

Funding Navigator



Elgin Fire Department
Success Story

Funding Navigator helps secure \$50,000 for life-saving equipment

Elgin Fire Department leverages grant expertise to strengthen applications for vital funding

As the demands of emergency response evolve, so must the equipment firefighters rely on to save lives. For the Elgin Fire Department in Illinois, upgrading their aging hydraulic-powered extrication tools – crucial for removing people from wreckage – became a priority. Switching to modern, battery-operated versions would improve efficiency and reliability, but the investment posed was significant.

Lieutenant Josh Smith knew the department would have to rely on grant funding to cover some of the cost. With the help of Funding Navigator, Smith secured a \$50,000 grant from the Gary Sinise Foundation.



Seeking funding and professional feedback

Smith, who has been with the Elgin Fire Department since 2005, began writing grants for the department in 2011. Over the last decade, he has applied for more than 150 grants, securing about 40 successful awards – most of them for amounts under \$10,000.

While Smith had developed an effective system for finding and managing grant applications, he saw Funding Navigator as a way to support his efforts. He turned to the platform to find new grants and strengthen his applications to secure larger awards.

"I was looking to find more opportunities on the private side and also get another set of eyes on my applications," Smith explained. **"I wanted to get more professional opinions and viewpoints and to talk to people that do this for a living."** Before using Funding Navigator, his process relied on fellow firefighters who had no grant writing experience to review his work.

The platform provides valuable support to users at any stage of their grant-writing career – from seasoned professionals like Smith to those just starting out.

"I can see how incredibly helpful it would have been for me 10 years ago, and how useful it would be for any organization just dipping their toe into grant writing," Smith said. **"Funding Navigator really holds your hand through the process and helps create a structure for setting up your grant program within your department."**

Exceeding expectations by securing substantial grant

When it came time to apply for grants to fund the new extrication tools, Smith turned to Funding Navigator for help with a grant submission to the Gary Sinise Foundation, an organization known for supporting first responders, veterans, and military personnel. The department had previously received a smaller grant from the foundation in 2021, so Smith was already familiar with the organization and its process.

Knowing five-figure grants were difficult to obtain, he felt the platform's grant writing feedback and professional editorial assistance would improve their chances of securing a grant between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

"Having people who are familiar with grants and have a writing background review your narratives and give you tips, edits, and suggestions is something I don't often get to do," Smith shared. **"Even though I'm somewhat experienced compared to other firefighters doing this, that kind of feedback is hugely beneficial."**

When the call came through that they would receive the foundation's maximum grant of \$50,000, it far exceeded his expectations.

"I was happy, the chief was extremely happy," Smith recalled. **"And it makes a huge difference for a project like this."**

Supplementing a limited budget with grant support

Although Elgin is a large municipality, serving a community of approximately 115,000, the department's budget is stretched to cover many different areas including personnel and benefit costs, station expenses, and new vehicles and apparatus to name a few. Due to the amount of fire and EMS equipment needed, grant funding is a vital part of supplementing dollars allocated in the budget. Major expenses, such as vehicles or specialized tools, often come from a different section of the budget, making capital purchases difficult. Departments must apply to the city and request additional funds, which are not guaranteed and can vary year to year. This volatility makes grant funding an essential source of extra money for equipment upgrades that might not otherwise be possible.

The \$50,000 grant from the Gary Sinise Foundation will completely cover the cost for a new set of battery-operated extrication tools, eliminating many maintenance challenges associated with older hydraulic systems, and providing firefighters with more efficient and reliable equipment to help save lives.

Reflecting on the process, Smith noted the role Funding Navigator played in the department's success. **"It helped me tighten up the application,"** said Smith. **"I had my standard narratives, but having someone suggest ways to phrase things better made it cleaner, neater, and more effective. That kind of feedback is something you don't get working on your own."**

Maximizing opportunities for long-term success

Smith plans to continue using Funding Navigator and believes that the platform is a valuable tool for both experienced grant writers like himself and departments new to the process.

"I would absolutely advise other departments to try it and see if it works for them," Smith said. **"It's a one-stop shop to organize, evaluate, and submit grant applications for your department."**