

# **Request for Qualification (RFQ)**

## **Rural Grocery Store Co-op Conversion Specialist (Contract)**

**Issuing Organization:** Montana Cooperative Development Center (MCDC)

**Funding Partners:** Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF) and Montana Healthcare Foundation (MTHF)

**RFP Release Date:** January 28, 2026

**Questions Due in Writing to** [\*\*tracy@medc.coop\*\*](mailto:tracy@medc.coop) **by close of business:** February 13, 2026

**Proposals Due:** February 27, 2026, at 12:00 p.m. (noon). Late submissions will not be reviewed.

**Anticipated Award Date:** March 6, 2026

**Contract Term:** Upon execution through December 31, 2026

### **1) Background**

MCDC empowers communities across Montana to address economic and community needs through the cooperative business model. MCDC is expanding its rural grocery sustainability work—supporting at-risk rural grocery stores, strengthening local food access, and exploring/coordinating cooperative conversion pathways.

This contract supports MCDC's grocery store cooperative conversion work described in CDF's RCDG scope, including contracting a grocery transition specialist to support conversions and produce a replicable toolkit informed by Montana and Kansas State expertise.

This work also aligns with MCDC's MTHF-funded effort to sustain rural grocery access, connect stores with wholesale-ready producers, and create tools/templates and potential peer support structures.

### **2) Purpose of this RFQ**

MCDC seeks a qualified independent contractor ("Grocery Store Co-op Conversion Specialist") to:

- Help MCDC design a more in-depth grocery store co-op conversion program that integrates into MCDC's digital/online platforms.
- Support rural grocery stores and communities in learning about cooperative models and potentially proceed into cooperative conversion processes.
- Produce a step-by-step rural grocery conversion guide/toolkit that can be integrated into MCDC/MCOC digitized cooperative services.

### **3) Scope of Work**

Proposers should address, at a minimum, the following scope areas (you may propose enhancements):

## **A. Program & Service Design**

- Assess MCDC's current grocery conversion materials/workflow and recommend an expanded "conversion program" pathway suitable for MCDC's online/digital delivery.
- Create an implementation plan for how MCDC can use the program for outreach, education, and technical assistance.

## **B. Outreach & Field Support (Education + Early-Stage Exploration)**

- Support outreach to rural grocery stores and communities, including stores identified through past research and/or inbound inquiries (ongoing).
- Provide education on cooperative ownership models (community-owned and/or worker-owned) and readiness considerations.

## **C. Conversion Support (As Feasible During Term)**

- Provide targeted support to communities exploring conversion (up to a number proposed by contractor), consistent with MCDC priorities and readiness.
- Align with the broader goal of supporting conversions in at-risk communities and creating a replicable toolkit.

## **D. Toolkit / Step-by-Step Guide Deliverable**

- Produce a practical, plain-language, step-by-step rural grocery conversion co-op guide suitable for online publication and field use.
- Include recommended templates/resources (e.g., readiness checklists, community meeting outlines, conversion pathway overview, links to cooperative development steps).

## **E. Coordination & Collaboration**

- Coordinate with MCDC staff and relevant partners as needed (e.g., exchanges of best practices and collaboration with peer organizations working on rural grocery support, ownership transitions, purchasing/distribution co-ops).
- Provide inputs and/or materials that can support presentations and knowledge-sharing opportunities (e.g., conference sessions).

## **4) Key Deliverables & Suggested Timeline (Editable)**

Offer your proposed workplan, but MCDC expects deliverables to align with the following target dates:

- **Contract in place by: March 2026**
- **Program design (conversion program framework) by: May 2026**
- **Draft step-by-step guide/toolkit by: August 2026**
- **Final guide/toolkit by: December 2026**
- **Ongoing outreach support:** throughout the contract term

**Note:** This role supports a broader initiative that includes: engaging rural grocery stores, facilitating potential co-op conversions, mapping and facilitating producer-to-store connections, and publishing a toolkit/peer support resources.

## 5) Budget, Payment, and Travel

- **Contract Not-to-Exceed: \$20,000** (professional fees only).
- **Travel:** Travel is **in addition** to the contract amount and will be reimbursed per MCDC travel policies (proposer should include assumptions and a rough travel estimate).
- **Payment structure:** Proposer should suggest a payment schedule tied to deliverables (e.g., contract execution/program framework/draft toolkit / final toolkit).

## 6) Contractor Qualifications (Minimum + Preferred)

### Minimum Qualifications

- Ability to serve as an independent contractor and comply with all applicable laws and requirements.
- Holds an independent contractor license (or demonstrates ability to retain/obtain one prior to contracting).
- Carries general liability insurance (and professional liability/errors & omissions if applicable) and can provide proof upon request.
- Demonstrated experience working with rural communities and/or rural economic development, cooperative development, food systems, or adjacent fields.

### Preferred Qualifications

- Completion of the **Kansas State University Rural Grocery Transition Specialist program** (or substantially similar training).
- Experience with grocery operations, ownership transition, rural food access, or cooperative conversions.
- Strong facilitation and community education skills; ability to translate technical concepts into practical steps.
- Experience working in rural and agricultural settings

## 7) Reporting & Communication

Proposer should describe how they will communicate progress. MCDC anticipates:

- Regular check-ins with MCDC staff (e.g., biweekly/monthly).
- Brief written updates suitable for funder reporting cycles

## 8) Acknowledgement/Attribution (for published materials)

If deliverables are published or publicly shared and relate to the funded scope, contractor must provide materials in a format that allows MCDC to include required acknowledgements,

including USDA NIFA language, CDF and Montana Healthcare Foundation partnership acknowledgement.

## 9) Proposal Submission Requirements

Please submit a single PDF including:

1. **Cover letter** (1 page)
2. **Qualifications & relevant experience** (include 2–3 examples of similar work)
3. **Proposed Workplan & timeline** (address deliverables in Section 4)
4. **Approach/methodology** (how you support rural stores/communities; tools you use; how you integrate into digital delivery)
5. **Budget** (fees up to \$20,000; include an optional travel estimate separately)
6. **Resume/CV** for key personnel
7. **References** (2–3)
8. **Proof of insurance** (or statement of ability to obtain upon award)
9. **Independent contractor license** (or statement of ability to obtain)

## 10) Evaluation and Selection

MCDC will evaluate proposals using the rubric below. MCDC may request an interview or clarification.

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## Scoring Rubric (100 points total)

Category	Points	What MCDC is looking for
<b>Relevant experience in rural grocery transitions/co-op conversions/ownership transitions and/or working in rural and agricultural-related systems.</b>	25	Demonstrated past work supporting conversions, rural grocery sustainability, agricultural systems, or comparable ownership-transition projects
<b>Rural food systems expertise + community engagement/facilitation</b>	20	Practical experience in rural food access, producer-to-market connections, and culturally responsive community engagement
<b>Proposed workplan + feasibility to meet deliverables &amp; dates</b>	20	Clear steps to meet March/May/Aug/Dec deliverables and complete by Dec 2026
<b>Quality and usability of the proposed toolkit/guide approach</b>	15	The toolkit plan is actionable, step-by-step, user-friendly, and ready to integrate into digital platforms
<b>Alignment with program intent &amp; targets (education, outreach, potential conversions)</b>	10	Understanding of supporting communities, exploring grocery

		conversions and building replicable resources
<b>Qualifications/training (incl. KSU program or similar)</b>	5	KSU Rural Grocery Transition Specialist program completion strongly preferred
<b>Administrative readiness (insurance, IC license, availability, communication)</b>	5	Ability to start quickly, carry insurance, maintain clean reporting and coordination

**MCDC reserves the right** to reject any/all proposals, request additional information, and negotiate scope, deliverables, and budget with the selected contractor.