



Serving Neighbors Through Congregational Collaborations Initiative

REQUEST FOR CONCEPT PAPERS

2026

Lilly Endowment is pleased to announce its Serving Neighbors Through Congregational Collaborations Initiative (Serving Neighbors). This initiative has two complementary aims: 1) to enhance the quality of life of individuals and families by encouraging stronger collaborations in local communities between Christian congregations and charitable organizations (e.g., human and social service agencies, youth-serving organizations, arts and cultural organizations, neighborhood associations, and parks and outdoor recreational organizations, among others) that utilize their respective strengths to jointly undertake efforts that address community needs and priorities and 2) to deepen the faith of individuals and enhance the vitality of congregations by providing opportunities for Christians to practice their faith through acts of love and care for their neighbors.

Through Serving Neighbors, the Endowment anticipates awarding grants of **up to \$5 million each to approximately 60 charitable organizations** to develop and implement programs that advance the aims stated above and the following four objectives:

1. Helping Christian congregations identify and explore compelling human and social needs and priorities in their neighborhoods and local communities (e.g., hunger relief, after-school and educational enrichments programs, violence reduction, homelessness, outdoor recreational opportunities, community building festivals).
2. Assisting these congregations in building relationships with community organizations and, when appropriate, other faith-based organizations focused on those needs and priorities.
3. Guiding leaders from these congregations and charitable organizations in their local communities through a planning process to help them develop new and/or strengthen current collaborative joint endeavors that address the identified community needs or priorities.
4. Providing support and resources to help these congregations and charitable organizations in their local communities launch and, if successful, sustain these collaborations into the future.

Interested charitable organizations may apply for Serving Neighbors grants through a two-stage process:

Concept Papers: In the first stage, interested charitable organizations may submit concept papers that explain their interest in the initiative and provide initial descriptions of potential Serving Neighbors programs that would advance the initiative's aims and objectives.

The Endowment will review the concept papers and anticipates providing planning grants of **up to \$50,000 each to approximately 60 organizations** that submit the most promising descriptions of potential collaborative programs. Selected organizations may use their planning grants to develop their concepts and prepare proposals for implementation grants.

Concept papers must be submitted through the Serving Neighbors Concept Paper Submission Form on the Endowment's website. **Concept papers are due by January 19, 2027.** The Endowment anticipates notifying organizations of planning grant awards by the end of March 2027.

Implementation Grant Proposals: In the second stage, selected charitable organizations that receive planning grants may submit proposals for implementation grants of **up to \$5 million each that may be used for up to a four-year period** to execute their plans.

Implementation grant proposals must be submitted through the Serving Neighbors Implementation Grant Proposal Submission Form on the Endowment's website. **Implementation grant proposals are due by July 19, 2027.** The Endowment anticipates announcing implementation grant awards by the end of November 2027. Guidelines for preparing an implementation grant proposal will be provided with notice of approval of a planning grant.

Details about the initiative, eligibility, program design considerations, selection criteria, and guidelines for submitting concept papers are below.

Background

In recent months, Endowment staff has tracked an increasing number of reports – both from religious leaders, researchers and community leaders—that have noted a significant uptick in Christian congregations seeking to develop new or expand existing outwardly directed ministries to reach and serve individuals and families in their local communities. For example, the Endowment through its Thriving Congregations Initiative has provided grants to 248 organizations representing a broad spectrum of theological traditions to develop programs to help Christian congregations understand their changing contexts and adapt their ministries to meet emerging challenges and opportunities. Collectively, these organizations are working with thousands of congregations across the United States. A recent major evaluation of the Thriving Congregations Initiative, which included a national survey of participating congregations, noted that 80 percent of the congregations reported that their involvement in the initiative helped them establish and deepen their relationships with and strengthen ministries to serve individuals and families in their neighborhoods. Similarly, the Endowment-funded national study, *Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations*, which is based at the highly respected Hartford Institute for Religion Research at Hartford International University, found that a majority of Christian congregations increased outreach efforts to address specific community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and are continuing to seek ways to expand these efforts today. The Endowment is encouraged by these reports and by the renewed commitment of many congregations to expand efforts to reach out and care for their neighbors.

Yet the uptick in interest by congregations to serve their neighbors has sometimes raised unintended challenges. On one hand, the Endowment has received reports from community leaders about congregations that get excited about an idea and launch new outreach ministries in isolation from other charitable organizations that work to support their local communities. These community leaders note that, while well-intended, congregational leaders sometimes may not understand fully all the dynamics related to the human or social need that they are trying to address or have sufficient knowledge about local charitable organizations and community leaders already working to address this need. They wish that congregations would engage in conversation with them before launching a new community-focused ministry and explore with them how they could collaborate so their collective and coordinated efforts will have more effective and sustained

impact. On the other hand, congregational leaders have shared that community leaders sometimes view congregations merely as sources of volunteers and financial support. They wish that community leaders would understand better both the potential and limits of congregational volunteer-led ministries, the contributions congregations can make to efforts to address a human or social need and how the actions of congregants are motivated by faith and stitched into broader rhythms of congregational life. These congregational leaders are seeking opportunities to work with local charitable organizations in ways that recognize how congregations operate and bridge the organizational cultures of both parties.

There are many examples of congregational and community leaders who have found healthy and productive ways to work together and have noted the importance and benefits of collaborations. These benefits include: 1) larger or expanded outreach programs due to shared financial and human resources, 2) stronger community engagement as the trust built through collaborations helps people feel part of a wider unified movement, 3) increased leadership support as leaders share experiences with their peers resulting in reduced burnout and 4) creative problem-solving as relationships between diverse congregations and local charitable organizations combine unique strengths to address complex needs. Most notably, when congregations and local charitable organizations collaborate with each other, these leaders report that they often discover their complementary gifts and draw on one another's distinctive strengths to enhance efforts to address local challenges.

In response, Serving Neighbors is designed to help leaders of congregations and local charitable organizations work together more collaboratively and effectively in furtherance of the initiative's aims and thereby forge creative and mutually beneficial collaborations that amplify and multiply both the reach and impact of their efforts to serve individuals and families in their local communities.

Eligibility

Charitable organizations with Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and public charity status that are interested in and committed to supporting Christian congregations and local charitable organizations, as well as other faith-based organizations, in developing or enhancing collaborative endeavors to serve their communities are eligible to submit concept papers in the first stage of Serving Neighbors. Organizations should have knowledge about and be adept at working with groups of congregations and/or local charitable organizations.

The Endowment anticipates that interested eligible charitable organizations may include, among others: national and regional denominational agencies, faith-based service organizations, church associations and networks, theological schools, church-related colleges and universities, and national or regional community development organizations that are knowledgeable about and comfortable working with churches and faith-based organizations. *Individual congregations and local charitable organizations seeking resources for their own programs and services are not eligible to apply for grants through this initiative.*

Program Design Considerations

Concept papers should describe potential Serving Neighbors programs that would require grants of **up to \$5 million that may be used for up to a four-year period** to develop and execute. Organizations should state the amount of funding they anticipate needing to implement their programs.

Eligible organizations may submit concept papers for smaller programs that would not require the maximum amount of an implementation grant and are more appropriate for their organizational capacities. There is no minimum amount for an implementation grant. On the other hand, organizations may submit concept papers for larger programs that, in addition to a potential implementation grant from the Endowment, would require funding from other sources. In these cases, organizations should identify in their concept papers as much as possible the sources and estimated amounts of these other funds. The organizations selected to prepare implementation grant proposals in the second stage of the initiative will be required to confirm the sources of these other funds and include them in their program budgets.

Possible Areas for Collaboration

Organizations that submit concept papers are encouraged to propose programs that will give Christian congregations and collaborating local charitable organizations broad discretion in determining the needs and priorities in their local communities and in developing joint endeavors to address them. A partial list of possible community needs and priorities may include: addressing specific human and social needs (e.g., mental health, domestic violence, hunger); improving educational opportunities for children and youth (e.g., childcare, literacy programs and tutoring); supporting children and youth (e.g., summer camps, youth programs, sports leagues); and enhancing quality of life (e.g., arts and culture offerings, and parks or other outdoor amenities), among others.

Organizations may not submit concept papers to support collaborative endeavors focused on affordable housing or other property-related challenges. Addressing affordable housing challenges requires significant capital investment and detailed knowledge of housing development regulations and procedures, which is beyond the scope of Serving Neighbors.

Collaborations may focus on a broad spectrum of identified community needs and priorities. Some examples of potential joint endeavors are listed below. These examples are presented for illustrative purposes only and are not exhaustive.

- A regional denominational agency organizes congregations in the area to collaborate with the largest food bank in a region to increase the volume and quality of food at local church-based food pantries to support the growing demand for food relief from neighbors.
- An association of congregations in a rural area collaborates with a local community development organization to host conversations about improving quality of life in the area, resulting in a beautification project to clean up and upgrade local parks.
- Several congregations work with a youth-serving organization to expand after-school programs for teens focused on improving their mental health and enhancing their leadership, social-emotional and career skills.
- A seminary engages a cohort of congregations concerned about homelessness to work with a local human service organization to provide wraparound supports to unhoused families who are staying in nearby homeless shelters.
- A congregation organizes a network of local congregations to work with several local businesses and charitable agencies (e.g. healthcare providers, financial institutions, local township offices and other congregations) to offer collaboratively health and wellbeing education, cooking classes and food budgeting workshops.

- A network of congregations works with a community development organization to provide resources and support for vulnerable families and children.
- A network of congregations develops with a community service agency a gun–violence reduction and buyback program for its local community.
- A national human services organization develops ways to work with affiliated chapters across the United States and help them establish and deepen relationships with local congregations to strengthen and coordinate their efforts to provide workforce development coaching, spiritual care and other forms of support to formerly incarcerated individuals in their communities.

Helping Congregations and Community Organizations Build Sustainable Collaborations

Based on experiences with Endowment-supported organizations, the Endowment recognizes that building a strong and sustainable collaboration between Christian congregations and local charitable organizations takes time and careful planning. Therefore, organizations should incorporate into their Serving Neighbors programs a planning and design process through which they will gather leaders of the participating congregations and local charitable organizations and guide them through an extended and intentional planning process to build relationships with one another and design and develop together their plans for collaborative endeavors.

In their concept papers, organizations should demonstrate how their programs would:

1. Identify Christian congregations that are interested and well-positioned to develop ministries to address pressing needs and priorities in their communities and help them to explore in-depth these needs and priorities.
2. Help participating congregations identify and build relationships with leaders of local charitable organizations that are interested in and working on the identified needs and challenges.
3. Guide leaders of congregations and community organizations through an extended relationship-building process to understand their distinctive missions, motivations for addressing the identified need or priority, approaches to serving individuals and families in their communities and respective organizational strengths.
4. Provide resources and support to the congregations and local charitable organizations to assist them in planning and implementing a collaborative effort that they designed together to address specific community needs or challenges.
5. Assist participating congregations and local charitable organizations in evaluating and refining their collaborative efforts and, if successful, in securing the funding and resources needed to continue them into the future.

Selection Criteria

Selection criteria for concept papers will include the following considerations:

- The extent to which the organization presents a creative and compelling concept for a proposed Serving Neighbors program that demonstrates clear alignment with the aims and objectives of the initiative.

- The extent to which the organization through its concept paper demonstrates that it has knowledge about and relationships with Christian congregations and local charitable organizations and, when appropriate, other faith-based organizations.
- The extent to which the organization has knowledge about and is well positioned to help Christian congregations explore human and social needs and priorities.
- The extent to which the proposed concept has the potential to be developed into a high-quality Serving Neighbors program that is realistic and feasible.
- The extent to which the organization makes a compelling case for its commitment and capacity to execute and sustain a high-quality Serving Neighbors program.

Concept papers will be evaluated on the quality and promise of the proposed programs, not on the projected amount of the proposed implementation grant. Thus, the estimated size of implementation grants needed to develop and execute proposed concepts will not advantage or disadvantage the opportunity to receive grants. Organizations should propose concepts for programs that they have the capacity to execute well and, if relevant, sustain beyond the implementation grant period.

As noted in the overview section, the Endowment anticipates awarding **planning grants of up to \$50,000 each to approximately 60 organizations** to assist them in developing their concepts and preparing implementation grant proposals. These selected organizations may submit proposals for **implementation grants of up to \$5 million each that may be used for up to a four-year period** to execute their plans. **Implementation grant proposals are due by July 19, 2027.**

Although the Endowment hopes that all selected organizations that receive planning grants will submit strong implementation grant proposals and receive funding, the awarding of implementation grants to selected organizations is not guaranteed and is at the complete discretion of the Endowment. The Endowment intends to award implementation grants only to selected organizations that submit compelling proposals that present designs for high-quality programs that will advance the initiative's aims and objectives and demonstrate the organization's capacities to execute such programs.

Guidelines for Concept Papers

Concept papers must be submitted through the Serving Neighbors Concept Paper Submission Form on the Endowment's website and include the following components:

Official Request Letter: This **one-page** letter must be signed by the organization's chief executive officer and the chair of its governing board.

Concept Paper Information Form: This form, provided on the Endowment's website, requests key information about the organization, the concept paper and, if awarded a planning grant, the individuals responsible for planning activities.

Concept Paper Narrative: This narrative must be **no more than five pages** and should be written in 12-point font, single spaced with one-inch margins. In the narrative, organizations must provide the following:

- **Organizational Profile:** Provide a brief description of the organization, including its mission, history, major programs and annual operating budget. What is the organization's experience in working with Christian congregations and local charitable organizations?

- **Rationale:** Explain the organization's rationale for submitting a concept paper to develop a Serving Neighbors program. Why is the organization interested in developing a program? Who are the communities that the organization intends to serve through the program? How would a program build on relationships that the organization has with Christian congregations and local charitable organizations? What knowledge or experience does the organization possess regarding local community needs and priorities that may be addressed through collaborative projects? How does the proposed concept draw on and align with the organization's theological tradition (for faith-based organizations), its mission and its current activities?
- **Concept:** Describe the organization's concept for its Serving Neighbors program, including its aim and objectives, possible key activities and strategies and potential collaborators. What process will the organization employ to bring together leaders from the congregations and local charitable organizations to build relationships with each other and design a potential collaborative program? What are the program's possible activities and strategies? What are the anticipated outcomes for the program? How does the concept advance the aims and objectives of Serving Neighbors?
- **Funding Level:** Provide the estimated costs to implement the proposed concept and indicate the level of funding the organization would seek from the Endowment if invited to submit a proposal for an implementation grant. Why is this level of funding appropriate for the proposed program and the organization? (The Endowment understands that these costs are preliminary estimates and may increase or decrease during a planning period.) What, if any, other funders does the organization expect to support the proposed concept's implementation and what are estimates of the amounts of any such support? What are the organization's current capacities and resources for developing and executing a high-quality Serving Neighbors program? What capacities would need to be developed, and if developed, how will these capacities be sustained, if needed?
- **Planning Grant Activities:** In the event that the organization is selected to move into the second stage of the initiative and receives a planning grant to develop its concept and prepare a proposal for an implementation grant, describe the planning activities the organization would undertake to develop its concept (e.g., conducting research, engaging consultants, convening congregational and community leaders, preparing an implementation grant proposal, etc.).

Planning Grant Budget and Budget Narrative: The Planning Grant Budget, **up to \$50,000**, should describe projected planning expenses during a potential planning period. Note that planning grant funds may be used for up to one year. The Budget Narrative should provide brief explanations about how the organization calculated each budget line. *See the Guide to Budget Preparation for the required format.*

Letters of Support (optional): Organizations are encouraged to include **up to three** brief letters of support from potential collaborators. These letters should note the anticipated role of potential collaborators in the implementation of the proposed concept and their intention and capacity to undertake this role. Note that if an organization is invited to submit an implementation grant proposal in the second stage of this initiative, updated letters of support/endorsement will be required.

Copy of Organization's Current Year Operating Budget: The operating budget submitted with the concept paper must be for the organization's current fiscal year at the time of submission.

Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements: The annual *Audited Financial Statements* should be for the organization's most recently completed fiscal year. If the organization does not have *Audited Financial Statements*, it may submit with its concept paper *Reviewed Financial Statements* conducted by a certified public accounting firm.

Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form: This form, provided on the Endowment's website, is used to verify the organization's tax status as a qualified recipient of grants from private foundations such as Lilly Endowment. Please check a box in Section 2 of the form to reflect the organization's status. The organization's status may be located on an Internal Revenue Service exempt status determination letter, as indicated in Section 2 of the form and as described below.

Copy of Internal Revenue Service Exempt Status Determination Letter: Most public charities that are qualified recipients for grants from private foundations will have received a tax-exempt status determination letter from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). This letter provides verification of the organization's status as a tax-exempt entity described in Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3) and indicates the part of the tax code under which the organization's public charity status has been established. Many denominationally related organizations may not have asked for or received such a letter from the IRS. If that is the case, the organization should determine whether it is listed in a group exemption ruling for the denomination. If so, the organization should attach evidence that it is covered by the ruling (for example, by sending copies of the directory cover and the page on which the organization is listed in the official directory of the denomination). No grants will be awarded until the proper tax status is confirmed.

Concept Paper Submission Instructions and Checklist

Organizations must submit concept papers through the Serving Neighbors Concept Paper Submission Form on the [**Serving Neighbors webpage**](#) by **January 19, 2027**.

Concept papers and supporting documents must be organized in the order listed below and uploaded as a single PDF.

- ☐ Official Request Letter - (one page)
- ☐ Concept Paper Information Form - (on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Concept Paper Narrative - (no more than five pages)
- ☐ Planning Grant Budget - (up to \$50,000)
- ☐ Letters of Support (optional) - (up to three)
- ☐ Copy of Organization's Current Year Operating Budget
- ☐ Copy of Organization's Annual Audited Financial Statements
- ☐ Exempt Status and Charity/Foundation Status Information Form - (on the initiative's webpage)
- ☐ Copy of IRS Exempt Status Determination Letter - (sample on the initiative's webpage)

Information Sessions: Lilly Endowment will host virtual information sessions to discuss the aims and objectives of Serving Neighbors and review the guidelines for submission of concept papers. Organizations wishing to participate in one of these sessions must register via the [**Serving Neighbors webpage**](#) on the Endowment's website.

Please email any questions about this initiative to [**servingneighbors@lei.org**](mailto:servingneighbors@lei.org).