

SIG FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions by David P. Stevens/MCOA



Massachusetts
Councils On Aging

During my 25 years at the helm of the Massachusetts Councils on Aging, this is what I have learned regarding the Service Incentive Grant Program. It is important to note that this is my historical recollection and interpretation of the program, not necessarily the only interpretation. I drafted this because, as I tour the state, there are a lot of inaccuracies and unknowns about this program. I welcome input on this document. -DPS

What is SIG?

SIG is the acronym for Service Incentive Grant which is a portion of Line Item #9110-9002. That line item also includes the more notable Formula Grant (FG) - a local aid for municipally based Councils on Aging, based on the US Census count.

Has SIG always existed?

Yes. Though it wasn't always called SIG, money from this Line item had a set-aside dedicated for a specific purpose. The original set-aside was for "establishing municipally based COAs"; and Elder Affairs had several technical experts, "circuit riders," that traveled the state helping each municipality with seed grants to establish a Council on Aging Department.

What is the purpose of SIG?

SIG was established from the beginning to assist municipal COAs in developing services and programs. During the nineties, it focused on services that were innovative and promoted regionalization. Though there has been a component of SIG for ongoing outreach and transportation programs, the bulk of SIG has been used as startup funds - one to three years of funding to prove efficacy on a targeted problem, and then another more permanent funding source is needed.

How much is in the SIG portion of the line item?

It has varied, but the rule of thumb had always been around 10% of the FG. As we have recently grown from \$8/elder to \$12, I have calculated the total needed for FG and then added an additional 10% for SIG; that final amount comprises our ask to the Governor and Legislature. My calculations are posted on MCOA's website at <https://mcoaonline.com/2018/02/12/formula-grant-projections/> Members have voted in the past not to set aside more than 10% because members prefer funding as FG. During the great recession, MCOA's Membership voted to eliminate SIG and to keep FG whole.

What was allocated to SIG in FY18?

After the 3% across-the-board, line-item cut imposed by the Conference Committee to balance the budget, the FG was reduced to \$9.70 and the SIG (also reduced by 3%) was lowered to a total of \$1,314,762.25; of which \$349,612.25 was for Core Service (outreach and transportation grants to local and small regional transits projects) and \$965,125 was allocated to MCOA.

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Who approves SIG spending

As proscribed in Line Item #9110-9002, the Secretary of Elder Affairs has the final say. We survey our membership and propose a list of priorities. The Secretary then prioritizes the list, and eliminates some ideas that will not be funded. MCOA then is responsible for the RFP process, the billing requirements (accrual basis), and the final report. We are given a target budget and have some flexibility during the year.

Why does MCOA get such a large amount?

After the Great Recession, the first funding request the membership voted for was the restoration of the SIG funding. When it was restored to the line item, Elder Affairs stated they did not have the capacity to manage the million dollar plus account and offered to subcontract the SIG program to MCOA if we followed certain guidelines, which included ensuring a competitive process that focused on designated priority projects that could be replicated. We would manage the financing, and provide a comprehensive report of the outcomes produced by these funds after the close of the fiscal year.

What are the advantages to members by MCOA managing these funds

1. MCOA makes a concerted effort to poll our members about services and programs for which we should seek funding. We compile the list, lobby for, and then seek approval from the Secretary of Elder Affairs. Priorities are set, and some projects are not allowed by EOEА.
2. We create a simple application, bring in a review team to screen applications, and get MCOA Board endorsement on all subgrants.
3. Sub-grantees must provide a final report detailing expected outcomes, and submit a final billing statement to get paid. It is worth noting that, after the Great Recession, EOEА switched SIG funding to an accrual-based system, which means we have to document incurred costs, submit billing, then await payment. Previously, it was an upfront allocation with a reconciliation process, similar to FG.
4. Our sub-grant process is actually far simpler than issuing the bid on the state contract list, or by other means that EOEА would design today. Because of our relationship with our members, we can expedite the process and stream-line the local requirements to assist our members.
5. We see it as a win-win-win. A win for our members because we can get funds in their hands faster and easier than the state. A win for Elder Affairs because they have direct control of the outcome and can field test some of their innovative priorities. And a win for MCOA because we provide another valuable service for our members.

What is the SIG amount for FY19?

\$12/elder with a \$6000/minimum translates into \$15,453,216 needed for FG and thus I calculated we should request \$1,545,322 for SIG totaling \$16,998,538. Our ask at the \$12/elder level was rounded up to \$17million. But we received only \$16,515,125 after the earmarks were removed; that leaves only \$1,061,909 in FY19. However, EOEА feels there will be enough FG returned from FY18 to provide for 'level funding' for FY19: \$349,612.25 for Core Service (outreach and transportation grants to local and small regional transits projects-overseen directly by EOEА Program Manager Emmett Schmarsow) and \$965,125 for MCOA. MCOA's Executive Board voted on July 26, 2018 to immediately proceed with \$615,200 on existing 3-year grant commitments and employment contracts, and revisit the balance at our August 29th Board meeting.

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Why is the local COA input critical?

At the June MCOA membership meeting, Mary Kay Browne facilitated a discussion about SIG funding priorities for the next 3-5 years. With the distribution of this FAQ document, we also seek additional input to help shape our priorities for consideration by the Secretary. In addition, all ideas are kept on file because you never know where another funding source may emerge. SIG funding makes up only about 40% of our overall budget; we have successfully received funding from other funding sources (e.g. ACL/Federal, THPF, BCBS). Frequently, funders approach us with opportunities. By having member ideas on file, we can encourage partnerships with MCOA taking the lead or connecting funders directly with our members.

What MCOA Staff positions are paid thru SIG?

Four positions are currently funded thru SIG:

- Two Directors of Member Services (Kathy Bowler and Donna Popkin- formerly COA Directors) who are in charge of welcoming new directors, providing technical assistance as needed, developing a year-long training schedule including the three-day fall conference, broadening our portfolio of training resources, working with the Administration to introduce new programs into our Senior Centers (e.g. MA RMV and Me and SNAP) and representing MCOA on various statewide and regional associations. Their roles are similar to the EOEAs' "circuit riders" of the seventies and eighties.
- A Director of Special Projects (Mary Kay Browne) leads in the development of new resources and service programs for our network, including state or federal grants, foundations, and corporate sponsors. She oversees MCOA's grant-making and contracting. She has also successfully applied for an ACL (federal) Grant (\$1 million over 3 years) and a Tufts Health Plan Foundation Roosevelt Leadership Grant (\$300,000 over 3 years) to lead our Commonwealth towards becoming more Dementia Friendly.
- A Communications Manager (Lynn Wolf) who is responsible for the agency communications, including Briefs, Newsletter, email and web; maintains contact lists in coordination with communication planning calendar; and event coordination.
- The balance of MCOA's SIG funds (approximately \$600,000), along with most of the ACL grant and some of the THPF grants, is then sub-contracted to our members. MCOA is responsible for the application, sub-grantee RFP, oversight, billing and reporting of these grants.

What about ideas not funded by SIG?

MCOA searches for other funding sources. This is why we need our Members to submit their ideas ahead of time. There is no need for members to submit an application for a program that will not get funded under SIG; but, more importantly, SIG is not our only funding source. By having a current list of needs and ideas, MCOA can pursue alternative funding sources.