



Five Steps to Federal Funding

A Brief Explanation of the Safe Routes to School Program Process

Background

The federal transportation act SAFETEA-LU designated \$612 million over five years for Safe Routes to School (SRTS) programs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, to be administered by State Departments of Transportation (DOT). The Federal Highway Administration is the federal agency designated with oversight of the SRTS program funds. State DOTs are required to comply with the federal legislation, specifically [section 1404](#). The federal legislation requires that each state appoint a full-time SRTS coordinator to manage the state's SRTS program, and to track program expenditures. The SRTS coordinator generally works for the DOT and is the main contact for program funding and information in each state. You can find your state coordinator and a link to your state SRTS program's website on the SRTS National Partnership's [website](#).

The SRTS National Partnership created this *Five Steps to Federal Funding* fact sheet to help explain the basic process that states and local communities go through to spend the federal SRTS funds. Federal funding comes with a lot of 'red tape', and the Safe Routes to School program is no exception. The SRTS National Partnership created a [memo](#) (PDF file) that describes the implementation challenges state programs face in expending federal SRTS funds.

The Five Steps to Federal SRTS Funding

1. Application Guidelines Developed

The federal legislation gave State DOTs the flexibility to develop their own application guidelines for their state SRTS programs. To help, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) provided [guidance](#) to State DOTs regarding the distribution and tracking of funds. With these tools in hand, each State DOT has developed their own methods to distribute the SRTS funds. As such, there is considerable variation in process from state to state, and each state is in charge of its own program. The SRTS National Partnership created a [memo](#) (web page) about best practices states can utilize in establishing their programs, and a [memo](#) (PDF file) on the importance of non-infrastructure elements in Safe Routes to School programs.

2. Application Period Opens

Your state Safe Routes to School program may initiate a Call for Applications during a prescribed period of time, usually between 30-90 days. The program should make their application form and guidelines available on a central website, along with directions for completing the application, and may even provide trainings to potential applicants to assist with the application process. A Call for Applications may take place annually or every two years.

Some state SRTS programs will not set a period of time for application submittal, but will instead have an open, or rolling, application period. In other words, local applicants can apply whenever they wish, and the department will consider funding requests on a case-by-case basis, and based on available federal SRTS funding. In some states, there is not a Call for Applications at all, but instead a statewide consultant(s) is available to provide technical assistance and

possibly other resources such as planning, design, printed materials and incentive items or even mini-grants to those local communities who request help in launching programs and projects.

3. Grants Awarded

Each state SRTS program is subject to their state DOTs process for expending federal transportation funds, and this could mean that the SRTS coordinator is not the only decision-maker. The amount of time between receipt of an application for funding and the award notice can vary widely. Some states have been able to award funds within weeks, and in other states it has taken up to one or two years. In some states, a diverse advisory committee with representatives from health, education, transportation, and enforcement agencies and advocacy groups will have developed the application guidelines, and that committee is also the selection committee, reviewing, ranking and approving applications from local communities. The SRTS National Partnership considers this a best practice. In other states, regional committees will review and grade applications and submit lists to the state to finalize awards, especially in larger population states due to the sheer number of SRTS funding requests received. In many states, however, an internal committee of DOT staff members and/or board members, or even state level elected officials will make award decisions without external stakeholder input. The SRTS National Partnership does not consider this a best practice. In addition to an advisory or selection committee, states may require formal approval by a DOT director or administrator, the state transportation commission or board, or even the governor. The application selection process can take as little as a few months, or as long as two years in some states.

4. Obligation and Notice to Proceed

Once a state has awarded funds for a project or program, another process begins. This process requires the DOT and the applicant to make sure that the federal SRTS funds are spent in compliance with federal regulations such as [Title 23, United State Code](#), and the National Environmental Policy Act ([NEPA](#)). The state DOT will work with the local transportation agency, school district or other applicant to complete all required steps, which usually are in three phases: design, right-of-way, and construction; includes adding projects to the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), and can take up to a year or more to complete.

State, tribal, and local governments, schools and school districts, and private nonprofit organizations are eligible for federal SRTS funds, although states often restrict the types of recipients. In some cases a non-profit organization will be the lead applicant on the SRTS project or program, but usually it is a local road authority and/or school district.

Once the state and local applicant have both completed this process, the state will issue a Notice to Proceed. At this point the state is 'obligated' to reimburse the SRTS funds awarded. An "obligation" is a commitment of the federal government to pay, through reimbursement to the states, the federal share of a project's eligible cost.

5. Construction and Programs Begin

On the date that a Notice to Proceed is issued by the state, and no earlier, the obligated SRTS project and/or program can begin. The federal-aid program operates as a "reimbursable program," and the Federal Highway Administration only reimburses states for costs actually incurred. The state will receive reimbursement for the federal share when the project or program is completed, and it will reimburse the local applicant for the amount expended. In some states the local applicant may have to front the cost of project design, construction or programs. In other states, though, the DOT will conduct some or all of the design and construction of projects, thereby relieving the applicant from expending funds.