



WISCONSIN TOWNS
ASSOCIATION
Empowering Town Officials

Routes to Recovery: Lessons from the First Reimbursement Period

Introduction

This document provides Wisconsin towns additional information about the Routes to Recovery (R2R) program based on lessons learned from the first reimbursement period (July 1st – 15th). It includes: an introduction to the R2R program; a list of items that have been approved by the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA); and, answers to several commonly asked questions about the program. This document is not intended to be a complete description of the R2R program. For more information on R2R please visit the DOA website - <https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/LocalGovtsGrants/COVID-Grants.aspx>.

Routes to Recovery Background

The Wisconsin Towns Association (WTA) is committed to assisting towns in mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic. We worked directly with Governor Evers to ensure that a portion of Wisconsin's federal funding was allocated to towns. Local governments are eligible to receive \$190 million. The R2R program appropriated funds to local governments based on their population and complexity of responsibilities. **All towns** were provided an appropriation, which was communicated by DOA to clerks via email in late June. If your town did not receive that email, please contact the DOA via email at covidgovgrant@wisconsin.gov.

R2R is a reimbursement based program that requires your town to make the expenditure and request payment from DOA. As of the time of this document's creation, towns still have two more opportunities to submit their expenditures for reimbursement to the DOA. The first is between September 1st-15th and the second is November 7th-18th. Before a town begins to make requests, WTA recommends the town board officially designate who is responsible for submitting expenses due to the meticulous steps required during that process.

There are four primary requirements that the DOA considers when choosing to approve/deny a reimbursement request (please read their Program Guidance document for more detail). An expenditure must be:

1. A government expenditure
2. Necessary due to COVID-19
3. Not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of 3/27/20
4. Incurred between 3/1/20 and 11/6/20

(Please note that payment must occur by November 6, 2020; however, installation can be completed as late as December 30, 2020)

Towns are encouraged to be extraordinarily descriptive when submitting expenses. The DOA has previously denied requests when there is lack of detail explaining the necessity of the purchase in response to the COVID-19 health crisis. Except in rare cases (e.g., personal protective equipment like masks), it is not enough to simply list the name of something that you're requesting. You must describe the nature of the request and why it was needed due to COVID-19. Not including that description risks a denied expenditure, and there are only 2 more reimbursement windows. A good rule of thumb is to assume that the DOA doesn't know what the product/service is for which you are requesting reimbursement.

Approved Items

A list of approved items with explanations (when necessary) is below. Explanations were provided to items that are unique in nature (e.g., not hand sanitizer, PPE). The list was developed through correspondence with towns who had submitted items during the July 1st-July 15th reimbursement period and through dialogue with the DOA. Inclusion on the list is not a WTA endorsement that it will be approved by the DOA in the future or that a federal government audit will concur with an approval. This is federal funding that is run through the state and subject to federal audit. It is the **town's responsibility** to explain why the purchase satisfies federal and state criteria and keep adequate records in case of a federal audit. Furthermore, this list was developed based on the first reimbursement period and other items/services are certainly eligible. If your town can find additional expenditures that satisfy the requirements, then you can submit those as well.

ELECTIONS

- Election supplies to support absentee voting
 - Postage, envelopes, ink, toner, labels, paper, binders, ballots that support absentee voting, which limits physical contact
- Voting machines
 - New voting machines can help clerks/elections workers process absentee ballots more efficiently while decreasing physical contact with materials and other people
- Voting booths
 - New voting booths can be advantageous to towns who have old booths that are difficult to sanitize
- Electronic paper folding machines
 - Paper folding machines can assist clerks/election workers process absentee ballots more efficiently while decreasing physical contact with materials and other people
- Ballot printing services
 - The increase in absentee ballot requests has created a greater need for more ballots to be printed; the absentee voting process limits physical contact

- Computers
 - Purchase of desktop and laptop computers for election recordkeeping
 - The increase in absentee ballot requests has created a greater for tools to mail out absentee ballots and keep absentee ballot records
- Wages related to public health and safety response
 - While people working at elections are not eligible for hazard pay, Routes to Recovery funds can be used to pay them for time spent cleaning/sanitizing
- Pens
 - Towns have bought supplies of pens so that each voter does not have to use a pen previously used by another voter

PPE

- Face masks/shields
- Gowns
- Gloves
- Boot covers
- Coveralls
- Hand sanitizer, alcohol wipes, etc.

TOWN HALL/TOWN FACILITIES ITEMS

- Chairs, tables, and other necessary furniture
 - These purchases can promote cleaner surfaces. Towns have upgraded from wooden and upholstered furniture to plastic based items for easier cleaning surfaces
 - Larger tables can promote social distancing during work/town meetings
- Mounted mail/drop boxes
 - These decrease physical contact especially as it pertains to people dropping off absentee ballots, mail, etc. at the town hall
- Electrostatic sprayers
- Microphones and audio systems
 - Towns can use these items to promote social distancing during town meetings and also for blended virtual/in-person meetings
- Cleaning services and/or cleaning supplies
 - Needed to sanitize town buildings, equipment, etc.
- COVID-19 related signage on town property
 - Signage used to inform public, employees, etc. of COVID-19 related town policies
- Air filtration systems
 - HEPA and ultraviolet air filtration systems to eliminate the virus
- Partitions/plexiglass installation to promote social distancing

- Towns have installed sneeze guards, reception barriers, etc. to minimize employee to customer contact, employee to employee contact, and customer to customer during elections and daily town activity
- Touchless hand sanitizer dispensers, faucets, toilets, urinals, paper towel dispensers, etc.
- Foot operated doorways
 - These can be used to limit COVID-19 exposure in high risk areas such as bathrooms, high traffic doorways, etc.
- Cordless conference phone
 - Can help reduce physical contact during conference calls and can provide blended virtual/physical meetings

EMPLOYEES

- Wages for workers that typically work in public health/safety fields that are responding to COVID-19
- Wages for workers that typically do not work in public health/safety fields that have been redeployed to COVID-19 related work
 - Please provide detailed explanation and keep comprehensive documentation when applying for this reimbursement
- Mileage costs
 - If an employee has incurred mileage expenses due to COVID-19 related work, then mileage can be submitted for approval
- Supplies for public safety/health professionals necessary for COVID-19 response
 - PPE, thermometers, batteries for electronics, etc.

TELEWORK (THESE ITEMS COULD ALSO BE USED FOR VIRTUAL TOWN MEETINGS)

- Tablets, computers, scanners
 - Towns have been reimbursed for tablets, computers, and scanners so employees can work from home and town boards can meet from home
- IT Setup for Telework
 - Towns might need software and hardware (e.g., server, access to the cloud) and other outside services to help implement telework
- Virtual Meeting Subscriptions
 - Subscriptions to Zoom, Webex, etc. to help promote telework
 - This would also include software licenses for remote access so that employees can work from home
- Miscellaneous supplies for telework
 - Supplies necessary for telework, such as, microphones, headsets, monitors, webcams, USB cables, etc.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Public notice reposts due to COVID-19 health emergency
 - Specifically, the annual town meeting date change
- Legal fees
 - Towns may use R2R funds to pay for appropriate legal fees necessary due to the COVID-19 health emergency; such as, creating or updating employee policies, facility policies, etc.
 - These fees **must** be for legal services from outside counsel

Frequently Asked Questions

Below please find several of the frequently asked questions from town officials. For further information and FAQs, please consult the Department of Administration's Program Guide available at <https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/LocalGovtsGrants/COVID-Grants.aspx>.

Q: We'd like to give some of our Routes to Recovery allocation to another local government. Can we transfer some or all of our balance to another local government (town, village, city, or county)?

A: Yes. The Routes to Recovery program allows local governments to transfer their funds to up to 5 other local governments. There are two ways to transfer funds: either through the expense reporting app or by emailing covidgovgrant@wisconsin.gov.

Your town should:

- Use the **expense reporter app** if
 - You are transferring your entire remaining balance
 - AND
 - The balance is to be split equally among the designated local governments
- Use **email** if
 - You are only transferring part of your balance
 - AND/OR
 - You are transferring your remaining balance to multiple local governments and each are receiving different amounts (expense reporter will only transfer remaining balances in equal parts)

Q: Can we transfer some of our funds to a school district?

A: No. R2R funds can only be transferred to another general purpose government. Counties, villages, cities, and other towns are the only governments who can receive transfers. Towns

may purchase items and donate them to a school district if those items satisfy the R2R program's four primary eligibility requirements.

Q: Are election workers allowed to receive hazard pay through the Routes to Recovery program?

A: No. Hazard pay eligibility is extremely limited and can only be given to workers in the public health and safety fields. However, if your election workers have spent time cleaning due to COVID-19, those hours are reimbursable. The town must provide detailed explanation to the DOA when reporting the expense and keep comprehensive documentation for themselves in case there is an audit.

Q: Due to the increase in requests for absentee ballots, our town has spent a lot of money on postage, envelopes, and other absentee ballot related expenses. Can we request reimbursement through the Routes to Recovery program for these expenses?

A: Yes, the DOA approved these items in the past and will continue to do so. Make sure to provide a full description as to what the purchase was and why it was necessary due to COVID-19.

Q: We can't get the project done by November 6th. Can we prepay?

A: Yes, the payment must occur by November 6th, but installation can occur as late as December 30th.

Q: It's been a few days since our town has completed the expense reporter. We still haven't received a check or an ACH file. How long will it take for us to receive our reimbursement?

A: Towns received reimbursement from the state within a month after completing the expense reporter during the July reimbursement period. There were 14,000 individual items for which reimbursement was requested in July. DOA is anticipating a larger number of requests during the September and November reimbursement periods as more communities begin to use their R2R money. Please be aware that reimbursements may take a little longer in September and December due to the increase in requests.

Q: Our town has a lot of the same purchase. For example, we bought hand sanitizer every day for a month because you could only buy so much per day. Can we bundle our expenses into one report item?

A: Yes. If you were purchasing similar items, such as PPE, you can bundle them into one reimbursement request per week or per month. Make sure to note that in your description in the expense reporter.

Q: Our town is very concerned about any potential audit that could take place. Town official positions can change, and we're not sure how we'll be able to keep track of why we purchased certain items. How should we keep track of our purchases?

A: The WTA and the DOA recommends keeping extremely detailed records when participating in the R2R program. You are **required** to keep any receipts, invoices, purchase orders, etc. from any items/services that you use R2R funds for. For other items such as employee wages and benefits, documenting the hours that an employee worked in a COVID related capacity is also required. It is extremely important to document when an employee has been on leave regarding COVID-19 related circumstances.

Town official turnover is a valid concern, and internal knowledge is important to help explain why R2R money was used. The WTA recommends including a brief summary of the town board's reasoning for using their R2R money with other purchase records. These summaries could be written in an electronic document, printed off, and placed with its corresponding R2R expenditure file. Remember, receipts, invoices, purchase orders, payroll records, etc., must be kept for 7 years, so it would be wise to include these summaries for the current town board and any future town boards.

Final Thoughts

The R2R program presents many possibilities for local governments to alleviate the effects of COVID-19. Please consider using these resources to help improve your community and keep you and your citizens safe.

Thank you to the DOA for taking the time to help us prepare this document. In addition, thank you to the towns who responded to the R2R survey that was sent out in mid-August.

Sources/Further Reading

Wisconsin Department of Administration's R2R Program Guide

<https://doa.wi.gov/Secretary/RRG-ProgramGuidance.pdf>