



# **Orange County Citizens' Commission for Children (CCC) Citizens' Review Panel for Human Services (CRPHS)**

## ***Focus Groups Report***

December 09, 2025 and December 11, 2025





# Orange County Citizens' Commission for Children (CCC) Citizens' Review Panel for Human Services (CRPHS)

## Focus Groups Report

**Focus Groups Held: December 9 and December 11, 2025**

### Overview and Purpose of the Citizens' Review Panel Focus Groups

As Orange County continues to invest in programs serving children, youth, and families, it is important that the Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) Fund Distribution Process remains fair, accessible, and responsive to community needs. To support this goal, the Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) conducted structured focus groups with nonprofit agencies that have participated in the funding process. These sessions were designed to ensure that potential process enhancements are informed by organizations directly engaged in the application, review, and contract-building stages.

Through these sessions, agencies were able to share observations, describe their experiences, identify process strengths and challenges, and offer recommendations to support continued improvements related to transparency, clarity, and efficiency in future funding cycles.

### Methodology

To support meaningful focus group discussions, nonprofit agencies that applied for CRP funding between 2020 and 2025 were included, representing a mix of awarded, non-awarded, and previously funded organizations. The sessions were led by CCC staff.

Focus groups followed a structured discussion format guided by scripted questions covering application processes, scoring, system usability, training, and overall experience. To support balanced dialogue, agencies were organized into small subgroups designed to reflect a range of funding outcomes, participation history, organization types, and discussion interests.

CCC staff documented feedback during the sessions and subsequently reviewed and synthesized the input to identify recurring themes and opportunities for process improvement. The findings and recommendations presented in this report are based on that cross-session analysis. For more detailed methodology, please see Attachment A.

Agencies represented across both sessions included grassroots and regional organizations:



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### December 9, 2025, Focus Group

- Motivational Vision and Purpose, Inc.
- Orlando Science Center, Inc.
- Capoeira for Tomorrow, Inc.
- Mental Health Association of Central Florida, Inc.
- Central Florida Urban League, Inc.
- Hispanic Federation, Inc.
- Florida Economic Consortium, Inc.
- Passionate Heart Ministries, Inc.
- Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.
- Gift of Swimming, Inc.
- Lifting Individual and Family Expectations, Inc.
- Rights 2 Success, Inc.
- King Solomon Foundation, Inc.
- The New Creation Heartgiver, Inc.
- 8 Cents in a Jar, Inc.

### December 11, 2025, Focus Group

- Valor Living Foundation, Inc.
- Children Enriched with Opportunities (CEO), Inc.
- Florida Economic Consortium, Inc.
- HavServe, Inc.
- Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, Inc.
- Chance 2 Dance, Inc.
- Victim Service Center, Inc.
- Generational Mindset, Inc.
- Mentors for Fatherless Children and Abused Families, Corporation
- Volunteers for Community Impact, Inc.
- Grays Project, Inc.



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### Objectives of the Focus Groups

**The focus groups were intended to:**

- Understand agency experiences with the application, review, and contract-building stages of the CRP process.
- Identify procedural barriers encountered during the funding cycle.
- Gather recommendations to improve communication, guidance materials, timelines, and expectations.
- Strengthen coordination and collaboration between Orange County and nonprofit providers.
- Promote transparency by providing a structured forum for agencies to share input.
- Support continuous improvement of the CRP Fund Distribution Process to maintain alignment with community needs.

### Use of Feedback

All feedback shared by participating agencies was reviewed and analyzed to identify common themes, trends, and opportunities for refinement. This input will inform updates to CRP guidance materials, training offerings, scoring clarity, contract-building tools, timelines, and administrative processes in future funding cycles.

### CRP Focus Group Feedback Summary

Participants across both focus groups noted continued improvements to the CRP Fund Distribution Process, particularly related to staff communication, availability, and technical assistance. Agencies—especially first-time applicants and smaller organizations—identified staff support as an important factor in navigating the process. Participants also identified several structural and procedural elements that present greater challenges for small, grassroots, and emerging organizations.



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### Key Strengths Identified

#### CCC Staff Support & Communication

- **CCC Staff Support & Communication:** Staff responsiveness was repeatedly rated very highly (often “10/10” or “11/10”). Agencies valued timely responses, patience, and clear follow-through, especially for first-time applicants.
- **Training & Q&A Sessions:** Q&A sessions were widely viewed as helpful. Agencies appreciated multiple formats (live sessions, recordings, follow-up materials) and the ability to contact staff directly.
- **Neighborly Platform (Overall):** Most agencies found Neighborly easier than paper-based systems and effective for application submission. Reminders and task notifications were helpful.
- **Transparency Improvements:** Participants recognized improvements such as public posting of scores, which reduced the need for public records requests.

Agencies consistently noted timely responses, follow-up, and staff availability throughout the application and contract-building stages.

### Identified Challenges & Process Barriers

During the opening overview of the focus group sessions, a participant raised concerns regarding the timing of determination letters and appeal windows coinciding with major holidays. CCC staff addressed the full group and shared that this issue had already been identified and was under review. While this topic was not discussed during the focus group breakouts, it is noted here for context and transparency.

#### Neighborly Platform (Overall)

Most agencies reported that Neighborly was more efficient than paper-based systems for application submission. Automated reminders and task notifications were cited as helpful features.

- Character limitations were noted as insufficient for fully addressing application responses.



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### **Budget & Unit-Cost Methodology**

The budget component was consistently identified as the most complex element of the process. Agencies noted challenges related to establishing unit rates, aligning budgets with application categories, forecasting across fiscal years, and distinguishing between units and hours—particularly when agency fiscal years differ from the County's. Agencies reported that participation in budget-focused training improved understanding and navigation of this section.

### **Application Length & Information Duplication**

Agencies described the application as detailed and time intensive. Some information requirements were noted as duplicative or not commonly requested by other funders.

### **Scoring Transparency & Review Process**

Agencies provided feedback related to the scoring and review process. Participants indicated that prior performance on CCC-funded contracts could be considered as part of the scoring process to recognize demonstrated program delivery and contract compliance. Agencies also suggested that relevant external experience in community-based programming be considered during application review.

Participants recommended that past performance be evaluated for new and returning organizations to ensure a fair and balanced review process. They noted that prior performance on CCC-funded contracts can be an appropriate measure for returning agencies, particularly when evaluating areas such as unit utilization, reporting accuracy, responsiveness, and interactions with contract managers. However, participants also emphasized that new organizations may not have a CCC funding history or long-term performance data and should not be disadvantaged as a result. For these agencies, participants suggested allowing alternative ways to demonstrate capacity and community impact, such as letters of recommendation, reference letters, or descriptions of anticipated outcomes and expected impact. Participants further observed that larger, well-known organizations may benefit from name recognition or prior funding, reinforcing the need for evaluation approaches that account for differences in organizational history and experience.



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Some agencies were not aware that scores could be requested or had difficulty locating scoring rubrics. Agencies expressed interest in automatically receiving score breakdowns following award decisions. Feedback from one participating agency referenced isolated instances in which reviewer interpretation affected scoring consistency. Agencies also expressed interest in increased transparency regarding the review process, including access to general background information about individuals involved in scoring grant applications.

### **Small & Emerging Organization Considerations**

Agencies observed that organizations with established infrastructure and grant-writing capacity may have advantages over smaller or newer organizations.

### **Funding Categories & Eligibility Clarity**

- Ongoing questions were noted regarding Small Scale limitations, Innovation eligibility, and distinctions among funding categories.
- Participants suggested consideration of more tiered funding categories based on organizational size.

### **Geography & Coverage Maps**

- Agencies noted that commission district maps do not always align with how funding is structured by service areas or ZIP codes and requested clearer guidance.

### **Neighborly Technical & Navigation Considerations**

Agencies provided feedback regarding technical and navigation-related aspects of the Neighborly platform. Identified issues included:

- Lack of auto-save functionality
- Forced "N/A" fields
- Difficulty navigating between sections
- Confusion during contract-building
- Attachment placement challenges
- Syncing agency-level versus program-level applications
- Noted concerns about Agency staff having the capacity to view budget data

Participants requested clearer separation between the Application and Contract-Building stages within the Neighborly platform to improve usability and reduce administrative complexity.



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### **Training, Technical Assistance & Q&A Sessions**

Agencies reported generally positive experiences with the training, technical assistance, and Q&A sessions provided through the CRP Fund Distribution Process. Participants noted that training and technical support contributed to improved understanding of application requirements, budgeting expectations, and contract-related processes. Agencies also identified Q&A sessions as useful and valued the availability of multiple delivery formats, including live sessions, recorded materials, and follow-up documentation.

**Discussions highlighted a strong preference for:**

- Plain-language walkthroughs, examples, and templates to support application and budgeting tasks
- More interactive, Q&A-focused training offered both in person and virtually
- Budget-specific training, including unit-cost development, template examples, and prior successful applications

**Agencies expressed interest in expanded and ongoing support, including:**

- Year-round technical assistance beyond the application window
- Clearer explanations of post-award contractual expectations (e.g., monitoring, reporting, performance measures, and financial audits) prior to application submission
- Monitoring and reporting training offered before applications are due
- Opportunities to submit questions in advance during Q&A session registration to support targeted discussion
- Greater opportunities for networking and peer exchange

**Participants also identified capacity-building needs, particularly for smaller and emerging organizations. Suggestions included:**

- Exploring partnerships with external entities (e.g., UCF, Valencia, Rollins) to support eligibility, readiness and compliance
- Considering mentorship and peer-learning models, including mentor-protégé programs pairing funded agencies with first-time applicants
- Exploring access to technology and related resources (e.g., systems, computers, or shared facilities) to support administrative and reporting requirements.



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Additional operational considerations raised included:

- Providing access to initial funding prior to the contract start date to assist with upfront program and operational costs
- Extending contract periods when projected program start dates are delayed

Finally, participants noted that those who attended training generally found them helpful, while those who did not attend indicated that lack of participation may have contributed to confusion or less favorable outcomes.

### **Marketing**

Agencies recommended strengthening outreach to ensure funding opportunities are widely visible and clearly communicated through mailing lists, partner networks, and social media channels.

### **Facilities**

Agencies reported that Orange County–funded organizations should receive priority access to Orange County facilities. Participants recommended that CCC provide a list of available locations where services may be delivered. Small agencies reported challenges establishing Facility Use Agreements.

Agencies also noted challenges when they do not have a physical location within targeted ZIP codes, which can affect compliance with Sector or District requirements.

Following the focus group sessions, a participant submitted additional input related to CCC forum participation and communication practices. The participant recommended that CCC clearly identify desired attendee roles for forums and trainings (e.g., grant writers, grants managers, contract administrators) and allow virtual participation options to support off-site staff. This input is noted here for consideration, though it was not discussed during the focus group sessions.

In addition to focus group findings, CCC received post-session participant input suggesting that providing general information on how service categories are added, modified, or removed between funding cycles could support provider planning and understanding of program priorities.



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### **Overall Experience**

Agencies described their overall experience with the CRP Fund Distribution Process as positive. Participants consistently noted effective communication and responsiveness from CCC staff throughout the application, review, and contract-building stages.

Agencies also provided recommendations for future consideration, including:

- Evaluating contract amounts in relation to cost-of-living considerations
- Continuing to incorporate past performance into funding and scoring decisions where appropriate, while accounting for differences between new and returning organizations and allowing alternative ways to demonstrate capacity and expected impact

### **Executive Summary**

The Citizens' Commission for Children conducted CRP focus groups on December 9 and December 11, 2025, to assess the effectiveness, transparency, and accessibility of the Fund Distribution Process. Feedback reflected strong recognition of CCC staff professionalism, availability, and technical assistance. Agencies identified staff support as a key contributor to successful participation.

Participants also identified several process elements requiring refinement, particularly related to budgeting methodology, application complexity, scoring transparency, and accessibility for smaller organizations. The most frequently cited area for improvement was the budget and unit-cost methodology, followed by application scaling and scoring clarity.

Overall, agencies expressed confidence in CCC's commitment to continuous improvement and encouraged further refinements to support fair and consistent access, clarity, and efficiency in future funding cycles.



## **Orange County Citizens' Commission for Children (CCC) Citizens' Review Panel for Human Services (CRPHS)**

### **Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) Focus Groups – December 9 & 11, 2025 “What We Heard & What We’re Doing”**

#### **What We Heard**

Agencies told us that CCC staff support and communication are strong and highly valued. Many shared that staff responsiveness made the application process manageable, especially for first-time applicants. Agencies also told us that while the process has improved, the budget and unit-cost methodology remain the most significant challenge, particularly for small and grassroots organizations. Participants asked for clearer scoring information, simpler applications scaled by agency size, more hands-on training, and improved transparency around funding categories, innovation eligibility, and post-award expectations.

#### **What We Are Doing**

Based on feedback received, CCC is committed to continuing improvements for the Spring 2026 funding cycle. We are prioritizing clearer budget guidance, expanded training and Q&A opportunities, stronger scoring transparency, and system enhancements within Neighborly. We are also exploring tiered application options, additional support for small and emerging organizations, and expanded capacity-building partnerships.

### **Actionable Recommendations for the Spring 2026 Cycle**

#### **Focus Area 1: Budget & Financial Accessibility**

- Develop plain-language budget guides, unit-cost walkthroughs, and templates.
- Offer budget-only trainings and Small Scale-specific Q&A sessions.
- Reduce required budget years or align requirements with submitted audits/990s.
- Explore options for earlier access to initial funding (e.g., advance funding) to support upfront program and operational costs.
- Consider contract term flexibility when projected start dates are delayed.

#### **Focus Area 2: Application Scaling & Simplification**

- Create tiered opportunities for limited competition applications (Small / Mid / Large).
- Allow greater use of uploads instead of manual data entry.
- Provide a readiness checklist so agencies can self-assess before applying.
- Review and consider adjusting character limits to allow sufficient space for meaningful responses.



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### **Focus Area 3: Scoring Transparency & Consistency**

- Embed scoring rubrics directly in Neighborly and/or application packets.
- Automatically release score breakdowns post-award.
- Strengthen reviewer orientation and calibration to prevent misinterpretation.
- Publish panel member lists and reinforce conflict-of-interest safeguards.
- Allow applicants to demonstrate capacity through prior performance on CCC-funded contracts, where applicable, or through relevant external experience in community-based programming supported by documentation such as references, letters of recommendation, past outcomes, or clearly defined anticipated outcomes and community impact.
- Include the existing Innovation category definition, eligibility criteria, evaluation factors, and examples in the CRP process information packet to ensure clarity, consistency, and shared understanding among applicants and reviewers.

### **Focus Area 4: Training, Capacity Building & Mentorship**

- Expand in-person and virtual training simultaneously.
- Host nonprofit mixers to encourage networking and mentorship opportunities.
- Partner with UCF, Valencia, and others for readiness and compliance education.
- Clarify contractual expectations (monitoring, audits, reporting) before application submission.
- Provide year-round technical assistance, not limited to the application window.
- Encourage pre-submission question collection to inform targeted Q&A sessions.
- Continue supporting agencies in managing cost-of-living pressures within partial funding models by leveraging existing financial management training through UCF, clarifying budget flexibility, and encouraging funding diversification.



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### **Focus Area 5: System & Process Improvements**

- Improve Neighborly functionality (auto-save, clearer navigation, synced applications).
- Separate Application vs. Contract-Building clearly in the platform.
- Improve geographic clarity by aligning maps with funding structures (sectors/zip codes).
- Explore access to technology and administrative resources to support smaller organizations (e.g., systems, shared resources, or tools).
- Strengthen outreach and visibility of funding cycles through coordinated communications (mailing lists, partners, social channels).
- Continue to review and consider internal timelines to minimize the scheduling of determination letters, appeal windows, and other key milestones during or immediately following major holidays.
- Meet with Neighborly Software Developers to determine capabilities of the Neighborly Platform regarding user permissions.

### **Focus Area 6: Communications:**

- Clearly document and communicate the revised three-year Small Scale reapplication timeframe, including eligibility criteria, transition pathways to other funding categories, and expectations for future participation, within the CRP process information packet to ensure consistent understanding among applicants and reviewers.
- Continue the practice of sending forum and training invitations to each organization's authorized agent and consider further emphasizing within those communications the intended audience for the event (e.g., grant writers, grants managers, contract administrators) to support appropriate internal routing and participation.

### **Optional Focus Area 7: Facilities & Infrastructure**

- Provide a centralized list of County facilities available for service delivery.
- Consider priority access to County facilities for CCC-funded agencies.
- Address challenges related to service delivery requirements tied to ZIP codes or districts.



## ATTACHMENT A



## **Orange County Citizens' Commission for Children (CCC) Citizens' Review Panel for Human Services (CRPHS)**

### **Methodology**

The Citizens' Commission for Children (CCC) conducted focus groups to gather structured qualitative feedback on the Citizens' Review Panel (CRP) Fund Distribution Process. The methodology was designed to ensure balanced participation, consistency in discussion, and reliable synthesis of feedback across sessions.

### **Participants**

Focus group participants included nonprofit agencies that participated in the CRP Fund Distribution Process between 2020 and 2025. Agencies represented a range of experiences, including:

- Agencies that were awarded funding
- Agencies that were not awarded funding
- Agencies previously funded but not awarded in recent cycles

### **Focus Group Structure**

Focus groups were conducted using a structured discussion format guided by scripted questions to ensure consistency across sessions. Discussion topics included:

- Application process clarity and accessibility
- Use and functionality of the Neighborly platform
- Scoring criteria, transparency, and alignment with program goals
- Training, technical assistance, and overall participant experience

Each session included time for open discussion and recommendations, allowing participants to share both specific feedback and broader observations.

### **Subgroup Formation**

To promote meaningful dialogue and capture diverse perspectives, agencies were organized into small discussion subgroups using a structured approach. Subgroups were intentionally composed to include variation across:

- Funding outcomes (awarded, not awarded, previously awarded)
- Length of participation in the CRP process (long-term, mid-level, first-year applicants)
- Topics of interest identified during registration
- Organization type and service area



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Each subgroup consisted of five agencies to support balanced participation and inclusive discussion.

### **Facilitation and Documentation**

CCC staff served as facilitators and scribes for each subgroup. Facilitators guided discussions, ensured balanced participation, and managed time, while scribes documented participant input. Observers attended in a non-participatory role to identify cross-cutting themes relevant to oversight and process improvement.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Following the focus group sessions, staff compiled written notes from each subgroup. Feedback was reviewed and analyzed to identify recurring themes, areas of alignment across sessions, and opportunities for process refinement. Individual comments were synthesized into aggregated findings and recommendations, which form the basis of this report.

This methodology supports CCC's commitment to transparency, fairness, and continuous improvement by ensuring that feedback reflects a broad range of agency experiences and is collected and analyzed in a consistent and structured manner.