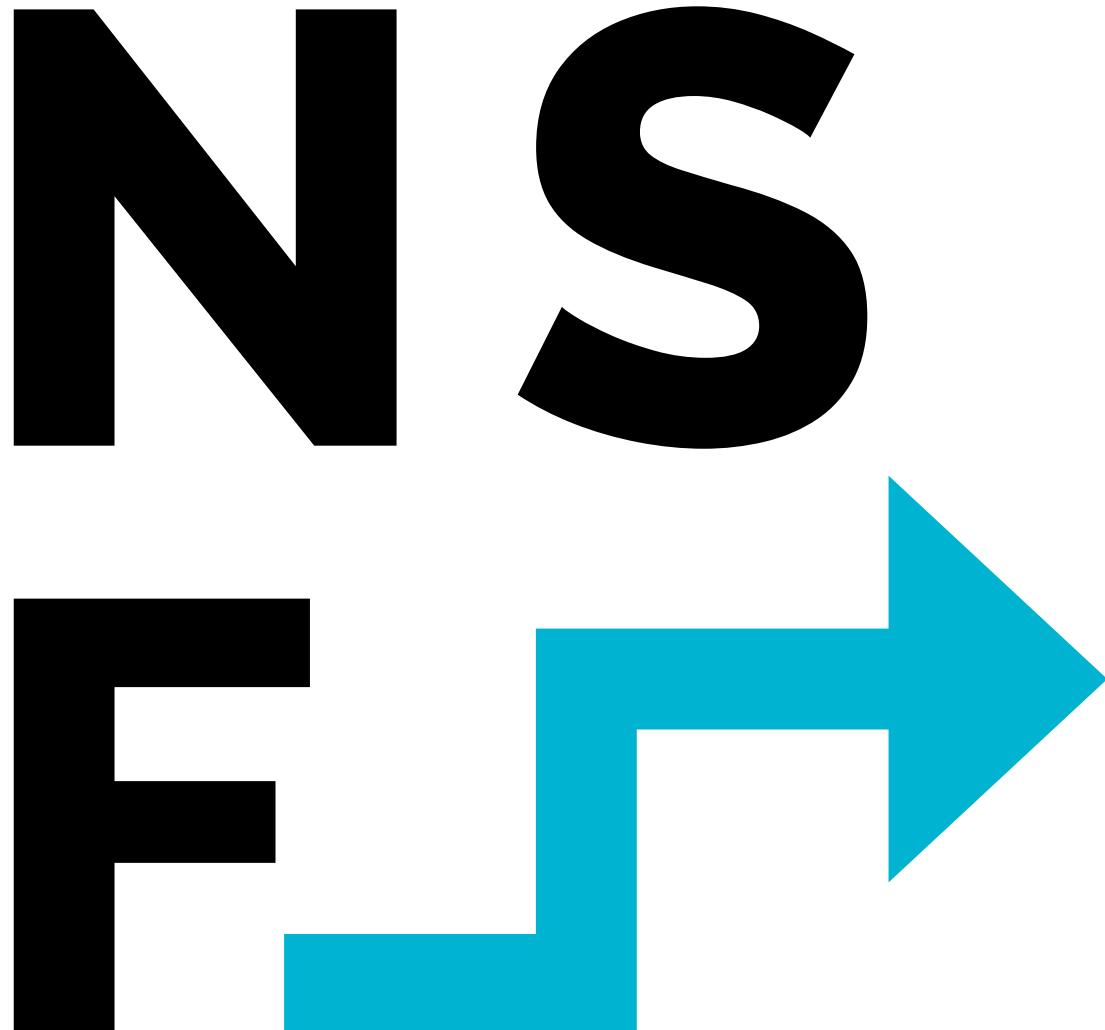


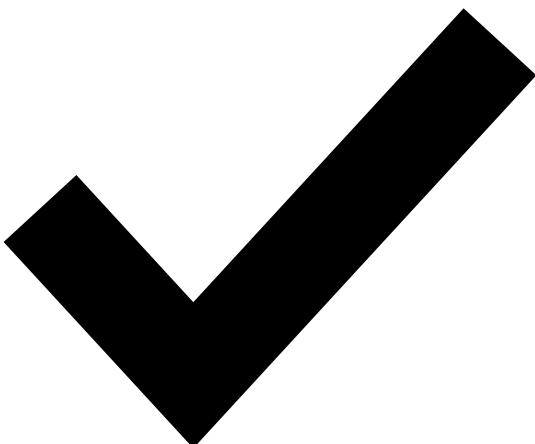
Grant Program Overview and Application Instructions



Next Step Fund is made possible by support from the McKnight Foundation.

McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Dates



Important Dates

Application opens in Submittable
February 2, 2026

Deadline

**Monday, March 16, 2026,
12 noon CDT**

Eligible funding period

June 29, 2026–June 29, 2028

Contact

nextstepfund@mrac.org

Parts

1.

Part 1: Grant Description and Eligibility: who can apply, what kinds of proposals are eligible, when your proposal can happen, and other important information about the grant.

2.

Part 2: Application Content Overview: the questions you will be asked in the narrative section, information about budgeting, eligible and ineligible expenses, the application's budget plan spreadsheet, and parameters around required work samples.

Contents

The following is the information you need to fill out an application for the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council's 2026 Next Step Fund grant. Read this document thoroughly.

Once you submit your application through our online portal, you **cannot make changes** and **cannot resubmit an application in whole or in part**. If your proposal is funded, parts of your application are considered public information.

3.

Part 3: Preparing to Apply and Application Instructions: what you will need before you begin your application and how to use Submittable, our online application portal.

4.

Part 4: Application Assistance and Additional Resources: MRAC staff contact information for application assistance and materials such as application templates and the scoring guide.



Part 1: Grant Description and Eligibility

Part 1: Grant Description and Eligibility

What does this grant provide funds for?

The Next Step Fund grant program provides up to \$6,000 to artists for proposals that would help them sustain the trajectory of their artistic career, overcome a barrier to success, and/or leverage a beneficial career opportunity.

Who is eligible to apply for this grant?

Applicants must meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as an artist, working in any discipline, at any stage in their career, and have evidence of artistic output indicative of their career stage.
2. Be able to submit work samples of their own artwork. Artists should have had decision-making authority over the artwork depicted in the work samples.
3. Maintain a primary residential street address in Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, or Washington county (P.O. boxes are not accepted). Eligible applicants must reside in the seven-county metro region for **at least six (6) months** prior to the application deadline (from September 16, 2025) and continue to do so for the entirety of their proposed grant period. If a grantee moves away during that time, MRAC may recall the grant funds.
4. Be at least 18 years of age on the grant deadline date (March 16, 2026).

What types of grant requests are eligible?

Requests must outline strategies that will help the applicant sustain the trajectory of their artistic career, overcome a barrier to success, and/or leverage a beneficial career opportunity.

Requests should be appropriate to the career stage of the applicant and in alignment with their stated goals.

Examples of what applicants may seek support for include:

- Learning new skills to adapt, transition, or expand their creative process or artistic practice
- Professionalizing or increasing artistic output and quality
- Researching, producing, or presenting new creative work
- Developing a business plan, promotional materials, and/or documentation of a creative portfolio

When can my proposal happen?

The eligible funding period is June 29, 2026, to June 29, 2028 (24 months). All grant-funded activities must take place between these dates.

If any proposal activities occurring outside of this period are included in the application, the entire application may be deemed ineligible.

When can I spend the grant funds?

All grant funds must be spent and all expenses incurred between June 29, 2026, and June 29, 2028.

Definition of Incurred Expenses

Incurred expenses are promises to pay. Because grants are not guaranteed, applicants may not make any *promises to pay* (i.e. incur an expense) before the grant funding period begins. As such, all grant-related contracts or agreements must

Part 1: Grant Description and Eligibility

be both **entered into** (signed) and **executed** (paid or fulfilled) within the funding period.

Examples include bookings with artists or venues, artist fee agreements, and any other formal agreement for goods or services where payment is promised, whether or not cash changes hands at the time the agreement is signed.

If any expenses (both incurred and spent) or reimbursements made outside of this period are included in the application, the entire application may be deemed ineligible.

Where can I execute my proposal?

There are no restrictions on where applicants can execute their proposals, however, they must maintain their primary residence in Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, or Washington county (P.O. boxes are not accepted) for at least six (6) months prior to the application deadline (from September 16, 2025) and continue to reside in this region for the entirety of their proposal period.

How do I submit an application?

All applications are filled out and submitted through Submittable, our online application portal. Refer to [Application Instructions](#) (page 12) for a Submittable overview.

Applications in other formats will not be accepted without prior approval and arrangement with a program officer. Refer to [Application Assistance](#) (page 13) for contact information.

What types of proposals have been funded in the past?

Please see our award announcement for the [**2025 Next Step Fund Grant**](#).

How are the funds for this grant allocated to applicants?

Funds will be awarded to the highest scoring applications.

How are applications reviewed and scored?

MRAC trains artists from all seven metro counties to become review panelists. The [**Application Scoring Guide for Review Panelists**](#) (page 13) shows the criteria used to evaluate each application.

Applications are grouped by arts discipline, and then 4-8 panelists score each application. The scores from each panelist are averaged, and that average score determines the application's ranking. Grant funds are awarded based on these panel score rankings and MRAC Board-approved budget allocations. The MRAC Board of Directors awards as many applications as possible until the allocated funds for Next Step Fund run out.

What if I have received a grant from MRAC before?

Grantees who received a Next Step Fund award in FY23, FY24, or FY25 are not eligible to apply in FY26.

Applicants may not have more than one **open** Next Step Fund grant at any given time. A grant

Part 1: Grant Description and Eligibility

is not considered closed until you have submitted your **Final Report** and it is approved by MRAC staff. For grants prior to FY26, your Final Report is due two months after your Proposal End Date.

If you have an open Next Step Fund grant, all grant-funded activities must be complete and all funds must be spent before the Proposal Start Date of your FY26 proposal.

If you have an open or pending grant from another MRAC program or are affiliated with an organization/group that has an open grant in another MRAC program, you are eligible to submit a Next Step Fund application as long as your outlined activities and expenses are distinct from any other open or pending MRAC grant(s). Next Step Fund grants may not supplement a project or program that has an awarded or pending MRAC grant.

Please note that prior grants awards do not guarantee future grant awards.

What are the tax implications of receiving this grant?

This grant award may affect your individual taxes. Successful grantees will be required to submit a W-9 form with their legal name and personal social security number or ITIN. The grant check will be written to the name and address on the W-9 form. All grant checks in this program will be made to individuals (LLCs or businesses are not accepted). All grantees will receive an IRS Form 1099-NEC from MRAC for the tax year the check was issued.

Please note that MRAC staff are not tax professionals and cannot advise on how much the grant will affect individual tax situations. Applicants and grantees are encouraged to contact a tax preparer for more information on tax liability.

Who is not eligible for this grant?

The following groups and individuals are not eligible to apply for Next Step Fund:

- Duos, collectives, groups, nonprofit organizations, LLCs, or any other incorporated entities are not eligible. Applicants must be individuals, and grant checks will only be issued directly to the applicant, not to an applicant's business.
- Creatives who cannot demonstrate a history of producing original artworks before the application deadline.
- Individuals seeking to begin a career as an artist or make a professional transition to the arts.
- Artists currently enrolled in a degree or certification program in their respective art form, unless the applicant can demonstrate they maintain a career/practice as a professional artist outside of their educational program.
- Individuals who do not have a social security number. (If you are awarded a grant, you must submit an individual W-9 form with your personal social security number or ITIN.)
- Individuals who are under the age of 18 on the grant deadline date.
- Individuals with primary residential addresses outside of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, or Washington county.



Part 2: Application Content Overview

Part 2: Application Content Overview

This section includes the questions you will be asked in the narrative section of your application, information about how you will provide your proposal budget, lists of eligible and ineligible expenses, and parameters around required work samples. It does not include all the application questions, only the narrative questions.

We encourage you to review all the questions by starting an application in Submittable once the application window opens on February 2, 2026. You can also review the [Application Questions and Explanations](#) document (page 13) at that time.

About the Proposal Narrative

You will answer the following questions in Submittable. Each textbox will display a character limit (**inclusive** of letters, numbers, spaces, and paragraph breaks).

Do not include hyperlinks in narrative text boxes, as the panel review will be limited to the content of your application. Any hyperlinks will be deleted and may affect your application's eligibility.

You can use the [Narrative Drafting Document](#) (page 14) to work on rough drafts of your narrative answers.

List of Narrative Questions

- What is the name or title of your proposal? (50 characters max, about 8–10 words)
- Provide a short description of your proposal (200 characters max, about 30–40 words)
- Select the discipline that best represents your artistic work (drop-down menu)
- Proposal Start Date (on or after June 29, 2026)
- Proposal End Date (on or before June 29, 2028)
- *About You:* Answer all the questions below. This section may be very similar to an artist statement but should include your artistic and professional accomplishments, particularly as they relate to clearly defined artistic and career

goals. (Text: 4,000 characters max, about 650–800 words OR audio upload: suggested 5–10 min., max 10 min.)

- Describe your work and your artistic vision. Describe any significant accomplishments that demonstrate achievement in your artistic field.
- What are your artistic goals, related to your development or career as an artist? What opportunities or strategies are you currently using to meet those goals?
- *Your Proposal:* Answer all the questions below. Be as specific as possible and make a strong connection between the proposal and your individual needs as an artist. Please note not all panelists will be familiar with your discipline, so avoid technical jargon and don't assume familiarity with proposals of this type. (Text: 3,000 characters max, about 500–700 words OR audio upload: suggested 3–7 min., max 10 min.)
 - Describe the proposal you are seeking funding for. What are the goals of this proposal?
 - How does this proposal align with or help you achieve the artistic goals you describe in the About You section?
 - Describe the major activities or tasks that take place between the start and end dates of your proposal.
 - If you are working with other individuals during your proposal activities, describe their involvement. How does their participation serve to help you meet your artistic or career goals?

About the Budget Plan

General Budget Information

Your request for MRAC funds **may not exceed \$6,000**. You may request less than \$6,000 if that will cover your expenses. There is no advantage or disadvantage to asking for an amount smaller

Part 2: Application Content Overview

than the maximum. Budget expenses should clearly align with your proposal narrative.

Submittable Budget Plan Spreadsheet

In the Next Step Fund application in Submittable, you will input your budget into the Budget Plan Spreadsheet. It will include columns for the Expense Description and Dollar Amount. You can use the [Budget Plan Drafting Sheet](#) (page 14) to estimate your expenses before inputting them into Submittable.

Eligible Expenses

Examples of eligible cash expense items (this is not a complete list; you may request expenses that are not on this list):

Artist compensation/stipends (for yourself and/or other artists), individual taxes, contracted artists, professional fees/consultants, supplies/equipment purchases, space/equipment rental, accessibility-related costs (be specific), child/elder care, travel expenses.

Ineligible Expenses

The following projects and expenses are ineligible:

- Activities that violate applicable federal, state, or local laws, rules, regulations, or ordinances.
- Activities that attempt to influence any state or federal legislation or appropriation, serve the religious socialization of participants, or discriminate against persons or groups.
- Projects where the applicant is applying on behalf of a duo, group, collective, or organization. This program provides support for the professional and artistic development of an artist independent from their organizational identity. For example, a choreographer may apply for an independent study, but not to produce or stage a work marketed as a production of their dance company.

- Projects where the community is the primary beneficiary. Next Step Fund projects must focus on the needs and development of the individual artist.
- Projects and activities designed to raise funds/regrant/donate funds on behalf of another person, organization, or cause. MRAC funds cannot be donated to another organization or person.
- Enrollment in a degree-seeking or credited college/university program.
- Project activities and/or expenses that are included in another MRAC grant, pending or awarded.

About Required Work Samples

You will **upload up to five (5) work samples**. All work samples remain the property of the artist. You **may not provide** URLs/hyperlinks to view samples online.

How Work Samples Are Used by Reviewers

Work samples will not be scored independently of your narrative. The work samples you choose should clearly demonstrate your artistic discipline and stage of artistic development. They should align with the artistic vision and career development goals described in the About You section.

If you feel fewer works samples will adequately represent your practice, then you do not need to submit five samples. Please note that application reviewers will spend a limited amount of time looking at work samples.

Work Sample Identification

For each work sample, you will provide a title, medium, date, description, and your role in the creation of the work. Depending on your medium, the identification could also include completion or performance date, dimensions, duration, or other relevant information.

Part 2: Application Content Overview

(Limited to 300 characters each sample).

Work Sample Identification Examples:

- A Painting, oil on canvas, 25 x 36 in., 2025, a painting of a vase of flowers. Part of a series I created between 2024 and 2025.
- My Life, HD video, 3 min., 2025, a short documentary work created for an important event.

File Sizes, Lengths, and Formats

Work samples must fit within the following parameters. Work samples in different formats, exceeding allowable file size or length, or otherwise outside the allowable formats may be deemed ineligible and/or will not be looked at by reviewers.

The maximum file upload size is 400MB per work sample. The entirety of your work samples may not exceed 800MB.

Each upload must represent **only one (1) artwork**. You may not submit files containing multiple works.

1. Audio/music files
 - a. An audio file may not exceed 5 mins.
 - b. Allowed audio/music file types: .aac, .flac, .mp3, .wav
2. Digital image files
 - a. Images must open in the proper viewing orientation (vertical or horizontal)
 - b. Allowed image file types: .gif, .jpg, .png, .tif
 - c. Recommended file size: 5MB or 1200 pixels on the longest side.
3. Film/video files
 - a. A film/video file may not exceed 5 mins.
 - b. Allowed film/video file types: .avi, .mov, .mp4, .wmv
4. Text files
 - a. A text file may not exceed five (5) double spaced, 8 ½ x 11 in pages.
 - b. Font size must be 12 pt or larger.
 - c. Allowed text file types: .doc, .docx, .pdf, .rtf



Part 3: Preparing to Apply and Application Instructions

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Preparing to Apply

The most successful proposals are well conceived before starting the application process in Submittable. Take time to plan your request and consider compiling the following information before you begin.

The Next Step Fund application is divided into the following parts:

1. **Individual Information:** your legal name, primary residential address including county, and phone number. It will be optional to provide a public-facing name, demographic information (such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, veteran status etc.), pronouns, and name pronunciation.
2. **Proposal Narrative:** the name of your proposal, a short proposal description, and your proposal's timeline. You will describe your work and artistic vision, significant accomplishments, and career goals. You will state why you are seeking funding, the major goals and activities in your proposal, and how this proposal aligns with your artistic or career goals. Refer to the [List of Narrative Questions](#) (page 8–9).
3. **Budget Plan:** the total amount of funds you are requesting and the expenses covered this MRAC grant request. Refer to [About the Budget Plan](#) (pages 9–10).
4. **Work Samples:** You will upload examples of your artwork. You can review the specifications in [About Required Work Samples](#) (page 10).

Application Instructions

Step 1. Create an account with MRAC's online Submittable portal

MRAC uses Submittable for all our grant applications. If you are a first-time applicant, you should create a Submittable account with your email address.

Use an email address you check frequently, as all our correspondence about your application will be sent through Submittable.

Note: Be sure to "safelist" notification emails from Submittable and check your inbox frequently. You can learn how to do so in this [**Submittable safelist email explanation article**](#). MRAC staff may reach out with questions or request additional information. If we do not hear from you within the timeline provided in the email, your application may be deemed ineligible.

If you are considering applying, we encourage you to make an account and review the application in Submittable when the application window opens on February 2, 2026. Familiarizing yourself with the Submittable interface can be useful when you are ready to input the information there!

Step 2. Fill out the FY26 Next Step Fund Application in Submittable

The Next Step Fund application in Submittable includes questions with checkboxes, date selection boxes, dropdown boxes, text boxes for written answers, and options for file uploads. Additionally, you will need to type your proposal's planned expenses into the Budget Plan Spreadsheet.

Each text box will display a maximum character count, which is **inclusive** of letters, numbers, spaces, and paragraph breaks. There are no formatting options (bold or italics).

Part 3: Preparing to Apply and Application Instructions

Do not include hyperlinks in narrative text boxes, as the review panelists will be limited to the content of your application. Any hyperlinks will be deleted and may affect your application's eligibility.

Submittable will auto-save your work every few minutes, and there is also a "save" button at the bottom of the form.

Step 3. Complete the application and hit "Submit"

You must answer every question marked "required" to complete the application. Be sure to double check all your answers, including budget amounts and totals, before you submit your application.

Once you submit your application, you **cannot make any changes** and **cannot resubmit an application in whole or in part**.

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Part 4: Application Assistance and Additional Resources

Part 4: Application Assistance and Additional Resources

Application Assistance

Email us at nextstepfund@mrac.org with any questions. Application assistance for Next Step Fund opens Monday, February 2 at 9 am and closes Friday, March 13 at 5 pm.

MRAC staff are dedicated to creating an accessible application process for everyone. If you have any questions about accessibility or need an accommodation, please reach out to nextstepfund@mrac.org **at least two weeks** before the application deadline (by March 2, 2026). You can get assistance according to your preference, usually over email, phone, or Zoom.

To keep the process fair and balanced, staff may only provide assistance related to eligibility. They cannot review content or make recommendations for improving the strength of the application.

Additional Resources

Below is a list of resources that can help you prepare your application. You can find all of them on the [Next Step Fund webpage](#) once the application window opens on February 2, 2026.

Application Scoring Guide for Review Panelists

All eligible applications will be reviewed and scored by panel participants according to this guide.

Application Questions and Explanations

This document presents all the sections and questions so that you can read through them beforehand. It also describes the reasons behind each question. The reasons for each question are provided in Submittable as you fill out the forms online as well.

Please note that this is **not the application**. You will need to fill out the form in Submittable.

Narrative Drafting Document

You can use this document to work on rough drafts of your narrative answers.

Please note that this is **not the application**. If you use this document to draft your answers, you will need to transfer your answers to Submittable.

Budget Plan Drafting Sheet

You can use this spreadsheet to estimate your expenses before inputting them into Submittable.