



2025-2026

Urban & Community Forestry Grant Starter Guide

For Urban & Community Forestry Grant Applicants

Connecticut Urban & Community
Forestry Program
DEEP Forestry Division

DEEP.UCF.Grants@ct.gov



Contents

Part One: Grant Program Overview	page 4
Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal	page 10
Part Three: Tips for Successful Projects & Proposals	page 16
Part Four: Additional Resources	page 20



Introduction

Welcome! You are reading the Starter Guide to Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) Urban and Community Forestry (UCF) Grants. This resource is intended for those who are interested in applying for financial assistance from the UCF program, especially first-time applicants. In the following pages, you will learn more about financial assistance and associated support available through the UCF program, as well as strategies for creating a competitive grant application.

The UCF Program provides financial and technical assistance to municipalities, non-profit organizations, and volunteer groups to grow, maintain, and improve their urban and community forests. A primary goal of the program is to help communities in low-canopy areas to increase tree cover. Other focuses include improving forest health and resilience and connecting residents to the trees and forests in their community.



Part One: Grant Program Overview

UCF Grant Opportunities

The UCF program offers multiple grant opportunities. Each program has different award amounts, eligibility criteria, cost-share requirements, and allowable scopes of work; the most up-to-date information about the specific grants available can be found on the [Urban Forestry Grant Opportunities](#) webpage.

Eligible Applicant Types

- a. Local governmental and public organizations (e.g., cities or towns, Councils of Government (COGs), school boards, state universities, conservation commissions)
- b. 501(c)(3) organizations (e.g., registered nonprofits, churches)
- c. Organizations with a qualifying fiscal sponsor.

Individuals and for-profit businesses are not eligible for UCF grants.

Funding

Some UCF grants allow reimbursements for the complete cost of the project, while others require a match, usually 50%. Programs are exclusively reimbursement-based*; at the end of the project, the grantee submits an invoice and is reimbursed for the project costs that they incurred. Depending on the program, invoices may be submitted more frequently.

*Some programs may allow a partial “upfront” payment to the contractor, before any expenses are made, but only under specific circumstances.

Part One: Grant Program Overview

Request for Proposals

Every grant program is announced with the release of a Request for Proposals (RFP), which can be considered like an instruction manual for writing an application to that program. It is the primary document used to describe the goals and eligibility for the program, so it's always worth a close first read and additional review throughout the application-writing process. Information in UCF RFPs includes:

- Context for and main goals of the program
- Type of projects that are suitable for funding
- Specific rules for reimbursements, reporting, & match
- Important program dates.
- The rubric that applications are scored with
- Additional resources to aid applicants.

The Application

Applications for UCF grants are currently hosted online through the Survery123 platform. The application form asks for information about the applicant, like their:

- Sam.gov unique entity ID (UEI)
- FEIN number
- Contact information
- Mailing address

The application will also collect basic information about the project. Most of the detailed information for each project (e.g., scope of work, timeline, budget) will be submitted through a series of file uploads. Further guidance on these application components can be found in Part Two of this guide.

Part One: Grant Program Overview

The Contract

Receiving a grant from the UCF program involves entering into a contract with the State of Connecticut, where the specific requirements of the agreement are outlined. The contract will contain standard terms and conditions, some of which may be specific to the grant program due to the original source of the funding, and others that are standard language for all state contracts.

Appendix A of the contract describes the deliverables and associated reporting and regulations for a specific project. Appendix A will outline the deliverables the Contractor/grantee needs to fulfill, as well as other requirements for reporting and acknowledgement of funding. The deliverables in this section are constructed by directly referencing details provided in your grant proposal.

Appendix B describes how payments/reimbursements will work. Depending on the grant program, additional appendices, with progress report templates or photo disclosure forms, may be included for the Contractor's use and reference.



Part One: Grant Program Overview

The Review Process

“Reviewers” refers to the panel of subject matter experts that review and score each application. The UCF grant program lead will read every application, but will not contribute a score to the final determination.

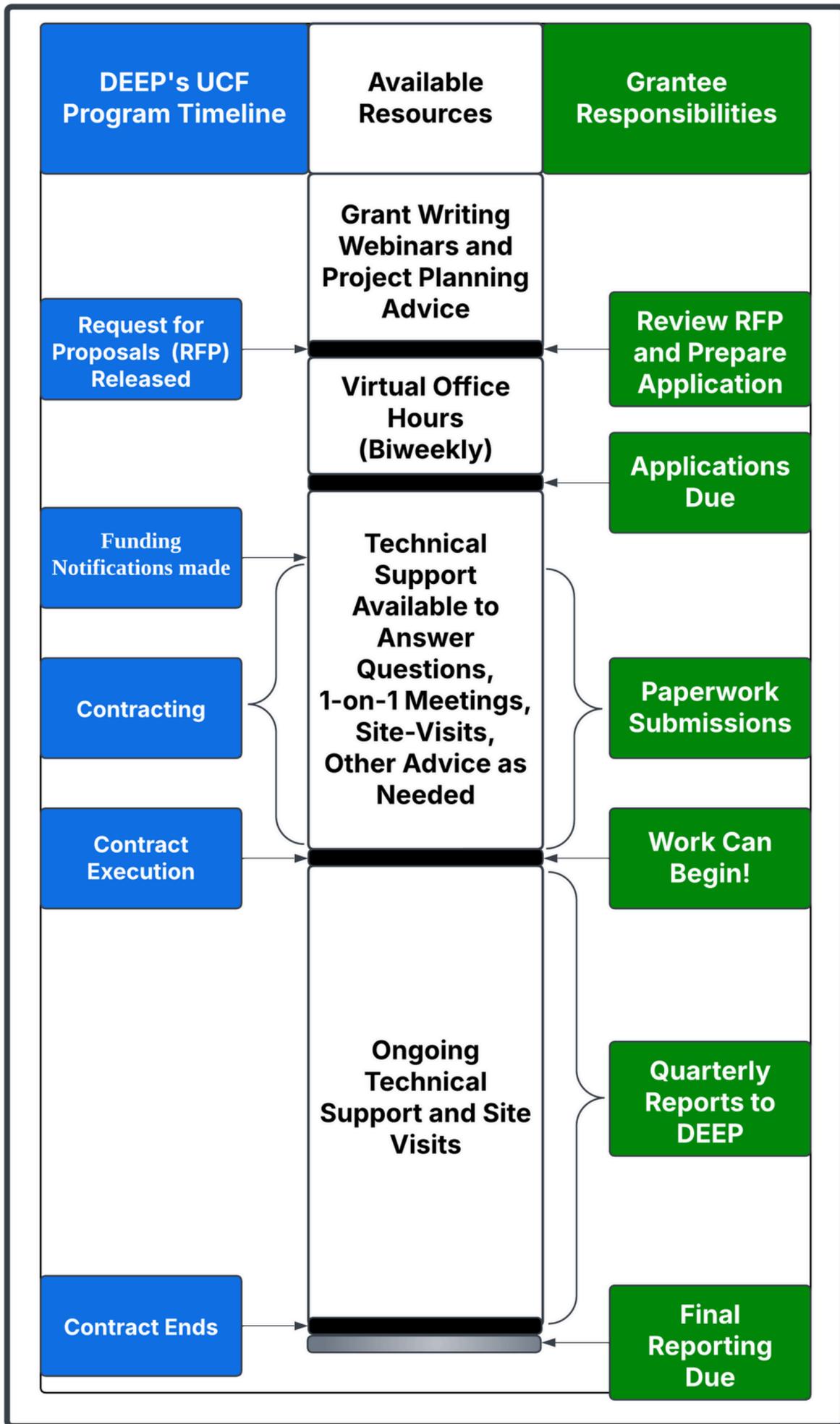
Reviewers have specialized knowledge that is relevant to the grant program. For example, your application might be reviewed by a Forester, an Arborist, and a Community Engagement Specialist; this variety of reviewers helps to fill in knowledge gaps and ensure that there are fewer blind spots when applications are assessed. UCF provides a scoring rubric to reduce the effect of individual biases or knowledge gaps on scores.

After reviewers independently score their assigned applications, they meet as a team to discuss each proposal. Total points are tallied and ranked using the rubric provided in the RFP. During this meeting, discrepancies in timeline or budget, flaws in project design, or concerns about feasibility may be discussed. Reviewers may request modifications or additional information from applicants before recommending them for funding.



Part One: Grant Program Overview

Grant Timeline



When an RFP is released and the program begins to accept applications, UCF hosts office hours for those who have questions until applications are due.

The review process can take up to two months or more, and then funding decisions are made. This initiates the contracting phase.

Part One: Grant Program Overview

The Contracting Phase

The contracting phase can take three or more months. During this time, UCF staff and other DEEP personnel prepare the contract and work through legally required processes. The UCF team will frequently contact the grant recipient for paperwork and other requirements.

Once the contract is ready, it can be signed by the relevant parties, and work on the project can begin. Before this point, no expenses incurred are eligible for reimbursement.

During the project's execution, the grant recipient will be required to submit a progress report each quarter. Depending on the program, the grant recipient may also submit invoices for reimbursement at the same time.

The UCF team continues to provide individualized support to the grant recipient until the contract expires. Even outside of the typical grant cycle, the UCF program is always available to provide project planning advice and other technical support for urban forestry projects.



Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Scope of Work

A strong scope of work includes background, context, main goals, specific activities, and the materials, partnerships, personnel, and communities that will be involved in achieving the final deliverables. These components are all important, and the way that they are presented is crucial, especially since the scope of work is the first section most reviewers will read.

A clear, concise, and persuasive scope of work assures reviewers that funding will be used effectively to fulfill grant project obligations. A confusing or overwhelming scope of work can lead reviewers to “miss the forest for the trees”, so to speak. A good scope of work lays out a clear trail for a reviewer to follow, without excessive meandering, where they can see “the forest” clearly.

There is no standard format for a scope of work; what works best for a project depends on the specifics of that project and the RFP. That said, this section provides some general tips.

Scope of Work: Overall Structure and Level of Detail

UCF Grant programs typically have a tight word limit on the scope of work section. With this limitation, it is important to efficiently use the space given to make the case for your project. The most specific section is the final products or deliverables, which should always include quantifiable outcomes with plans for measuring or tracking.

The final deliverables section is usually at the end of your scope of work, with the rest of the scope of work serving to establish the necessity of your project and illustrating a strong, feasible plan for accomplishing those specific deliverables.

Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Tips for Writing the Scope of Work

- 🌳 Using section headings and lists can help to break up paragraphs, draw focus to specific aspects of your project, and communicate a large amount of detail while saving on word count.
- 🌳 Avoid using this section as a catch-all bucket for less-refined ideas, methods, partnerships, and next steps; text in this section serves primarily to contextualize the details in the timeline and budget.
- 🌳 Be sure to include references and data to back up your claims.

Example Scopes of Work

In the links below, we share well-organized, strong scopes of work from real applications that received funding, alongside commentary explaining what helped make these applications shine. All materials are shared with the applicant's permission.

Town of Vernon - This application proposed tree planting and outreach and education about the stewardship and maintenance of trees in the Rockville neighborhood. The project was partially awarded \$131,415.

Urban Resources Initiative - This application centered on using volunteer workdays to remove invasive vines from mature trees in forested natural areas within environmental justice communities in New Haven. The project was fully awarded \$24,975.

Town of Winchester - The applicant submitted an application to hire an arborist to conduct a tree inventory of specific streets and parks in the town of Winchester. The project was fully awarded \$5,000.

Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Project Timeline

A key component of a successful application is a well-organized and realistic project timeline. The timeline outlines the sequence of activities and milestones over the course of your project. This section helps reviewers understand how you plan to execute your project and how you will manage your time and resources effectively.

A solid timeline shows that you've carefully considered the scope of your project and have a feasible plan in place to accomplish each task that is suitable for your organization's situation. Reviewers will check that the information in your scope of work and budget matches the timeline, so attention to detail is important!

The format of a timeline should be a table that contains, at a minimum, a column for what will be done, a column for who will do it, and a column for when it will be done. The UCF program has created a template that can be used. This section provides some other general tips for your timeline.

[View the Grant Timeline Template.](#)



Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Project Timeline: Overall Structure and Level of Detail

Unlike the scope of work, timelines have no word limit. If a project is complex with many deliverables or partners, it can be useful to specifically name the deliverables for each item on the timeline. Generally, there is no harm in including more detail in the timeline; include as much detail as is necessary to understand the full logistics of your project.

Tips for Creating a Timeline

-  It can be challenging to predict the time it will take to reach a fully executed contract and begin work. We recommend basing your timeline on when the timeline is executed, rather than calendar dates. For example, you may say a task will occur “one month after the contract is executed”, rather than “July 2025”.
-  Awarded projects are required to submit a work plan after a final contract is executed. This work plan has calendar dates to properly reflect the expected sequence of events following contract execution.
-  Check the RFP for any program deadlines and incorporate them into your timeline.

Example Timelines:

Town of Vernon

Town of Winchester

Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Budget

Another important component of your grant application is the budget. The purpose is simple: to share how funding will be used over the course of the project. Inconsistencies or mispriced items in the budget raise red flags for reviewers. Comprehensive and complete budgets inspire confidence in the project's organization.

The format of a budget should be a table that contains, at a minimum, a column for budget category, an item description, the amount requested, and, for some programs, the amount to be contributed as a match. The UCF program has a standard recommended budget template. This section provides some other general guidance for your budget.

[View the Grant Budget Template.](#)

Budget: Overall Structure and Level of Detail

Like the timeline, the budget has no word count. You should include as much relevant detail as possible, providing quantities and unit rates as appropriate. Some programs require contributions of a **match**, typically 50%, which should also be included in the budget, with as much detail as the line items you are requesting funding for.

Match can include volunteer labor, compensated at the current value of volunteer time, donated goods and materials, direct contributions from partners, or employee time exclusively dedicated to the proposed project. Budgets may also include a line item for indirect or administrative costs (restricted to a percentage of the award amount).

Part Two: Components of a Grant Proposal

Tips for Creating a Budget

- 🌳 Check for ineligible expenses in the RFP. UCF grants exclude non-woody plants, for example. Federal requirements may limit how much can be spent on a piece of equipment or exclude categories like land acquisition or research.
- 🌳 If awarded, be prepared to submit a second budget. Some projects receive only partial funding, so applicants must submit a revised budget for the amount awarded.
- 🌳 For budget items that will be contracted out, it is useful to include quotes or estimates from potential vendors with your application as supplemental materials. This helps to justify the cost you list in your budget and demonstrates prep work.

Example Budget:

Town of Vernon



Part Three: Tips for a Successful Proposal

Now that we have reviewed the main components of an application, there are a few strategies that can be leveraged in the project planning and application-writing process to help make your project more robust.

Community Engagement

Early, enduring community engagement is essential in successful urban and community forestry projects. In previous sections, we shared successful applications that used various strategies to demonstrate to reviewers that they had the support of and would continue to work with communities in the name of collaborative urban forestry.

Grants from the UCF program have a few specific requirements to this end, like mandatory meetings to inform the public about projects. The strongest applications feature work above and beyond these minimum requirements to demonstrate lasting and authentic investment in the community.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to working with different communities; the reach and needs of each project vary. Instead, we'll explain a few broad categories of support that successful applicants frequently demonstrate. Which ones you implement is up to you!



Part Three: Tips for a Successful Proposal

Letters of Support

Most applications include letters of support, which are brief, formal letters from organizations or individuals (often members of local government or boards) that express their support for the project. Providing letters shows that, in addition to your own organization, others agree with the work that you've planned.

Letters from the communities you've planned work in are especially meaningful and are even built into the scoring rubric for some grant programs. Doing the work to obtain letters from smaller or less environment-focused organizations (e.g., faith-based groups, tenet groups, or neighborhood associations) can give reviewers confidence that you are meaningfully engaging with the broader community.

Partnerships and Commitments

A step beyond writing a letter of support is providing direct support for a project. Developing partnerships is one way to increase the scope of work that is achievable through your project by borrowing the skillsets or resources that other groups offer. An organization with a lot of outreach capacity can accomplish more if it works with a group that is knowledgeable about planting and caring for trees.

If you are proposing to work in a community your organization is not very familiar with, having a strong partnership with a group based in that community to support the project can be meaningful. To reviewers, seeing a well-considered partnership featured in a proposed project signifies that significant logistical work has been done in advance of applying.

Note that partnerships require considerable time and labor to establish, coordinate, and maintain, and won't be necessary or feasible for every project. Take care, especially when delegating important project duties to a partner. To prevent misunderstandings, partnerships should have a formal MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) to outline the commitments expected of each partner.

Part Three: Tips for a Successful Proposal

Community Input

Some applicants host public meetings in the process of developing their project to gather public input on the content of the application itself, while others will use data from local surveys or workshop discussions to inform the priorities of the project.

Some examples of community input may be surveying public opinion on the location of new trees, priorities for the management of public natural forested areas, the types of public education or workshops they would like to attend, or their vision for the restoration of a park or old lot. The process of obtaining high-quality community input can be a lot to manage logistically, but some level of community involvement in application crafting is highly recommended. It demonstrates to reviewers that the community has been engaged with the project from the outset, rather than merely informed along the way or after the fact.

Accessibility

Meetings to involve and inform the public are important, but successful applicants typically go beyond this minimum requirement. You should be able to name the specific needs of the audience you've already engaged or will engage through outreach. Some broad examples may include:

- Childcare
- Translation services
- Access to public transportation
- Meeting times that are outside of typical work hours

Having awareness and taking necessary steps to account for these needs helps demonstrate that you are making the effort to fully and authentically engage communities through your work. If your organization already routinely holds well-attended meetings, has formed an agreement for a venue, or found a partner for childcare or translation services (if relevant to your audience), be sure to mention these details in your application.

Part Three: Tips for a Successful Proposal

Using Data

Increasingly, urban foresters are turning to science and data-driven methods to identify where and what type of work should be prioritized. Grant programs offered through DEEP UCF reflect this approach: grant programs collect data about their urban forests, and scoring rubrics include a data category. It might seem intimidating, but there are many free online tools and resources to help develop your application.

TreeCanopy.US: An online tool developed by the Arbor Day Foundation, the USDA Forest Service, and PlanIT Geo to assist communities across the United States in assessing and monitoring urban tree canopy coverage. It has a suite of useful features, including land cover categories and change in tree cover over time. Applicants can use it to identify areas with low canopy cover, and landcover types to target planting locations.

Tree Equity Score: Tree Equity Score National Explorer is an online tool developed by American Forests to help communities identify areas where increasing tree canopy can improve equity. It assesses neighborhoods across the United States by analyzing tree canopy coverage, population density, climate and public health data, and socioeconomic factors. On a local level, the tool generates a score for each census block group, which demonstrates how well the tree canopy is serving the local community. Applicants can use this tool to demonstrate areas with lower tree equity scores that more urgently need investment to address disparities in tree canopy.

Connecticut Environmental Justice Mapping Tool: The CT Environmental Justice Screening Tool displays various environmental burden and social vulnerability indicators and organizes them into composite indexes. These can be helpful for applicants to illustrate the relative severity of environmental and social impacts that a given community faces.

Data comes in all forms! Online resources are valuable, but community input, historical registers, tree inventories, and other local records can also be valid sources of data depending on the demands of your project.

Part Four: Additional Resources

Thank you for reviewing the Starter Guide to Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection Urban and Community Forestry Grants. We hope that you found some useful information and will consider submitting an application.

Before you apply, note the following set of resources:

Connecticut Tree Owner's Manual: This guide offers specific recommendations and specs for tree planting in CT.

City-Scale Urban Forest Management: This resource from CT DEEP provides an overview of city-scale urban forest management, including relevant laws, policies, and ordinances. It links to additional tools and suggests strategies to help communities assess, plan, and enhance their urban forests effectively. Applicants can use this guide to align their project goals with management practices that are endorsed by CT DEEP.

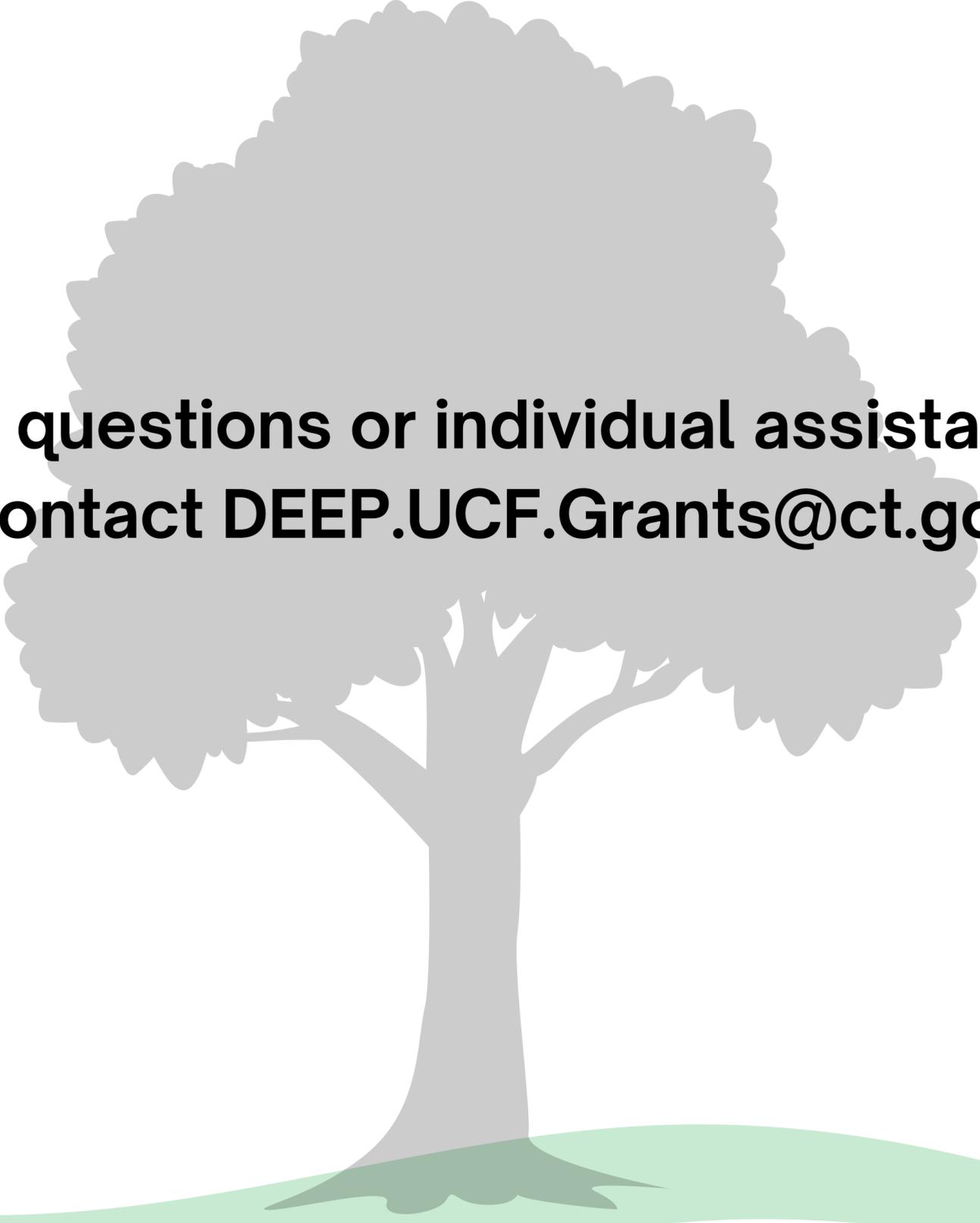
Vibrant Cities Lab: The Vibrant Cities Lab Toolkit from the U.S. Forest Service, American Forests, and the National Association of Regional Councils is a resource for planning and implementing urban forestry projects. It includes tools for assessing community needs, setting project goals, and developing actionable strategies. Applicants can use this toolkit to design projects with measurable outcomes, build community support, and demonstrate alignment with best practices in urban forestry.

CT Forest Action Plan: The 2020 Connecticut Forest Action Plan outlines the Division of Forestry's master strategy for managing and conserving the state's forests. It identifies key challenges, opportunities, and priority actions to enhance forest health, biodiversity, and community benefits. Applicants can use this to align their proposals with statewide goals, ensuring their projects address priority issues and demonstrate strategic value. Alignment with state priorities is a criterion on all UCF grant rubrics.

Part Four: Additional Resources

Governor’s Council on Climate Change (GC3) Forests Sub-Group Final Report: The GC3 Sub-Group Final Report examines the role of forests and other natural lands in addressing climate change challenges. Applicants can use this to align their proposals with statewide goals, ensuring their projects address priority issues and demonstrate strategic value. Alignment with state priorities is a criterion on all UCF grant rubrics.

Project Planning Worksheet: This worksheet provides step-by-step guidance as applicants develop their scope of work, timeline, and budget. This document should be considered a “first step” for first-time applicants, and not a replacement for any of the other guidance provided in this booklet.



**For questions or individual assistance,
contact DEEP.UCF.Grants@ct.gov**