



2026 Innovate to Grow Program Overview

WHAT'S NEXT FOR INNOVATE TO GROW

Since its inception in 2017, Innovate to Grow (ITG) has supported 214 grants with more than \$19.6 million, with the potential to impact more than 1.85 million players, 53,000 coaches, and 51,000 referees across nearly all 50 states. Since its launch, ITG has evolved alongside the Federation's broader strategic framework, adapting to better serve the changing needs of U.S. Soccer's members.

Over the past several years, U.S. Soccer has engaged members and participants across the soccer ecosystem to help shape a future that is more connected, accessible, easier to navigate and better aligned with the needs of players and participants. This work will bring organizations closer together, strengthen local leadership, and create better experiences for all participants in environments that are right for them.

In June, U.S. Soccer implemented the feedback and launched a collaborative effort with State Association leaders to design a stronger local operating model for soccer in the U.S., piloting, testing, and scaling proven structures and processes over the coming years.

While the broader work under the U.S. Way and its [Pathways Strategy](#) continues to advance, the changes to ITG for the 2026-27 cycle are intentionally incremental, better aligning with U.S. Soccer's generational ambitions that drive these efforts:

- **U.S. Soccer Success:** We want to win major tournaments, including World Cups.
- **U.S. Soccer is Yours:** We want everyone to feel ownership of soccer's future in the U.S.
- **U.S. Soccer Everywhere:** We want soccer to be the #1 most played sport in every community across America.

As the transformation of the soccer ecosystem continues, ITG will evolve alongside it by supporting expanded participation, enhancing the quality of the playing experience and advancing the long-term vision of the U.S. Way.

KEY CHANGES FOR 2026-27

To further align with U.S. Soccer's [In Service to Soccer strategy](#) and generational ambitions, the required program themes have been updated. All programs must align with one or more of the following themes:

- **U.S. Soccer Success:** Support pathways, infrastructure, and professional development for coaches, referees, administrators, and players
- **U.S. Soccer is Yours:** Innovate to improve experiences for participants
- **U.S. Soccer Everywhere:** Grow participation meaningfully and sustainably



SOCCER FORWARD & SOCCER IN SCHOOLS

Building on the collaboration that began with the 2025 cycle, ITG will continue to work with the [Soccer Forward Foundation](#) on programming priorities, evaluation of applications and support for maximizing impact and learning via the [Soccer Forward Resource Hub](#).

New for the 2026 cycle, ITG-funded programs that help to increase the scale, quality, or impact of soccer played at schools will also be considered part of our [Soccer at Schools](#) initiative. Soccer Forward will reach out to these programs to discuss opportunities for collaboration, support and learning through and beyond the grant term. Such programs will also be included in Soccer at Schools impact reporting and storytelling activities.

Programs that align with other Soccer Forward priorities, including Coaching for Impact, soccer in parks, developing places to play, and collective impact, may also be engaged in this way.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

CONTINUED SUPPORT FROM BANK OF AMERICA

As part of their partnership with U.S. Soccer, Bank of America continues as a supporting partner for ITG. This support will include:

- Matchday activation with grantees, hosting recipient organization representatives at a National Team match, including on-field recognition
- Bank of America local activation at select grantee activities
- The ability for grantee organizations to leverage Bank of America's local branches and employee network for program volunteers
- Pro-bono financial advising to grantee organizations

Select ITG recipients will also be featured in content developed with Bank of America.

ELIGIBILITY

All U.S. Soccer Member Organizations who are in good standing, except Professional Leagues, are eligible to apply. Good standing is defined as:

- All member dues through FY27 paid as of application close date
- Player data submitted to the Soccer Data Platform (for organizations that register players)
- SafeSport incorporated into organization's personal conduct policies (to be submitted as part of application process)
- Current ITG recipients must be up to date with reporting as of the July 31, 2026 reporting due date for reports on activities through June 2026 (must be received but can still be under review)

The Soccer Data Platform, which has replaced the National Data Center, is live. U.S. Soccer is currently working with registration platform vendors on connectivity; no action is needed by Member Organizations at this time. However, successful applicants will be required to connect their data for their grant to be released. If the organization and / or its registration platform vendor are actively working with U.S. Soccer to reconnect player data but have not yet completed the process by the time the grant is awarded, this requirement will be considered satisfied.



If organizations that are not U.S. Soccer Member Organizations are interested in utilizing ITG funds, they must partner with one of U.S. Soccer's 114 non-Professional League [Member Organizations](#) who will submit on their behalf. The U.S. Soccer Member Organization will assume primary legal, fiscal, and compliance responsibilities for the grant. Any clubs or leagues affiliated with a U.S. Soccer Member Organization must submit applications with the approval and support of that Member Organization. **Applications submitted without the Member Organization's agreement and support will not be considered for funding.**

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Programs applying for funding are subject to the following requirements and restrictions:

- To ensure programs meet U.S. Soccer's top priorities for investment, proposed programs must align with one or more of the following program themes:
 - *U.S. Soccer Success*: Support pathways, infrastructure, and professional development for coaches, referees, administrators, and players
 - *U.S. Soccer is Yours*: Innovate to improve experiences for participants
 - *U.S. Soccer Everywhere*: Grow participation meaningfully and sustainably
- Proposed programs may be one (1) to three (3) years in duration and may choose a January 1 or July 1 start date
- Proposed programs that include partner organizations who will be responsible for implementing any activities must:
 - Identify the partner organizations with defined roles, responsibilities, etc. in the proposal as well as detail oversight mechanisms for the partnership(s)
 - Provide letters of agreement / support from each partner listed in the application
 - If partners are added or changed after a grant is awarded, member must obtain written approval from U.S. Soccer before implementation of partner activities begins
- Member must show financial investment into program
 - Investment options include:
 - Member funds
 - Other donor or sponsorship funding
 - Program revenue invested back into program
 - In-kind contributions
 - No minimum threshold / percent for match, as each member has a different financial context
- Aligns with applicable U.S. Soccer standards and guidelines on:
 - Player Development
 - Coaching & Referee Education
 - Participant Safety
- Budget restrictions:
 - Funding cannot be used for:
 - Social events (e.g., end-of-season party, adult league happy hours)
 - New construction
 - ITG funds may be used for renovations or improvements needed to maximize or repurpose existing spaces
 - Approval of renovations / improvements using ITG funds is subject to review by the U.S. Soccer Legal department during the application review process
 - Applicants that are proposing renovations / improvements will be required to provide information on the processes they will use to select contractors, vendors, etc. to perform the work



- Proposal must include plans for programming, even if funded by other sources; requests for renovation / improvement only without information on program plans will not be considered
- Salaries cannot make up more than 33% of total budgeted ITG expenses
- ITG-funded portion of the program is capped at \$200,000, subject to exceptions approved by the U.S. Soccer Board of Directors

Please note that while U.S. Soccer staff will support programs as appropriate, they should not be relied upon for the proposed program's success. ITG grantees must agree to make their program resources available via the [Soccer Forward Resource Hub](#).

APPLICATION PROCESS

Members will apply through the [Innovate to Grow portal](#) and will be notified via email when the 2026-27 application goes live.

The application consists of uploads or responses for the following components:

- Organization Information / Profile (*direct entry into portal*)
- Statement on Fit with Program Themes (*direct entry into portal*)
- Other Program Information (duration, participants, information on alignment with priority areas / populations, projected impact numbers, information on program leads and partners) (*direct entry + upload of partner letters of agreement / support*)
- Executive Summary (*direct entry into portal, limit 500 words*)
- Program Background (*upload*)
- Program Description / Execution Plan (*upload, + additional information via direct entry into portal*)
- Program Information on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging (*direct entry into portal*)
- Technical Plan (only required if project includes on-field instruction of players) (*upload*)
- Long-Term Strategic Plan (*upload*)
- Learning & Replication (*direct entry into portal*)
- Detailed Budget (*upload*)
- Policies Incorporating SafeSport (*upload*)

Please see Appendix A for a detailed description of each application component.

EVALUATION PROCESS

ITG applications go through multiple rounds of review, including review for completeness, member adherence to good standing requirements, and committee review. Applicants will have the opportunity to submit supplemental information if requested from U.S. Soccer or respond to questions regarding their application throughout the review process as needed.

After initial rounds of review for completeness, good standing, and adherence to applicable U.S. Soccer standards and guidelines, applications submitted will be scored by a review committee. Evaluation criteria are divided into the following sections which will be weighted based on their relative priority:

- *Alignment – 35%*
- *Planning & Implementation – 25%*
- *Sustainability, Stakeholders, & Learning – 30%*
- *Competitive Priority – 10%*



Please see Appendix B for detailed evaluation criteria. Scoring results will be reviewed with the Technical Development Committee of the U.S. Soccer Board of Directors before making final funding recommendations to the full Board of Directors.

ANTICIPATED TIMELINE

- **August 10, 2026:** Application opens to members
- **September 8, 2026 at 5pm ET:** Application window closes
- **September 9, 2026 – mid November 2026:** Review process
- **November 20, 2026:** U.S. Soccer Board of Directors approval
- **Late November – December 2026:** Results communicated to members and grants signed
- **January 1, 2027 OR July 1, 2027:** Grant start dates

The timeline outlined above is subject to change due to committee availability, applicant responsiveness to follow up, etc.

Questions? Please contact ITGFund@ussoccer.org.

APPENDIX A

Innovate to Grow

Application Components

- **Organization Information / Profile:** basic contact information about your organization and program (if you applied in 2024 or 2025, your profile is still in the portal and can be updated as needed)
- **Statement on Fit with Program Themes:** justification of how the program fits one or more of the three required program themes
 - *U.S. Soccer Success:* Support pathways, infrastructure, and professional development for coaches, referees, administrators, and players
 - *U.S. Soccer is Yours:* Innovate to improve experiences for participants
 - *U.S. Soccer Everywhere:* Grow participation meaningfully and sustainably
- **Other Program Information:** basic information on
 - Planned duration of program
 - Desired start date (January 1, 2027 or July 1, 2027)
 - Partner organization(s) and letters of support / agreement (if applicable) [template available [here](#)]
 - Primary program participants (players, coaches, referees) and projected impact figures
 - Whether the program targets priority implementation areas or populations
 - Priority Implementation Areas
 - Soccer deserts
 - A soccer desert is defined as lacking three key components:
 - Soccer programming in schools
 - Soccer spaces accessible, inclusive, and affordable in the community
 - Coaches and other community leadership that is representative of the groups they are serving
 - If targeting a soccer desert, the applicant will need to demonstrate the implementation area meets the definition above
 - Schools
 - Priority Target Populations
 - Persons with disabilities
 - Women and girls
 - Program administrative and technical leads
- **Executive Summary:** brief overview highlighting key goals and expected outcomes
- **Background:** why, who, and what
 - Why the project was chosen / is needed (problem statement)
 - Who you are trying to reach (target population, market, or audience and whether this represents a new area for your organization)
 - What you want to achieve (goals and objectives, including numerical targets)
 - Demonstrates applicant's capacity to implement proposed program based on past programs and experience
- **Program Description / Execution Plan:** how, when, and by whom
 - How proposed activities will be carried out

- When proposed activities will occur (detailed program timeline)
- Who is responsible for carrying out and overseeing activities (staffing detail), including details on roles, responsibilities, etc. for any proposed partnerships
- How success will be measured (program metrics)
 - At minimum, grantees will be required to report on the number of players, coaches, and / or referees impacted by the program
 - Information on how impact numbers will be collected, verified, etc.
 - Applicants are encouraged to include additional measures in their proposals as appropriate to strengthen their ability to show impact of the program
- Risk management and SafeSport considerations
- Other important pieces of planning as appropriate (e.g., communications, marketing)
- Information on what non-financial support from U.S. Soccer or Soccer Forward Foundation may be beneficial to implement the program
 - *Example:* Support on establishing monitoring and evaluation processes
 - Please note that U.S. Soccer or Soccer Forward Foundation staff should not be relied upon for the proposed program's success
- *For programs implemented with partner organization(s):* description of oversight mechanisms to ensure program, participant safety, and financial compliance by your partner organization(s)
- *For programs that include renovation or repurposing of spaces:*
 - Description of processes that will be used to select contractors, vendors, etc. that will perform the work
 - If funded by another source, information about planned programming for the renovated / repurposed space
- **Program Information on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging (DEIB)**
 - Information on underserved or marginalized populations that would benefit from program
 - Estimate of how much of total budget is allocated to serve these populations
- **Technical Plan**
 - Required only if program includes on-field instruction of players
 - Should be completed by your organization's technical lead
- **Long-Term Strategic Plan: what next**
 - Where do you want the program to go in the future?
 - What is your plan for when ITG support ends? How does it become financially self-sustaining or move on to the next phase?
 - Includes details on next steps for the program, both operationally and financially
- **Learning & Replication**
 - What learnings do you expect during implementation of your program that could be shared to benefit the wider soccer community?
 - Do you expect this program can be replicated by other organizations in other communities? If so, what are the strengths or capabilities required by those organizations, and what support might they need, other than financial resources?
 - Do you already have learnings, evidence, case studies, tools, or implementation models for your proposed program that can be shared?
- **Detailed Budget**
 - Optional template available [here](#)
 - Present program costs in sufficient detail so that reviewers can clearly see how costs were determined
 - Should clearly delineate which costs would be covered by ITG funds v. other funds; maximum amount for ITG funds is \$200,000
 - If program is multi-year, please include total by year
 - Salaries cannot make up more than 33% of total budgeted ITG expenses
 - Costs that are not funded for ITG programs include:
 - Social events (e.g., end-of-season party, adult league happy hours)



- New construction
- ITG funds may be used for renovations or improvements needed to maximize or repurpose existing spaces
 - Approval of renovations / improvements using ITG funds is subject to review by the U.S. Soccer Legal department during the application review process
 - Applicants that are proposing renovations / improvements will be required to provide information on the processes they will use to select contractors, vendors, etc. to perform the work
 - Proposal must include plans for programming, even if funded by other sources; requests for renovation / improvement only without information on program plans will not be considered
- **Policies Incorporating SafeSport:** all policy documents from your organization that incorporate SafeSport requirements (see Appendix C for more information)



APPENDIX B

Innovate to Grow

Evaluation Criteria

Following initial review for completeness, good standing, and adherence with applicable U.S. Soccer standards and guidelines, the review committee will use the rubric below to score proposed programs. Each section will be weighted based on its relative priority.

Alignment (60 points maximum, 35% weight)			
Criteria	Yes (20 points)	Somewhat (10 points)	No (0 points)
Fit with Required Program Themes	Program fits at least one of the following program themes: 1) <i>U.S. Soccer Success</i> : Support pathways, infrastructure, and professional development for coaches, referees, administrators, and players; 2) <i>U.S. Soccer is Yours</i> : Innovate to improve experiences for participants; or 3) <i>U.S. Soccer Everywhere</i> : Grow participation meaningfully and sustainably	Program somewhat fits one or more of the specified themes	Program does not fit any of the specified themes
Program Need	Program background information clearly outlines the need for the program and who it is trying to reach	Program background information somewhat outlines the need for the program and who it is trying to reach	Program background information is unclear on the need for the program or who it is trying to reach
Program Goals & Objectives	Program goals and objectives are clearly stated and appropriate for proposed program and budget	Program goals and objectives are mostly clear and somewhat appropriate for proposed program and budget	Program goals and objectives are unclear or inappropriate for proposed program and budget



Planning & Implementation (60 points maximum, 25% weight)				
Criteria	Excellent (9-10 points)	Good (7-8 points)	Fair (4-6 points)	Poor (0-3 points)
Program Plan / Approach	Program plan / approach is exceptionally reasonable and appropriate	Program plan / approach is mostly reasonable and appropriate	Program plan / approach has some reasonable and appropriate elements, but has gaps	Program plan / approach is unreasonable and inappropriate
Organizational Capacity	Demonstrates strong capacity / history of performance to implement the proposed program	Demonstrates adequate capacity / history of performance to implement the proposed program	Demonstrates some capacity / history of performance to implement the proposed program but has notable concerns	Demonstrates little to no capacity / history of performance to implement the proposed program
Staffing & Management	Plan to staff the program is exceptionally reasonable and appropriate, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities	Plan to staff the program is adequate / reasonable, with mostly defined roles and responsibilities	Plan to staff the program is somewhat reasonable, with some gaps in roles and responsibilities	Lacks appropriate plan to staff the program, with little or no defined roles or responsibilities
Targets	Targets are very realistic and appropriate for the proposed activities and budget	Targets are mostly realistic and appropriate for the proposed activities and budget	Targets are partially unrealistic or insufficient for the proposed activities and budget	Targets are unrealistic or inappropriate for the proposed activities and budget
Metrics	Includes comprehensive and appropriate metrics and plan to monitor activities and measure success, including metrics beyond the required program measurements (players, coaches, referees)	Includes adequate metrics and plan to monitor activities and measure success	Includes some metrics, but they are insufficient or the plan to monitor activities and measure success is partially unrealistic	Lacks appropriate metrics, or the plan to monitor activities and measure success is completely unrealistic
Budget	Budget is highly reasonable and appropriate for the proposed program	Budget is mostly reasonable and appropriate for the proposed program	Budget has some reasonable elements but also notable concerns	Budget is unreasonable and inappropriate



Sustainability, Stakeholders, & Learning (60 points maximum, 30% weight)				
Criteria	Excellent (9-10 points)	Good (7-8 points)	Fair (4-6 points)	Poor (0-3 points)
Future Programming	Program has clear, comprehensive, and realistic plan for next steps or operational expansion of the program	Program has long-term plan for next steps or operational expansion that is mostly realistic	Program has long-term plan for next steps or operational expansion, but it is not sufficiently clear or realistic	Program has little to no long-term plan for next steps or operational expansion
Financial Sustainability	Program has clear, comprehensive, and realistic plan for how to fund the program after ITG support ends	Program has plan for how to fund the program after ITG support ends that is mostly realistic	Program has plan for how to fund the program after ITG support ends, but it is not sufficiently clear or realistic	Program has little to no plan for how to fund the program after ITG support ends
Partnerships	Program includes strong, well-defined partnership with one or more other organizations with clear roles, responsibilities, and plan for sustainability	Program includes mostly defined and appropriate partnerships with some sustainability	Program includes partnerships, but they are poorly defined or lacking in detail	Program does not include appropriate or sustainable partnerships
New Markets / Participants	Program seeks to serve new markets or participants extensively	Program seeks to serve some new markets or participants	Program seeks to serve new markets / participants minimally	Program does not seek to serve new markets or participants or has not provided sufficient clarity
Learning & Replication	Program already has learnings and tools that can be utilized by the wider soccer community to replicate / adapt the program	Program has potential to produce learnings and tools that can be utilized by the wider soccer community to replicate / adapt the program	Program may produce some learnings and tools that can be used by the wider soccer community to replicate / adapt the program, but with limited applicability	Program is unlikely to produce learnings and tools that can be utilized by the wider soccer community to replicate / adapt the program
Budget for Underserved Populations	Points based on the percentage of the budget allocated to programs for underserved populations: • 10 – 100% • 9 – 90-99% • 8 – 80-89% • 7 – 70-79%			
	• 6 – 60-69% • 5 – 50-59% • 4 – 40-49% • 3 – 30-39%			
	• 2 – 20-29% • 1 – 10-19% • 0 – 0-9%			



Competitive Priority (60 points maximum, 10% weight)			
Criteria	Yes (20 points)	Somewhat (10 points)	No (0 points)
New to ITG Funds	Organization has never received ITG funds	Organization has received ITG funds, but not within past two cycles	Organization has received ITG funds within past two cycles (2024, 2025)
Priority Implementation Areas	Points based on targeting one or more of the following: • Soccer desert area [see Appendix A for definition] (10 points) • Schools (10 points)	Program does not target one or more of the following: • Soccer desert area • Schools	Program does not target one or more of the following: • Persons with disabilities • Women & girls
Priority Target Populations	Points based on targeting one or more of the following: • Persons with disabilities (10 points) • Women & girls (10 points)	Program does not target one or more of the following: • Persons with disabilities • Women & girls	

Illustrative Weighting Based on Maximum Scores			
Criteria	Maximum Raw Score	Weight	Maximum Weighted Score
Alignment	60	35%	21
Planning & Implementation	60	25%	15
Sustainability, Stakeholders, & Learning	60	30%	18
Competitive Priority	60	10%	6
Total	240	100%	60

APPENDIX C

Innovate to Grow

SafeSport Requirements

U.S. Soccer Policy 212-3, Section 1 requires that all Organization Members “implement and enforce, at minimum, U.S. Soccer’s [Model Prohibited Conduct Policy](#)... which prohibits misconduct including bullying, hazing, harassment (including sexual harassment), emotional misconduct, physical misconduct, and sexual misconduct, as those terms are defined by the U.S. Center for SafeSport’s SafeSport Code for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movements (the ‘[SafeSport Code](#)’).” Organizations are also required to implement U.S. Soccer’s [Model Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policy \(MAAPP\)](#) which enforces the Center’s training requirement and governs one-on-one interactions.

The policy also requires:

- a background screening policy
- a reporting process
- a resolution process for reports

For resources on drafting policies, please see the model policies linked above, Policy 212-3 (found in the policy manual [here](#)), and other resources available on U.S. Soccer’s [Safeguarding Hub](#). Organization Member policies should be adapted to the member and references to U.S. Soccer updated to the member organization.

The best way to meet the SafeSport training requirements is by utilizing U.S. Soccer’s [Safe Soccer Clearance program](#). Phases 1 and 2 of the program include the required SafeSport training as well as additional training on creating safe environments for all participants. Phase 3 includes a background screening using the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee standard. Please note that Organization Members may use a different background check provider but must meet the requirements in Policy 212-3 for an appropriate background screening.

Questions? Please contact Gareth Hedges, U.S. Soccer Director of Safeguarding Operations, at ghedges@ussoccer.org.