

Regional Food System Grant Program Evaluation

Findings and Recommendations



Project Partners



King Conservation District, a nonregulatory, special purpose district that provides education, technical assistance, cost-sharing to private residents, farm conservation planning, wildfire preparedness, and streamside and shoreline enhancement. They also provide grants and work with cities and other organizations to support community gardens, urban forest canopy, and local food systems.

KCD achieves natural resource improvements by providing outreach to connect with people ready to take action, education to train individuals to better steward their natural resources, technical assistance to provide access to natural resource technicians, and cost-share to overcome financial barriers.



Cardea is a national, women of color-led organization with 50 years of experience in social impact evaluation, policy advancement, capacity development, and professional learning. Cardea envisions a world in which optimal health and well-being, equity, and justice are realities for all communities.

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We appreciate everyone whose wisdom and perspectives informed this report



**Community
Expert Council
Members**



**King Conservation
District Core
Team**



**Regional Food
System
Workgroup
Members**



**RFS Grantees,
RFS Applicants,
and Prospective
Applicants***

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Background

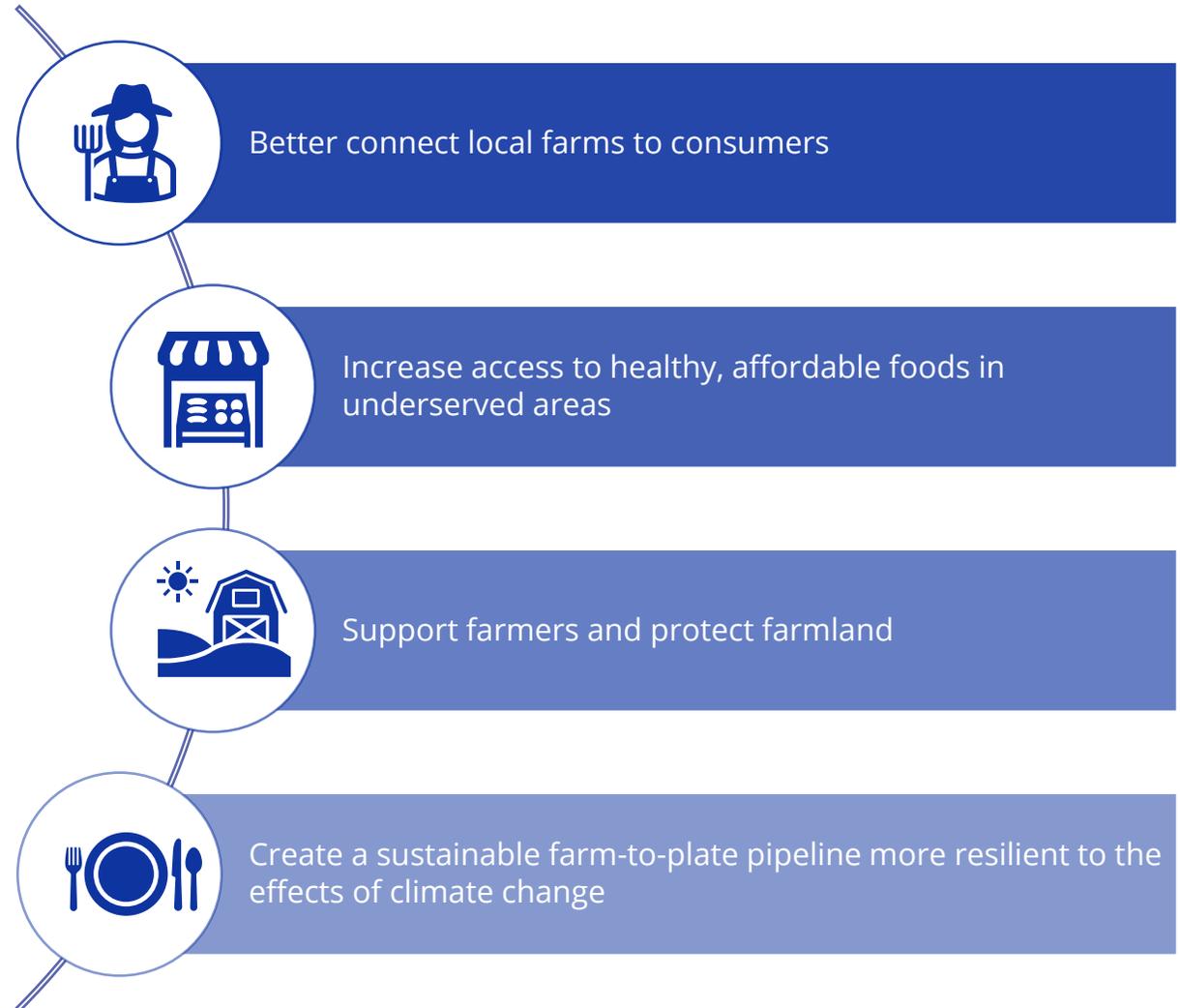
About King Conservation District and the Local Food Initiative

King Conservation District (KCD) is a special purpose district authorized by Washington State and guided by the Washington State Conservation Commission. Since 1949, KCD has helped the people of King County manage their natural resources and build resilient communities. KCD promotes conservation through demonstration projects, education, and providing technical assistance and, in some cases, providing or pointing the way to funds that may be available for projects. KCD has no regulatory or enforcement authority and only works with those who choose to work with them. In addition to funding its core programs, KCD offers grant funding and cost-share programs to support stewardship congruent with its mission.

KCD is governed by 5 Board of Supervisors who determine matters of policy, oversee the budget, and manage the Executive Director. This Board consists of 3 positions elected at-large by residents of King County and 2 positions appointed by the State Conservation Commission. The Board hires a full-time Executive Director who is the lead administrator. An Advisory Committee of 15 elected officials and senior staff from cities, the County, and organizations across King County provide policy recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

The King County Executive launched the [Local Food Initiative \(LFI\)](#)₂ in 2014 with aims to build a **stronger farm-to-plate pipeline**. To support the goals of the LFI, KCD created the RFS Grant Program which provides small grants to organizations that improve access to affordable healthy food. The information presented in this report reflects findings on the evaluation of the RFS Grant Program.

The Local Food Initiative aims to build a stronger farm-to-plate pipeline by setting targets and taking bold steps to:



This evaluation explores the RFS Grant Program

In 2022, KCD partnered with Cardea to plan and implement a third-party evaluation of its RFS Grant Program.

Cardea worked with KCD to plan a mixed methods evaluation approach to:

	Summarize RFS Program grant and program processes, including grant-making, decision-making, and reporting processes
	Identify opportunities to support RFS grant program processes and systems processes to be more equitable
	Better understand the RFS program's impact on the food system and opportunities to enhance impacts in the service area
	Uplift strengths and opportunities for growth of the RFS program through stories of success and challenges



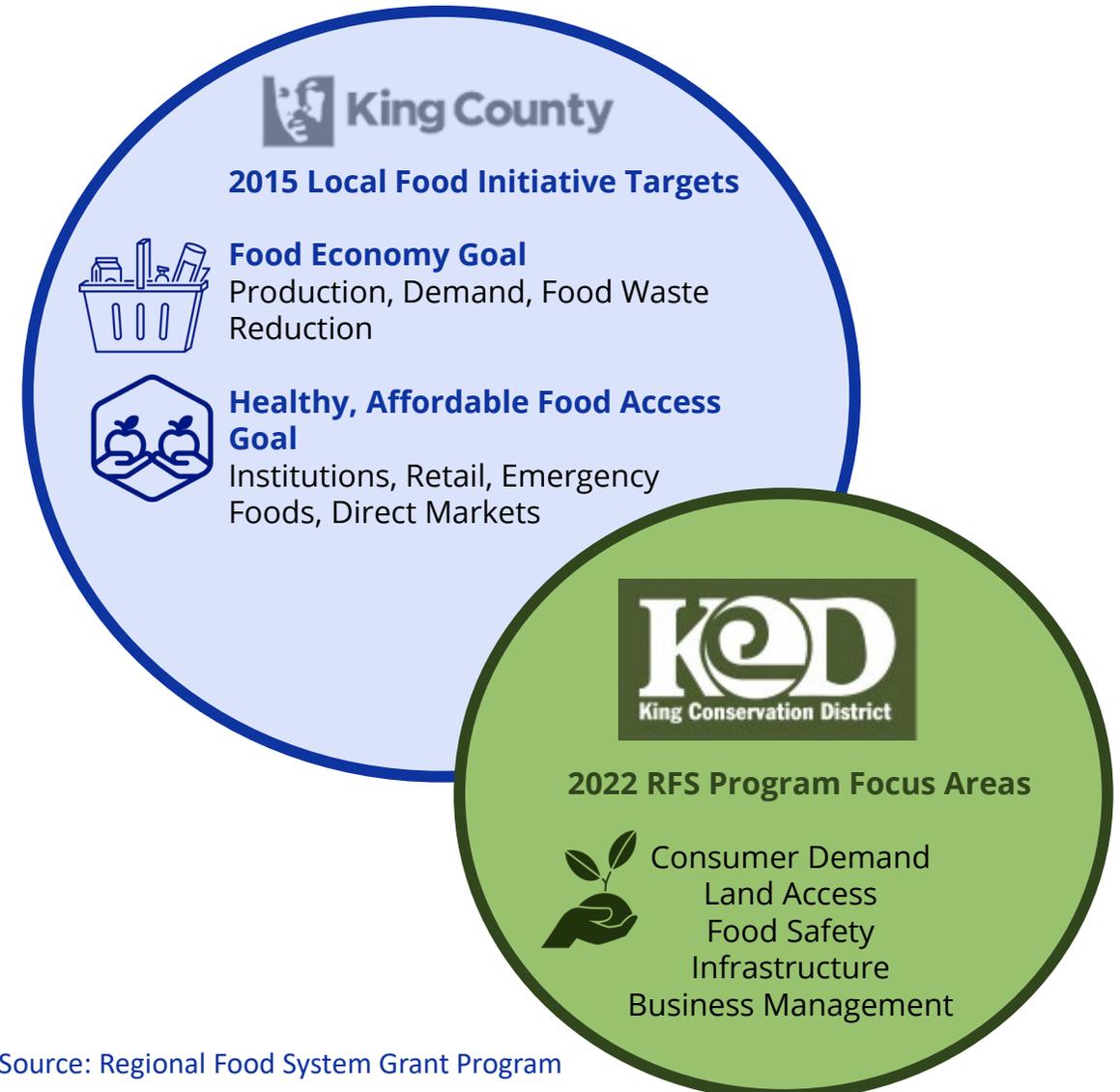
About the Regional Food System Grant Program

As part of KCD's **Better Food Program** and with support from a wide range of local food system advisors, KCD implemented a series of initiatives to strengthen the local food economy. Established in 2015, the **Regional Food System (RFS) Grant Program**, is one of those programs that supports projects that contribute to the economic viability of local farmers, encourage new farmers, expand acreage in food production, improve food access, and increase demand for King County farm products.

Eligible applicants include farmers, producer networks, marketing cooperatives, farmers markets, businesses, schools, special districts, nonprofit organizations, tribes, and jurisdictions within KCD's service area. RFS awards for both the competitive grants and strategic investments was at least \$900,000 annually. Investments in the RFS Grant have historically been made in **four key areas**:

- Infrastructure
- Scaling up
- Farmland access
- Institutional demand

How the Local Food Initiative and RFS Are Connected





Approach

Evaluation questions

Cardea and the KCD core team, which included a group of key KCD staff and one RFS Workgroup member, met regularly to plan and coordinate elements of the evaluation. As part of evaluation activities, Cardea, the KCD core team, with the feedback from the CEC, developed a list of evaluation questions to guide the RFS Grant Program report. Questions include:

	<p>How equitable is the Regional Food System Program grant?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can the RFS Program enhance equity in its grant application and program processes?• What are the key characteristics of funded grantees?
	<p>How are Regional Food System Program grant investments promoting equity within the food system landscape in the service region?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the key factors that promote equity within the food system landscape in the service region?• What are RFS Program grant practices that support the program's financial sustainability beyond the grant program timeline?• What changes or improvements can the RFS Program implement to enhance equity in their processes and investments?• What are the strengths and opportunities for improvement of the RFS Program?



Community engagement strategies

As part of community engagement strategies, Cardea and the KCD core team worked together to identify interested community members who served as the **Community Expert Council** (CEC) with diverse knowledge and perspectives of the King County food system to ensure that community priorities were centered in the evaluation.

In total, **12** community members were invited to join the CEC with an estimated total time commitment of 2 to 5 hours per month. Some community members did not have the bandwidth for this commitment due to other responsibilities. Ultimately, there were about **10** community members who served on the CEC.

The roles and responsibilities of the CEC included:

- Participating in virtual meetings with Cardea and the KCD core team
- Providing input and feedback via during virtual meetings or by e-mail/phone
- Reviewing and providing feedback on draft materials (e.g., interview guides, community engagement materials, reports, etc.)

CEC members were compensated for their time via stipends throughout the evaluation period, reviewed materials, and provided input and feedback.



The **Community Expert Council** provided input and shared community perspectives with KCD and Cardea to:

- Center community voice and ensure this work reflects the diverse range of work being done within the food system sector
- Share experiences with RFS program and within the food system sector
- Guide the design, implementation, and communication of this work
- Support understanding of the information we get from conversations with key community partners
- Explore ways to convey the story and impact of RFS program

Overview of RFS Program Data

To inform this evaluation's community engagement strategies, KCD shared RFS Grant Program data covering the 2015-2022 grant years. Cardea used findings from the RFS Grant Program data review to inform the survey, interview, and focus group question development.

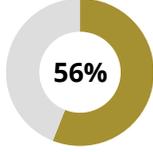
The RFS Grant Program consists of both Competitive Grants and Strategic Initiatives. Cardea reviewed RFS Grantee project descriptions and narratives to explore investment areas and populations served. The RFS Grant Program data shared with Cardea included:

- Grantee reporting documents, including progress, quarterly, annual, and close-out reports
- RFS Grant Program project descriptions and grant proposal
- RFS scoring guides and grant selection documents

Cardea reviewed program data from even years for the Competitive Grants (*i.e., 2016, 2018, 2020, & 2022*) because of data challenges and time constraints. Cardea reviewed program data from all years of Strategic Initiatives (*i.e., 2015 - 2022*). Finally, Cardea systematically organized program data and analyzed by:

- Grant year
- RFS Grantees vs. RFS Applicants that were not awarded
- Amount awarded vs. requested
- Competitive Grant vs. Strategic Initiative

Key takeaways from the program data

	<p>56% of RFS Competitive Grant applicants received funding</p>
	<p>The number of RFS Competitive Grants was consistent across grant years</p>
	<p>On average, Strategic Initiatives were awarded a greater amount than Competitive Grants. Competitive Grants received an average award of \$47,992 and Strategic Initiatives received an average award of \$69,653.</p>
	<p>Common investment areas/themes* included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business development • Consumer demand • Education • Food justice • Food security • Infrastructure • Local food economy • Resource access • Support and assistance

*Refer to Appendix A for definitions of each Investment area/theme



*"The combined effort to **educate, train, and provide technical assistance to new and beginning farmers**, in the near-and long-term, will **significantly contribute to the King County Local Food Initiative goals** of a **sustainable food economy** that ensures healthy, affordable food access for all communities."*

—RFS Grantee

Community Engagement Strategies

Cardea used a mixed methods approach to address the evaluation objectives and questions. This approach included reviewing RFS Grant Program data and engaging with key partners via surveys, semi-structured key informant interviews, and focus groups. Cardea provided compensation commensurate with level of effort to interview, focus group, and survey participants.

Cardea used descriptive analysis to assess the range of survey responses and develop an initial understanding of the data. Cardea applied thematic content analysis to identify themes from interviews and focus groups. After preliminary analyses, Cardea conducted meaning-making sessions with participants and partners to share back key findings and recommendations for reflection, co-interpretation, and discussion. Cardea then synthesized the data and themes from meaning-making sessions into this final report.

Considerations and Limitations

Some RFS Grant Program data were missing or inconsistent from year to year. To account for this limitation, Cardea used a sampling approach and integrated interviews, focus groups, and surveys to supplement program data and address any gaps. Individual RFS grantees, RFS applicants, prospective applicants, KCD staff, and RFS workgroup actively opted into participation in this evaluation. People who chose to participate may have been more intrinsically motivated to see this program improve than those who did not. Because of the potential of response bias, the findings in this report may not reflect the diversity of views related to the RFS Grant Program.



Survey

Cardea received **83 survey responses** (43 completed responses and 40 partial responses). Cardea shared the survey directly with 249 key partners and distributed via KCD newsletter, LFI newsletter, Good Food Forum, the WA Women in Food System listserv and WA Food and Farming Resources listserv.

We received survey responses from:

- 38 RFS Grantees: 31 Competitive Grants and 7 Strategic Initiative
- 16 RFS Applicants (applied and were unsuccessful)
- 29 Prospective Applicants



Key Informant Interviews/Focus Groups

Cardea spoke with **21 people** through interviews and facilitated **2 focus groups** with a total of 9 people.

Interviews were conducted with:

- 5 RFS Workgroup members
- 5 KCD staff
- 6 RFS Grantees
- 5 RFS Applicants

Focus groups were conducted with:

- 5 RFS Grantees
- 4 CEC members



Meaning-making sessions

Cardea conducted **3 meaning-making sessions** with:

- KCD core team and RFS workgroup
- RFS Grantees, applicants, and prospective applicants and CEC members



Grant Process

Grant Process: Key Takeaways

Incorporate Equitable Grant Practices

- Ensure engagement and outreach of **Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC)** and **small organizations**
- Offer alternative application processes that better accommodate **non-English speakers**
- Establish application related mechanisms that intentionally address and **disrupt power-dynamics** and **biases**
- Provide **technical assistance** and guidance to applicants

Streamline Grant Reporting Processes

- Incorporate more **systematic program measures generated in collaboration with grantees** to improve KCD's ability to track progress, successes and challenges consistently and support opportunities for continuous learning, improvement, and accountability



*"[KCD] has helped initiate and launch projects or expand upon projects that I don't think that that would have been able to happen otherwise. I think they have a **positive presence in our community**, and I think the work that they're doing is good... And I think the projects that they have funded have been really good projects."*

—RFS Grantee

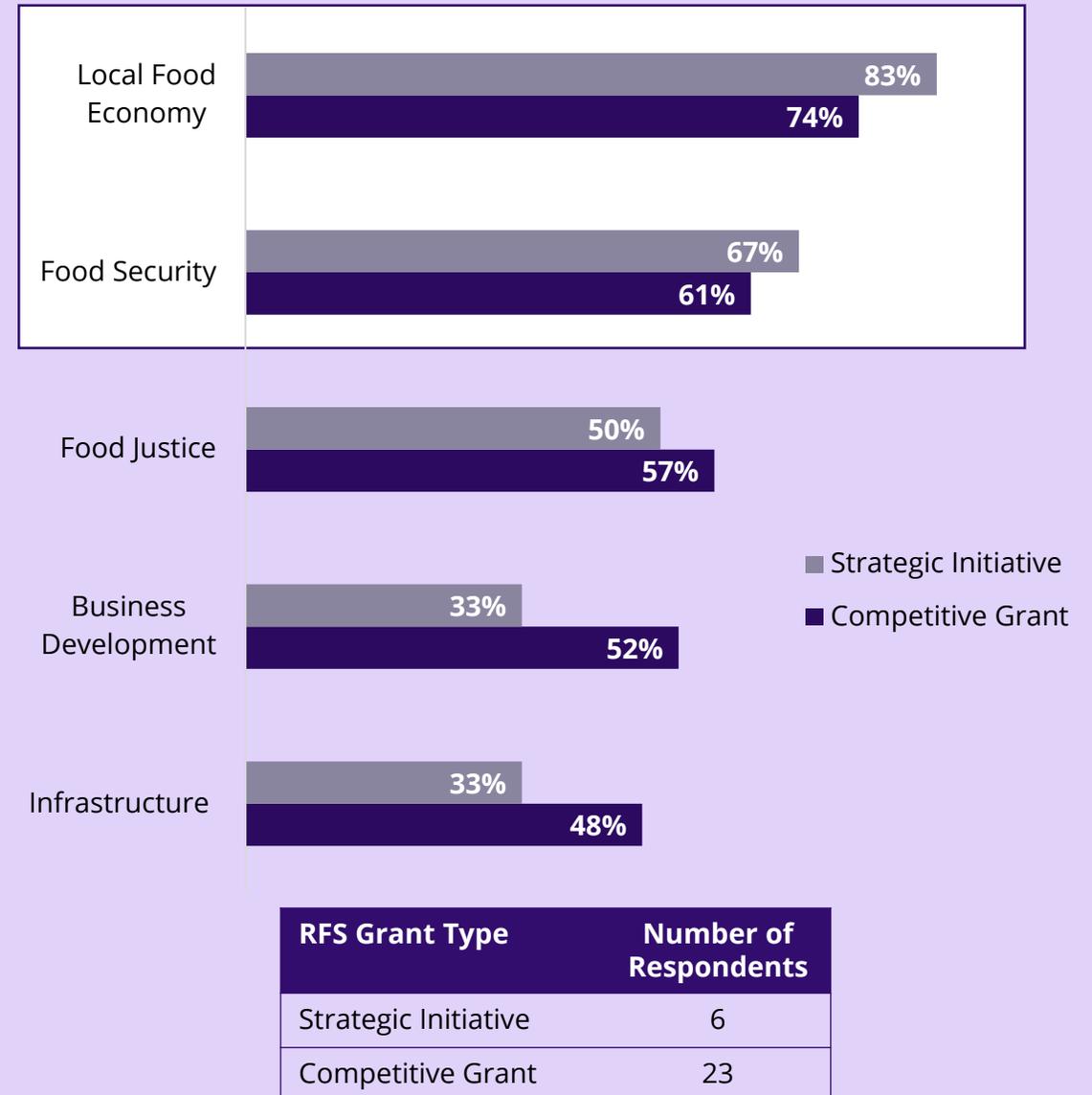
RFS Grantees primarily supported Local Food Economy and Food Security through their grants

RFS Grantees who responded to the survey most commonly selected **Local Food Economy** and **Food Security** as priorities that their organizations satisfied through the RFS grant they received.*

RFS Grantees highlighted that the grant funding initiative must continue to focus on supporting the overall **Local Food Economy** and ensure that the communities most in need are provided with access to fresh, affordable, and healthy food by prioritizing **Food Security** as an area of investment.

*Grantees were able to select multiple funding priorities their grants met

Figure 1: Funding Priorities of RFS Grantees*



*Additional funding priorities can be found in Appendix B

RFS Grantees feel that while the application process is straightforward, it could be more streamlined

Among RFS Grantees, a majority share positive feedback about the grant application process and feel the grant process was **straightforward** and **accessible**.

Many appreciate KCDs ongoing efforts to streamline and simplify the grant application process in a way that **centers equity**. Those we spoke with note that KCD has made efforts to do intentional outreach to BIPOC and small organizations and should continue to do so via advertising campaigns tailored to BIPOC audiences. Some suggest that KCD offer **alternative application processes** that can better accommodate the needs of a diverse set of applicants, particularly those who are not fluent in English.

"I am very strongly in favor of shorter applications, standardized processes, [and] standardized questions."

RFS Grantee

"I've seen some organizations offer over-the-phone interviews in lieu of applications, due to different levels of education, literacy, etc. among various communities."

RFS Grantee

RFS Applicants and Prospective Applicants shared a variety of challenges and barriers to applying for the RFS Grant Program

The top three concerns about the grant application process voiced by RFS Applicants were the **overall grant application process**, **limited feedback from KCD**, and the constraint of **insufficient time and capacity** for proposal development.*

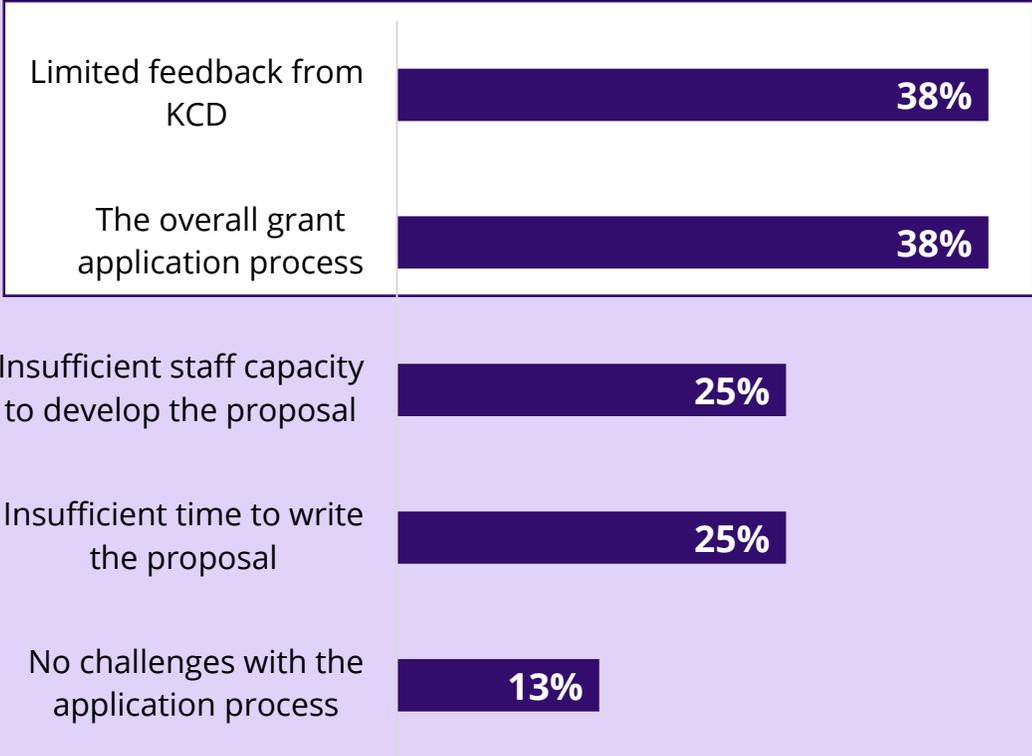
Additionally, among Prospective Applicants, nearly half of respondents (42%) had never considered applying for the grant because they were **unaware** of the grant. Prospective Applicants also share a desire for information on grant opportunities further in advance of deadlines, as they had often learned about KCD grants too close to application deadlines.

Finally, RFS Applicants propose adapting the grant criteria to reflect the specific regions or communities that the organization serves, rather than being solely dependent on the organization's address.

*Applicants were able to select multiple populations they served by the grant



Figure 3: Challenges identified by RFS Applicants*



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
RFS Applicants	15

KCD could provide more robust support to alleviate burdensome aspects of grant applications and reporting

While the application process was straightforward for some, many evaluation partners discussed challenges they faced during this process and made suggestions for how KCD could better support applicants of the RFS Grant Program. Grantees that applied for a Competitive Grant that are less fluent in English shared that they needed to overcome language barriers when they were applying for the grant.

KCD Staff and RFS Workgroup members recognized that the application process is too **long and repetitive**. They also acknowledged that some grant reporting requirements (i.e., quarterly reporting) may be too frequent and could be reduced.

Among those we engaged in this evaluation, many noted that the **purpose and criteria** of the RFS Grant Program could be more clearly outlined and communicated. They believed that the lack of clarity in the RFS Grant Program's goals and criteria created confusion and presented a barrier to prospective applicants. They also shared that the current RFS Grant Program investment areas may be too broad and could benefit from being more specific. Most participants feel that **technical assistance** from KCD would support their ability to apply for the grant.

"I think something about the RFS program is... the grant applications and all of the reporting forms ask way too many questions and... it's so repetitive and I believe it's the same no matter who a grantee is... And then there's quarterly progress reports, which I don't agree with requesting quarterly reports, it's just like busy work."

KCD Staff

Better and more clear communication and support are important to improving grant processes

Key partners of this evaluation elevate the importance for KCD to prioritize consistent and clear communication throughout each stage of the grant process. For example, RFS Applicants said that KCD could be more provide **specific and constructive feedback** to unsuccessful applicants so they have more clarity and can apply the feedback to future proposals, should they want to reapply. RFS Grantees also shared that more regular email updates with pertinent information would help them stay better informed throughout their grant cycle.

"No one provides feedback unless you seek it out. You get notified via email that you were the 'biggest loser.' And then, if you are smart, you seek an appointment with the [Grantor] to get feedback about your grant...And we tend to do that...We contact the funders, and we asked why we were not successful in this particular case."

RFS Applicant

"KCD could provide more feedback as to why we were not funded and what we can do to be successful next time."

RFS Applicant

Overall, RFS Grant Program funding is a small amount relative to the broad intended impact

Most participants acknowledged that the cap of \$20,000 for Competitive Grants may deter potential applicants from applying because it is insufficient to meet their organization's or program's goals. Some Strategic Initiatives grantees felt that a **more consistent funding model** could support them in sustaining their work longer term (such as payment in installments).

"When the RFS program decided to separate the Competitive Grant process from the Strategic Initiative, they also reduced the Competitive Grant award cap significantly...\$20,000 grants are...not significant enough to really help get a program up and running."

KCD Staff

"The cost to apply versus the low amount of money wasn't good for small organizations. Other barriers include grant-specific language, unfamiliarity with government agencies, thereby favoring those who have experience, resources, and privilege."

RFS Workgroup Member

Grant decision-making processes could be more transparent and collaborative

RFS Workgroup members shared that the grant review process is collaborative and efficient in the way they review, score and rank applications for consideration.

Some CEC members, however, note that **power dynamics** in the RFS Workgroup could influence the decision-making process, and encourage that a mechanism be put in place to address this, as well as other biases that may arise during the decision-making process.

Overall, some evaluation partners suggest re-imagining the RFS Workgroup **decision-making process** in a way that centers **transparency** and **collaboration**. RFS Workgroup members share that a more systematic process (i.e., consistent scoring rubrics and criteria) would better support their ability to share feedback with applicants that are not selected and contribute to more clarity on what the intended goals of the grant are.

"And so, by having that opportunity for people to then get a little bit of a chance to basically say, Well, can you clarify this? Can you clarify that? I think that helps the grantees and gives them a fair shot at it. especially if they haven't written a lot of grants before."

RFS Workgroup Member

"Process could be improved in terms of incorporat(ing) mechanisms to check potential biases and power dynamics that arise during decision making."

CEC Member

A photograph of a group of people dining at an outdoor restaurant at night. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a green shirt, is smiling and gesturing with her hands as if in conversation. Behind her, a man with curly hair and another man are also seated at the table. The table is set with plates of food, glasses, and a vase of flowers. The background is filled with colorful string lights and a festive atmosphere.

Relationship Building

Relationship Building: Key Takeaways

Improve Relationship-Building Efforts

- Consider **intentional strategies** to improve KCD's efforts around **relationship-building** and the **time** and capacity this would require

Provide Opportunities for Connection and Collaboration

- Provide opportunities for grantees and prospective applicants to **connect, build relationship, and collaborate** to connect efforts across the food system space and **encourage innovation**



*"[The RFS grant] has helped us to not only build up, I think, **our Tribal food system, our Tribal food economy**, to create a platform, we're [also] **connecting as a community around our food system**. I feel like it's also identified individuals that didn't necessarily see themselves as a producer, didn't see their value-added product in that light...so it is **helping us to connect...** Tribal producers to a market and hopefully, consumers to that market. "*

—RFS Grantee

Overall, participants elevate the importance of building and maintaining meaningful and trusting relationships with RFS Grantees

Nearly all groups that we spoke with widely agreed that it is important for KCD to prioritize fostering **meaningful and trusting relationships** with RFS Grantees. RFS Grantees and KCD staff shared that opportunities to check-in or, more ideally, conduct site-visits focused on relationship-building are ways that KCD can build relationships while seeing how grantee projects are progressing and offering support.

We also heard from many participants that KCD is uniquely positioned to support collaboration and partnership among RFS Grantees. KCD could consider creating more opportunities for grantees to **connect and learn from each other** through learning circles, communities of practice, or similar approaches.

RFS Applicants also suggested that KCD could consider **funding collaborating organizations** (i.e., partnerships or coalitions) which could bridge the gap between the urban and rural farming landscape and support efforts among aligned organizations.

While it is universally agreed upon that meaningful relationship building should be a priority, those we spoke with understood that it will require intentional effort for KCD to dedicate time and capacity needed.

"I think it would be great to have KCD think about how to have even just some occasions to create a peer learning community among current recipients."

RFS Grantee

"It's hard only having one staff member... It's hard to truly create those partnerships and relationships...it's kind of transactional, you know....So, the relationships could be stronger. We could be more interactive, more hands on, providing more support... We can't [do that] as much as we'd like to."

KCD Staff



Equity

Equity: Key Takeaways

Prioritize Equity-Centered Practices and Values

- Commit to equity-centered practices and values, including **transparency, power-sharing, advocacy, and meaningful collaboration** with and **engagement** of **BIPOC communities**, to continuously make progress toward equity

Integrate Inclusive and Holistic Perspectives

- Integrate **holistic and eco-cultural** framing and language into the RFS Grant Program description to move toward more inclusive perspectives



Advancing equity is an ongoing process that requires a continued commitment to addressing oppressive systems

Overall, participants agree that advancing equity within the food system in King County is an ongoing process and should continue to be a key priority for KCD and the RFS Grant Program. RFS Applicants and CEC members shared that centering equity involves **acknowledging the underlying and persistent inequities** within the food system. They suggest that the RFS Grant Program should focus specifically on inequities in food access and resource management, such as **helping farmers access land** and establishing successful businesses, to advance equity in the food system.

RFS Grantees shared that one way the grant program could better center equity is to offer **more flexibility in funding**, such as having fewer requirements and contingencies. RFS Grantees noted that they appreciated KCD's flexibility with timelines around funding, particularly as they navigated the unexpected impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

RFS Grantees also encouraged KCD to establish common language of frequently used terms (i.e., food equity, environmentally-friendly, etc.) so that the greater community can understand its relevance to their farms and forests. Some participants shared that KCD could use an **eco-cultural lens** which encourages the consideration of ecological as well as cultural and Indigenous/Tribal perspectives. This can offer opportunities for **open dialogue** between KCD and the community so they can work together towards a **common vision**.

"A fundamental intention of our farm stand is to help address the barriers that BIPOC farmers face when trying to get their produce to market. The operation is run by our fellows and volunteers; however, other members and young people also help when they can."

RFS Grantee

"When I think about equity in my work in the food system, it is recognizing that we have deep and persistent inequities based on race, place and income...it is really important to understand where people come from and their background and speaking directly to the communities is the best way to learn directly from them."

CEC Member

Engagement and outreach to BIPOC community members should continue to be a priority

Many of those we spoke with observed that although some RFS grantees support underserved communities, there is still a large gap in the communities served. Many participants would like to see expanded relationships and grantmaking to **Indigenous/Tribal communities**. To address this gap, KCD can intentionally deepen their outreach and engagement of BIPOC-led and -focused organizations. It should be noted that many participants acknowledge that KCD has improved on these efforts over the past several years. RFS Applicants agreed that an ongoing commitment to engaging BIPOC-led and -serving organizations will expand their familiarity with the RFS Grant Program and encourage their likelihood to apply.

Through this evaluation, we also heard that **representation and elevation of BIPOC perspectives and voices** to positions of power are central to advancing equity. Some participants suggested that KCD could approach meaningful engagement and relationship building with the community by creating activities and opportunities to **listen to community feedback** and transparently integrate this feedback into how KCD operates the RFS Grant Program.

"And KCD definitely is doing very good things and is really understanding what it means to provide some access, especially to people who are...often unheard, unseen and discriminated against and also just traumatized."

RFS Applicant

"On the cultural side, I have to be recognizing concerns about tribal governance in addition to environmental change and social cultural stability. As I filter the Tribal rights and responsibilities through that [ecological and social justice], we end up being diminished. Let's go that extra mile to where you're actually sharing the bounty of the land with the people that need it and letting them be a part of it."

Prospective Applicant



*“We have **engaged community members and students** in thousands of hours of **gardening and food education** and created valuable educational materials and signage for many future engagements...We also produce **thousands of pounds of culturally relevant organic produce for local families.**”*

—RFS Grantee

KCD can expand a common understanding of how equity is integral to their mission and vision

RFS Workgroup members shared that recent efforts to integrate equity have been good, but they still find the application of equity to be unclear in how it relates to their role. Given the important role that the RFS Workgroup plays in the review and selection of RFS Grant Program applications, it is critical that members have **clarity** on how equity shows up in the decision-making process.

KCD Staff observed that current efforts to integrate a diversity, equity, and inclusion have progressed significantly in recent years, and still see that there is a need for a **common framework** of how KCD demonstrates and embodies equitable practices. KCD Staff and the CEC also acknowledged that the RFS Workgroup could be more inclusive and diverse to better reflect communities within King County, particularly underserved and BIPOC communities.

"I guess that's one of the things that you know. We talk a lot about this within our [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] work in the county. It's not just about spreading more money to more organizations. It's about deepening the commitment to projects and organizations."

KCD Staff



Sustainability & Impact

Sustainability & Impact: Key Takeaways

Continue to Prioritize RFS Grant Program Funding

- KCD's funding has had a **positive impact** in initiating, launching, and expanding projects and filling a unique need within the food system landscape

Facilitate Collaboration among Partners

- Through the RFS Grant Program, RFS Grantees were able to **support underserved groups, foster collaboration, and expand access to fresh food**
- Program improvements should continue to focus on **accessibility, equity, and transparency**
- RFS Grantees would appreciate continuous support from KCD throughout their grant cycle, and share **that capacity building opportunities and connections to other potential funding streams** would be most helpful in maintaining their program

The RFS Grant Program is important within the LFI and must continue growing its impact

CEC members shared that the RFS Grant Program funding fills a unique need within the King County food system and should continue to approach funding with a **broad, holistic perspective** of the food system. From their perspective, KCD is well-positioned to facilitate **collaboration** among partners that are doing work toward common purposes within the food system that have the potential for **synergistic impacts**.

"KCD was on the vanguard of thinking more broadly about a food system being both of those you know, both sides of the equation...They were trying to meld a couple of different components together so that it was more impactful for a broader food system, really thinking about food systems as being not just growers and agriculture, and not just under relief work or other things, but finding that middle ground that that combined both of them."

CEC Member

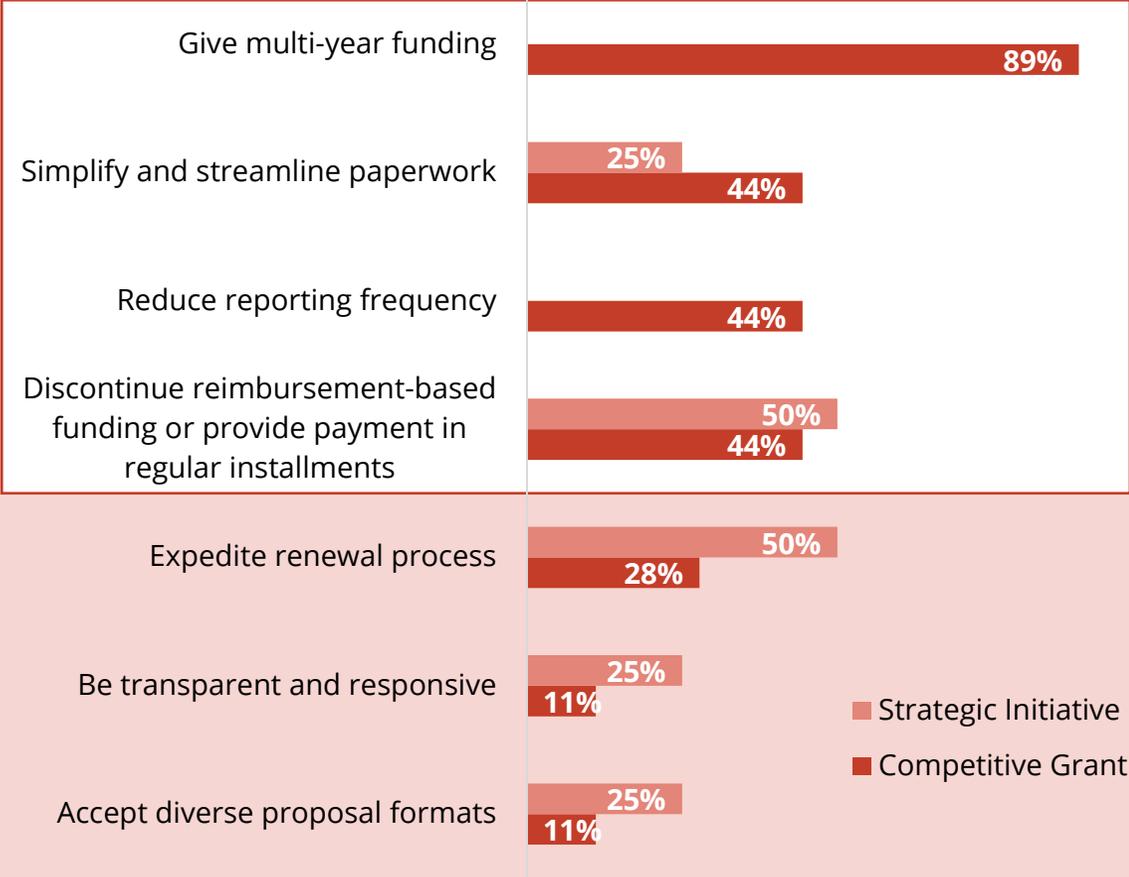
RFS Grantees desire installment-based, multi-year funding opportunities with expedited renewal processes

RFS Grantees prioritized different actions that KCD could take to support their project activities depending on their grant type.* Both Competitive and Strategic Initiative Grantees shared a desire for KCD to **discontinue reimbursement-based funding** and move toward providing payments in **installments**. Competitive Grantees most desired the ability to access **multi-year funding** (89%) and Strategic Initiative Grantees would appreciate a more **expedited renewal processes** (50%).

Across RFS Grantees, they expressed a desire for KCD to improve the program supports and services they offer such as being more **transparent and responsive** to requests for support in successfully meeting the goals of their project.

*Grantees were able to select multiple supports KCD could have provided to carry out project activities they served by the grant

Figure 4: Support that KCD could have provided to carry out RFS Grantee Projects



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Strategic Initiative	4
Competitive Grant	18

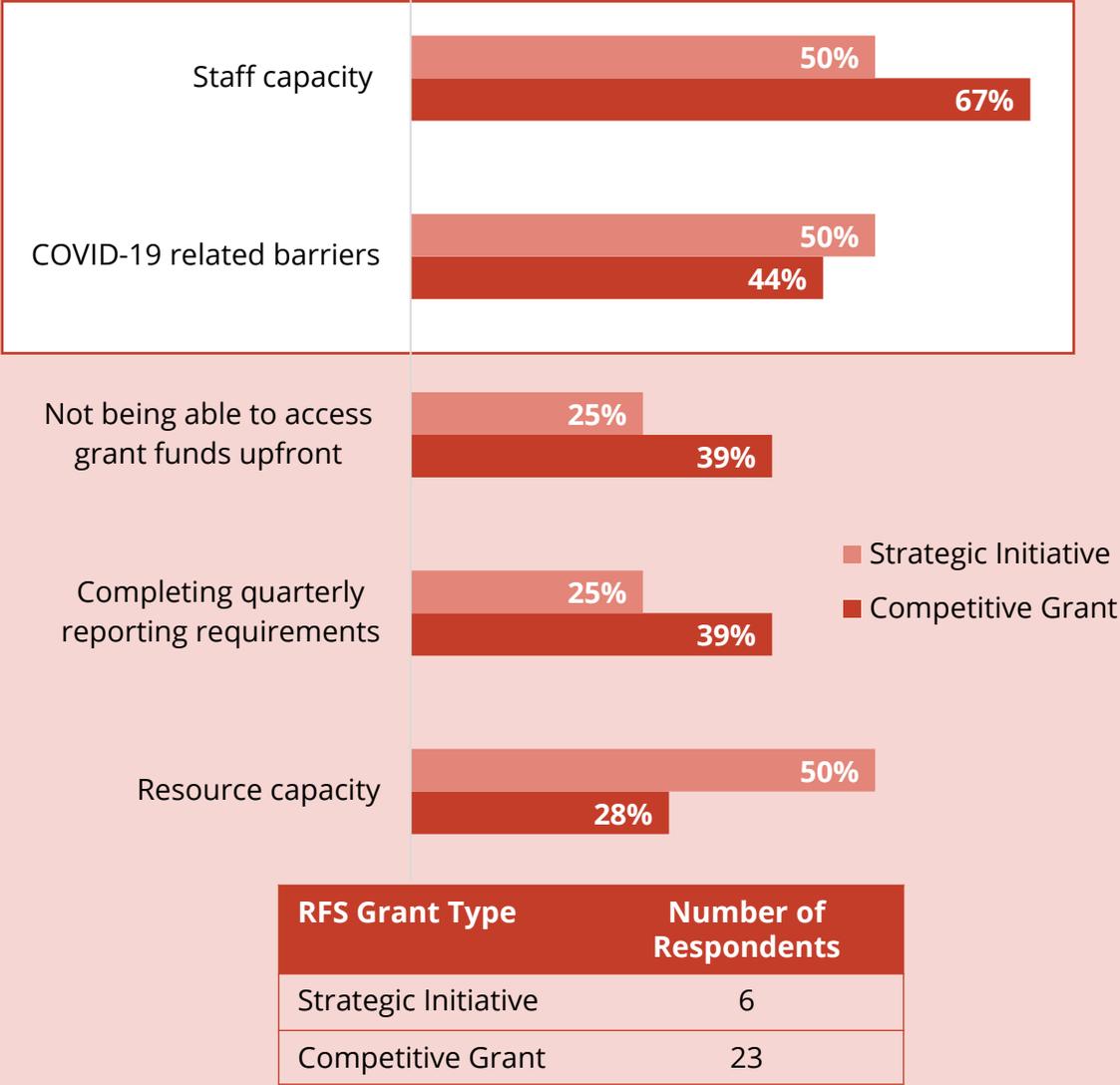
RFS Grantees identified a variety of challenges related to limited staff/resource capacity, and COVID-19 related barriers

RFS Grantees report having faced multiple challenges during their grant period. The top challenges reported by RFS Grantees were a **lack of staff capacity**, and **COVID-19 related barriers** encountered during the funding year.*

In general, RFS Grantees share that they would appreciate KCD's support in addressing or mitigating the challenges shared in **Figure 5**.

*Grantees were able to select multiple challenges they encountered during their funding year

Figure 5: Challenges reported by RFS Grantees during their grant period



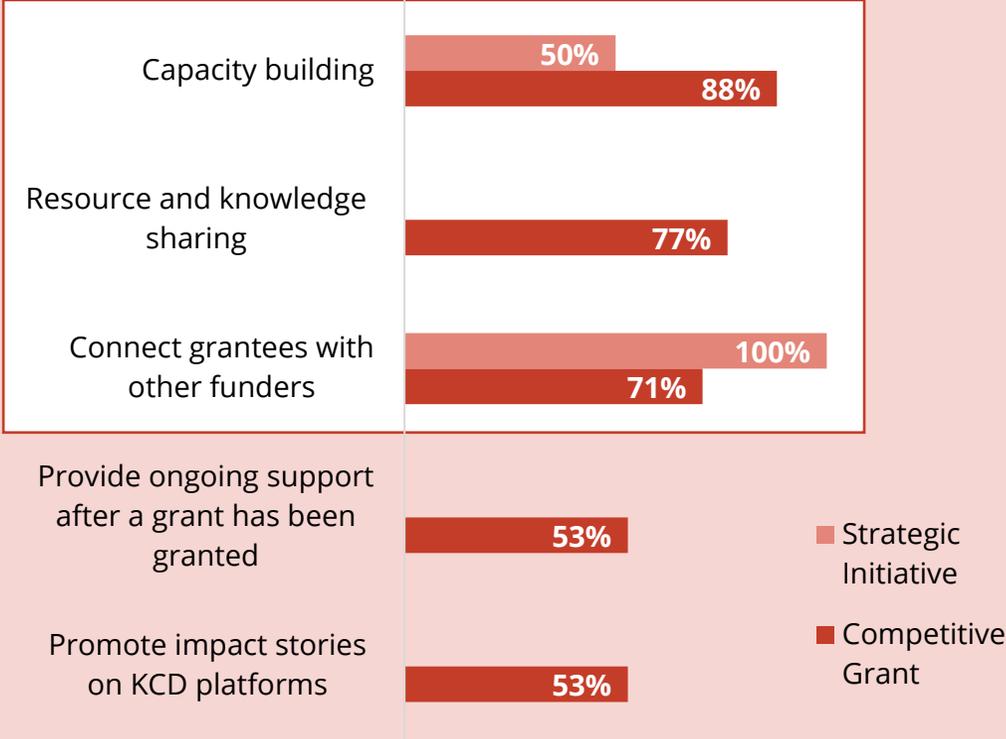
Additional challenges can be found in Appendix B

RFS Grantees would like KCD to support their work through capacity building, knowledge sharing, supports, and connections

RFS Grantee survey respondents shared that they would like support from KCD with **capacity building** and **connecting grantees with other funders**. Competitive Grantees also highlighted that they would appreciate **access to resources** and **knowledge sharing opportunities, ongoing support** throughout the duration of their grant cycle, and **the promotion of impact stories** on KCD platforms.*

*Grantees were able to select various ways KCD can continue to support their work after project completion

Figure 6: How KCD can support RFS Grantees



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Strategic Initiative	4
Competitive Grant	17



*"We helped to **strengthen connections** across the **local food system**, benefitting not just the 294 registrants who made an estimated **1,600 sales and organizational connections** during the event and through the supplemental matchmaking document that was displayed on a wall during the event, but to the millions of eaters in our region and further in WA state who will have access to more food that is locally grown, harvested, and made in King County due to these connections. We invested not only in sales relationships, but infrastructure resources through our panels on processing and land access and believe we have **strengthened the regional market** for King County agricultural products and beyond."*

—RFS Grantee

Overall, RFS Grantees reported positive impacts on their local communities and in the broader food system

RFS Grantees observed a range of positive impacts in initiating, launching, and expanding projects that address the needs of community that they attributed to RFS Grant Program funding.

Many RFS Grantees credited the RFS Grant Program with giving them the ability to **support communities furthest from opportunity** (e.g., unhoused youth, immigrant and refugee communities, BIPOC communities, and Indigenous/Tribal communities) and **strengthening relationships** with these community partners. Some RFS Grantees observed **increased collaboration** between organizations and expanded access to fresh food in underserved communities. A few RFS Grantees indicated the RFS funding enabled them to **build job skills capacity** among young people entering the food systems workforce.

RFS Grantees acknowledge KCD's **community engagement** efforts as well as highlight the importance of KCD's continued role in advocating for community members to play an active role in defining goals, strategies, and impact measurement. It should be noted that unpredictable factors such as the weather and wildlife create challenges, particularly for farmers, and influenced grantees' abilities to balance project goals.

"With two of the grants, I received (from two different organizations/agencies), we built infrastructure to transition raw land to be more suitable for developing farm businesses on a shared site. Both of the projects made it possible for multiple farm businesses to expand their markets and improve farming efficiencies."

RFS Grantee

"Honestly, we were very thankful for this funding, because it has...helped us find edges and allowed us to map out our next 12 months to 72 months of work and so that has been tremendously wonderful."

RFS Grantee



*"We provided almost **4,000 lbs. of fresh, organic fruits and veggies to the local food bank**... we hosted ongoing classes on **gardening and food-related topics**... we provided pea patches for those that have no garden space... we engaged students and the community in sustainable gardening practices... we improved our irrigation infrastructure to save water... we solarized the garden with solar panels to run appliances for cooking classes."*

RFS Grantee



Recommendations

Develop a set of common performance measures to improve the understanding of the impact of the RFS program

Develop a set of common performance measures to improve the understanding of the impact of the RFS program. The **Results Based Accountability (RBA) Framework**⁵ is a model to consider. RBA is a plain-language framework that starts with the vision and works backward toward the strategies for getting there. Many King County agencies use the RBA framework to track individual and aggregate outcomes for a range of programs funded by **Best Starts for Kids**⁶ and other initiatives. There are three types of performance measures that help to shape the story of a program:

1. How much did we do? (e.g., # of clients served)
2. How well did we do it? (e.g., % of clients satisfied)
3. Is anyone better off? (e.g., % of clients reporting food stability)

KCD can collaborate with RFS Grantees on developing measures that are meaningful to their program and aligned with the overarching goals of the RFS Program. Measures can also be tailored to the four main investment areas of the RFS Program.



Storytelling is a powerful tool to demonstrate RFS Grantees' impact

Storytelling can be a compelling tool to demonstrate the impact of a program. The combination of data and stories is powerful and effective. Stories are best conveyed using a warm and relational tone that focuses on community strengths and centers the vision the program hopes to achieve.

When planning for storytelling, it is important to consider audience (i.e., community members, internal staff, funders) and communication plan (how will you share the story?).

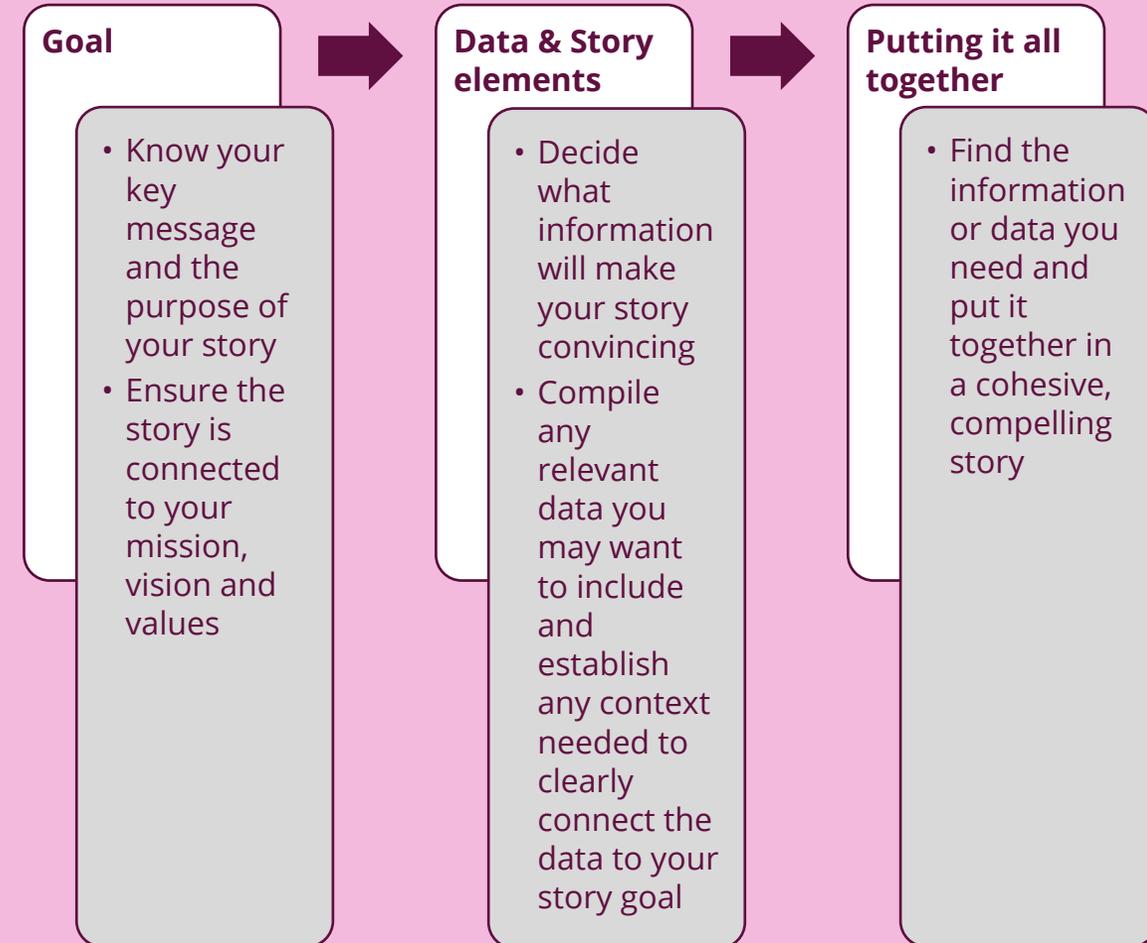
KCD could regularly provide storytelling templates to RFS Grantees or arrange interviews with RFS Grantees to support them in telling stories about their programs. With grantee consent, KCD can feature these stories in newsletters, annual reports, and other formats.

Equity Considerations:

- Is this story personalized? Is it detailed and human centered?
- Does it benefit the individual/organization involved? Would you share it if it were your story?
- Does it represent the funder as a partner by acknowledging the individual's/organization's agency?
- Will readers see themselves reflected in it?
- Does the story challenge traditional models or ways of thinking?

Recommendations

Important steps to telling a compelling story





*"[Outcomes of the grant were] **one additional acre** of land into production, **5,000 pounds of fresh produce** donated for meals, **3.3 million meals** delivered to those in need, **1,168 teens** participated in all garden activities, **3,671 volunteer hours**, engaging more families and providing donations to cover seed purchases."*

—RFS Grantee

Use equitable grantmaking and reporting processes to expand the diversity of RFS Grantees

KCD should integrate additional equitable grantmaking and reporting processes to increase the diversity of RFS Grantees. Examples of the ways in which KCD can lead and become a more equitable grant maker include:

	Offer alternatives to written applications, such as video submissions or interviews with KCD Staff and RFS Workgroup members
	Make the application process accessible in multiple languages
	Look for ways to streamline reporting requirements and reduce reporting frequency to minimize the burden on RFS Grantees
	Pivot to paying grantees in installments instead of a quarterly reimbursement schedule
	Explore ways to offer multi-year grants without matching requirements and make the renewal process seamless





*"The way the programs are thought about, in the way they are structured at their core architecture, needs to be updated and brought **into synchronicity with the reality of climate change** and weather patterns shifting, [with] the hydrological and climate conditions in the Pacific Northwest, [and with] the importance that **small farmers and micro producers** have in Western Washington and the region in general. And **the need for institutions and agencies to think of food as infrastructure**, just like with electricity. "*

—RFS Grantee

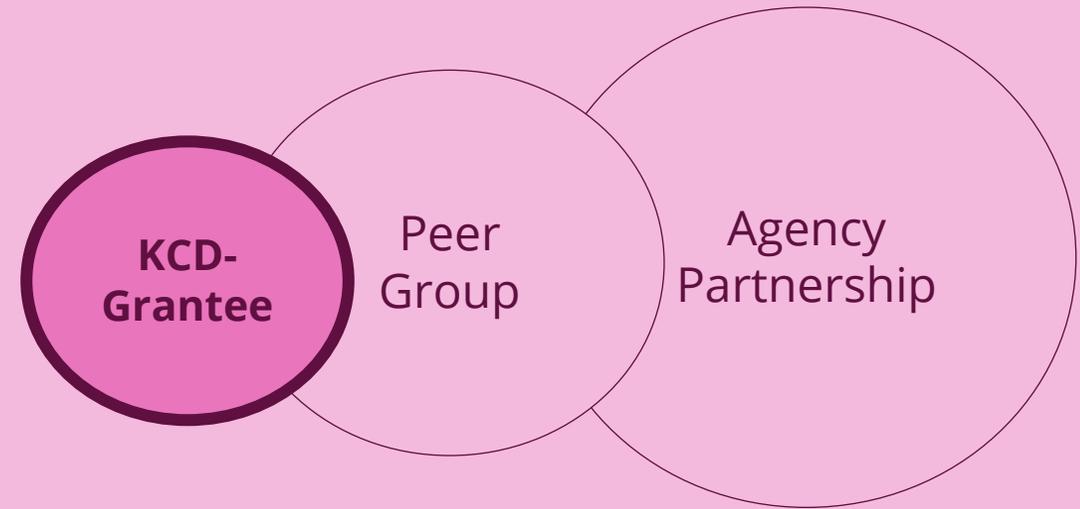
Prioritize relationship building between KCD Staff and RFS Grantees

To prioritize relationship building between KCD Staff and RFS Grantees, KCD can invest in providing comprehensive support by increasing the number of dedicated staff members to provide grantees the support they need throughout the course of their grant. The staff person(s) should act as a thought partner and work closely with grantees to understand their unique needs and challenges, as well as gather direct feedback on how KCD could provide better supports to grantees. This higher-touch level of support has the potential to generate deeper trust, address power imbalances, and ensure grantee voices and perspectives are heard and valued.*

Alternatively, KCD could consider hiring sub-contractors to serve in a capacity building role with grantees. Having contractors provide support reduces the impact of power dynamics in the funder/grantee relationship, so agencies can show up more fully in the work.

Suggested Strategies:

- Organize regular feedback sessions where grantees can openly discuss their experiences with the RFS Grant Program.
- Listen actively to grantee suggestions for improvement and use this feedback to make positive changes in the program.



"If KCD would...assign somebody to work with us...they could coordinate and say, 'Okay, we're going to have a workshop with you guys until we make sure that you succeed because that's the goal.' [it would show] that KCD is really interested in the work that we do by coming to our activities, our events, the places that we work."

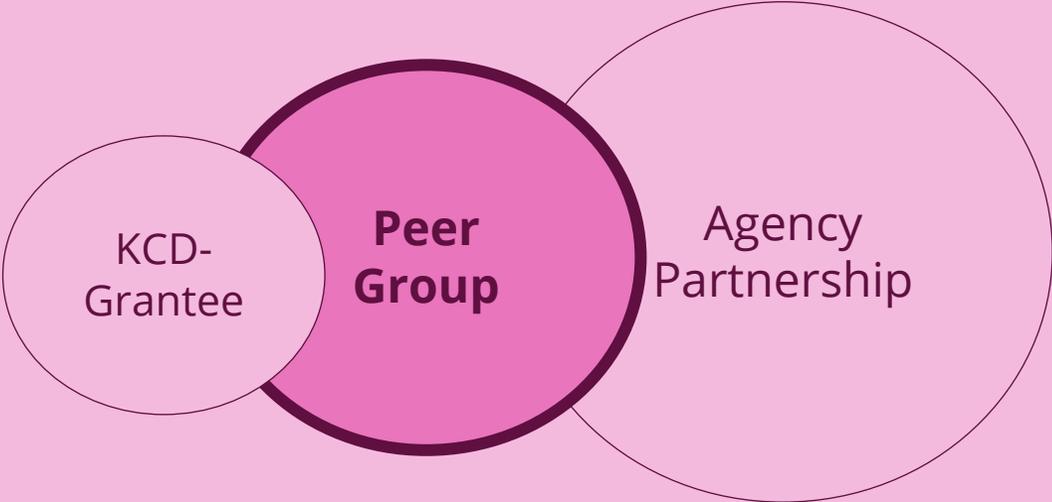
RFS Grantee

Facilitate opportunities for collaboration and connection among grantees to foster shared learning and expand their network of support

To facilitate shared learning and expand the network of support among grantees, KCD could consider organizing opportunities for collaboration and connection via a Community of Practice or peer-to-peer network. By creating space for grantees to share their success and problem-solve emerging challenges together, KCD can signal to grantees that they value grantees' lived experiences and support co-learning.*

Suggested Strategies:

- Host peer learning workshops and knowledge-sharing events
- Facilitate online forums and other ways to create community
- Form cohorts and encourage collaborative projects
- Consider creating a mentorship programs



"I think it would be great to have KCD think about how to have even just some occasions to create a peer learning community among current recipients."

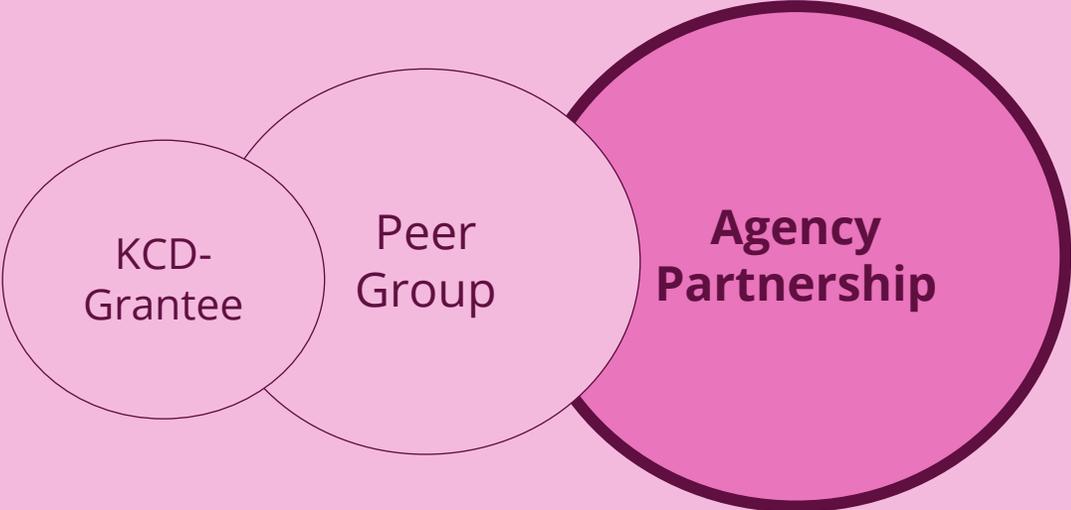
RFS Grantee

Explore opportunities for deeper collaboration with King County to align the RFS Grant Program goals with the overarching goals of the LFI

To foster better alignment between the RFS Program and the overarching goals of the LFI, KCD should explore opportunities for deeper collaboration with King County. This collaboration could involve more regular dialogue and strategic planning sessions to ensure that the program actively supports LFI's objectives. By fostering a strong partnership at this level, KCD can influence power structures and relationships within the broader King County system. The RFS Grant Program should consider the influence it can have in shaping the county's approach to local food systems, and creating a more equitable and inclusive framework that benefits all key partners involved.*

Suggested Strategies:

- Host regular strategic alignment meetings
- Evaluate grant program description and terms



"A really important piece of the equity puzzle is having the clarity of vision, but then, having the tools, the infrastructure, and the larger system to help carry out that vision to make it real."

RFS Grantee

A photograph of a diverse group of people in a meeting or social gathering. In the foreground, a woman with dark curly hair is laughing heartily, looking towards the right. Behind her, another woman is also laughing, and a man with a beard is looking towards the right. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The overall mood is positive and collaborative.

*"I really just think we need to **improve our internal processes** and **have a better understanding of what we're trying to accomplish**, how we accomplish it, and then **keep ourselves accountable**, because I think we do **great work**."*

—KCD Staff

In summary...

KCD should continue to **prioritize** and **center equity** as it focuses on improving ways to make the RFS Grant Program more **accessible**, **equitable** and **impactful**. There are numerous approaches that KCD could take to simplify and streamline various aspects of the grant processes, such as using the RBA framework to develop standardized performance measures. KCD should not overlook **storytelling as a powerful tool** to uplift and highlight how grantees are making an impact in the community.

KCD is well-positioned to lead **relationship building opportunities** and **collaboration** amongst community organizations within the region. Doing so will foster opportunities for knowledge sharing, networking and bridging gaps across historically siloed initiatives.

The historical influence of the LFI on the goals of the RFS Grant Program is important to consider and should encourage **meaningful collaboration between King County and KCD**.





*"[Our impact through RFS] really has been about dispelling a ton of myths and **bringing folks together** with culturally appropriate correct information. And this, in and of itself, has **built stronger networks** of the communities that we've been serving through these two [RFS] grants. "*

—RFS Grantee





Appendices & References

Appendix A

Acronyms & Definitions

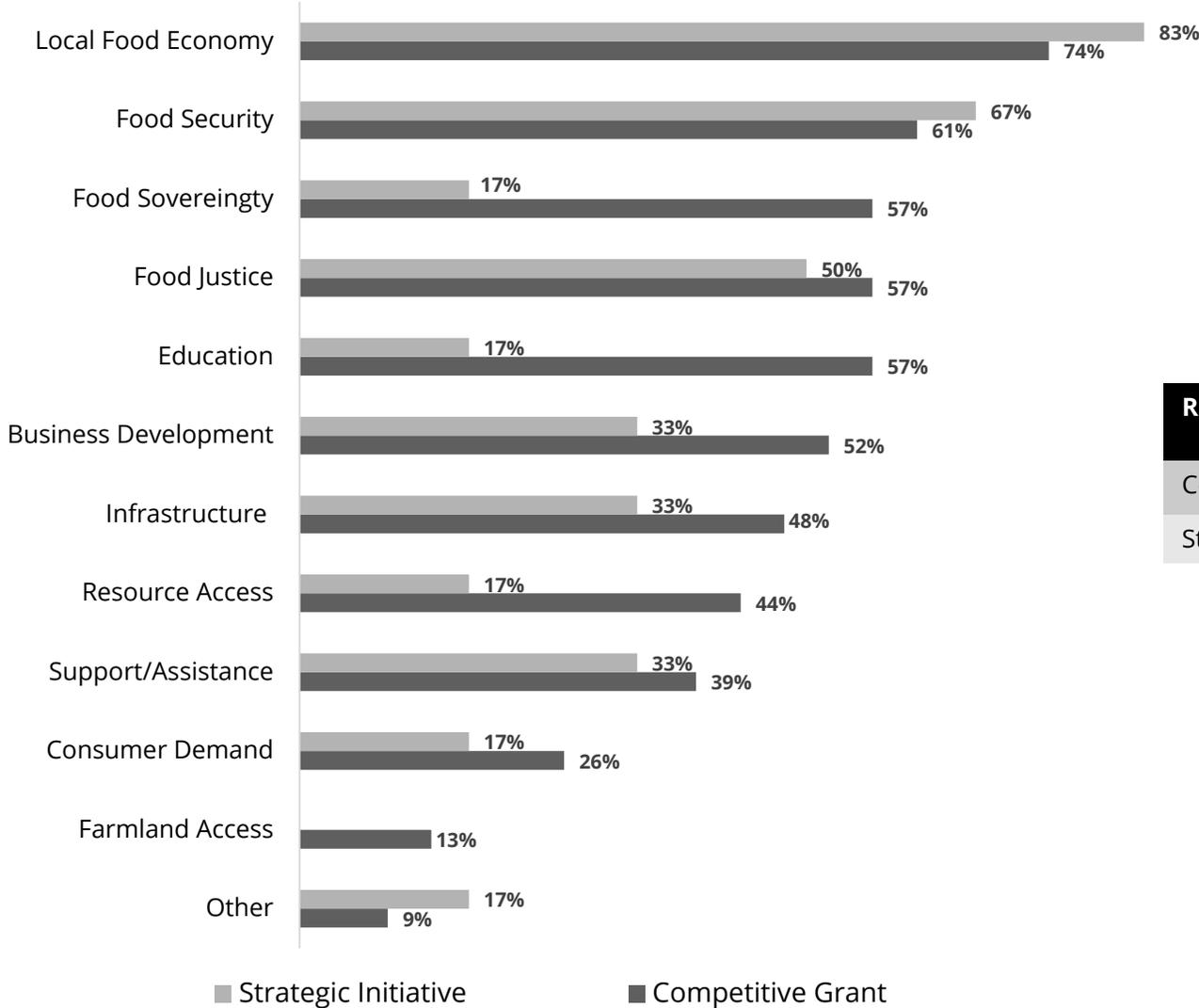
Acronyms and Definitions

Category	Term	Definition
Investment Area	Business development	Farm business, incubator farm, business management support, staff capacity, commercial kitchen space, technical training, and sustainable agricultural practices
Investment Area	Consumer demand	Farmers markets, Fresh Bucks program, online marketplace, meal preparation, supply chain, consumers, and customers
Investment Area	Education	Farmer training, workshops, classes, agricultural education, tuition assistance, scholarships, educational gardens, local food awareness, nutrition, and food system navigation
Investment Area	Food justice	Food sovereignty and/or BIPOC farmers
Investment Area	Food security	Food access, community gardens, culturally appropriate food, food banks, food transportation, delivery, food emergency, and food production
Investment Area	Infrastructure	Food processing facilities, equipment, irrigation, water supply, farm infrastructure, food preservation, and processing centers
Investment Area	Innovation	Research, pilot projects, farming methods, ecosystem services, and new ideas
Investment Area	Local Food Economy	Catch all bucket, pertaining to general food economy, and/or references bolstering economy
Investment Area	Resource access	Land, resources, agriculture network, tools, potable water access, farmland preservation, bioremediation access, and technology access
Investment Area	Support and assistance	Financial support, technical support, capacity development, connection, and relationship building
Evaluation participant	RFS Grantees	Applicants to the Regional Food System grant program who were awarded a grant
Evaluation participant	RFS Applicants	Applicants to the Regional Food System grant program who were not awarded a grant
Evaluation participant	Prospective Applicants	Potential applicants and who are interested in applying to the Regional Food System grant program

Appendix B

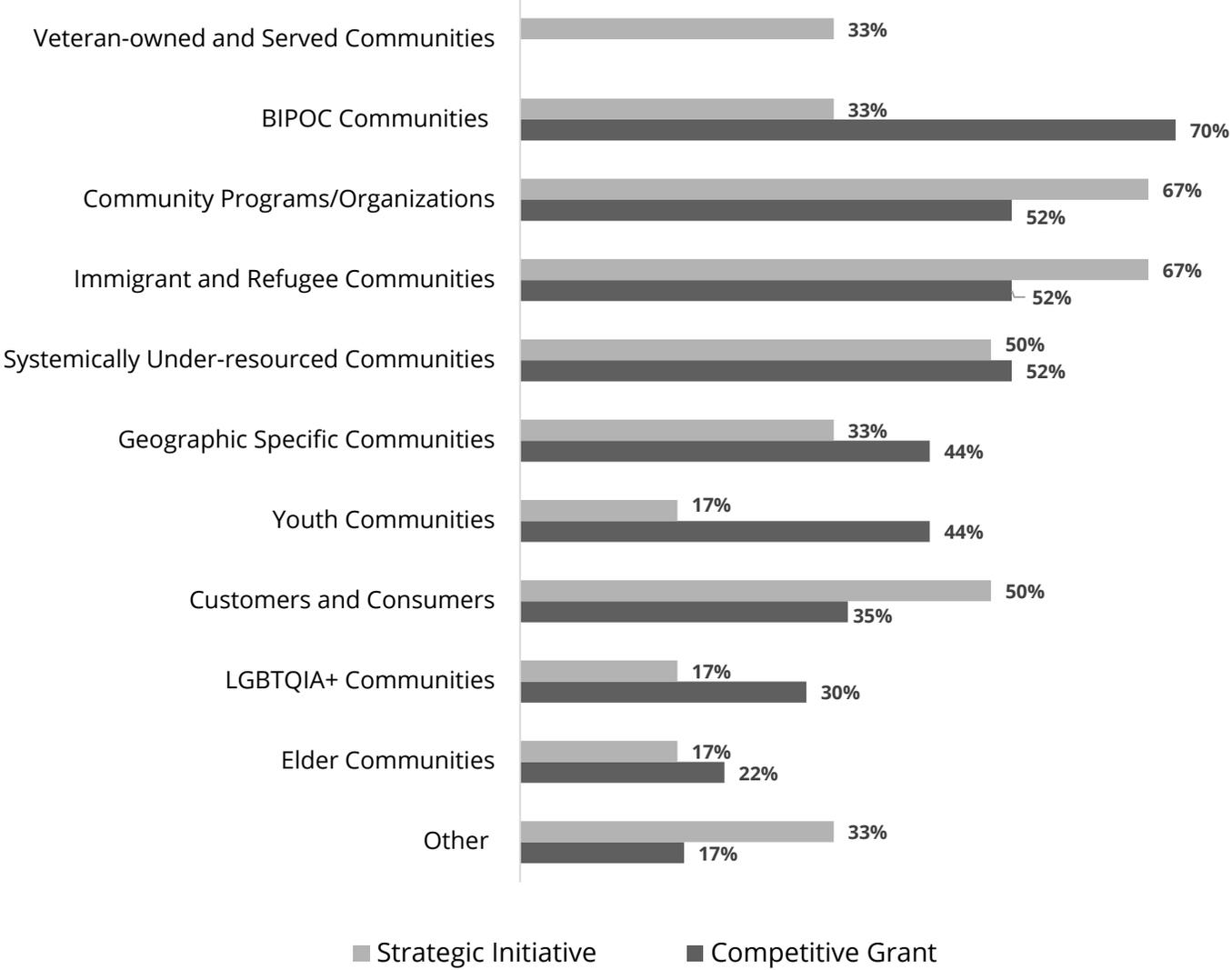
Expanded Survey Data

Figure 1: Funding Priorities of RFS Grantees



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Competitive Grant	23
Strategic Initiative	6

Figure 2: Populations Served by RFS Grantees



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Competitive Grant	23
Strategic Initiative	6

Figure 4: Support that KCD could have provided to carry out RFS Grantee Projects

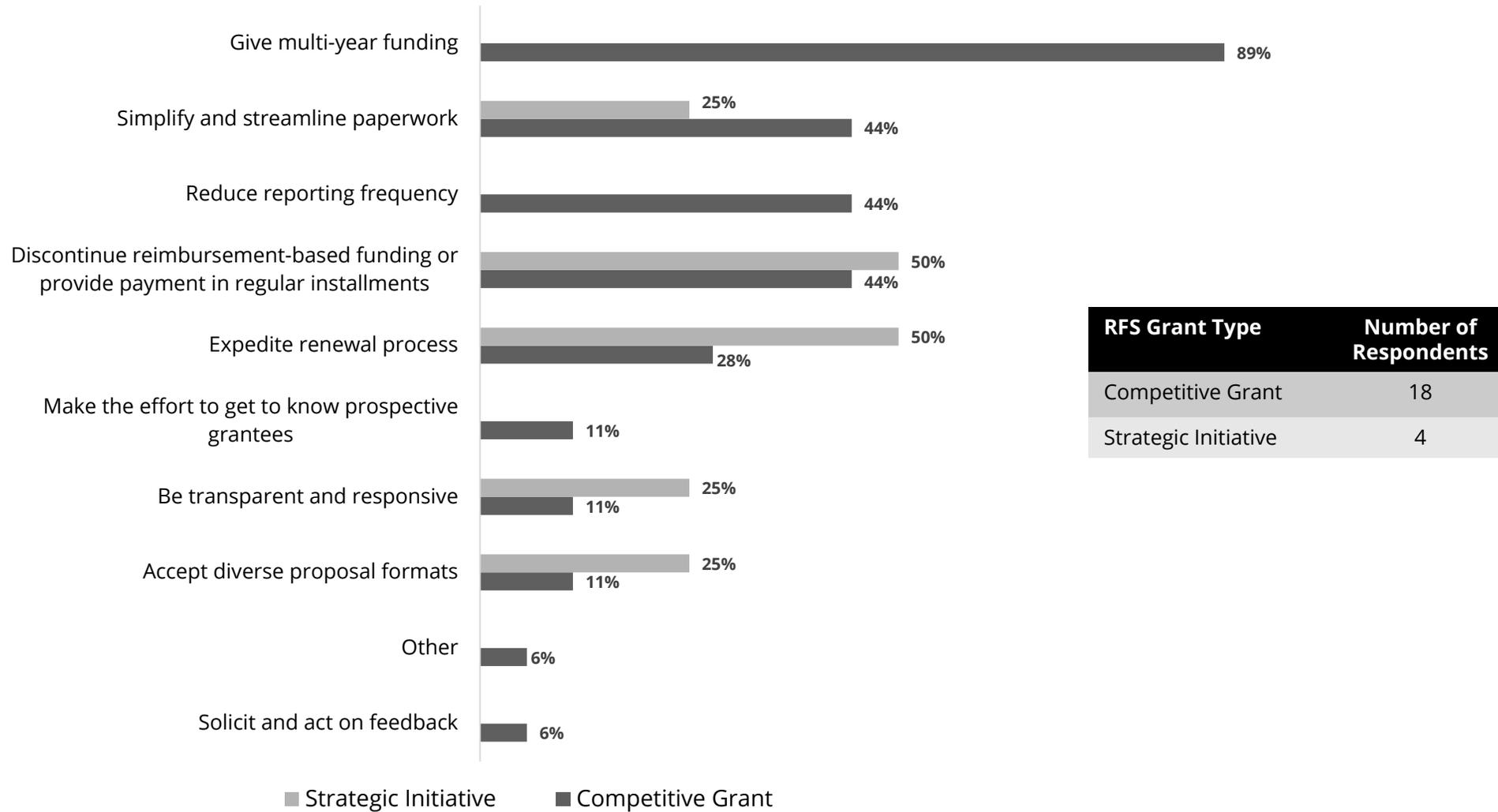
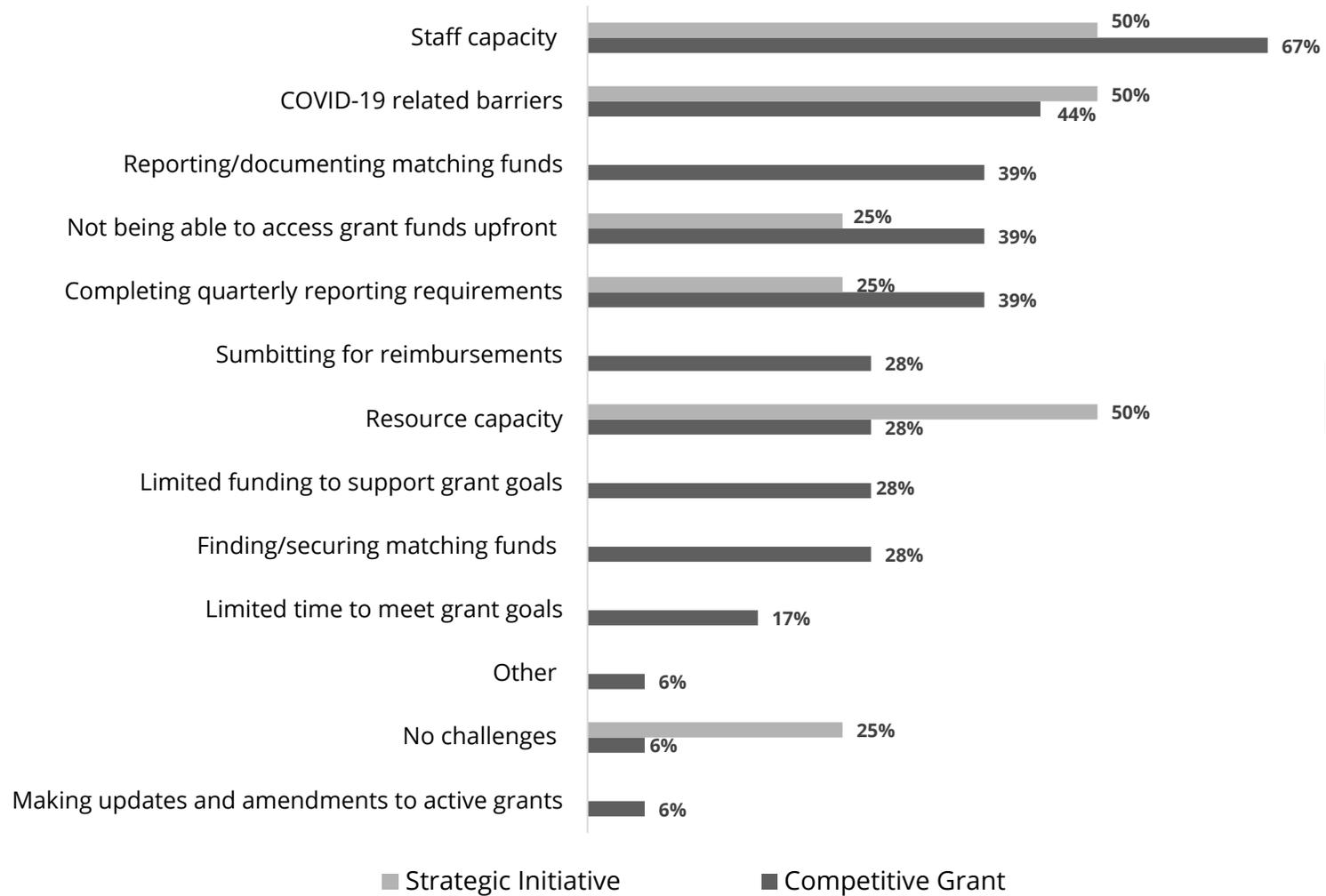
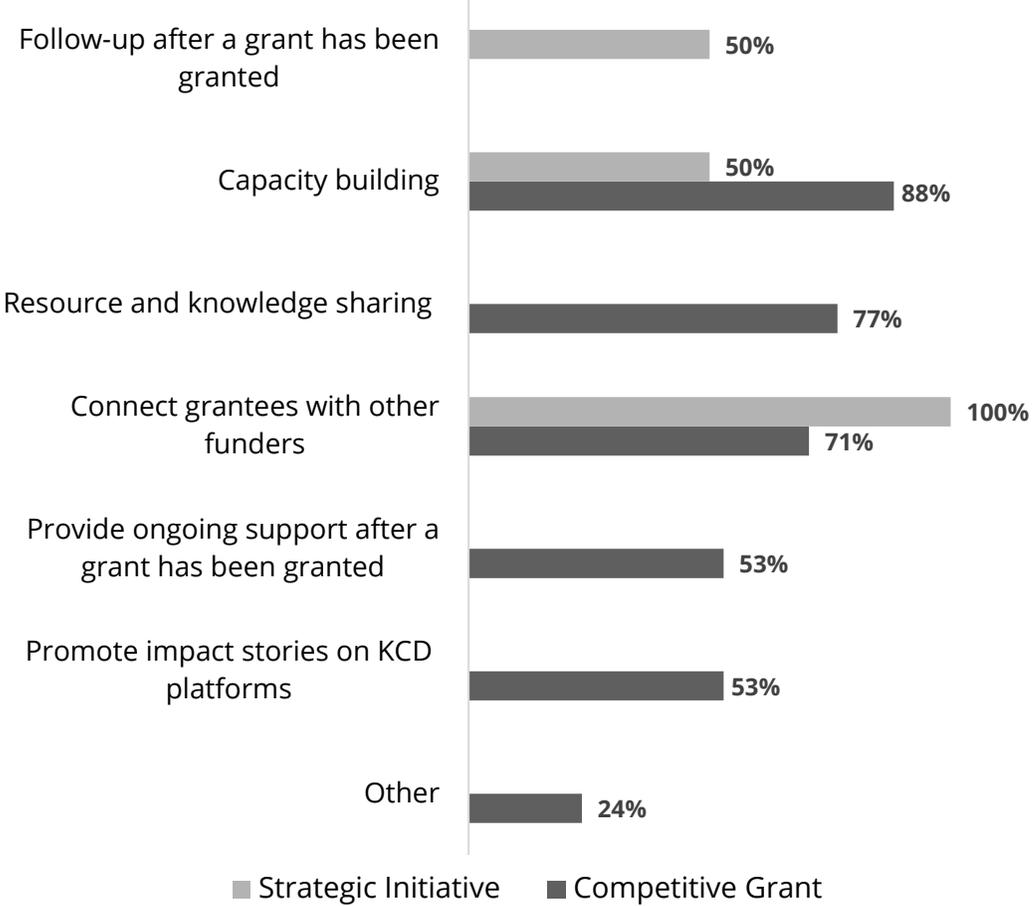


Figure 5: Challenges reported by RFS Grantees during their grant period



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Competitive Grant	23
Strategic Initiative	6

Figure 6: How KCD can support RFS Grantees



RFS Grant Type	Number of Respondents
Competitive Grant	17
Strategic Initiative	4

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