

**Department of Human Services
Agency Budget Review Team**

**November 2017
Charlottesville, Virginia**

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I. Introduction

In this assessment, the students in the Consulting Clinic Class at the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy (hereafter referred to as “the team”) were charged with advising the City of Charlottesville’s Department of Human Services (DHS) on its Agency Budget Review Team (ABRT). The ABRT reviews applications from nonprofit organizations and provides recommendations for recipients of city funds. The team aims to advise the DHS on how the ABRT may improve the process for allocation of funds to applicants, communication between stakeholders, and the overall performance and value of the ABRT process.

The report presents a profile of activities the team conducted from September to November in 2017, the key findings from these activities, and a series of final recommendations. The three main categories discussed in this paper include mission, application and review process, and decision-making. The mission section discusses the perceived and stated goals of the ABRT and how the process is structured to achieve those goals. The process section refers to the application and review processes of ABRT and the City of Charlottesville, including the role of technical assistance. The decision-making section discusses the role of various stakeholders, especially the Charlottesville City Council, in the ABRT process.

Each section discusses main themes, key findings, relevant evidence and sources of information, and recommendations.

II. Methodology

The team used a variety of methods to assess the ABRT process, including a document and data analysis, environmental scans, a logic model and theory of change, stakeholder interviews, and survey data.

- The team conducted document and data analysis by reviewing and assessing documentation from previous ABRT reports, reviews, and historical funding data. This was completed to understand the history of the ABRT, provide relevant context, and identify trends in funding allocation, training strategies for ABRT volunteers, and training strategies for nonprofit applicants.
- The team conducted environmental scans to collect and interpret best practices at the local, regional, and national levels for public, nonprofit, and private philanthropic funding. Environmental scan topics included philanthropic fund allocation, public fund allocation, evaluation in fund allocation, and grant application technical assistance.
- The team created a logic model and theory of change to clarify and evaluate the ABRT goals, mission, and process.

- The team conducted stakeholder interviews with Charlottesville City Staff, Albemarle County Staff, ABRT volunteers, and Charlottesville City Council members. From these interviews, the team analyzed the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the ABRT to inform the findings and recommendations presented in this report.
- The team conducted a survey of nonprofit applicants. This survey was sent out to nonprofits immediately after the application was due to elicit responses while the process was fresh on applicants' minds. A summary of the results is included in Appendix 4.

III. Mission

a. Findings

Based on data from stakeholder interviews, the ABRT's main mission is to provide funding recommendations for nonprofits delivering goods and services to the community aligned with the City's strategic goals. Interviews suggest that distributing city funds to nonprofit agencies through the ABRT is a way for the city to "move the needle" on core issues defined in the City's strategic plan. It is a way for the City to "put our money where our mouth is" by allocating funds to directly invest in work towards strategic goals. Analysis of relevant documents further supports this notion. Both the ABRT application and the metrics used by the team include language specifically targeting strategic goals, as illustrated in the Appendix 2. The ABRT has made a concerted effort to emphasize these goals in the past year, adding them to the application using metrics and outcomes defined in collaboration with the nonprofit agencies.

While the ABRT is successful in many aspects of its design and process, there are three key areas the team identified, using the ideal logic model included in Appendix 1, as gaps or misalignments with the determined ABRT mission.

Clarity of Mission

Despite widespread knowledge of the ABRT process among volunteers, city staff, and local nonprofit agencies, there is no explicit or published definition of the ABRT's mission or purpose. As seen in Appendix 3, the ABRT portion of the Human Services website details only the purpose and process of ABRT volunteers. The published report goes into more detail on its requirement for applicants to align themselves to either Albemarle County or Charlottesville City Strategic Goals, but does not state the overall mission of the ABRT.

Application and Evaluative Criteria

The ABRT application recently added a clear list of criteria for applicants to explicitly link their program to the City's strategic goals. However, despite the inclusion of these criteria, the team identified two gaps within strategic goal inclusion in the application.

First, despite stakeholder perceptions that the ABRT is driven by community needs, the team's findings suggest that the review process does not prioritize the strategic goals of the city. Although there has been an increased focus on addressing the city's strategic goals through the ABRT in the past few years, the process is still not driven by these goals. Stakeholder interviews revealed that despite being included in the process, these goals are not prioritized. This creates a disconnect between the stated mission of the ABRT, as it is expressed by stakeholders, and the actual process.

Second, while previous applications may have given nonprofits an opportunity to connect their mission to goals for the city, stakeholders interviewed claimed that the goals were often vague enough for any applicant to make the connection. The recent addition of listed activities that apply to strategic goals imply that the ABRT is working toward a more goal-driven process, but that it has not historically been one. Additionally, while the inclusion of strategic goals in the ABRT application was a step in the right direction, that criteria is not weighted heavily enough in comparison to other evaluation metrics to imply importance. Despite claims that recommendations are intended to reflect strategic goals of the city, stakeholders interviews and the weighting of scoring metrics suggest otherwise.

Funding Allocations

The team's analysis indicates that the ABRT tends to fund the same organizations each year, mostly due to budget constraints. If a new applicant proves that their organization is advancing one of the City's strategic goals, there is no guarantee that they will receive funding. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that sometimes when the ABRT recommends new agencies, there are not enough funds to support a new agency and the City or County "would prefer to support those we've been supporting, even if the new agency is a great recommendation," or aligns with strategic goals of the city.

b. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Adjust Applicant Scoring Metrics to Prioritize Strategic Goals

Interviews confirmed multiple stakeholders support measures to reform the ABRT process to move towards increased emphasis on identifying and funding organizations that align with the City's goals for the community. One possible method of resolving the identified gaps and refocusing the ABRT onto the City's strategic goals is to increase the importance of meeting these goals in the application and scoring processes. This could be accomplished by increasing the weight of meeting community goals in the nonprofit scoring sheet. Records of previously funded applicants suggest that the current 12/100 points awarded if an applicant's program "addresses a priority area" are not enough to disqualify nonprofits that do not align with strategic goals. Outcome measures should be weighted heavily enough for an applicant to be disqualified if they fail to prove that their agency adequately addresses a strategic goal.

Recommendation 2: Formalize an ABRT Mission Statement

A formalized ABRT mission statement should be drafted to describe the City's goal and desired outcomes for the ABRT. The creation of a formalized mission statement would clarify the ABRT's purpose to volunteers, applicants, and Charlottesville residents. The mission statement should be placed on the ABRT page of the City's Human services website and published as part of the annual ABRT funding recommendation report.

Interviews revealed that many stakeholders believe that the ABRT is an avenue through which emerging needs should be addressed. However, emerging needs were not identified as the main priority or mission of the ABRT during the team's investigation. Should the City choose to shift focus to address emerging needs through the ABRT process, they should either include addressing emerging needs in the mission statement of the ABRT, include them as an evaluative aspect of the application, or create a new bucket of funding specifically to address emerging needs.

IV. ABRT Review Process

a. Findings

Despite efforts to improve the ABRT Review Process through updates to the application, metrics, and evaluation methods, concerns remain about the time investment required to complete and review the applications as well as the objectivity of the process. Interviews with Charlottesville City Council members, ABRT volunteers, and city staff revealed several common concerns, including time commitments, technical assistance, subjective scoring, site visits, and repeat applicants.

Time Commitments

First, there is widespread concern that the current ABRT Review Process is excessively time-consuming. While several stakeholders saw the rigor of the application process as a strength, others felt that time investment necessitated by the application disproportionately affected smaller and newer non-profit agencies without time and personnel resources to devote to the task of understanding and properly completing the application. Additionally, though the application is seen to be time consuming for non-profit agencies, some stakeholders also took issue with the short period during which reviewers must evaluate applications.

Technical Assistance

A second major concern is that the current ABRT Review Process is perceived to, and may in practice, lack objectivity. One potential issue area is the technical assistance provided by city staff members who have taken on the role of liaisons. For example, all feedback from ABRT volunteers to nonprofit applicants is filtered through the Program Coordinator for the ABRT,

who then disseminates the information to applicants through an informal process. Though communicating feedback is critical to the future success of the applying agency, this informal process for providing technical assistance can result in the perception that the review process itself is not objective. Agencies may come to see relationships with the program liaison to be critical to obtaining funding or that scores are somehow predetermined by them.

Subjective Scoring

Some of the stakeholders interviewed also expressed concerns that the current evaluation process is inherently subjective. Though the evaluation metrics were developed to align with the city's strategic goals, interviews revealed that some stakeholders feel the entire scoring process is often influenced by preconceived notions about the agency applying. Thus, an agency with a reputation for lack of organization or a poorly completed past application could suffer in all categories during the scoring process due to the biases of volunteer evaluators. However, studies on best practices for public grantmaking suggest that subjectivity is unavoidable in all grantmaking practices, so these notions that the ABRT falls short of objectivity are unsurprising and perhaps unavoidable.

Site Visits

One area in which the ABRT can easily improve perceptions of partiality, however, is in site visits. The ABRT review process currently has no standard protocol for site visits, meaning the visits can either come as a welcome surprise or a concerning one. One interviewer explained that some site visits revealed value that was not or could not be fully explained in the applications, while others revealed organizations that were far less streamlined and effective than they appeared in writing. If these site visits are as potentially critical to determining an agency's effectiveness as the stakeholder described, they should be uniformly instituted. If there are not useful, they should be eliminated altogether. If they are only helpful when an agency falls between two scoring categories, then there need to be clear guidelines for when an agency receives a site visit. The existence of site visits without protocol only leads to increased perceptions of subjectivity or bias in the evaluation process.

Repeat Applicants

Finally, stakeholder interviews suggest that the ABRT Review Process favors repeat applicants. Numerous individuals shared perceptions that repeat applicants more intimately understood the application process in a way that allowed them a competitive advantage over less-experienced agencies. For example, one stakeholder noted that past applicants have the advantage of knowing what data and materials to have ready when beginning the application. Others perceived that priority funding was awarded to agencies that had previously received funding. However, data analysis of the past three grant cycles are not entirely consistent with these claims. While only three out of seven new applicants received funding in fiscal year 2017, seven of the nine new applicants in fiscal year 2016 were awarded funding. Though the data is inconclusive, these

concerns about subjectivity and potential bias should be taken seriously, as they may impact agency perceptions of the ABRT.

The team developed several recommendations to improve the ABRT Review Process and respond to the concerns revealed through the team's analysis:

b. Recommendations

Recommendation 3: Increase the time period for application review

The current time period for volunteers to review applications is insufficient for a nuanced and detailed review. This time constraint puts undue pressure on volunteers, who may in turn allow their personal perceptions of agencies to impact scoring. One way to alleviate this problem is by starting the review process earlier. Extending the review deadline by one or two weeks by opening and closing the application period earlier in the year would allow volunteers more time to individually review applications without conflicting with year-end commitments.

Recommendation 4: De-centralize technical assistance

While there are benefits to having a single city staffer provide technical assistance to applicants to during and after the grant cycle, this system naturally creates a “gatekeeper” role. As a result, agencies may mistakenly believe that scores are predetermined based on the applicant's relationship with this staffer. The team recommends that technical assistance be decentralized during both the application process and after evaluations have been released. During the application cycle, technical assistance can be decentralized by delegating the task of assisting agencies to multiple city staffers. Doing so would also ease the transition when the current Program Coordinator for the ABRT leaves their position, as institutional knowledge and relationships with agencies would be maintained by the remaining city staff.

Alternatively, the technical assistance could be decentralized or disassociated from the role of a city staff person by developing webinars or instructional videos, so that all agencies have access to the exact same resources. After evaluations are complete and scores have been released, technical assistance can be decentralized by requiring that debriefs with agencies be conducted by a team including one city staff member and one ABRT volunteer.

Recommendation 5: Decrease opportunities for subjectivity through objectivity and conflict of interest training

Given concerns about biased scoring as a result of preconceived notions about individual agencies, the team recommends the implementation of objectivity and conflict of interest training for both ABRT volunteers and the city staff members who review applications and provide the aforementioned training sessions for volunteers. City staff should avoid using specific agencies as examples of “good” or “bad” applicants, and the ABRT should have clear guidelines for what is appropriate to discuss during the scoring process and when to recuse oneself from scoring an

agency application. Ideally, the ABRT would be able to implement a blind scoring system. However, the team acknowledges that such a system might have little impact given the number of repeat applicants and the close ties that ABRT members often have to the nonprofit community.

Recommendation 6: Standardize protocol for site visits

A lack of standardized policy for site visits can unintentionally communicate subjectivity to agencies, which may feel they are being unjustly scrutinized. The ABRT should therefore seek to standardize site visits. This can be achieved either by drafting and making publicly available clear guidelines for when a site visit is merited, or by mandating a site visit for every agency that applies or is awarded funding. Additionally, procedures during the site visit should be standardized so that no agency is being more highly scrutinized than another.

Recommendation 7: Continue to evaluate the acceptance rate of new applicants for funding

There is currently insufficient data to support claims by stakeholders that new applicants are at a systematic disadvantage when compared to agencies that have previously applied for ABRT funding. However, given the overwhelming sentiment that this is the case, the city should continue to collect and analyze detailed data on the ratings received by new versus experienced applicants. An imbalance in funding between these two groups may indicate subjective scoring criteria and evaluative practices or an overly complex application process. Moving forward, it will also be important to track this data to understand whether or not the current budget for the ABRT is sufficient to fund new organizations and emerging needs.

V. Final Decision Making

a. Findings

Concerns about the City Council overriding ABRT recommendations have been salient since the outset of this project. As currently constituted, the ABRT's recommendations are non-binding. City Council has final decision-making power to approve or override ABRT recommendations with their own funding suggestions. The Council approves the vast majority of the recommendations, but there is frustration among ABRT volunteers and other stakeholders over the handful of Council overrides that do occur each year.

When asked about their feelings on City Council overrides, volunteers and city staff acknowledged that the overrides are somewhat uncommon. There was general consensus across interviews that the Council approves "90-95 percent of the recommendations." Interviewees also noted that the Council never rejects recommendations to fund programs; it only overrides ABRT recommendations to give programs zero funding. Analysis of data from fiscal years 2016 and

2017 corroborates these claims. As shown in the tables below, there were no instances of the Council rejecting recommendations to fund during fiscal years 2016-2017.

Table 1A: FY2016 Override Summary	
Overrides	3
Total Applicants	72
Override as % of Total Recommendations	4.2%
Total Override	23,252
Total City Funding for FY16	2,889,753
Override as % of Total Funding	0.8%

Table 1B: FY2016 Overrides		
Agency	Program	Actual Funding
Offender Aid & Restoration	Restorative Justice	8,322
African American Teaching Fellows	AATF Core Program	3,938
Legal Aid Justice Center	Just Children	10,992

Table 2A: FY2017 Override Summary	
Overrides	4
Total Applicants	67
Override as % of Total Recommendations	6.0%
Total Override	73,503
Total City Funding for FY17	3,187,944
Override as % of Total Funding	2.3%

Table 2B: FY2017 Overrides		
Agency	Program	Actual Funding
Musicians United to Serve Youth of Cville	Music Resource Center	14,209
Light House Studio	Light House Studio	8,321
Legal Aid Justice Center	Just Children	10,992
Legal Aid Justice Center	Civil Advocacy Program	39,981

Source: City of Charlottesville Data

Beyond the number of ABRT recommendations the Council chose to override, it is worth noting the total amount of override funding for each year. In both years described above, override funding represented less than 2.5% of the overall funding pool and largely went to one organization. Despite the overrides' small ultimate impact on a given year's funding, Council overrides were a major source of worry and frustration throughout interviews with city staff and ABRT volunteers. Levels of frustration ranged from mild to acute. While one interviewee noted that "you cannot take this stuff personally," another interviewee described the overrides as "extremely frustrating." More importantly, interviewees expressed worry that the overrides pose long-term threats to the ABRT process for two main reasons.

First, many felt that the overrides harm the credibility of the ABRT process. When the Council decides to overturn an ABRT recommendation, it is often because representatives from an organization attend public City Council meetings to plead for money. These pleas are sometimes dramatic or emotional, and Council members must make the decisions quickly. Observing these emotional pitches year after year, several interviewees expressed concern over the Council's "reputation" for responding favorably. One interviewee noted a growing mindset that "if I lobby a couple of councillors, I can get moving in the direction I want."

Second, interviewees expressed concern over volunteers becoming discouraged and withdrawing from the ABRT as a result of Council overrides. As one interviewee described, “it feels a little bit like [the Council] is not honoring the work of the volunteers... When it happens, it feels pretty bad. It has a disproportionate impact on us thinking about the process. [It] really sticks with people.” Several interviewees echoed the same sentiment, and one added that the Council “could do better” to show appreciation for the ABRT. Evidently, the volunteers do not always feel properly valued for their work.

Given these concerns and frustrations, the team proposes the following recommendations to improve final decision-making in the ABRT process.¹

b. Recommendations

Recommendation 8: Institute Time-Delayed Overrides & Non-Binding Override Statement

At present, City Council members hear appeals and make funding decisions quickly in public meetings. These meetings are often crowded with pleading nonprofits, the press, and other onlookers. This is a difficult position for Council members; under calmer conditions, they can make more reasoned decisions. The team recommends a one-week time delay between nonprofit appeals and ultimate funding decisions by the Council.

During this time delay, the team recommends that appealing nonprofits be prohibited from further communication with the Council. This provision is included so Council members are not bombarded with pleas in the interim week before their decision. The team also recommends that the ABRT issue a brief and non-binding “override statement” each year to guide the Council in its final decision-making following appeals. The statement provides the ABRT an opportunity to defend its recommendations and explain why the Council should not override particular recommendations, but the non-binding statement still leaves the decision in the hands of the Council.

Overall, the one week time-delay will likely reduce the number of Council overrides and, therefore, reduce the number of nonprofits that undermine the ABRT process by appealing directly to City Council. Additionally, for the overrides that do persist, the time-delay will signal more careful and thoughtful override decisions from the Council.

Recommendation 9: Clarify Role of ABRT Volunteers During Training

The ultimate role of the ABRT is to make recommendations, not to make final decisions on funding. However, it is easy for ABRT volunteers to lose sight of this. The volunteers put tremendous time and effort into scoring applications and take pride in their work, so it is

¹ Note: By contrast, the County ABRT does not appear to face either of these issues. According to several interviewees, the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors very seldom overrides proposed funding amounts.

reasonable for volunteers to take offense to sudden overrides to their weeks of work. Accordingly, the team proposes a clear statement during ABRT volunteer training that the volunteers are valuable contributors but not final decision-makers.

ABRT volunteers may show less frustration if reminded of their important, but still limited, responsibility. The city staff member who leads volunteer training should emphasize that while the Council values the volunteers' work by accepting the overwhelming majority of recommendations, the Council has the right to make funding decisions that do not align with the recommendations provided by the ABRT. With a clearer sense of their purpose, volunteers may express less personal frustration or offense as a result of Council overrides.

VI. Conclusion

The Batten team seeks to advise the ABRT on how it may improve allocation of funds to applicants, communication between stakeholders, and overall satisfaction with the ABRT process. The team found that the ABRT process has strengths, including a detailed scoring system, committed and knowledgeable volunteers and staff members, and the ability to empower local nonprofits to carry out valuable work for the community. The team also believes that the ABRT process has the opportunity to improve its consistency, objectivity, and assistance to applicants. These areas of improvement are addressed in the following nine recommendations, with the top three priorities bolded:

- **Recommendation 1: Adjust Applicant Scoring Metrics to Prioritize Strategic Goals**
- Recommendation 2: Formalize an ABRT Mission Statement
- Recommendation 3: Increase the time period for application review
- **Recommendation 4: De-centralize technical assistance**
- Recommendation 5: Decrease opportunities for subjectivity through conflict of interest training
- Recommendation 6: Standardize protocol for site visits
- Recommendation 7: Continue to evaluate the acceptance rate of new applicants for funding
- **Recommendation 8: Institute Time-Delayed Overrides & Nonbinding Override Criteria**
- Recommendation 9: Remind ABRT of Role

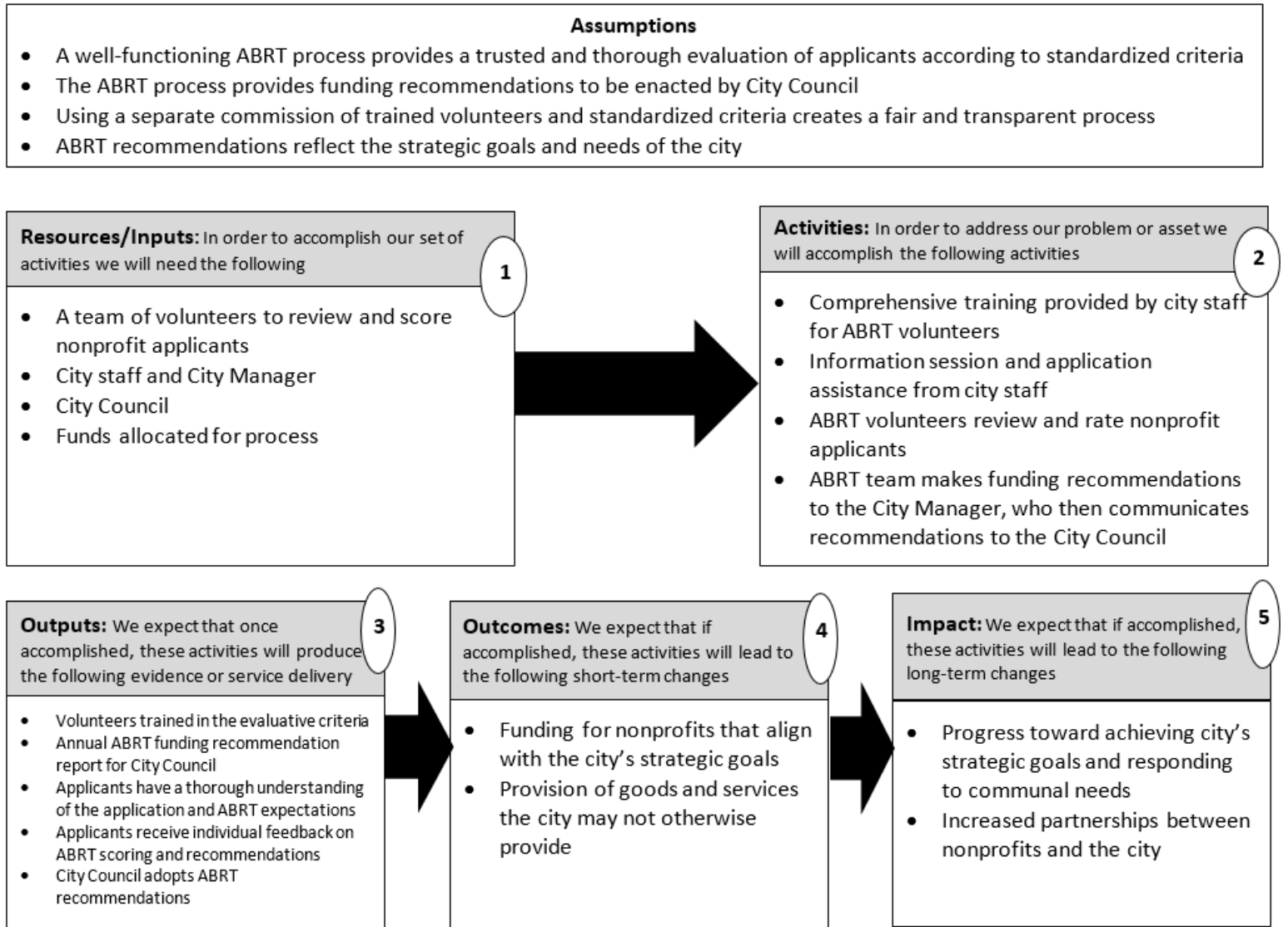
With this list of recommendations, supported thorough investigation and analysis, the team hopes to equip the ABRT with the proper next steps to ensure greater improvement of the process in the coming years.

Thank you to the various interview participants, including Charlottesville City Council members, ABRT volunteers, and city staff. Thank you to Director of Human Services Kaki Dimock for her guidance, input, and responsiveness throughout the process. Finally, thank you to Saphira Baker for leading the team and for providing her vast expertise to ensure the successful completion of this project.

I. Appendices

Appendix 1

ABRT LOGIC MODEL



Appendix 2

3. If your organization is requesting funds from the City of Charlottesville, indicate which strategic objective(s) the program addresses (no more than 2).

Charlottesville Goals: 1: Inclusive community of self-sufficient residents 2: Healthy and safe city 3: Beautiful and sustainable natural and build environment 4: Strong, creative and diversified economy 5: Well-managed and responsive organization





- ☐ C1. Prepare students for academic and vocational success
- ☐ C2. Prepare residents for the workforce
- ☐ C3. Enhance financial health of residents
- ☐ C4. Increase affordable housing options
- ☐ C5. Reduce adverse impact from sudden injury and illness and the effects of chronic disease
- ☐ C6. Improve community health and safety outcomes by connecting residents with effective resources
- ☐ C7. Meet the safety needs of victims and reduce the risk of re-occurrence/re-victimization
- ☐ C8. Reduce occurrence of crime, traffic violations and accidents in the community
- ☐ C9. Attract and cultivate a variety of businesses
- ☐ C10. Grow and retain viable businesses
- ☐ C11. Promote tourism through effective marketing
- ☐ C12. Provide planning and technical assistance
- ☐ C13. Intentionally address issues of race and equity
- ☐ C14. Promote tourism through effective marketing
- ☐ C15. Engage in robust and context sensitive urban planning and implementation
- ☐ C16. Provide reliable and high quality infrastructure
- ☐ C17. Provide a variety of transportation and mobility options
- ☐ C18. Be responsible stewards of natural resources
- ☐ Not applicable

CULTURAL, ARTS, FESTIVALS EVALUATION				
1	The application explains how the program addresses the priority			12
		The application does not describe a meaningful impact on the objective	0	
		The application indicates that some impact can be partially affected by the program	4	
		The application describes some impact that can be directly affected by the program	8	
		The application describes meaningful impact that can be directly affected by the program	12	
2	The program presents local data to explain the need addressed (could include audience or community surveys, utilization)			4
		No data provided	0	
		Only state, regional, or national data provided	1	
		Some local data provided by not specific to community needs	2	
		Local data describes community need	3	
		Local data describes specific needs of participants or audience.	4	

Appendix 3

- ▶ Community Attention
- ▶ Community Mental Health and Wellness Coalition
- DMC
- Re-Entry
- ▶ **ABRT**
- BMA
- City of Promise
- Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee
- Partnership Peer Network

AGENCY BUDGET REVIEW TEAM

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FY19 Application Process for Human Service Agencies, Arts/Cultural/Festival Programs, and Contractual Organizations.

The application will be released on August 28 and is due on October 25. Two identical orientation sessions will be held on August 30 and September 5. Contact Gretchen Ellis at 434-070-3967 or ellisg@charlottesville.org.

*****NEW*** UPDATE: August 29, 2017.** The application is now available at:

<https://zoomgrants.com/gprop.asp?donorid=2201&limited=1480>

The Agency Budget Review Team (ABRT) is a 16 member team tasked by the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County with reviewing community agency program funding requests to the City and County governments, and with providing ratings recommendations to the Charlottesville City Manager and Albemarle County Executive, whose offices make the ultimate funding recommendations to Charlottesville City Council and the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors. City staff serve as the grant managers for the ABRT process, including issuing the application, facilitating orientation and ABRT trainings, providing technical assistance to applicant agencies, organizing and staffing Team meetings, and preparing this report.

The ABRT process begins with technical assistance orientation and training for prospective applicants, generally held in late summer or early fall. Applicants are provided with special instructions, an overview of the process and any specific priority areas identified by the local governments. Applications are accepted via an online tool. The applications are reviewed and scored by the designated ABRT review team. Site visits are conducted based on the interest of the review team members. Applications are scored individually and then discussed as a team. The final scores are submitted to the city manager and county executive for consideration in their budget deliberations. The city manager and county executive submit their budget recommendations to the Charlottesville City Council and Albemarle County Board of Supervisors for final consideration and adoption.

The city holds a series of public meetings to hear community feedback in the creation of the annual budget, including a worksession dedicated to discussion of the ABRT recommendations and final adoption. The public is specifically invited to attend this worksession.

[Click here to access the FY18 ABRT Final Report.](#)

[Click here to access the FY18 Rating Sheet for Arts, Cultural and Festival programs.](#)

Appendix 4

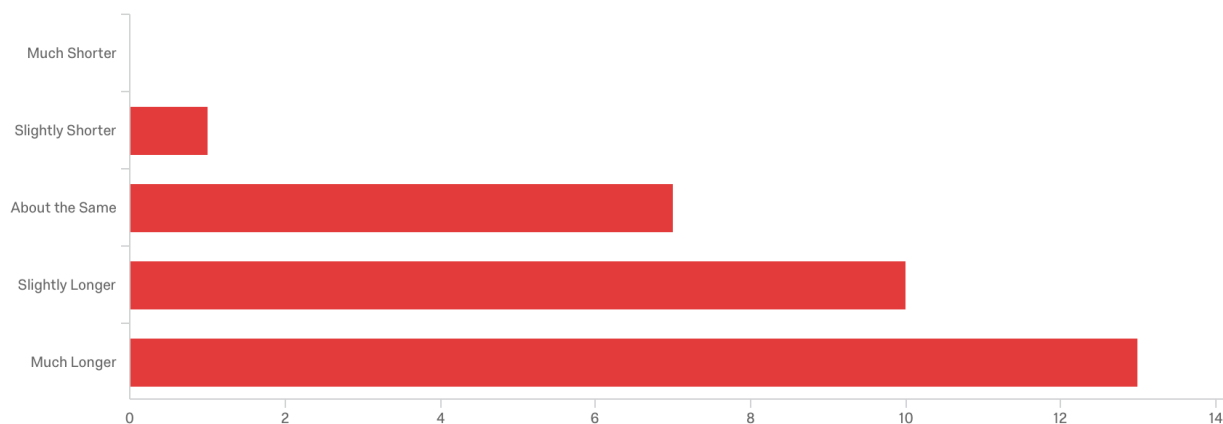
Charlottesville Nonprofit Agencies: Survey Results November 2017

From October 26th to November 2nd, 2017, Charlottesville nonprofit agencies that applied for funding from the Agency Budget Review Team (ABRT) provided feedback to identify concerns and offer suggestions to improve the current functioning of the ABRT. The feedback is intended to contribute to the data used by the Batten Community Consulting students as they complete their final deliverable.

1. Time

The time required to complete the ABRT application varied greatly among each of the applicants, but the general trend showed that the time investment was perceived as long. The maximum number of staff hours required to complete the ABRT survey was 125 hours; second highest 110 hours; third highest was 70 hours. The minimum number was 8 hours; second lowest 10 hours; third lowest 12 hours.

Compared time spent on applications for other grants of this size:



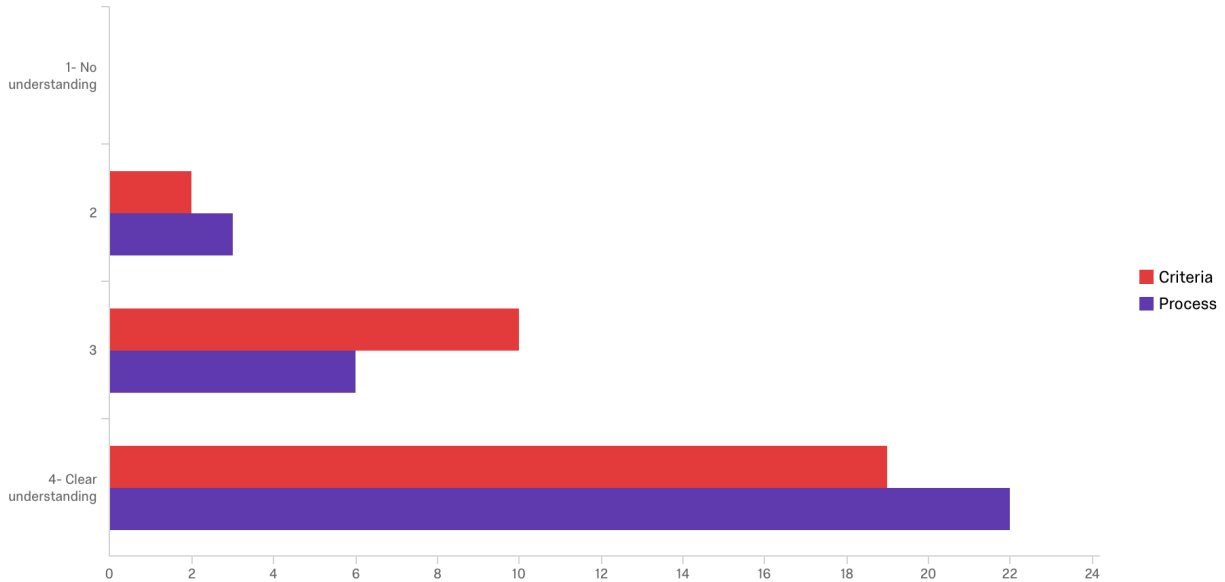
Thirteen (13/31) respondents thought the time required to complete the ABRT application was “much longer” than other comparable grants.

a. Development staff

Ten respondents (10/31) employed designated development staff within their agency to complete the ABRT application. Twenty-one respondents (21/31) did not.

2. Level of understanding: criteria and process

On a scale from 1 to 4, a majority of respondents described their level of understanding about the ABRT criteria and process as levels 3 or 4. None of the respondents reported that they had “no understanding” of the ABRT process and criteria.



3. Sources of information to assist with application

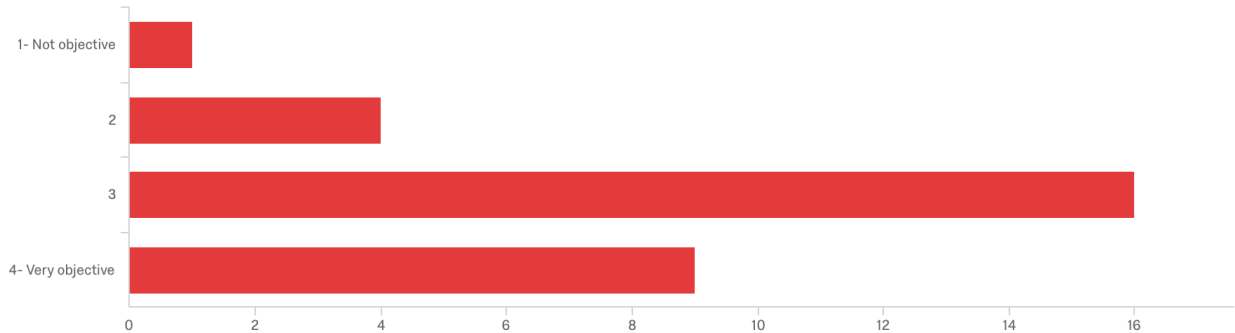
The respondents were asked to rank which two sources of information were most helpful in increasing their understanding of the ABRT process. The ranking after counting the votes from all 31 respondents, from most helpful to least helpful, is as follows:

- 1) *Email, phone conversation, or meeting with Gretchen Ellis (30/31)*
- 2) *ABRT training for nonprofit agencies (19/31)*
- 3) *Informal discussion with a contact (5/31)*
- 4) *ABRT website (4/31)*
- 5) *Email with ABRT city staff (2/31)*

Almost every respondent said the most helpful source of information was contact with Gretchen Ellis, and the ABRT training was useful as well. The other sources of information were perceived as far less useful, or they were not utilized by the applicants.

4. Objectivity

Objectivity of the ABRT review process and criteria ratings did not prove to be one of the main concerns among survey respondents. A majority of respondents (83.33%) rated objectivity as 3 or 4, while only one respondent rated the ABRT process as not objective.



When asked to justify their rating, several respondents acknowledged that complete objectivity was perhaps an unrealistic standard.

- “I understand the rating process itself to be objective, but have observed that **some of the reviewers bring personal biases to the evaluative process.**”
- “I think the ABRT is trying to be objective **but that is a difficult thing to achieve.**”
- “I believe that the reviewers use the scoring matrix that is published, and **the matrix seems objective. However, the scores do not seem to be consistent across applications.** We received a wildly different score from our first to second year of applying with an almost identical application. City Council can also override all ABRT recommendations, which adds a subjective layer to the process that already doesn't feel objective.”
- “It's a small community. Everyone knows everyone. **I think it's challenging for people to be objective when reviewing these applications.** I think it's also challenging for the smaller programs/staff who don't have as much experience or as much infrastructure support. It's also challenging because whatever funding amount you first get determines how much you will continue to get since there isn't a way to get a significant increase without adding another program - and then another application.”

Several respondents believed that the criteria are not adequate.

- “The ABRT grants are very focused on fitting into pre-determined criteria, **which may not adequately show agencies' effectiveness.**”
- “It is objective, but **some criteria don't apply across the board** (evidence-based).”
- “**Over reliance on statistics** is obvious.”
- “Materials and guidelines are clear; committee review is not always clear, especially re: outcomes. **Process does not fit all programs equally well.**”

- “While my organization relates specifically to the criteria, I can understand how **other organizations may struggle with meeting any of the criteria.**”

5. Funding from City Council

Two of the 31 respondents (2/31) reported having asked for funding directly from City Council. Both of those two respondents reported that their funding request was granted.

6. Suggestions

The open-ended suggestions from the respondents covered a wide range of topics, which were divided into two main categories: suggestions to prepare different nonprofits for the application process, and technical suggestions about the application itself. Similar suggestions were expressed among multiple respondents.

Preparation for the application process:

- Add to Gretchen’s staff/provide more technical support from her office
- More guidance for new applicants
- More grantmaking training for all applicants (so they can speak grant language and be more equipped to fill out the extensive application)
- Make the criteria more applicable for smaller nonprofits
- Allow more flexibility/adjust funding amounts from year to year-- right now, the funding amounts are set in stone after the agency’s first ABRT application
- More training to ABRT reviewers to account for biases
- Implement different criteria/process for social service organizations and arts organizations

Specific to the current application:

- Eliminate the duplicate questions. Some application questions are just rephrasing of others-- instead, the application should expand the character limit for the final set of questions
- Carry over responses from year to year (as is, nonprofit agencies tend to just copy and paste)
- Link budget and beneficiary forms