process has been completed and rejection and approval letters have been transmitted.

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

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.