

## ► BUILDING CAPACITY



Darryl Booth, MBA

## Building Capacity Through the Coronavirus Relief Fund

**Editor's Note:** A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the business of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has initiated a partnership with Accela called Building Capacity—a joint effort to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

The *Journal* is pleased to publish this column from Accela that will provide readers with insight into the Building Capacity initiative, as well as be a conduit for fostering the capacity building of environmental health agencies across the country. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Darryl Booth is the general manager of environmental health at Accela and has been monitoring regulatory and data tracking needs of agencies across the U.S. for almost 20 years. He serves as technical advisor to NEHA's informatics and technology section.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020 authorized \$2 trillion to battle COVID-19 and its economic impacts. Within the law, the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) authorized \$150 billion earmarked for state and local governments. Departments of environmental health might be well-suited to utilize a portion of this fund in very strategic ways, perhaps in ways not previously considered.

The \$150 billion earmarked for state and local governments was rapidly injected into a whirlwind of distribution formulae and disparate request processes, all with extremely limited visibility. Said another way, it can be a

challenge to determine the status of the fund in many regions.

At its foundation, the practical need for massive appropriations is apparent and urgent, especially to those in the service of public health—an intensely local matter. But too, Congress intended the fund to accommodate many varied necessities.

As the last calendar year closed and the original December 30, 2020, deadline loomed large, Congress extended the program through December 31, 2021. The president signed the omnibus bill (H.R. 133) into law on December 27, 2020. Notably, Congress did not increase the fund. Most agree that

there are substantial unspent or unreported funds, at least in certain regions.

Important facts to know:

1. The U.S. Department of the Treasury disbursed funds directly to states, counties, and cities with populations >500,000, as well as to certain tribal governments.
2. Regionally, states and counties were encouraged to “pass down” funds to municipalities (e.g., those with populations <500,000) within their boundaries.
3. The funds may be used to reimburse for expenditures related to the public health emergency and not budgeted for prior to March 27, 2020.

Congress made spending rules vague on purpose. The U.S. Department of Treasury has published guidance for the CRF program in the January 15, 2021, *Federal Register* (see sidebar). We can appreciate, though, that the intent of Congress was to enable states, cities, and counties to execute against regional priorities.

Let's add that the intent of Congress is undermined if the funds are never spent. Unspent funds do not aid in COVID-19 response. Unspent funds do not stimulate the economy.

Environmental health departments could still utilize these funds if applied to the pandemic response. Beyond the more obvious direct public health needs, other projects can fit, too. For example, closing (or downsizing) your customer counter by moving plan review, applications, consulting, and payments to the internet reduces virus exposure and risk. Enabling inspectors to do more remotely (e.g., through virtual inspections) eliminates contact. Often overlooked, department payroll (including overtime) for environmental health

employees substantially involved in these and other COVID-19 response projects is also reimbursable by the fund.

What we know today:

- It is challenging to determine the remaining funds available and the local processes to access it. You must contact the grant, budget, or finance office of your jurisdiction and ask.
- The CRF can pay for software licenses and implementation and configuration services, as well as the payroll and overtime for involved department staff. The software licenses can extend for 12 months (i.e., beyond the deadline), but services (e.g., configuration, data conversion, report writing) should be completed prior to the December 31, 2021, deadline. If services are not completed, you can expect only a partial or proportional reimbursement.
- Some jurisdictions told us that they balance and reallocate expenses to the fund, where the rules allow it, near the end of the reporting period. For example, an environmental health inspector might be assigned to coronavirus education or enforcement, thus making their salary and overtime eligible. That example uses the CRF to free up traditional budgets.

Therefore, I advise environmental health directors and their IT leaders to plan with intent to access all the resources available. Through your local inquiries, identify the status of the CRF in your state, county, or city. Health districts can also be funded. Finally, isolate the processes and approvals that would be needed. If the path is clear, revisit your backlog of projects and find those that meet the definitions above. You could potentially have a way to fund some projects in whole or part.

Remember that projects involving payroll and overtime, as well as most professional services, have a diminishing horizon. That is, the number of pay periods or work products that can be delivered by December 31, 2021, is impacted by the start date of your project. So, delays can diminish the potential.

We also note that President Biden, just prior to the inauguration, committed to a follow-on relief and stimulus package, which promises to include more funding for cities and counties. As of press time, the Biden Administration is still meeting with lawmakers, cabinet secretaries, and industry leaders to gain support for a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package to be voted on in mid-March 2021. If the CRF is not accessible to you at this time, there could be a new program available in the future. We sug-

**Additional Resources**

- **Eligible Units of Local Government:** <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Eligible-Units.pdf>
- **Eligibility of Local Governments:** <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Census-Data-and-Methodology-Final.pdf>
- **Payments to States and Eligible Units of Local Government:** <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Payments-to-States-and-Units-of-Local-Government.pdf>
- **Federal Register: Coronavirus Relief Fund Program Guidance:** [https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/CRF-Guidance-Federal-Register\\_2021-00827.pdf](https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/CRF-Guidance-Federal-Register_2021-00827.pdf)

gest maintaining a list of those project priorities and keeping them “shovel-ready.” 🛠️

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*Corresponding Author:* Darryl Booth, General Manager, Environmental Health, Accela, 2633 Camino Ramon #500, San Ramon, CA 94583. Email: [dbooth@accela.com](mailto:dbooth@accela.com).





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