ANNOUNCEMENT

Toward Smarter Communities: Federal Agencies Partner on a Research and Action Competition

The Civic Innovation Challenge, funded by the National Science Foundation, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Homeland Security, supports partnerships between communities and universities that address mobility and resilience priorities.

April 8, 2020 — Today, the National Science Foundation (NSF), in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), announced the launch of the Civic Innovation Challenge, a national research and action competition in the smart and connected communities domain. Teams will compete for awards of up to $1 million to support ready-to-implement, research-based pilot projects that have the potential for scalable, sustainable, and transferable impact on community-identified priorities. Teams will include civic partners—such as local, state, and tribal government officials, and non-profit and community leaders—working together with technical and social science researchers. The Civic Innovation Challenge is funded with an anticipated $9 million in funding from NSF, DOE, and DHS. Access the NSF solicitation here.

While development of the Civic Innovation Challenge has been ongoing for over a year, the release of the Challenge comes as the world faces unprecedented obstacles in response to the novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, which is impacting healthcare, economic, and social systems. Although the collective energy and effort of communities must focus on the crisis at hand, community members, researchers, and leaders will soon also be considering how civic services and systems should be rebuilt to be stronger and more resilient once communities emerge from this crisis. As teams reflect on the focus areas of the Civic Innovation Challenge (tracks described below), they are encouraged to consider how both the current situation and other experiences in their communities uncover new challenges, motivate new questions, and highlight the need for new perspectives.
The Civic Innovation Challenge comprises two tracks, shaped by input from cities and communities from across the country at an Ideas Festival held in early 2019:

1. **Communities and Mobility**: Offering Better Mobility Options to Solve the Spatial Mismatch Between Housing Affordability and Jobs; and

2. **Resilience to Natural Disasters**: Equipping Communities for Greater Preparedness and Resilience to Natural Disasters.

The Challenge is organized in two stages. In the first stage, teams will compete for planning grants of up to $50,000 per team over a period of four months. Awards will be offered to approximately 12 teams per track and are expected to be made in Fall 2020. Planning grant applications are due on July 1, 2020. With the support of the planning grant, the selected teams will then refine their projects and compete for second-stage grants of up to $1 million per team over a period of 12 months; these awards will support ready-to-implement, research-based pilot projects and will be offered to a cohort of awardees in each track. Only awardees of Stage 1 will be eligible to submit proposals for Stage 2.

“The Civic Innovation Challenge is the latest step by NSF to provide funding for high-need research areas with significant societal impact,” said Margaret Martonosi, NSF Assistant Director for Computer and Information Science and Engineering. “We are thrilled to partner with DOE and DHS to support community-based innovation. The structure of the Civic Innovation Challenge will allow for teams to learn from each other and develop transferable approaches poised to address key civic priorities on a national scale.”

In discussing the **Communities and Mobility** track, Daniel R. Simmons, Assistant Secretary for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, U.S. Department of Energy, said “DOE is proud to participate in the Civic Innovation Challenge and inspire communities and researchers to work together to develop affordable, innovative mobility options that better connect residents to work, critical services, and amenities. DOE’s national labs conduct cutting edge research encompassing transportation and mobility, and we are eager to build off of our existing knowledge-base to address this priority.”

In discussing the **Resilience to Natural Disasters** track, André Hentz, Deputy Under Secretary (Acting) for the DHS Science and Technology Directorate, remarked: “Natural disasters and crises like the COVID-19 outbreak requires resilience in cities and communities across the country and across the spectrum of planning, response and recovery efforts.”

Our federal, state and local customers need safe, reliable and secure tools to adapt to and respond to changing environments and emergencies, and to drive-down risk, according to Hentz. “DHS is excited to partner with NSF and invest in new ideas and tools to improve services and serve as living labs for innovative approaches. The discoveries and solutions generated through the Civic Innovation Challenge will make the nation more resilient.”

NSF has a cooperative agreement with MetroLab Network, a non-profit organization that will support the Civic Innovation Challenge through organizing outreach to prospective communities and teams in preparing for Stage 1 and Stage 2, as well as cultivating communities of practice among awardees to help teams develop methods and solutions transferable to communities across the U.S. MetroLab contributed to the design of the Civic Innovation Challenge, supported by a grant from
Through this multi-agency federal effort, the Civic Innovation Challenge prioritizes community engagement, transdisciplinary research, and real-world pilots to enhance science and create lasting community impact.

Because of competing priorities and schedule disruptions due to the COVID-19 crisis and response, several measures will be taken to accommodate those responding to the Civic Innovation Challenge:

- MetroLab will host webinars to share guidance on best practices in crafting research-community partnerships amid the current organizational responsibilities of civic leaders.
- In preparing the planning grant proposals, partnerships with civic leaders may be not be as developed as they would have been under typical circumstances; MetroLab will provide general guidance on how teams can ensure sufficient “buy-in” from civic leaders and enlist additional partners that will strengthen their planning grant efforts.
- All workshops and events associated with the Civic Innovation Challenge will be held virtually until public health guidance changes.

Questions? For questions about the solicitation or applying for an award, contact NSF program officers David Corman, Michal Ziv-El, Sandip Roy, and Linda Bushnell. For questions about programming or partnership inquiries, please contact MetroLab.

**Testimonials from leaders in the civic ecosystem:**

“The current multiple crises facing state and local leaders concurrently strain capacity and demonstrate the critical way that the public sector can better use data to address key priorities. The Civic Innovation Challenge offers a pathway for transformative projects to be incubated and deployed,” said Stephen Goldsmith, the Director of the Innovations in American Government Program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and 46th Mayor of Indianapolis.

“The Civic Innovation Challenge has the potential to help cities, communities and universities work together to address some of the most challenging issues that we face as a society: access to opportunity, and resilience in the face of disaster, whether that is a global pandemic, economic calamities, or increasingly severe and extreme weather,” said Harriet Tregoning, Director of the New Urban Mobility Alliance. “We are seeing fundamental shifts in how we think about identifying actions and solutions that solve multiple problems, not just serve a single purpose. Federal programs like the Civic Innovation Challenge provide the resources, support, and encouragement to partner and collaborate in ways that could positively transform so many of our communities and broaden access, opportunity and resilience.”

**About the National Science Foundation**

The National Science Foundation (NSF) is an independent Federal agency that supports fundamental research and education across all fields of science and engineering. In fiscal year (FY) 2020, its budget is $8.3 billion. NSF funds reach all 50 states through grants to nearly 2,000 colleges, universities and other institutions. Each year, NSF receives more than 50,000 competitive proposals for funding and makes about 12,000 new funding awards.
The Civic Innovation Challenge is an effort in the Smart & Connected Communities (S&CC) domain. The NSF’s S&CC program, led by the Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering, encourages researchers to work with communities and residents to identify and define challenges they are facing, enabling those challenges to motivate use-inspired research questions.

The S&CC program supports integrative research that addresses fundamental technical and social science dimensions of smart and connected communities, and pilots solutions together with communities. Importantly, the program is interested in projects that consider the sustainability of the research outcomes beyond the life of the projects, including the scalability and transferability of the proposed solutions.

About the U.S. Department of Energy’s Vehicle Technologies Office
The U.S. Department of Energy’s Vehicle Technologies Office supports research, development, and deployment of efficient and sustainable transportation technologies that will improve energy efficiency, fuel economy, and enable America to use less petroleum. These technologies, which include advanced batteries and electric drive systems, lightweight materials, advanced combustion engines, alternative fuels, as well as energy efficient mobility systems, will increase America’s energy security, economic vitality, and quality of life.

About the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Science and Technology Directorate
As the research and development arm of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) focuses on providing the tools, technologies, and knowledge products to DHS security operators and the first responder community. As technology continues to transform society and change our security landscape, S&T is building new research partnerships with governmental and industry innovators to accelerate solutions and address complex threats.

About MetroLab Network
MetroLab Network is a DC-based non-profit focused on advancing civic research and innovation. It works with cities and communities globally that leverage local government-university partnerships to undertake technology transformation in government and drive forward research-informed, evidence-based policy. MetroLab’s involvement in the Civic Innovation Challenge is supported by a cooperative agreement with NSF.

To Access the Solicitation on the National Science Foundation site:
CIVIC Solicitation

To learn more about the Civic Innovation Challenge:
www.nsfcivicinnovation.org

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