

Community-Led Solutions Initiative

Request for Proposals

RFP Release: September 18, 2026
Application Deadline: December 11, 2026 at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time

Funding Opportunity at a Glance

Funding opportunity	Community-Led Solutions Initiative
Award amount	Up to \$10,000 per project
Number of awards	Up to five awards anticipated
Project period	March 2027 through March 2028
Eligible applicants	Eligible community organizations applying with an identified VCU faculty or staff partner
Application deadline	Friday, December 11, 2026 at 12:00 p.m. Eastern Time
Purpose	Support community-led approaches to societal and regional challenges through collaborative partnerships with VCU

Overview and Rationale

The Community-Led Solutions Initiative (CLSI) is a new funding opportunity offered by the VCU Division of Community Engagement to support community-led projects that address societal and regional challenges through partnerships with VCU.

Traditionally, many university-based community engagement initiatives have asked the question:

“How can the university engage the community?”

The Community-Led Solutions Initiative builds on this work by also asking:

“How can communities engage the university as a collaborative partner to address community-identified priorities?”

This funding opportunity recognizes that meaningful community engagement can begin from different starting points. By supporting community-led approaches, CLSI creates an additional pathway for reciprocal partnerships in which communities and VCU contribute complementary knowledge, expertise, and resources to address shared challenges.

Communities possess deep knowledge, lived experience, leadership, and assets that uniquely position them to identify the issues that matter most to their residents. In this model, community organizations identify the challenge and lead the vision for addressing it, while VCU serves as a collaborative partner by contributing expertise, resources, and institutional capacity in support of community-defined goals.

At the center of every proposal must be a clearly defined community, societal, or regional challenge that has been identified or validated by the community. The proposed work should explain what will be done to address the challenge, how the community will help shape and carry out the work, and how the VCU partnership will contribute.

Projects must demonstrate authentic community engagement. The community the project is intended to benefit should be meaningfully involved in shaping the work and, as appropriate, in implementation, evaluation, and improvement. CLSI supports work developed and carried out with communities through shared decision-making, mutual respect, and reciprocal partnership.

Strategic Pillars

Projects funded through CLSI should align with four strategic pillars.

Community Leadership

Communities identify priorities, define the proposed approach, and help guide the overall direction of the project. VCU contributes expertise and resources in support of community-defined goals.

Partnership Development

The initiative supports strong, reciprocal partnerships between community organizations and VCU. Projects may strengthen an existing relationship or establish a new partnership with the potential to continue beyond the award.

Knowledge Generation and Sharing

Projects should generate practical knowledge that benefits communities and the university. Lessons, tools, and resources should be shared in ways that are useful to relevant community, practice, policy, and academic audiences.

Sustainable Community Impact

Projects should make meaningful progress on the identified challenge while building the capacity, knowledge, relationships, or resources needed to extend the work beyond the initial funding period.

Funding Available

The Division of Community Engagement anticipates making up to five awards of up to \$10,000 each. Funding is contingent upon the availability of funds and the quality of the proposals received. The Division may make fewer awards or fund a proposal below the amount requested.

Funds must directly support the approved project activities and contribute to addressing the identified community, societal, or regional challenge.

Applicant Eligibility

Eligible applicants include community-based nonprofit organizations recognized as tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, neighborhood associations with an eligible fiscal sponsor, local governments, public schools, faith-based organizations, coalitions, and other eligible community-based entities.

The community organization or eligible community entity must serve as the lead applicant. Individuals may not apply independently.

Applicants must identify at least one VCU faculty or staff partner at the time of application. The VCU partner must be included in the proposal and have a defined role in the project.

An organization may submit only one proposal as the lead applicant but may participate as a partner on other proposals. Awardees must be eligible to receive funds from VCU and meet all applicable fiscal and administrative requirements.

Use of Funds

Requested funds must be reasonable, necessary, and directly related to the proposed project. The budget should show how the funds will support project activities, community and stakeholder engagement, the community-VCU partnership, expected outputs, and progress toward the proposed outcomes.

Additional guidance on allowable and non-allowable expenses will be included after VCU fiscal requirements are confirmed.

Application Requirements

Submit the proposal as a single PDF in the order listed below.

1. Cover Page

- Project title
- Lead community organization
- Community or neighborhood served
- Executive Director or Project Director
- Primary contact person and contact information
- VCU partner or partners
- Funding requested
- Project period
- Three to five keywords

2. Project Abstract

Provide a 150- to 200-word summary that identifies the community challenge, the proposed solution, the VCU partner or partners, and the anticipated community impact.

3. Proposal Narrative

The Proposal Narrative may not exceed four pages. Use single spacing, 12-point font, 0.5-inch margins, and the section headings below.

I. Community Challenge

Introduce the community, societal, or regional challenge the project will address and explain why it is an important priority. Address:

- Why the issue is important and who is most affected.
- How the challenge was identified or validated by the community.
- Supporting evidence, such as community input, local data, surveys, assessments, listening sessions, organizational experience, public reports, or other relevant sources.
- Community strengths and assets that can be built upon.

II. Proposed Solution

Explain what the project will do and how the proposed approach responds to the identified challenge. Include:

- The overall approach and major project activities.
- Why the organization is well positioned to lead the work.
- Why the proposed approach is likely to make a meaningful difference.
- Any new, adapted, or innovative features of the project.
- A reference to the Project Activity Plan, which will provide the detailed activity timeline, engagement, outputs, and outcomes.

III. Community Leadership and Engagement

Explain how community members and other relevant stakeholders helped shape the proposal and how they will help guide and participate in the project. Address:

- How community input informed the challenge and proposed solution.
- Who will be engaged and how they will participate.
- How decisions will be made.
- How information, progress, and results will be shared with community members and other stakeholders.
- The collaborative approach that will guide the work.

IV. Community-University Partnership

Explain the proposed partnership with VCU and the value each partner brings. Include:

- The VCU faculty or staff partner or partners.
- The expertise and contributions of the community organization and VCU.
- The roles and responsibilities of each partner.
- Whether the partnership is new or existing.
- The partners' vision for working together during and beyond the project.

V. Community Impact

Explain the changes the project is intended to achieve and how progress will be assessed.

Include:

- The expected outcomes.
- How success or progress will be measured.
- The difference the project is expected to make for the community and the identified challenge.

VI. Knowledge Sharing

Explain how project lessons, findings, and outcomes will be shared. Address:

- How information will be shared with community members.
- How lessons will be shared with other relevant audiences, such as practitioners, policymakers, public agencies, community organizations, and academic audiences.
- The practical resource or product that will be developed for others to use.

VII. Sustainability

Discuss how the work may continue or contribute to future efforts after the funding period.

Consider future collaboration, additional funding, continued use of project resources, or other ways the work can continue to address the identified challenge.

End of Proposal Narrative

4. Project Activity Plan

Complete the one-page Project Activity Plan using the template provided. The plan should align with the Proposed Solution section and summarize each major activity, when it will occur, who will be engaged, the anticipated number of participants when known, the expected output or deliverable, and the expected outcome.

5. Budget and Budget Justification

Complete the one-page budget template provided. The budget and budget justification must be included on the same page.

6. Letters of Support and Commitment

Include one letter from the VCU partner confirming participation and describing the anticipated role and contribution, and one letter of support from another community organization familiar with the identified challenge. The second letter should confirm support for the proposed work and speak to the importance of the challenge and the potential community impact of the project.

Project Activity Plan Template

Complete one row for each major project activity. Add or remove rows as needed. The completed plan may not exceed one page and must align with the Proposed Solution section of the narrative.

Project Activity	Timeline	Community and VCU Engagement	Expected Output or Deliverable	Expected Outcome
Briefly state the activity.	Indicate when it will occur and note key milestones.	Identify who will be engaged and the anticipated number of participants, if known.	State what will be completed, produced, or delivered.	State the anticipated change or benefit.
Activity 1				
Activity 2				
Activity 3				
Activity 4				

Project Resource or Product: Identify the primary practical resource or product that will be developed and shared with others.

Intended Audience: Identify who is expected to use or benefit from the resource or product.

Definitions

Project activity: A major action or task that will be completed as part of the project.

Expected output or deliverable: A tangible product or accomplishment that results directly from an activity, such as a meeting, workshop, training session, event, report, toolkit, video, policy brief, website, or educational resource.

Expected outcome: The anticipated change or benefit resulting from an activity, such as increased knowledge, improved skills, stronger participation, improved access, greater organizational capacity, or progress toward addressing the identified challenge.

Review Process and Criteria

Applications will be reviewed through the Division of Community Engagement's competitive review process. Both community and university reviewers will evaluate proposals using the published criteria. Reviewers must disclose potential conflicts of interest before participating.

The review criteria align with the Proposal Narrative so applicants can clearly understand how each section will be evaluated.

Criterion	What reviewers will consider	Points
Community Challenge	The challenge is clearly defined, supported by relevant evidence, and shown to be a community priority.	20
Proposed Solution	The approach is responsive to the challenge, feasible within the project period and budget, and likely to make a meaningful difference.	25
Community Leadership and Engagement	The proposal demonstrates meaningful community input, leadership, participation, communication, and shared decision-making.	15
Community-University Partnership	The VCU partner has a clear and appropriate role, and the proposal draws on the complementary strengths of the community organization and VCU.	15
Community Impact	Expected outcomes are clear, relevant to the challenge, and supported by a reasonable plan for assessing progress.	10
Knowledge Sharing	The proposal includes a useful plan for sharing lessons and a practical resource or product for relevant audiences.	10
Sustainability	The proposal identifies realistic ways the work, partnership, or benefits may continue beyond the award.	5
Total		100

Application Submission

Applications must be received by Friday, December 11, 2026, at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time. Late or incomplete applications will not be considered.

Submit the complete application as a single PDF. Submission instructions and the email address will be provided in the final RFP.

Suggested file name: OrganizationName_CLSI_2027.pdf

Funding Timeline

Milestone	Date
RFP release	Friday, September 18, 2026
Information session	Tuesday, October 6, 2026, 12:00 to 1:00 p.m.
Information session	Friday, November 20, 2026, 11:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Application deadline	Friday, December 11, 2026, at 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time
Review period	January 4 through February 12, 2027
Award notification	February 28, 2027
Project period	March 2027 through March 2028
Final report due	March 2028

Community Impact Collaborative

The community leads and VCU leads for all funded projects will participate in the Community Impact Collaborative. The Collaborative will meet three times during the funding cycle and will focus on the impact of the funded work: how projects are addressing their identified challenges, what outcomes are emerging, and how promising approaches can be strengthened, shared, or expanded.

The Collaborative will provide structured opportunities for project leads to examine progress, discuss implementation challenges, strengthen plans for measuring and communicating impact, and identify opportunities to extend the reach of the work. Participation is a requirement of the award.

Anticipated Meeting Schedule

May 2027: Community Impact Collaborative Kickoff

September 2027: Six-Month Midpoint Check-In and Report Meeting

March 2028: Final Community Impact Collaborative Meeting

Award Requirements

Funded projects will be expected to:

- Implement the approved project and carry out the activities described in the Proposal Narrative and Project Activity Plan.

- Maintain an active partnership between the lead community organization and the identified VCU partner throughout the project period.
- Ensure that the community lead and VCU lead participate in all required Community Impact Collaborative meetings, including the Six-Month Midpoint Check-In and Report Meeting in September 2027.
- Develop and share the practical resource or product proposed in the application.
- Submit the community-university partnership to VCU Collaboratory, VCU's partnership database, in coordination with the VCU partner.
- Submit a Final Project Report in March 2028. A template will be provided closer to the due date.

The Final Project Report will summarize project activities, community and stakeholder engagement, outputs, outcomes, lessons learned, use of funds, and plans for continuing or building upon the work.

Questions and Contact Information

Questions about the funding opportunity or application process should be directed to:

dcegrantsinfo@vcu.edu