



Frequently Asked Questions

2026 Program

Applications will be accepted for the 2026 National Gold Medal Awards, the “Oscars” for the parks and recreation profession, from **November 4, 2025, to March 13, 2026**.

The National Gold Medal Award program has been in existence since 1965 when it began with NRPA and the National Sporting Goods Association and its Sports Foundation.

The online application consists of 11 essay questions and data questions to support National Recreation & Park Association’s (NRPA)’s Park Metrics program. The application must be completed and submitted by March 13, 2026, at 12 midnight PST.

Here are responses to some of the most frequently asked questions about the application process:

Q: Why should my agency apply for a Gold Medal?

A National Gold Medal Finalist agency shared the award resulted in “...huge positive and significant public and political recognition” and that it “*was a great boost for staff and recognition of overall teamwork for the agency.*” Another agency shared “*Credibility, as it helps us improve fundraising, our elected leaders are more inclined to provide additional budget support.*”

Applying for the National Gold Medal Award can be viewed as a unique learning experience for your staff. It can be a powerful and exciting journey for your entire team!

Q: How long does it take to complete the application?

This varies per agency. It is highly recommended an agency does not wait until a few weeks before the application is due. The 2026 application period opens November 4, 2025. Applicants are encouraged to review the questions, brainstorm responses, gather supporting data, and then complete the application. Prior recipients suggest having your agency’s best writer responsible for writing the application and consider an external reviewer, i.e., someone who may not be as familiar with your operations. Your internal due date should be a few days prior to March 13th so you can make any last-minute edits.

Q: How many applications are received each year?

Even during the COVID pandemic, the National Gold Medal Award program received over 75 entries.

Q: What are the most common errors you see on applications?

The most common error is not providing the *number of examples* specifically requested in the question. Judges are looking for *quantifiable* data, and descriptive narratives.

Using different examples for each question gives the judges a broader understanding of the agency. Another missed opportunity is not highlighting what is unique and special about the agency's services and facilities. Agencies are encouraged to tell their overall story in narrative, while also providing examples and data.

Q: If you've applied before, is it acceptable to recycle previously submitted answers?

If the answers are still relevant, then yes; however, it is important to re-evaluate and make changes based on new and different data or elements from year to year. For certain questions, the application requests for data from previous three years.

Q: How are judges chosen?

The American Academy for Park & Recreation Administration (AAPRA) selects five judges: four permanent-term judges and one guest judge. Judges serve a total of five (5) years. Judges are carefully interviewed and selected to ensure they are individuals with an array of management experiences; they are from a variety of agency types and populations; from a variety of states; and have demonstrated a high level of integrity and objectivity. Judges are required to sign a conflict-of-interest form as well as disclose any personal knowledge they have about an applicant, and they may recuse themselves from judging that application.

Q: When asked about innovative or creative projects, are the judges basing this on the individual agency's innovation or against what other agencies are doing?

The National Gold Medal judges are experienced park and recreation administrators who are knowledgeable about multiple agencies. Judges score based on how creative and innovative the project sounds from its description. It is important to demonstrate how the project or initiative is improving the systems or services of YOUR agency in a new, unique way (i.e., reaching new customers, new delivery of the service).

Q: Can we reference future planned projects/initiatives? Does planning need to be "in progress" at the time of submission?

Future planned projects/initiatives can be referenced, if they are in progress or are ready to begin.

Q: How are the Finalists selected?

Each judge independently reviews each application and submits a numeric score for each question. The scores are shared "blind," so judges are not aware of how other judges scored that question/application. Scores are totaled by an independent party and the four (4) applicants with the highest scores in each population class, state park, and armed forces recreation categories are designated as "Finalist Award" recipients.

Q: How are the Grand Plaque Award recipients selected?

The judges meet in person (or virtually) to watch the agency videos and to discuss what they viewed on the agency website (verifying the website content supports the application information) and the Master and Strategic Plans. Through a consensus process they select the Grand Plaque Award recipient in each category.

Q: Where does CAPRA accreditation fit in?

Commission for Accreditation and Recreation Agencies (CAPRA) accreditation is NOT required to submit an application for the National Gold Medal Award program. Accreditation is used in the judging process if there is a tie between two agencies; with the CAPRA agency receiving 5 additional points.

Q: I've heard a video is required. Is that true?

Only the agencies selected as a Finalist are asked to post a social media type video, a MAXIMUM of 5 minutes by May 29, 2026.

The video should support what the agency states in its application; it should tell the story of how the agency is managed and how it is unique. The judges do not judge the *quality* of the video; their focus is on the *story the video tells* – does it support what the agency is stating in its application? Again, the *quality* of the video is not as important as the story it tells. This video can be used in multiple ways so don't think of it as a "Gold Medal" video;

plan to use it in other promotional efforts! The video is viewed ONLY in the second round of judging when the Grand Plaque Award recipients are selected.

Q: What other advice do you have for applicants?

Regardless of how often your agency has applied, it is worthwhile to talk to agency directors who have received a Finalist or the Grand Plaque Award. A list of Finalist and Grand Plaque Award recipients is on the Gold Medal page.

Make applying a team effort, inspire staff about applying by viewing the National Gold Medal Grand Plaque video presentation on the Gold Medal Award website, hold brainstorming sessions about the questions. Create a timeline with measurable milestones so you won't be pushing at the due date. Finally, if not already accredited, consider going through that process first as accreditation helps improve the agency's effectiveness.

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The American Academy for Park & Recreation Administration, the governing body of the National Gold Medal Award and judges thank all the agencies, state parks and military installations that have applied for the award over the years. The Academy is continually looking for ways to improve the application process and create public awareness for the esteemed Gold Medal Award.

Questions or comments? Contact goldmedal@aapra.org.