Community Assistance Program – State Support Services Element (CAP-SSSE) Tiered State Framework Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Guide

This Frequently Asked Questions guide provides information about FEMA's Tiered State Framework process and methodology to ensure the success of state grantees in the CAP-SSSE program. Please note that FEMA will continue to refine this document as necessary throughout the rollout phase and we welcome your input and feedback.

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Background Questions about the Tiered State Framework, Process, and Key Resources

1. **What is the Tiered State Framework?**
   - The Tiered State Framework (hereafter referred to as "TSF") was created in response to state feedback and recommendations from the 2017 CAP-SSSE Program Evaluation. The TSF enables CAP-SSSE's shift to a performance-based program that allows FEMA to fairly evaluate state strengths and areas of needed improvement and ensure there is the necessary capacity and capability to perform the duties and responsibilities of the State National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) coordinating office as set forth in 44CFR §60.25.
   - Through an assessment process, the TSF assigns state grantees to one of three (3) tiers based off an assessment of key factors (e.g. capability, capacity, performance, etc.), to inform the appropriate:
     - Eligible activities;
     - Required activities;
     - Performance measures and targets;
     - Training plans/requirements; and
     - Eligibility for incentives (i.e., access to a "plus up" or competitive funding source).
   - The TSF establishes a level playing field upon which the program can make fair judgements about the resources that states require to maintain grant eligibility, including the kinds of enhanced community and state outcomes that might be possible with additional resources.

2. **How does the TSF assessment process work?**
   - The TSF assessment of States includes three basic steps:
     1. States are assessed on average every three (3) years against a series of characteristics and benchmarks that demonstrate their capability, capacity, past performance, and level of planning and coordination. The assessment will be comprised of a two-phases:

- ▪ State self-evaluation; and
- ▪ Regional validation.
2. Each state is then assigned a tier (i.e., Foundational, Proficient, Advanced) based on this assessment.
3. Tier assignments dictate the kinds of requirements and incentives to be reflected in statement of work (SOW) for the next period of performance.

> **State Tier Descriptions:**
> - **Foundational**: State Program Meets the Minimum Requirements for Eligibility
> - **Proficient**: State Program is Considered to be Functioning Well and Performing to Expectations
> - **Advanced:** State Program is Considered to be "Best in Class" and Performing above Expectations

- The TSF Playbook and the Tier Assessment Tool are the two primary tools for performing TSF assessments (*see questions 3 and 4*).
- States are expected to work with their respective Regions to understand the requirements associated with their overall assigned tier. In instances where the state and the Region differ in their tier determination for a given characteristic, the case is forwarded to FEMA Headquarters (HQ) to review and make a final determination of the state's tier.
- Following Regional validation, assessments and final tier assignments are submitted through the Non-Disaster Grants Management System (ND Grants) as an addendum to the state's SOW by the Regional CAP Coordinator.

3. What is the Tier Assessment Tool?
- The Tier Assessment Tool (hereafter the "Tool") is an interactive, Microsoft Excel-based form required to perform state self-assessments. Please note that the Tool provides detailed step-by-step user instructions in addition to the interactive assessment form.
- The interactive form is where states will select the benchmarks they meet and provide descriptive details about the required evidence for each (as needed). The form indicates the areas where you must make selections or add comments in the Gold box. Once the requirement is satisfied, the form automatically turns the Gold box to Light Blue.
- To satisfy the evidence requirement, states should provide a quick soundbite, for example: "link to state law" or "state community engagement plan" in the 'Evidence Provided' cell.
- Once the state self-assessment is completed, states are required to submit their completed tool and corresponding evidence to their Regional Coordinator so the Region can populate the supplemental "Regional validation" section of the tool.
- Revisions to the Tool will occur as needed. Any updated versions of the Tool will be dated in disseminated to all State Coordinators for their use.
- *Note the CAP-SSSE Program Manager distributed the current Tool to all Regions and states on January 14, 2020 and that it is also available as an attachment in the webinar invite emails.*

4. What is the TSF Playbook?
- The TSF Playbook (hereafter the "Playbook") is the primary reference guide for tier assessments and should be used in conjunction with the Tier Assessment Tool.
- The Playbook is structured with four (4) chapters aligned to the four (4) TSF categories (i.e., capacity, capability, performance measures, and planning and coordination). Within each chapter, you will find a detailed overview of each of the characteristics within a given category.
- For each characteristic, the Playbook provides the:
    - o Intention behind its inclusion in the TSF;
    - o Benchmarks that must be met to be assigned into each tier;
    - o Evidence required to prove that those benchmarks have, in fact, been met; and
   - o Evidence submission guidance.

- *Note the CAP-SSSE Program Manager distributed the current Playbook to all Regions and states on January 14, 2020.*

Questions about Timelines and Level of Effort

5. When is the timeline for TSF assessments?

- States are required to submit their tier assessments to their Regional CAP Coordinator by February 18, 2020. This deadline is not flexible, and any areas left without information will be marked as "below foundational."
- The TSF assessment validation process will begin in March 2020 with a Regional review and validation.
- See the TSF Assessment Timeline and Annual Grant Milestones below for more details:

Figure 1: TSF Assessment Timeline and Annual Grant Milestones
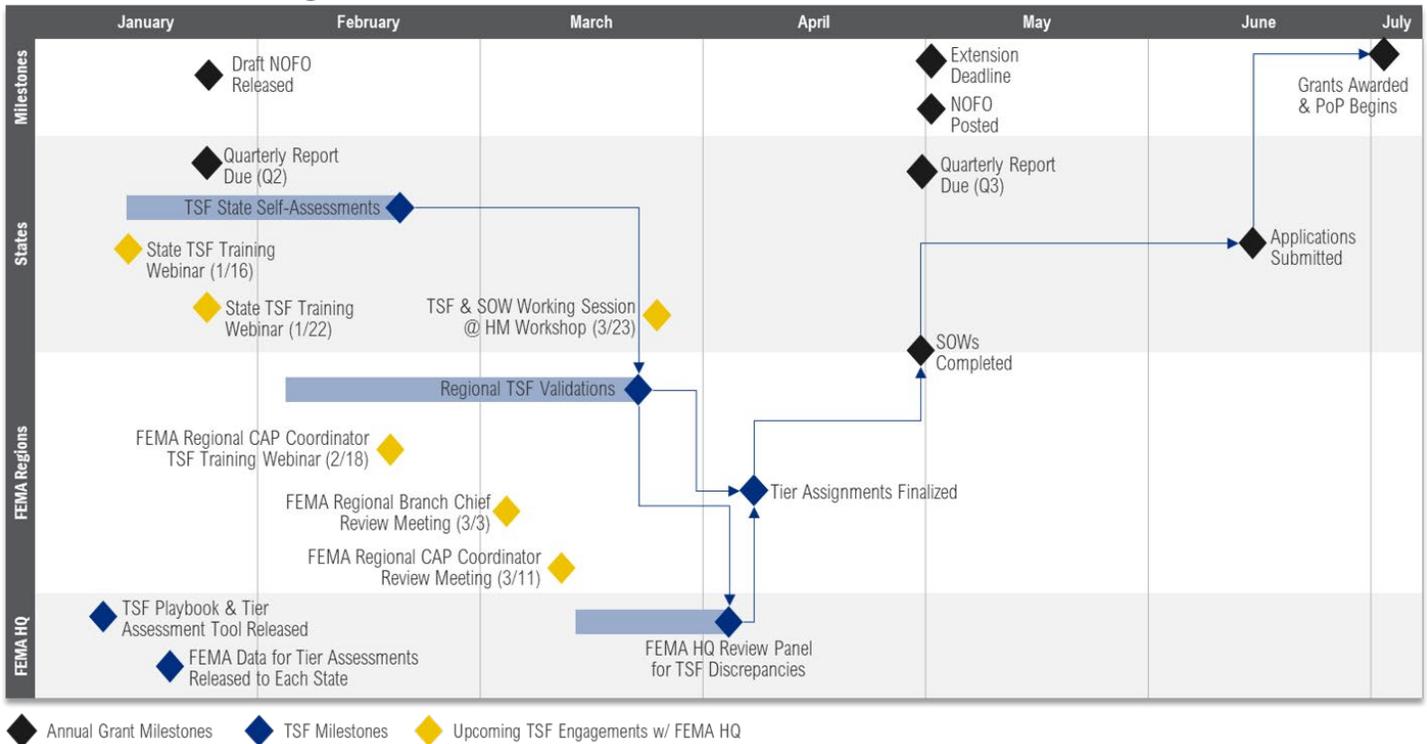
6. How often will TSF assessments take place?

- Beginning in 2020, FEMA will require a TSF assessment from each state every three (3) years or upon first applying for the CAP-SSSE grant; whichever is most recent.
- States may request an "off-cycle" TSF assessment. Off-cycle assessments may be desired, for example, if a state believes they meet the benchmarks for the next tier and would like to be assigned to that tier earlier than the next assessment cycle.
- Understanding there may be scenarios where states are assessed at "Below Foundational" for 2020, FEMA strongly encourages these states to work at closing any gaps throughout the FY2020 PoP and request an "off-cycle" TSF assessment for FY2021, that would occur in the January to March timeframe of 2021.

7. What happens if a state is unable to complete the self-assessment by the February deadline?
- States should make every effort to obtain evidence and fill in the tool to the best of their ability. All states must submit an assessment by February 18, 2020. Any portion of the tool which is not completed will be assigned "Below Foundational."
- FEMA will continue to work with you past February 18 if there are additional items that need to be collected and/or documented.
- Since state funding will not be impacted by the TSF assessment until 2021, states that are "Below Foundational" are encouraged to request an "off-cycle" assessment and work with FEMA throughout the year to revise their assessment and collect all the necessary evidence.

8. If a state requests an "off-cycle" assessment, will the FEMA-provided data then be prepared and delivered to the state?
- Yes, the FEMA-provided data will be prepared and delivered to the state.
- The state must notify the CAP-SSSE Program Manager by January 1 of that year to notify FEMA HQ they are requesting a new TSF Assessment. This way, relevant data can be pulled and the Assessment can be validated by the Region by March 1.

9. What three (3) years does the first assessment cover?
- The first assessment will cover performance from FY2016 through FY2018.
- For some characteristics (i.e., Administrative Grant Management), where we do not have the data tracked in ND Grants for all three (3) years, we will accept evidence from FY2018 only.

10. When will tier assignments impact state SOWs and funding?
- A state's tier assignment will influence their annual SOW beginning in 2020 and their funding beginning in 2021 (*see question 14 in regard to funding*).
- Significant strengths found in a state's TSF assessment will enable special access to incentives such as additional funding, increased autonomy over workplans and strategies, and funding eligibility of certain non-traditional projects.
- Conversely, gaps or deficiencies found in a state's TSF assessment, coupled with their state-specific aspirations and goals, will provide a framework for determining the activities, performance metrics, training plans, reporting requirements, and subsequent funding level that would be required to aid in addressing those gaps.

11. What is the timeline for TSF assessments in 2020? How much time is estimated to complete the assessment?
- States are required to submit their tier assessments to their Regional CAP Coordinator by February 18, 2020. This deadline is not flexible, and any areas left without information will be marked as "below foundational."
- The TSF assessment validation process will begin in March 2020 with a Regional review and validation.
- The assessment should take approximately 10 to 30 hours to complete in order to gather the appropriate evidence and fill out the tool, depending on how much additional evidence the state desires to provide to meet higher benchmarks.

12. Will states still be required to submit a quarterly report?
- Yes, the quarterly reporting process remains a requirement to demonstrate grants management proficiency.

13. Can FY2019 SOWs be updated to reflect the additional time needed to perform the self-assessment?
- This would need to be negotiated with your Regional Coordinator.

14. When will the new Tiered Framework affect funding?
- Beginning in 2021, a State's tier may impact its funding determination.
- Before a new funding formula is finalized and rolled out, the program intends to develop and test several iterations and alternatives to ensure there is a thorough analysis of both the short and long-term impacts for the States and the NFIP.
- The intention is to engage all states on the development of the formula throughout the year, issue the final formula by mid-2020, and fully implement by the start of the FY2021 PoP so that states have ample time to assess and plan for any potential changes to their historical funding level.

Questions about Scoring and Tier Assignment

15. How will I be assessed to determine which tier I am in?
- The TSF utilizes a series of characteristics and associated benchmarks to assess which tier a state belongs in. These characteristics span several categories that would be found in any performance-based grant or contract, including assessing that the grantee has:
  - Capacity to complete the work;
  - Capability/expertise to accomplish the work;
  - A history of performing at or above expectations in administering program requirements; and
  - Plans, strategies, authorities, access, and/or other defined approaches in place to accomplish the work in the most efficient and effective manner possible.
- These categories are assessed in most (if not all) business to business relationships (e.g., contracts, grants, agreements, etc.). When one entity considers whether/what resources and responsibilities they will assign to another entity that is going to perform work on their behalf, they ask:
  - Can this entity manage the size and complexity of this work with the people and structure that they have? Can they effectively administer the agreement (financials, reporting, authorities, org infrastructure? (i.e., Capacity)
  - Does this entity have the necessary expertise to effectively deliver this type of work? (i.e., Capability)
  - Can we confirm that this entity will do a good/effective job? Do they have a history of meeting their performance objectives or commitments? (i.e., Performance)
  - Does the entity have the necessary plans and partners in place to be effective? (i.e., Planning and Coordination)
- Each characteristic has a set of pre-determined, transparent, and quantitative (wherever possible) benchmarks for states to understand the requirements for each tier.
- Subsequently, each benchmark has a corresponding set of required evidence that a state must provide as demonstrable proof that it meets a given benchmark.
- States are then assigned a tier based on how the majority of their characteristics are assessed.
- *Note it is <u>not</u> the intent of the program to have States shifting tiers on an annual basis. Multiple categories and characteristics are assessed and benchmarks, wherever possible, are based on multi-year trends in order to control for "off years" and expected annual variations.*

16. How are Tier assignments calculated?
- Based on a state's benchmark selections, the tool calculates a score for each TSF category and characteristic and an overall score which automatically assigns the state to a corresponding tier.

- o Foundational benchmarks receive one (1) point;
- o Proficient benchmarks receive two (2) points; and
- o Advanced benchmarks receive (3) points.

- Recognizing that no state will perfectly align to every benchmark in a given tier, the Tool establishes score ranges that determine a state's tier assignment.
- Generally, score ranges equate to the state achieving <u>all but two (2)</u> of the benchmarks in a tier before they are assigned to that tier.

Figure 2: TSF Score Ranges

ADVANCED	**50 - 54**
PROFICIENT	**31 - 49**
FOUNDATIONAL	**15 - 30**

17. What happens if a state doesn't meet the benchmark for Foundational?

- If a state doesn't meet the Foundational benchmark for any characteristic, that state will be assessed at "Below Foundational" overall by the Tier Assessment Tool, regardless of its performance on any other characteristics.
- States are still able to see their total score, which shows them where they otherwise would have fallen in the tier assignments.
- *For more information on being assessed at "Below Foundational," see question 19.*

18. There are a few characteristics that don't have a Foundational benchmark and only Proficient or Advanced benchmarks. Will I be required to meet that benchmark and therefore penalized and assigned as "Below Foundational" if I don't?

- No, states will only be required to meet the Foundational benchmark for characteristics that have a Foundational benchmark and will not be penalized or assigned "Below Foundational" for not meeting the higher benchmark.
- For example, the 'Optimized Use of Mitigation Funding for Priority Structures' characteristic only has an Advanced benchmark; States will not be penalized if they do not meet this benchmark. They will receive a score of 0 and it will not impact their tier assignment if seeking Foundational or Proficient assignments.

19. What does a "Below Foundational" assessment mean for funding and grant eligibility in 2020, 2021, and beyond?

- Funding and grant eligibility for "Below Foundational" states will not be impacted in 2020. This designation is largely to flag opportunities for improvement and FEMA will work with states to target those areas for improvement before their next assessment.
- Funding and grant eligibility for "Below Foundational" states may be impacted in 2021. The intent of the Foundational benchmarks is to clearly define minimum expectations for state programs and, thus, CAP-SSSE grant eligibility. FEMA will assess the lessons learned from this year's TSF assessments to determine impacts to funding and eligibility, if any, in 2021.

20. Will the program reassess the tiers in 2021 if a majority of states are unable to achieve the Proficient tier in 2020?

- FEMA will assess the results of the 2020 assessment and continue to refine this process as needed.

21. What if there is an unresolved discrepancy between the state TSF assessment and FEMA Region validation?

- In the event a discrepancy cannot be resolved, it will be escalated to the CAP-SSSE Program Manager and a FEMA HQ Review Panel will be convened to make a final determination.

22. Are any additional requirements expected for Proficient and Advanced states?

- Not at this time. FEMA will continue to be transparent with any updates made to the characteristics and benchmarks, including how SOWs are expected to change as a result of the assessment.

23. Will additional CAP funding be provided to complete the assessment?

- No, this process is fundamentally about what the program could accomplish if fully-funded.
- Therefore, these results evidence how – with the right funding – states can collectively meet the needs to fully support community-level NFIP implementation.
- Ultimately, by taking the time to identify proficiencies and gaps, these results help the program communicate up the funding needed to address shortfalls.
- The 2020 and future NOFO's allow for up to 5% management costs to compensate for additional reporting requirements.

Questions about Benchmarks and Evidence

24. What if I know that I meet the benchmark for a particular characteristic, but I don't have the specific evidence that is listed in the Playbook to prove it?

- Read the instructions in the Playbook carefully. The bullets listed in the "Required Evidence" section of each characteristic are **examples** of the types of evidence that is acceptable.
- States must submit evidence that supports their tier assignment, but that does not mean that the examples listed in the Playbook are the only means in which a State can prove their tier assignment.
- If you feel you have different but sufficient evidence that still supports that tier's benchmark and is equivalent to the evidence listed in that section, submit it.
- Your Regional Coordinator will be reviewing and verifying all evidence submitted and will either validate or reject the evidence with an explanation.

25. Are the TSF Assessment characteristics and benchmarks expected to change over time?

- As of now, FEMA will continue to use these categories and characteristics now and in the future. They have been subject to a rigorous review process to-date and are considered operational.
- However, given that this is the first year, we may enhance them, as needed.

26. Where using CIS data as evidence is acceptable, how do we resolve potential data quality issues?

- Please use evidence from CIS data as appropriate and relay your data quality concerns to your Region so FEMA can address them as part of a larger data cleanup and systems modernization effort.

27. For the State Land Use Authority and Enforcement for State Owned Properties characteristic, if responsibility rests with the local jurisdiction then what is the appropriate benchmark?

- In this instance, states should provide documentation on local permitting or other enforcement mechanism to meet the benchmark. Documentation should follow regulations of 44 CFR 60.12 with a statement saying all communities meet NFIP minimum standards and there are no non-participating communities.

28. For the Training Variety characteristic, what are the specific requirements to meet the Foundational benchmark?

- The state must demonstrate a minimum of two different NFIP training topics over a 3-year cycle.
- Half-day (4 hours), and full-day (8 hours) trainings may include 1 break per 4 hours, and 2 breaks and 1-hour lunchtime for full-day trainings.
- Please note that a combination of training sessions on a given topic would fulfill the requirement of four (4) hours required on a single topic (i.e., two, 2-hour trainings or four 1-hour trainings on the same topic).

- Trainings can be delivered as one-off in-person or virtual events, as part of conferences, or other forums as appropriate.
- The evidence submitted must prove the event was held and attended by your communities using a sign-in sheet, roster, or other proof, not just demonstrate the content of the training (e.g., a briefing, agenda, etc.).

29. For the Investment in Professional Development characteristic, what does it mean to be "covered" by the CAP grant? Must the full-time employee (FTE) be federally funded using CAP funding, or could they also be state funded FTE using the state's match for the CAP grant?

- To keep this less burdensome, FEMA will only require the benchmarks for those funded by CAP. However, FEMA would prefer to see all staff – including those funded by the state – achieving the professional development benchmarks.

30. In reference to characteristics I.A State Land Use Authority and Enforcement for Local Communities, if a state is using the FEMA Community Information System (CIS) to track compliance and enforcement, what documentation should be provided?

- Specifically, FEMA wants to identify how each state is actively maintaining its portfolio of compliance cases.
- However, if CIS is the monitoring mechanism then please work back with your Region to request a report from CIS that clearly demonstrates active case management.

31. For the Process for Reviewing and Improving Model Floodplain Management Regulations characteristic, if a state does not have a state model ordinance while a majority of the state's communities are participating and have adopted a compliant local FPM ordinance, will that result in the entire Capability category assessed at Below Foundational?

- Either a model ordinance or state statute is acceptable in this case. FEMA will work with a state if its communities have all adopted the minimums and there is sufficient supporting evidence.

32. For the Overmatch characteristic's 'above 25%' Proficient benchmark, how should a state prove 10% of someone's time has been spent supporting CAP?

- One sufficient option is to provide monthly time reports with the employee's name, tasks completed in line with CAP eligible activities, and number of hours along with evidence of their wage/salary.
- For in-kind contributions, a state should use their existing approach to certify that an employee meets the 25% requirement.

33. For the Administrative Grant Management characteristic, why is "Requesting a PoP Extension" a benchmark given grant awards have been historically late?

- Since the 2018 NOFO and the move of the CAP-SSSE Grant into the ND Grants system and POP beginning date of July 1, grant awards have not been delayed.
- Extensions should be a rarity, not a common operating practice, as it is seen as a negative indicator of grant performance.

Questions about Submitting the Self-Assessment and Evidence:

34. How should states submit their self-assessment and evidence files?

- Once the state has completed a self-assessment, please package together the completed tool with all evidence files and send to the Region per the submission instructions provided by the Regional Coordinator when they distributed the state's data.

35. Is there a standardized naming convention for the evidence files?

- Yes, please copy/paste the file name example directly from the Playbook under 'Submission Instructions' and then change the state acronym and document title accordingly.