



Request for Proposals:

**Randomized Controlled Trials to
Evaluate Social Programs Whose
Delivery Will Be Funded by
Government or Other Entities**

March 2018

I. Overview:

The Laura and John Arnold Foundation's (LJAF) Evidence-Based Policy team invites grant applications to conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of social programs in any area of U.S. policy in which:

- (i) LJAF will fund the RCT, and government or another entity will fund the program's delivery; and
- (ii) The RCT meets the additional selection criteria set out below.

Our goal in funding such RCTs is to build the body of programs rigorously shown to produce sizable, sustained benefits to participants or society, and to do so in a cost-efficient manner by leveraging program funds contributed by government, philanthropic foundations, or other funders.

The selection criteria in this request for proposals (RFP) are similar to those in LJAF's [RFP for low-cost RCTs](#). Specifically, we seek to fund sizable RCTs with strong designs that evaluate programs with highly promising prior evidence or that are widely implemented, and the RCTs must measure outcomes of self-evident policy importance over a sustained period of time. In contrast to the low-cost RCT RFP, however, this RFP does not limit the study cost to \$300,000 and thus can accept RCT proposals in cases where low-cost RCTs are not feasible (*e.g.*, because the study's key outcomes cannot be measured inexpensively using administrative data). Even in these higher cost studies, however, we encourage cost-saving approaches, as described below.

Applicants proposing a low-cost RCT may apply for a grant through this RFP if our low-cost RCT RFP – which only accepts applications within certain time frames during the year – is not active. Otherwise, we encourage such applicants to apply through the low-cost RCT process, as the chances of award are higher under that process. (LJAF plans to release its next RFP for low-cost RCTs in summer or fall 2016, and to release such RFPs on a regular basis in 2017 and thereafter. Please [join](#) our email distribution list to receive notification of such releases.)

II. Application Process and Selection Criteria:

A. We ask applicants first to submit a letter of interest (maximum three pages). Applicants whose letters are reviewed favorably will be invited to submit a full proposal (maximum six pages). There is no deadline for submitting a letter of interest; applicants may submit a letter at any time via email to RCTopportunity@arnoldfoundation.org. We will notify applicants within one month whether they are invited to submit a full proposal (full proposals must be invited). Applicants may use their own format, with single or double spacing, and an 11-point font or larger. The page limit does not include attached letters or other documents specifically requested in this RFP.

B. Letters of interest and full proposals will be reviewed by the LJAF Evidence-Based Policy team and, as needed, outside reviewers, based on the selection criteria below. Both the LJAF team and outside reviewers have expertise in RCT evaluations.

C. **Selection Criteria:**

We ask applicants to address the following four criteria in both the letter of interest and the full proposal. The full proposal should provide more detail (*e.g.*, on the study design) than the letter of interest, and also address any questions or issues identified by LJAF in its invitation to submit a full proposal.

- **PROGRAM FUNDER: Will the proposed RCT evaluate a program whose delivery is paid for by another funder, and does that funder, or do other essential parties, agree to the study?** To verify such agreement(s), the reviewers will look for attached letters or other communications showing that the necessary parties (*e.g.*, program funder and/or program provider) assent to the study, including random assignment. Such agreement(s) may be tentative at the time the letter of interest is submitted, but should be finalized before submission of the full proposal. We especially encourage agreements in which the necessary parties not only assent to the study, but also provide a credible description of how they or others would use the study findings to inform program or policy decisions.

- **IMPORTANCE: Is the applicant proposing to evaluate a program –**
 - **That is backed by highly-promising prior evidence, suggesting it could produce sizable impacts on outcomes of recognized policy importance** – such as educational achievement, workforce earnings, criminal arrests, hospitalizations, child maltreatment, and government spending. For example, we specifically encourage applications seeking to replicate findings from prior rigorous evaluations that are especially promising but not yet conclusive—*e.g.*, due to only short-term follow-up, a single-site study design, or well-matched comparison groups but not randomization. (Please provide full citations to the relevant prior studies as an attachment to the letter of interest.) As a threshold condition for “highly promising” evidence, applicants should show that the program can be or (preferably) has been successfully delivered under real-world implementation conditions.

 - or -
 - **For which there are other compelling reasons to evaluate its effectiveness – *e.g.*, it is, or soon will be, widely implemented with significant taxpayer investment**, and its impact on its targeted outcomes is currently unknown.

Please note that, to meet this criterion, it is not sufficient to establish that the study addresses an important problem; applicants must also present compelling reasons to evaluate the specific program.

- **EXPERIENCED RESEARCHER: Does the applicant’s team include at least one researcher in a key substantive role who has previously carried out a well-conducted RCT?** A well-conducted RCT is characterized, for example, by low sample attrition, sufficient sample size, close adherence to random assignment, and valid outcome measures and statistical analyses. To address this criterion, applicants should submit reports from prior RCTs the researcher has conducted (please send the full study reports as email attachments to the letter of interest – no more than two reports in all). Reviewers will rely primarily on these reports in assessing this selection criterion.

- **STUDY DESIGN: Is the applicant’s proposed RCT design valid?** In other words, does it have a sufficiently large sample (as shown through a power analysis) and other elements needed to generate credible evidence about the program’s impact on one or more targeted outcomes of high policy importance? We strongly encourage designs that measure such outcomes in both the short and longer term, as appropriate for the type of program and study, to determine whether the effects endure long enough to constitute meaningful improvement in people’s lives. Reviewers, in assessing an applicant’s proposed design, will use [Key Items to Get Right When Conducting RCTs of Social Programs](#) as a reference.

Applicants, as part of their discussion of this criterion, should specify the study's primary outcome(s) of interest; how they will measure the outcome(s) and over what length of time; and what analyses they plan to conduct (*e.g.*, any subgroups to be examined, regression methods to be used).

D. Other items to include in the letter of interest and invited full proposal:

- 1. Applicants should specify the amount of funding requested**, and, for the full proposal only, attach a one-page project budget that is consistent with LJAF's indirect cost policy (see attachment). To reduce study costs, we encourage the use of administrative data (*e.g.*, wage records, state educational test scores, criminal arrest records) to measure key study outcomes, wherever feasible, in lieu of more expensive original data collection. In addition, if the applicant proposes any implementation research to complement the RCT, we suggest streamlined approaches that do not greatly increase the overall study cost. If additional funding from other sources is needed to carry out the study, we request that the applicant's budget show (i) the total study cost, and (ii) the portion of that cost to be covered by LJAF; and include an attached letter or other communication showing that the additional funding will be in place prior to LJAF's grant award.
- 2. Applicants should specify the proposed recipient of the grant award, which we generally expect to be a tax-exempt organization** (*e.g.*, nonprofit organization, university, or governmental unit). If an organization is not tax-exempt and wishes to apply, please contact David Anderson (see contact information below).
- 3. Applicants should briefly address how their study meets recognized ethical standards for research with human subjects.**

III. What To Expect in the Grant Agreement: We will ask awardees, as a condition of their award, to –

- **Pre-register the study on the Open Science Framework (OSF) [website](#)** and, prior to commencement of the study, upload a copy of the research and analysis plan described in their proposal.
- **Provide us with brief phone or email updates on the study's progress on a periodic basis, and before making any key decisions that could materially affect the study's design or implementation.**
- **Submit concise reports on the impact findings at appropriate intervals.** These reports should make it easy for readers to see the study's main results and gauge their credibility (*e.g.*, by showing the similarity of the treatment and control groups in pre-program characteristics, the amount of sample attrition, and the statistical significance of the impact findings).

- and -

- **Make their datasets and related materials (*e.g.*, survey instruments, code used to clean and analyze datasets) publicly available on the OSF site.** We ask applicants to do this within one year of the last data collection, and only to the extent allowed under any confidentiality/privacy protections.

[Note: The above list previews the main items in the grant agreement, but is not an exhaustive list of the conditions of the award.]

IV. Questions? Please contact David Anderson, Director of Evidence-Based Policy (danderson@arnoldfoundation.org, 202-239-1248).