



Customer Satisfaction Survey: Technical Assistance Grant Program

EPA awards Technical Assistance Grants of \$50,000 to eligible citizens' groups representing communities whose health, economic well-being, or enjoyment of the environment are potentially threatened by uncontrolled hazardous waste sites. Citizens' groups must be nonprofit and incorporated to apply for a grant.

Background

EPA's Office of Emergency and Remedial Response (OERR) surveyed local citizens' groups to find out how well EPA is meeting their needs for understandable technical information about their local Superfund site. EPA provides community outreach services to communities, including the Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) program. EPA conducted the customer satisfaction survey in the summer of 1996 to improve the TAG program and promote greater participation in the Superfund cleanup process. This summary presents the findings of the survey.

Since the first TAG was awarded in 1988, grants totaling over \$9.6 million have been provided by EPA to more than 180 local citizens' groups affected by Superfund site activities. The Superfund Community Involvement Staff has responsibility for implementing the TAG program through the Community Involvement and Outreach Center (CIOC) in Washington, DC, and Community Involvement Coordinators in EPA's ten regional offices.

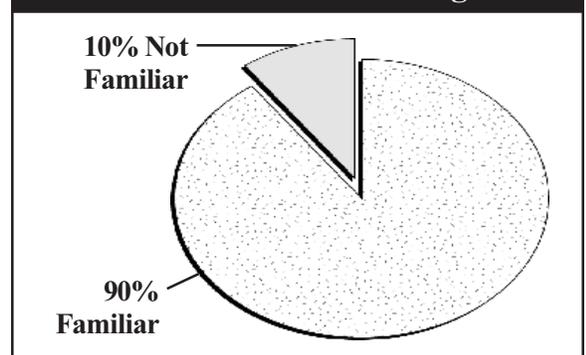
The Customer Satisfaction Survey (approved by the Office of Management and Budget as required under the Paperwork Reduction Act) went to citizens' groups that have received a TAG and citizens' groups that, although eligible, have not participated in the program.

Equal numbers of TAG recipients and non TAG participants were randomly selected to receive the questionnaires. Ninety-six of 270 questionnaires were returned (36 percent response rate) with equal numbers of responses for both the TAG and non-TAG groups. Analyses in the EPA report are based on the 48 responses from each group.

Findings

Responses indicated that EPA's regional Superfund programs are doing an excellent job of informing communities about the availability of TAGs. About 90 percent of eligible citizens' groups are familiar with the TAG program (see Figure 1). Both TAG recipients and non-TAG citizens' groups learn about their Superfund site and activities at the site through EPA fact sheets and updates. When asked about other sources of

Figure 1: Percent of Citizens' Groups Familiar with the TAG Program



Technical Assistance Grants Coordinators in EPA's Regional Offices

Boston, MA	Mike McGagh	617-223-5534
New York, NY	Carol Hemington	212-637-3420
Philadelphia, PA	Amelia Libertz	215-566-5522
Atlanta, GA	Rosemary Patton	404-562-8866
Chicago, IL	Sue Pastor	312-353-1325
Chicago, IL	Suzanne Coll	312-886-6044
Dallas, TX	Verne McFarland	214-665-6617
Kansas City, KS	Gladys Harris	913-551-7159
Denver, CO	John Ogden	303-312-6688
San Francisco, CA	Carmen White	415-744-2183
Seattle, WA	Andrea Lindsay	206-553-1896

information, TAG recipients said they rely more on paid technical advisors. Non-TAG groups rely more on media reports and technical expertise within the group to interpret technical information.

Earlier research suggests that the requirement that TAG applicants be incorporated is a significant stumbling block to groups who might otherwise apply for a TAG. It also has been suggested that the process of applying for a government grant is too burdensome and time-consuming for local citizens' groups and inhibits their taking advantage of the TAG program. Contrary to expected results, the survey showed that a majority (61 percent) of eligible citizens' groups who are not now participating in the TAG program already are incorporated, and 64 percent have previously applied for a grant.

Among those respondents without a TAG, 76 percent said they do not plan to apply for one. Reasons for deciding not to apply are shown in Figure 2. They include both concern with the administrative burden of applying for and managing a TAG (53 percent), and the opinion of the group that they do not need a TAG (69 percent). A number of citizens' groups said they had no interest in applying for a grant because they have adequate technical advice, are satisfied with information provided by EPA, or already have adequate input into decision making.

These findings revised earlier research that suggested the requirement to incorporate prevents citizens' groups from applying, and that most eligible participants are inexperienced in applying for government grants.

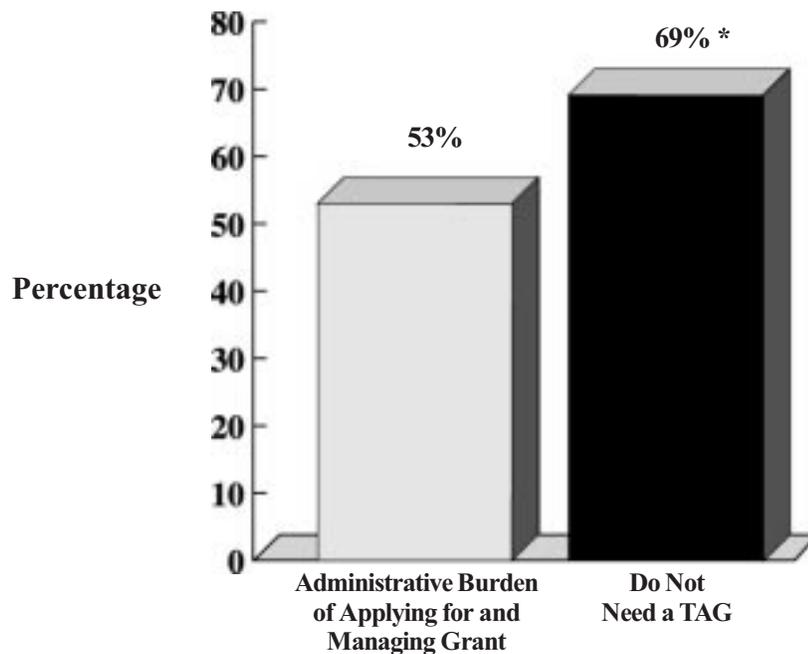
Outreach

Both TAG and non-TAG respondents were asked about the community outreach efforts made by EPA at their Superfund site. Overall, 51 percent thought EPA was doing a good or excellent job. They pointed to the personal involvement of EPA staff (mentioned by 40 percent of respondents) and EPA's response to questions or requests for information (38 percent) as the main reasons for their rating. Those who were dissatisfied with EPA community outreach thought EPA should show more initiative in providing information to citizens (30 percent), increase personal involvement by EPA staff (26 percent), and improve the timeliness of information (23 percent).

TAG recipients were more likely to report regular personal contact from EPA through telephone calls and personal meetings, while non-TAG groups said they contact EPA as needed and rely mainly on public meetings to interact with EPA. Similarly, TAG recipients were more likely to consider the level of contact with EPA as "about right" (60 percent), whereas 49 percent of non-TAG respondents said that EPA contact was "not frequent enough."

Almost half of all respondents also believe EPA does a good or excellent job at interpreting technical information about the site so that

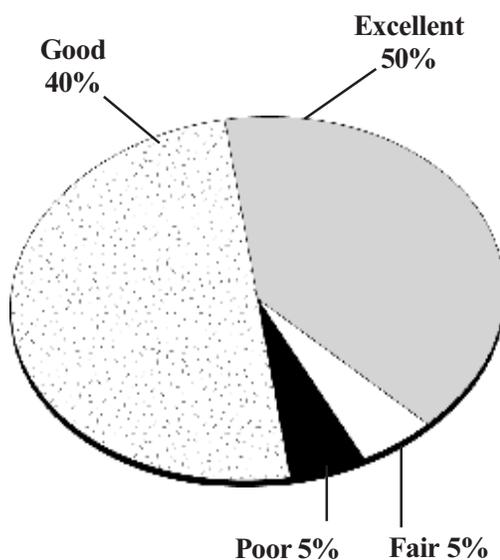
Figure 2: Reasons for Not Applying for a TAG



* For example, respondents indicated they have adequate technical advice, are satisfied with information provided by EPA, or already have adequate input into decision making.

citizens can understand the problems and solutions. EPA was seen as successful at explaining issues in terms laymen can understand, having a good understanding of the technical aspects of the site, and understanding local citizens' concerns. Those who felt EPA could do better suggested that EPA provide more open and comprehensive answers to citizens' questions.

Figure 3: Citizens' Ratings of Assistance From TAG Coordinator



TAG Experiences

Citizens' groups who now have TAGs were asked what reservations they had in deciding to apply. Most said they were concerned initially about the perceived difficulty of the application process (58 percent) and about meeting the matching funds requirements (48 percent). However, 95 percent of TAG recipients reported that EPA offered assistance in completing the application and 60 percent believe EPA assistance was critical to receiving the grant. TAG recipients rated assistance from EPA's TAG Coordinators as good or excellent 90 percent of the time (see Figure 3). They suggest EPA improve the TAG application process by requiring less detail, providing more user-friendly materials, and using less jargon in the information provided.

Figure 4 shows the percent of TAG recipients who reported using grant funds to conduct various activities, such as hiring a technical advisor, producing a community newsletter, conducting community meetings, and hiring a grant administrator.

Recipients also indicated problems they encountered in selecting and hiring a technical advisor. The most frequently reported problems were estimating budgets (mentioned by one-third of TAG recipients) and identifying consultants with the right experience (mentioned by one-quarter of respondents). This suggests that it may be important for EPA to provide additional guidance and assistance in helping citizens' groups identify and hire technical advisors.

TAG recipients reported difficulties they encountered in reporting on grant activities and receiving reimbursements. One-third of respondents said that payments sometimes take too long. Some TAG recipients also had problems meeting the matching requirement (23 percent) and completing grant activities within the grant's time frame (23 percent). They suggest that the grant continue throughout the cleanup without the need to extend the grant period. Other recipients noted the need for an initial payment so they would not have to wait for a reimbursement (15 percent) and problems in complying with reporting requirements (15 percent). TAG recipients believe that EPA requires unnecessary, time-consuming, and excessive paperwork and suggest fewer requirements and better guidance as solutions.

Benefits of a TAG

The primary benefits of hiring a technical advisor, according to TAG recipients, are the assistance such advisors provide in interpreting EPA data and reports so that the community can better understand them (reported by 85 percent of respondents) and citizens' increased understanding of

Selecting and Hiring a Technical Advisor

- Problems in estimating budgets
- Identifying correct mix of skills

Difficulties in the Grant Process

- Payments take too long
- Difficulty meeting matching funds requirement
- Need for extension of three-year budget period
- Need for initial advance payment
- Problem in complying with reporting requirements

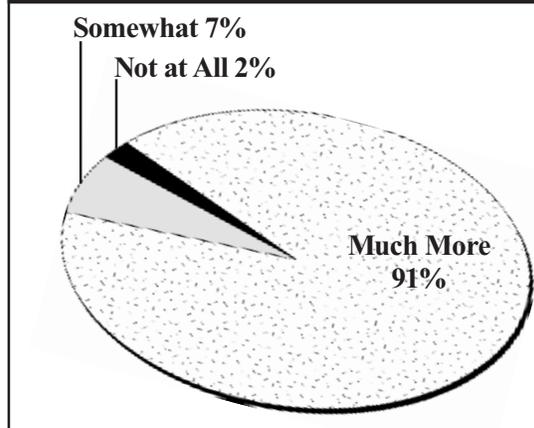
Figure 4: Uses of TAG Funds



* Percentages refer to number of groups reporting each activity, not amount of funds.

Citizens' groups commented that the TAG allowed them to be represented at the table by someone who not only has a scientific background, but also is sympathetic to their concerns and goals.

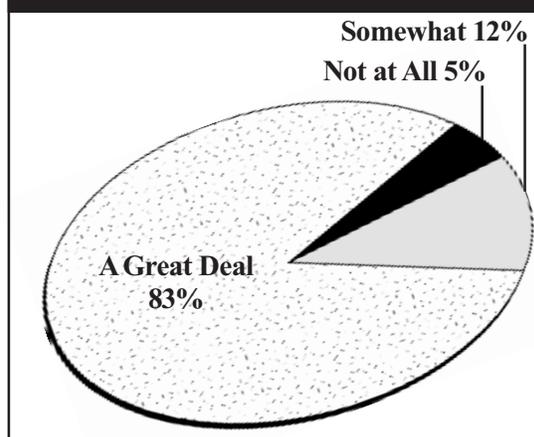
Figure 5: TAG Increased Citizens' Involvement in Cleanup Process



technical issues (83 percent) resulting from involvement of the technical advisor. More than half of respondents also felt that the technical advisor helped facilitate a dialogue with EPA and others, and inform citizens of site activities. Helping to establish the credibility or legitimacy of the group also was a frequently mentioned benefit of hiring a technical advisor. Respondents commented that the responsible parties, EPA, and the State now accept the group's comments as legitimate. They no longer need to struggle to prove their concerns, and they have developed better strategies on how to deal with all the parties involved in cleanup.

Indexes of customer satisfaction included in the survey addressed the extent to which the TAG program allowed citizens' groups to be more informed and involved in the Superfund process (see Figure 5) and the extent to which the community as a whole benefited from the group's involvement in the TAG program (see Figure 6). Ninety-one percent of TAG recipients said that the

Figure 6: Community as a Whole Benefited from TAG



TAG program allowed them to feel "much more informed and involved" and 83 percent reported that the community "benefited a great deal" from their TAG involvement. These two measures indicate that among TAG recipients, the program is considered highly successful and quite beneficial to the community despite the problems outlined above.

Conclusions

The customer satisfaction survey shows the TAG program is highly successful in meeting the purposes for which it was intended: TAG recipients feel more involved and believe the TAG provides a substantial community benefit. It also suggests EPA is doing an excellent job at letting communities know about the program, and that TAG Coordinators are consistently providing quality assistance to those interested in applying for a grant.

Information from citizens' groups that are not now participating in the program indicates that although the application process and required record keeping do discourage some groups, there are other important reasons for not applying for a TAG. Most said that they did not need a TAG because adequate technical advice is available, they are satisfied with information provided by EPA, or they already have adequate input to decision making.

Although about half of respondents believe EPA is doing a good or excellent job at involving communities in the Superfund process, the survey identified a number of suggestions for improvements. Citizens said EPA efforts could be improved by increasing the personal involvement of EPA staff, simplifying language used in EPA communications, and providing more honest and open information. Recommendations from citizens' groups for improvements in the TAG program include:

- Continue to simplify and streamline the application process.
- Reduce or eliminate the matching funds requirement.
- Make waivers for additional funds or time easier to obtain.
- Provide additional assistance in finding and choosing technical advisors.
- Correct problems with payment of vouchers.

Several of these concerns are being addressed in a "Revised Technical Assistance Grant Rule" now being prepared by EPA for publication in the *Federal Register*.