This series of six tutorials is designed to help potential applicants prepare their first application to the USDA Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program. The USDA SBIR Request for Applications, or RFA, is typically released in early July with a due date in October. This means that if you start the clock ticking the first week that the RFA is released, you will have approximately 12 weeks to prepare your application. This series of tutorials is organized around recommended activities that need to be accomplished every two weeks in order to prepare a responsive proposal or application. The activities are sequenced to help you shape and refine your application, weaving in additional complexity as you move forward.

WHEN TO SUBMIT AN APPLICATION
Let’s start by clarifying some terminology and laying some ground rules. A small business can only submit an SBIR application in response to a solicitation. In other words, the Agency specifies when it will accept applications and provides guidelines regarding its format. Although USDA calls their solicitation a Request for Applications, the “application” is really a proposal package submitted in response to topics in which USDA has an expressed interest. Therefore, the first thing that a potential applicant must do is develop an understanding of what the final application will look like.

APPLICATION COMPONENTS
The application that you will develop and submit has five major sections: a 17-page project narrative; a budget that can’t exceed $100,000 for Phase I and eight months effort; biographical sketches; a project summary and; a number of forms.

Please note that letters of support are also strongly encouraged. In order to submit the application, you must register with a number of systems and submit your application electronically in a specified manner by the time and date identified in the RFA. Your application will be reviewed by independent third parties who will examine the application for the following: (1) Scientific and Technical Feasibility; (2) Market Potential; (3) Importance of the Problem; (4) Investigator and Resource Qualifications; (5) Budget; and (6) Duplication.

BUDGETING YOUR TIME
For the first-time applicant, it is estimated that you will need approximately 150 hours over a 12-week period in order to prepare the various parts of a responsive application. The time required starts slowly and peaks about halfway through. So before we begin, it’s worth thinking about how you will add this responsibility to an already busy schedule. It is assumed that most applicants already have full-time responsibilities as an
employee/employer, a student, a family member … so, to be successful, how you will weave in 150 hours over a 12-week period? Will you go without as much sleep and work on the application early in the morning, late at night, or on weekends? How will you minimize distractions so that you can focus – will you work at home while other family members are sleeping, go to work early, or stay up late to work on this project? Will your family and friends be supportive and understand that you won’t have much time during this period? Will it help to schedule weekly meetings with service providers in order to assure that you are on track? Are there any major events taking place between early July and early October that you will need to work around? Consider these questions before beginning and discuss with your support network.

REVIEWING & SELECTING TOPIC(S)

Now let’s look at a 12-week schedule and discuss the priorities that need to be addressed during the first two weeks. During Week 1 you should review the topics in the USDA RFA, select the best topic(s), and locate resources in your area that may be able to assist you. The USDA topics can readily be found within the Request[s] for Application in PART I—FUNDING OPPORTUNITY DESCRIPTION.

The topic areas are numbered 8.1 through 8.13. Within each of the topic areas you will find the name and contact information for the National Program Leader, or NPL; a background section; and a list of priorities for that fiscal year. Read each of the topics and research priorities carefully. You can also review the types of awards that USDA has made in previous years by exploring the abstracts of awards made to other companies. These abstracts were prepared by small business for public viewing and are conveniently posted on the USDA SBIR website. You may not see the proposals themselves, just the abstracts.

CONTACTING NATIONAL PROGRAM LEADERS

It is possible that a number of topics might look appropriate - but you’re not sure. For that reason, you are encouraged to contact the NPL for that topic area. Contact the one that seems most appropriate – and ask for referrals as appropriate. The name and contact information for each National Program Leader is included under each topic heading. The purpose for contacting the NPL is to seek clarification regarding the topic and NOT to promote yourself or your company. It is therefore recommended that before reaching out to the NPL you prepare and send a brief email identifying the questions that you would like to discuss with them and then follow up with a phone call. A suggested template for an email is included in the Tools section of this lesson. To allow yourself as much time as possible to work on the application, reach out to the NPL during Week 1 of the suggested schedule. Assume that it may take a few days for you to schedule your phone call.

USING LOCAL, STATE, & FEDERAL RESOURCES

During this first week also begin to look for local state and federal resources that can perhaps help you with different parts of this process. If you have attended an SBIR workshop provided by a local USDA Cooperative Extension Service, then reach out to them first and set up a time to meet. Also, see if there is a local Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) in your area – as they can help you with one of the more important registrations – the System for Awards Management, also referred to as SAM. Also, see if there is a Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in your area. Ask if they provide assistance with companies that are submitting SBIR proposals and indicate your interest in receiving assistance with developing the budget for your SBIR application. Be sure to also become familiar with the On-Line Tutorials provided by the Small Business Administration on SBIR.gov. The Tutorials are brief and provide information to assist you in proposal preparation. Try to visit the various service providers during Week two. To prepare for that meeting take along some information about yourself, your company (if you have one already), and your research interests. This will help you in having a fruitful first discussion.

Seeking clarification on the topics at the outset and lining up potential sources of support will assure that you start down the right path. In the next Tutorial, we will focus on how to start preparing the project narrative.