The following recommendations are adapted from a 2007 report from the Human Services Network about RFPs in all departments, which are being reviewed by the Controller’s Office this year as part of an administrative process to examine procurement policies citywide. CASE contractors adapted the recommendations based on their recent experiences with the Dept. of Aging and Adult Services’ RFP process in 2009-2010.

1. Notification Process

In order to ease, and bring fairness to, the notification process for services to be contracted, and avoid the additional burden of developing and administering RFPs when they are not needed, we make the following recommendations:

- Develop a comprehensive description of the services being sought, the location of work to be performed, the timeframe and any special licenses, qualifications, or other requirements, then issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) to determine who is qualified and interested in providing the service.
- Qualifications should include current and past experience with providing the designated service to specific populations.
- DAAS should maintain a distribution list of current contractors and interested parties for services contracted by DAAS, and send notification of funding availability (NOFA) and RFQ to all entities on the distribution list, and extend outreach through advertising the funding availability.
- If only one provider is interested and qualified to provide a particular service, there is no reason to request proposals for that service. Proceed to contract negotiations.
- If more than one qualified party expresses interest in providing a specific service, proceed to issue a formal RFP.
- The DAAS Commission should develop a list of approved sole-source contracts (like DPH does), and submit it for approval by the Board of Supervisors.

2. Basic, Standardized Information

All organizations eligible to apply for funding need access to the same information and opportunities to understand clearly the nature of services to be provided and the requirements and expectations of those selected to provide the services. Basic, standardized information should be accessible to all. Ensuring a common language and understanding of service models among providers who serve across several systems
and share clients improves service delivery and promotes coordination. All information should be posted on the funding entity’s website.

Recommendations are:

- DAAS should seek input from service providers as they are developing RFPs in order to refine expectations for service delivery and avoid unrealistic procedures and outcomes.
- DAAS should have standard policies and procedures for issuing RFPs and make them available to current and potential contractors.
- For each RFP, publish how much total funding is available to be contracted for a specific program; post the exact funding or a range of funding that is available for service provision.
- Identify if this is a new or existing funding source, and who the current providers of service are.
- If the timing of the RFP or awards is influenced by outside requirements, explain them clearly to applicants.
- Post the RFP on the funding entity website at least seven days prior to the bidder’s conference, or mail it, whichever is most appropriate.
- Clearly state desired outcomes and guidelines for the program/services described in the RFP.
- Clearly define the scope of service, reporting requirements, monitoring expectations, and unallowable vs. allowable costs. Specify the reimbursement procedures for the service – performance-based (fee-for-service) or cost reimbursement.
- All information that amends, adds to, or corrects the RFP should be disseminated appropriately.
- Specify the type and extent of documentation needed to verify partnerships or collaborations, e.g. LOC’s, MOU’s, etc.
- Use the standard budget pages for human service departments, as developed by the Contract Streamlining Task Force.
- All forms should be available for downloading in accessible formats from the website or through email, and budget spreadsheets should be formatted and available in appropriate software applications (i.e., Microsoft Excel as opposed to a Word document).
- A checklist at the beginning of each proposal should be included with each RFP to clearly identify all sections and attachments required with submission.
- Include the evaluation criteria and scoring points for the proposal.

3. Calendar and timelines

The length of time needed to respond to RFP’s varies considerably, but it is important to have established guidelines.

Recommendations are:
• Maintain consistent timelines between notification, distribution of the RFP, the bidder’s conference and RFP due dates.
• Establish a minimum four week turn-around timeline after the bidder’s conference for standard proposals. RFP’s that require extensive collaboration, subcontracting, partnerships etc. for service delivery should have six weeks. (These timelines are dependent on the execution of a timely Bidder’s Conference, discussed below.)
• December is a very busy service month for the nonprofit community; therefore it is advisable that RFP deadlines are not scheduled between December 15th and January 5th.
• Any delay in notification of awards should be communicated in writing to all applicants with an explanation of why the delay is necessary and when the awards will be announced.
• Sufficient planning (4-6 weeks) should be provided between notification of award and start of contract. Notification of awards must allow sufficient time for contractors to plan for their next fiscal year.
• Planning and transition time should be considered if the RFP could result in a change of providers for an existing service.
• When/if funding is cancelled to one provider and transferred to another, a transition plan should be in place, monitored and enforced to insure seamless services for clients.

4. Bidder’s Conference and Questions about the RFP

Ongoing access to information on the part of bidders during the RFP process is of the utmost importance. We believe this allows for new providers who may not be familiar with the system of care to have access to information and assistance. This also allows all interested bidders to have equal access to information and assistance.

Recommendations are:
• Bidders’ conferences need to occur at least seven working days after the release of the RFP’s to allow for contractors to learn the specifics for each RFP.
• DAAS program staff and HSA contracts staff need to work out the process and procedures in advance of the bidder’s conference so that there is no disagreement about answers provided at the bidder’s conference.
• Responsible staff should be present at each bidder’s conference including any staff that has authority for implementation of the RFP or program.
• Questions and answers discussed at the bidder’s conference should be mailed or emailed to the contractors’ list and all potential contractors, as well as posted on the funding entity website.
• If questions occur that cannot be answered at the bidder’s conference, there should be a 3-day turn around to respond to bidders. The questions and answers should be forwarded to the contractors list and posted on the funding entity website.
• Scope of service, reporting requirements, and monitoring expectations for the program should be clearly defined and reviewed at the bidder’s conference.
• A staff person should be appointed to be the point person for technical questions about the application from potential bidders.
• The staff person should respond to all RFP questions within 48 hours of receipt of the question.
• Questions and answers should be posted on the RFP website and be distributed to all participants at the bidder’s conference.
• No questions should be accepted 48 hours prior to the final deadline for submission of proposals.
• The final date for submission should be extended if questions posed cannot be answered within 48 hours of the date of the posted submission.

5. Review panel and proposal scoring

The process for evaluating proposals must be clearly stated and communicated to all potential bidders. Review panels must be clear of conflict of interest. A clear point system for scoring proposals is essential to ensure fairness and objectivity, and provide constructive feedback to unsuccessful bidders. Clear and objective criteria should be established and the review panel should be trained in evaluating proposals. Program/contract experts should be utilized.

Recommendations are:

• The proposal review panel(s) must be comprised of individuals without conflict of interest, consistent with ethical practice. No individuals should be included on the review panels who are from agencies (e.g., board members, volunteers, current clients or staff) that are bidding on the RFP being reviewed. Panel members should be required to disclose any potential conflicts or dual relationships.
• Review panel(s) should include community participants and subject-matter experts along with representatives from the appropriate city department. These experts should understand our local community context and service systems.
• Preference should be given to local agencies which are better suited to provide services to the San Francisco community. While we understand that a clear definition of what “local” means must be discussed and identified, it is our belief that San Francisco non-profits should take precedence over non-profits rooted in other counties.
• Experience points should be awarded to applicants that are currently providing the requested service and performing well, as measured by monitoring reports and client satisfaction surveys.
• Review panelists must receive training necessary to ensure inter-rater reliability and fair and consistent review and application of RFP requirements, criteria, and scoring. Training should include a review of the program development and planning processes relevant to the proposed services.
- The process for scoring the proposals should be clearly defined in the RFP, reviewed at the bidder’s conference, and included in review panel training.
- There should be only one review panel for each service within an RFP to ensure consistency in ratings and minimize appeals.
- The full proposals (including attachments) should be read by all panel members.
- A clear point system for scoring proposals should be used. The final awards and any reduction in funding should be tied to scores.
- If certain services or populations must be funded, state that expectation in the RFP and evaluate proposals accordingly.
- Final scores should be widely advertised.
- There should be a clear process and timeline for appealing contract awards
- A process should be developed in advance of negotiation that delineates what happens if negotiations with the selected provider are unsuccessful.

6. Contract Requirements

Recommendations are:

- Requirements that were not in the RFP should not be added to the final contract, and the contract negotiation process should not allow significant changes in the nature and/or costs of the proposed program/services that are inconsistent with the RFP. Contract negotiations should be conducted with a team of DAAS staff rather than one person. If funding must be reduced, then there must be a corresponding reduction in services.
- All contracts shall identify specific performance outputs and/or outcomes that should be comparable across same-service providers.
- Once per contract period, each contractor should be monitored by the Department to ensure service quality and progress toward outputs and outcomes is being achieved.
- Contracts with contractors that fail to achieve performance outputs or outcome requirements should not be automatically renewed. Such contracts should be reviewed to ensure that the desired outputs or outcomes are achievable. A new contract may be established, if appropriate, following a competitive bid process.
- Contracts will contain a provision for termination at the convenience of the County upon 30 day advance written notice, or immediate termination by written mutual consent.
- Training should be provided to ensure contractors are clear about billing, reimbursement, and payment timing processes.
- Contract reimbursements should be timely and when possible, the funding entity should establish a direct deposit payment program.