



FREELANCE
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTERS +
EDITORS

2016 Pilot Project: Reporter Feedback

DRAFT

March 31, 2017

Contents

- **Overview & Key Findings**
- **Online Survey Highlights**
- **Comments from Surveys/Interviews**
- **Critiques and Responses**
- **Appendix: Testimonials & Quotes**

Overview

- **Background:** The online feedback survey was available to all 2016 FIRE applicants. The survey invited journalists to comment on aspects of FIRE's application process. In addition, all 30 recipients received questions about reporting services, as utilized. Additionally, those individuals were interviewed by a third party consultant to gain more substantive qualitative information.
- **Respondents:** Seventeen (17) valid sets of responses were obtained from the online survey -- six FIRE Virtual Newsroom and 11 Helpdesk. Additionally, 22 individuals were interviewed by the consultant, a veteran investigative journalist.
- **Purpose:** Summaries of the feedback from the survey and interviews have subsequently been used to improve FIRE's 2017 application and programmatic offerings.
- **Content:** This summary highlights key quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from both online surveys and interviews.

Key Findings (1)

- **Expectations:** **83%** of Virtual Newsroom recipients stated that FIRE met or exceed their expectations.
- **Importance of Services:** **81%** of Newsroom recipients and **64%** of total respondents rated FIRE's services as very or extremely important to their stories.
- **Helpfulness of Services:** Over **75%** of Virtual Newsroom respondents rated several of FIRE's services as helpful to extremely helpful.
- **Customization of Services:** **83%** of Virtual Newsroom respondents rated FIRE's services as extremely customized to their needs.
- **Comparison to other organizations:** Over **75%** of Virtual Newsroom respondents rated several of FIRE's services as better or much better compared to other freelance facilitators or grantmakers.
- **Stipends:** Respondents overwhelmingly cited the importance of stipends in the decision to apply to FIRE. **88%** of the total respondents and **100%** of Newsroom recipients rated stipends as highly or extremely important to their decision to apply.

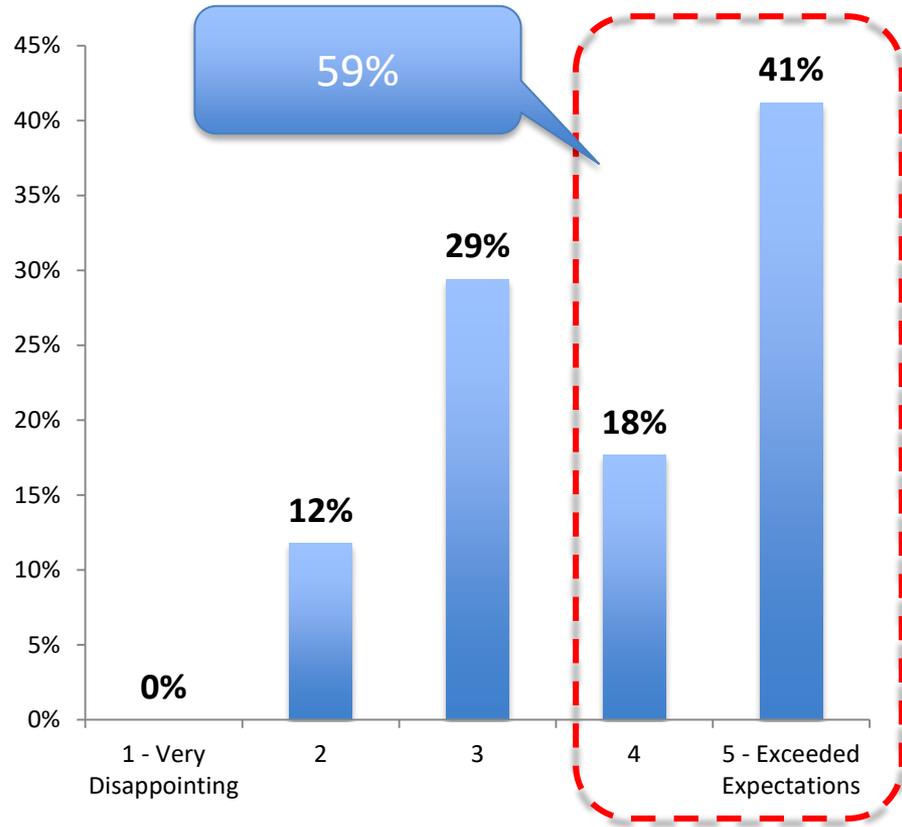
Key Findings (2)

- **Reporting Services:** 70% of the total and 100% of Virtual Newsroom respondents stated that if they did not receive a stipend that they would be interested in receiving reporting services.
- **Qualitative feedback:** Virtual Newsroom consistently rated higher than Help Desk (now “Editorial Consultancy”) for reasons addressed in Critiques, which also lists responses to the critiques.
- **Comments:** Respondents stated that FIRE provided badly needed support, comprehensive service, helpful advice and assistance as well as respectful engagement and an antidote to isolation.
- **Critiques:** Areas for improvement included clarifying service offerings, decreasing length of decision-making, increasing engagement, reducing application follow-up, and offering more stipends.

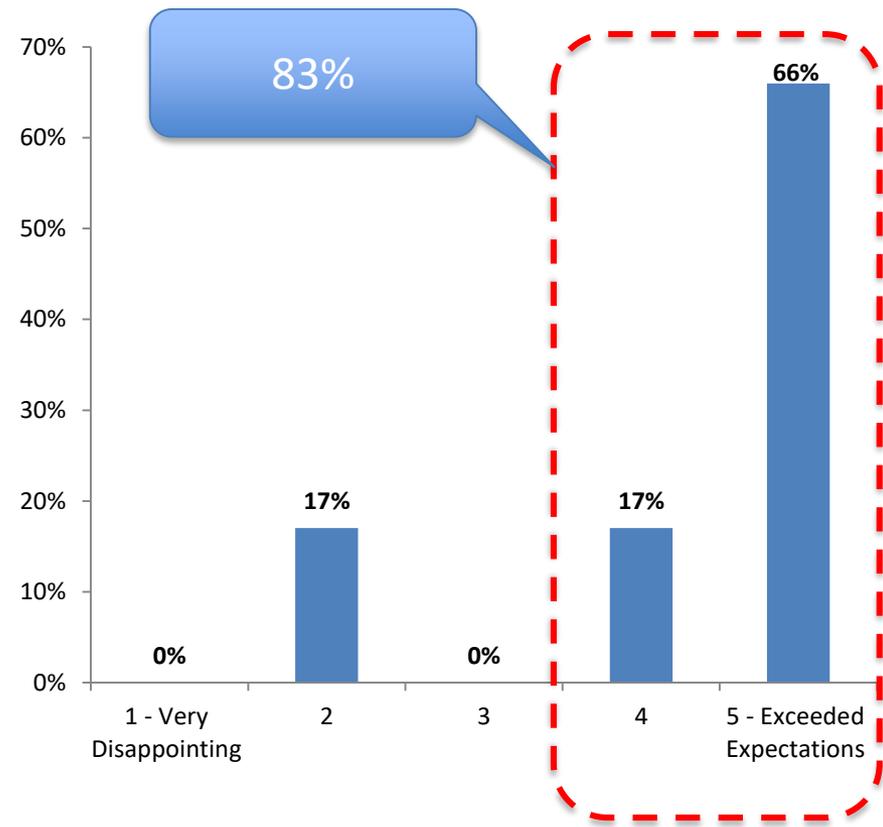
Meeting Expectations

Overall, how well did FIRE's services meet you expectations?

Combined N=17



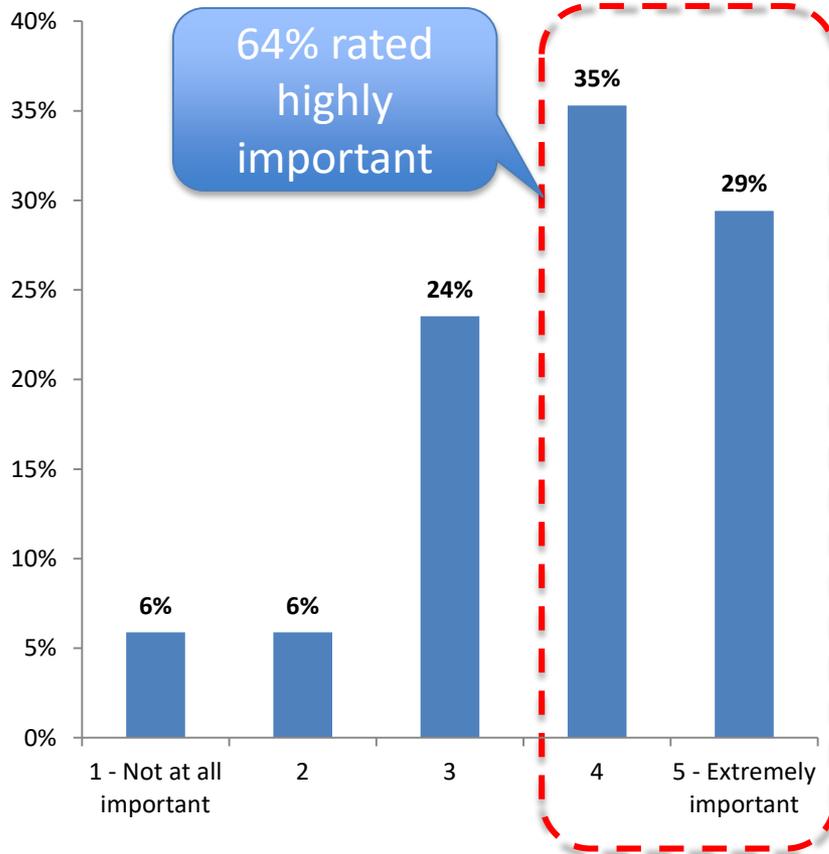
Virtual Newsroom N=6



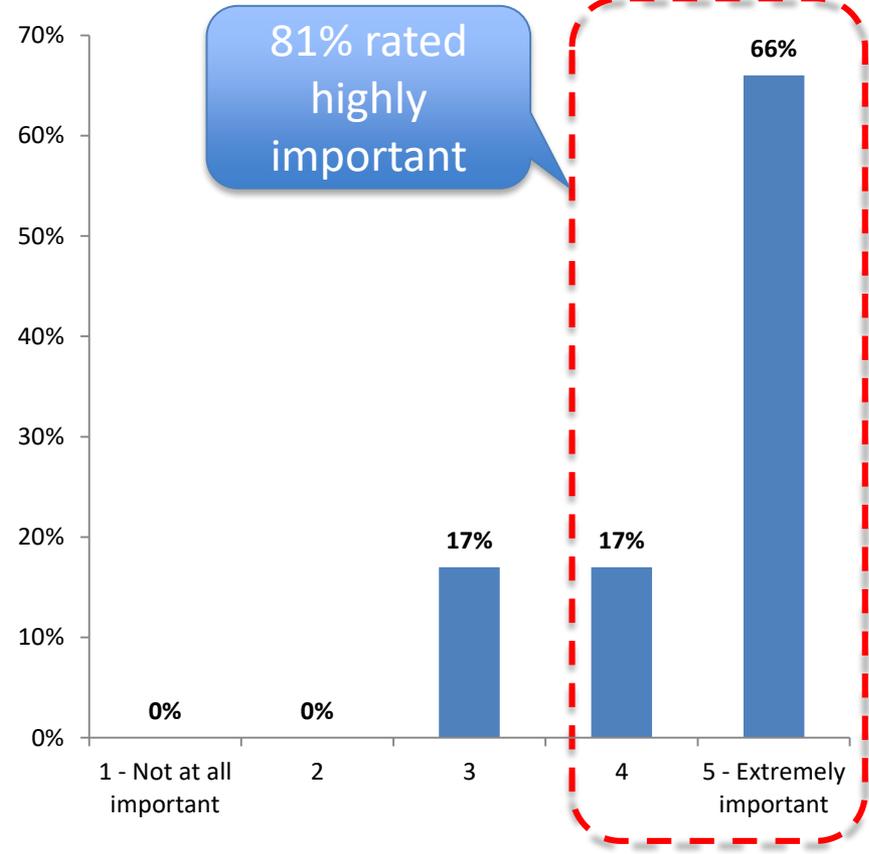
FIRE's services highly important to stories

How important were FIRE's services to your story or project?

Combined N=17



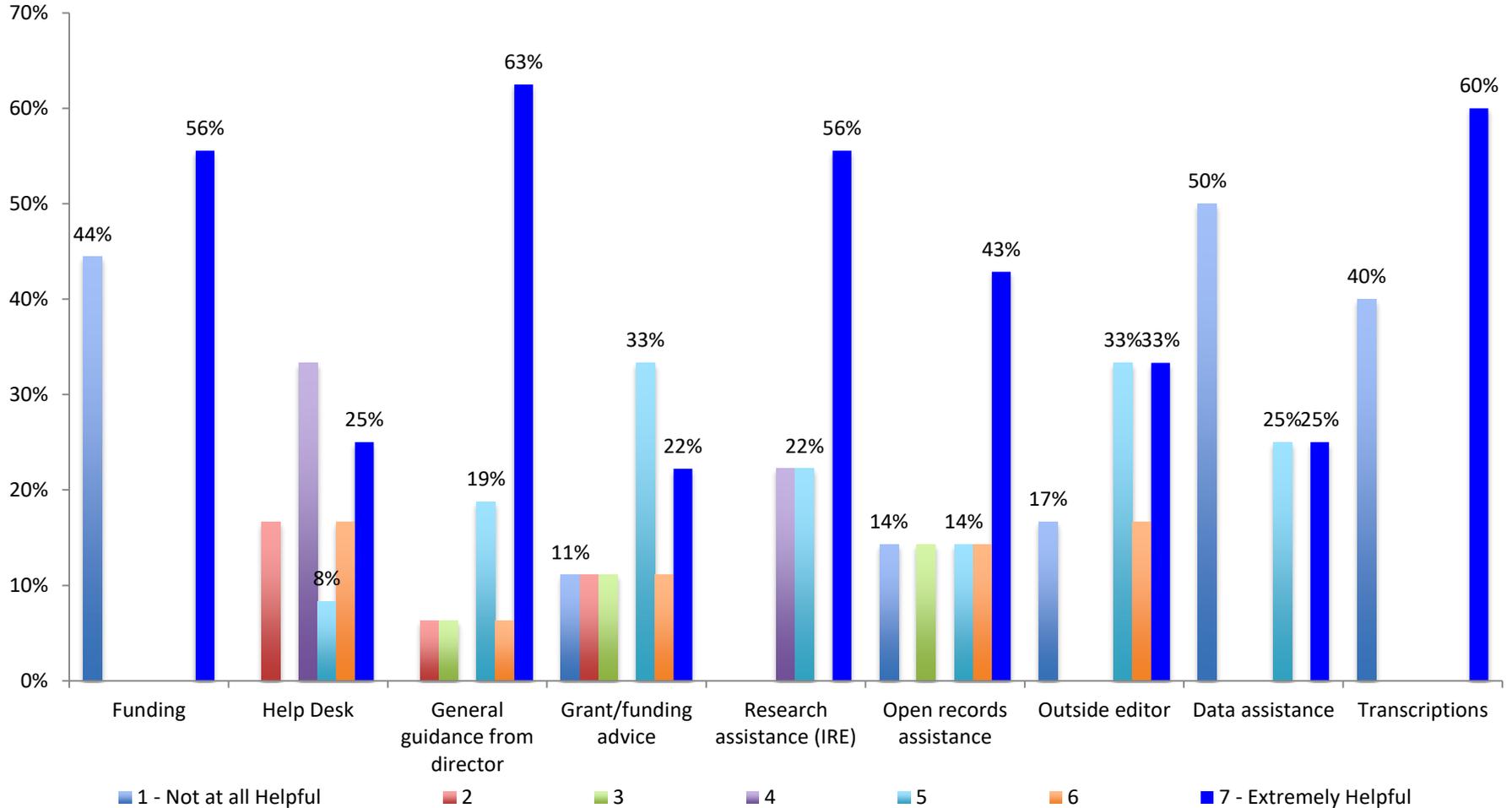
Virtual Newsroom N=6



Services rated extremely helpful

Please rate the helpfulness of the services you received.

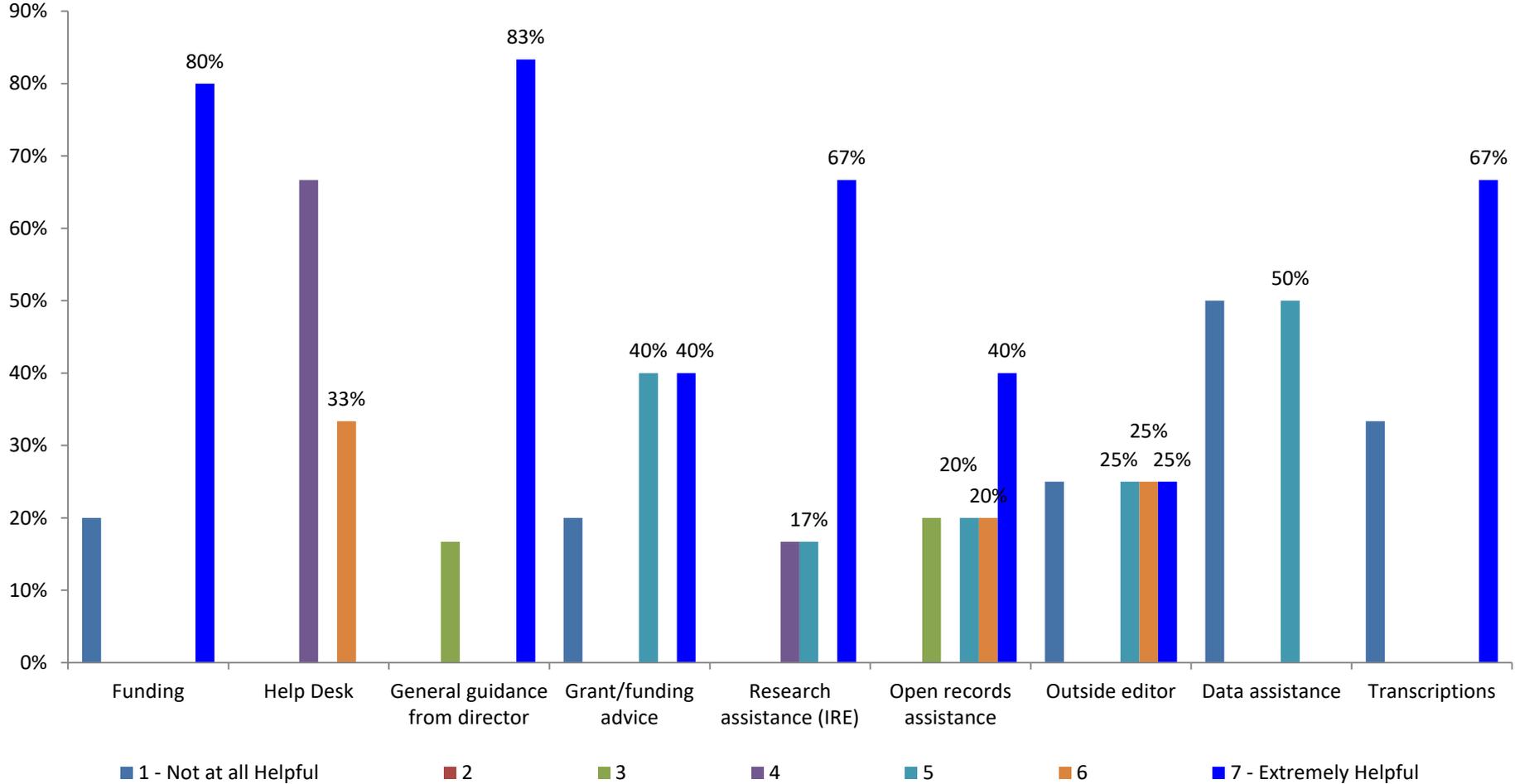
Combined N=17



Services rated extremely helpful

Please rate the helpfulness of the services you received.

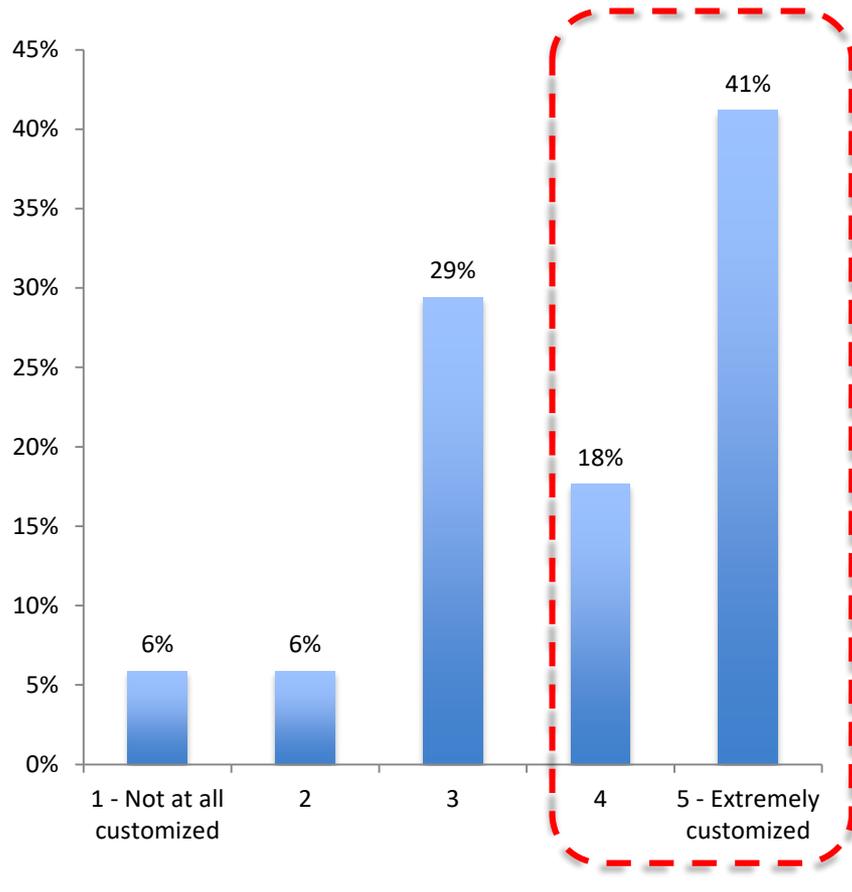
Virtual Newsroom N=6



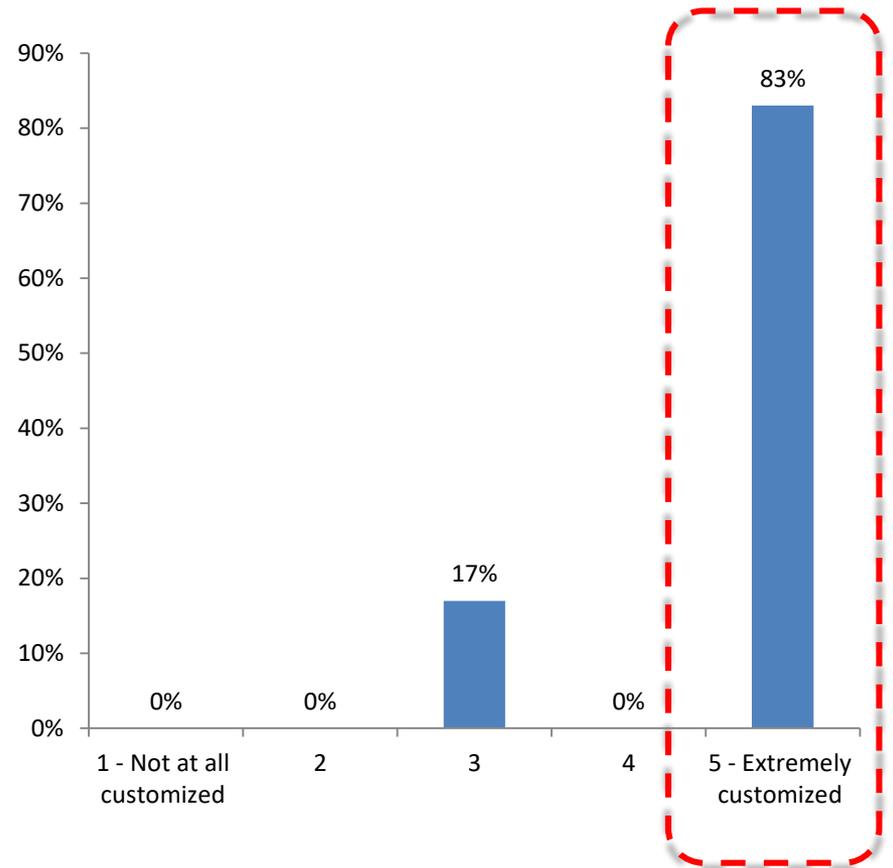
Extremely customized services

Needs-sensitivity: How well were FIRE's services customized to your needs?

Combined N=17



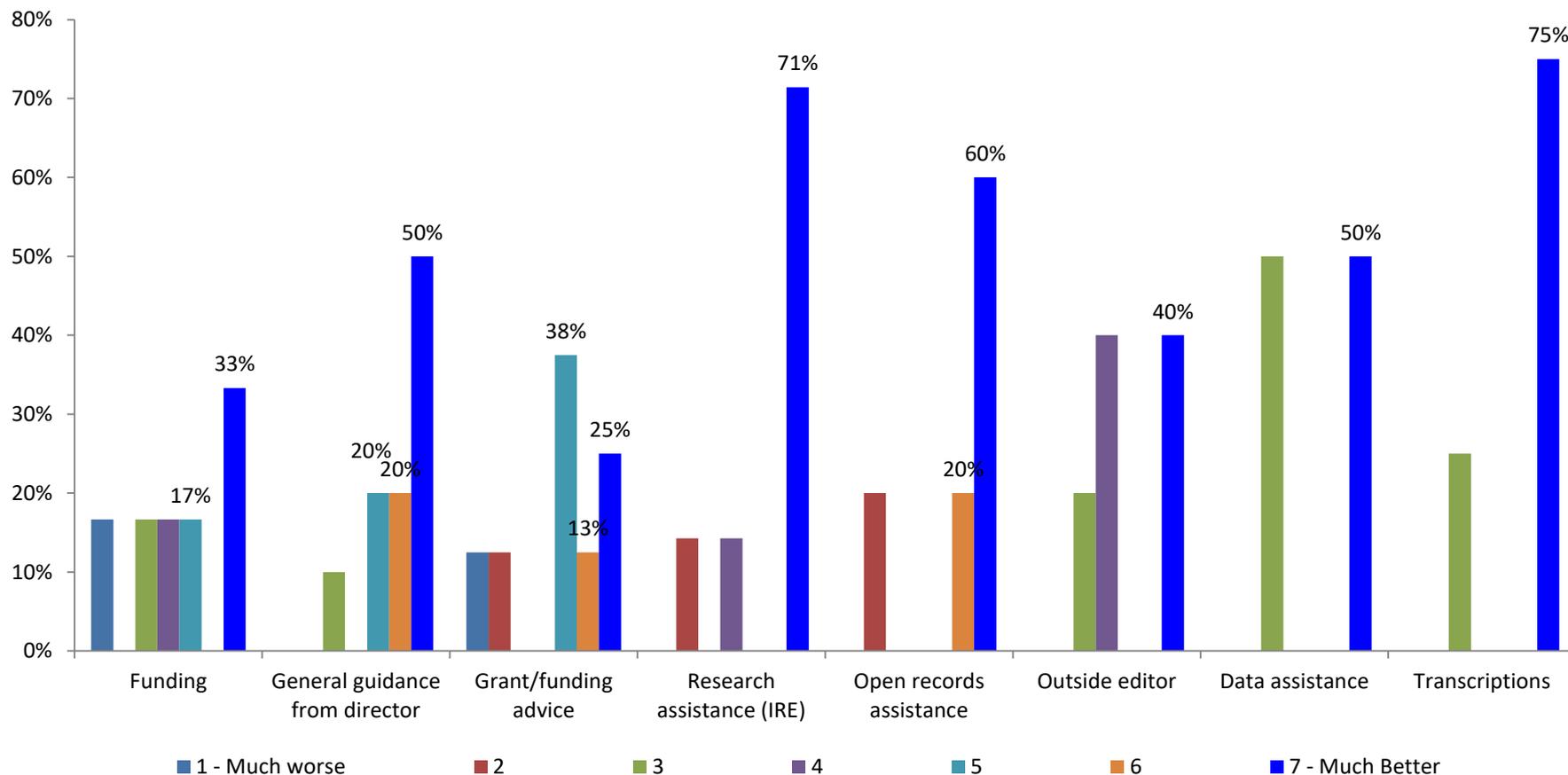
Virtual Newsroom N=6



FIRE's services rate highly across multiple categories

How would you rate FIRE's service relative to other freelance facilitators or grantmakers?

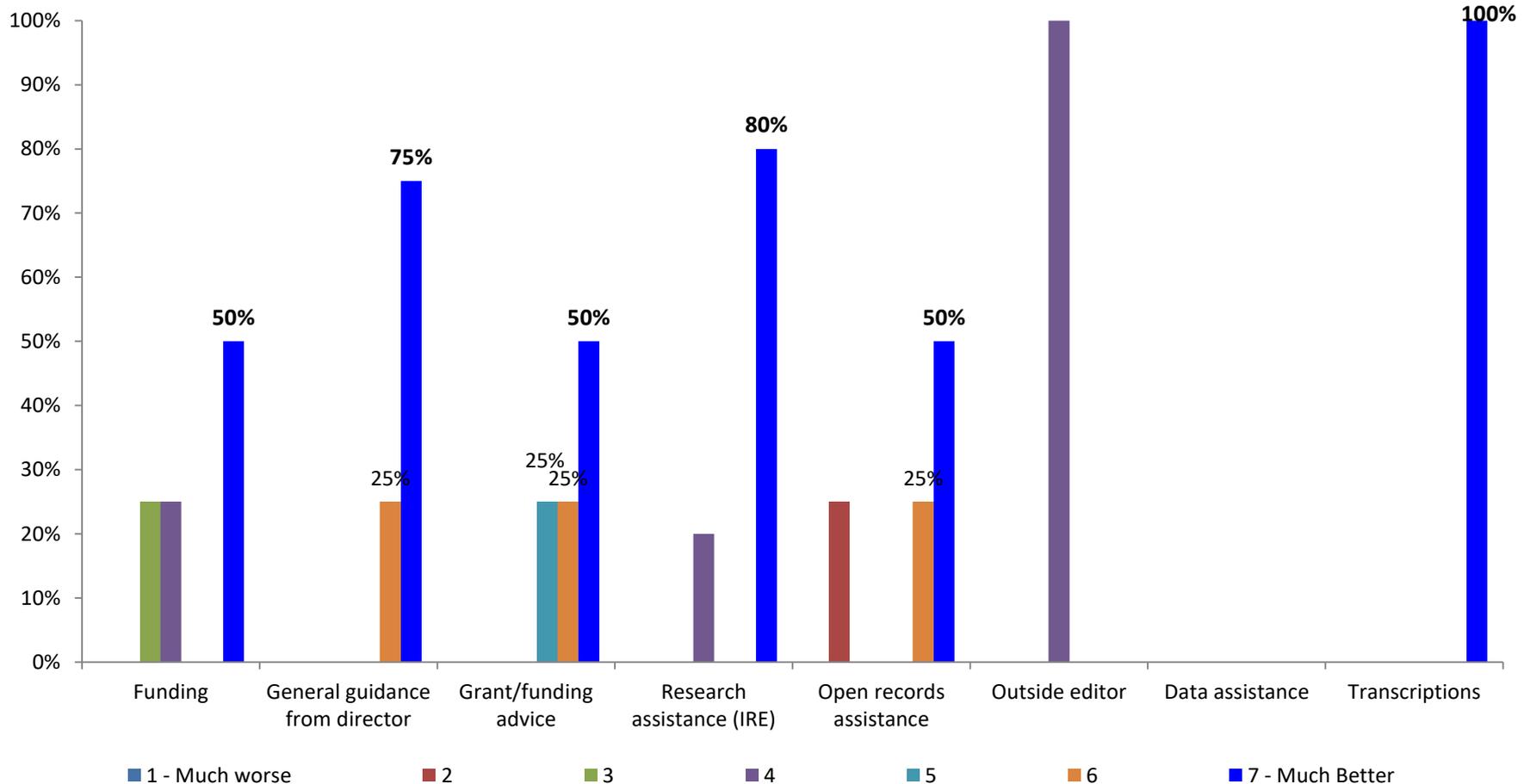
Combined N=17



FIRE's services rate highly across multiple categories

How would you rate FIRE's service relative to other freelance facilitators or grantmakers?

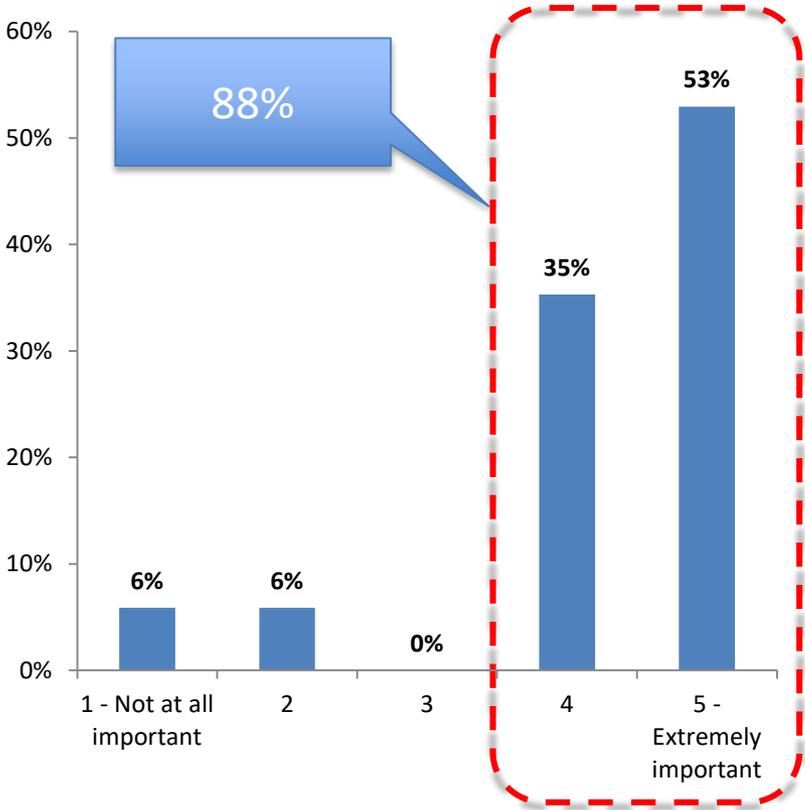
Virtual Newsroom N=6



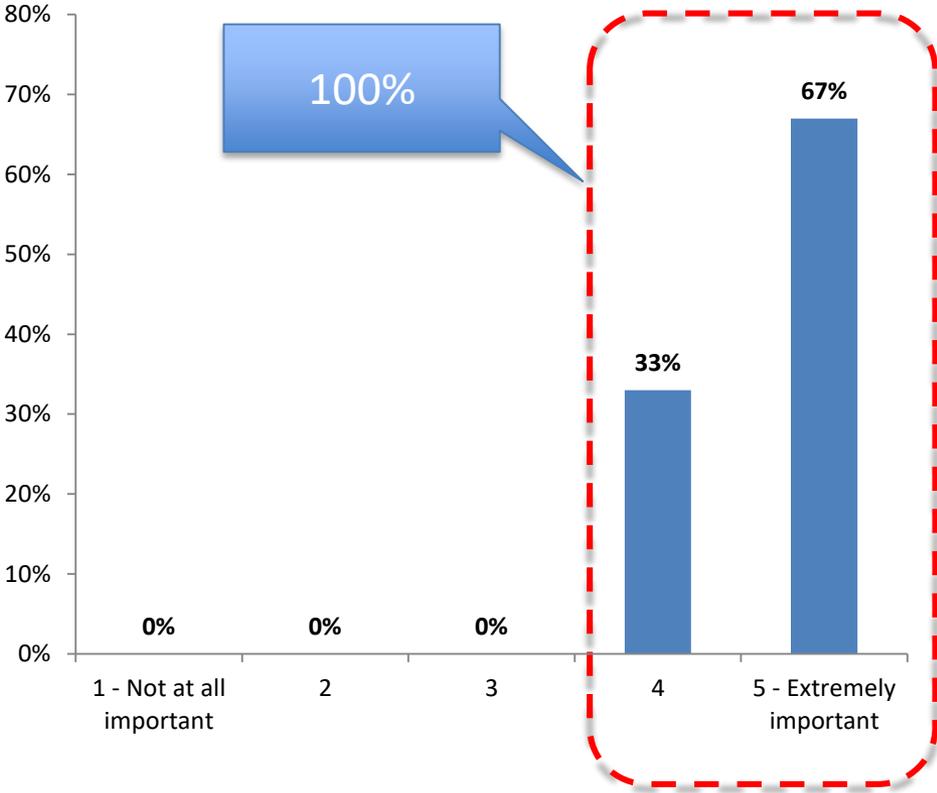
Stipends critical for decision to apply

In weighing whether to invest your time in applying to FIRE, how important was the prospect of a financial support (stipends)?

Combined N=17



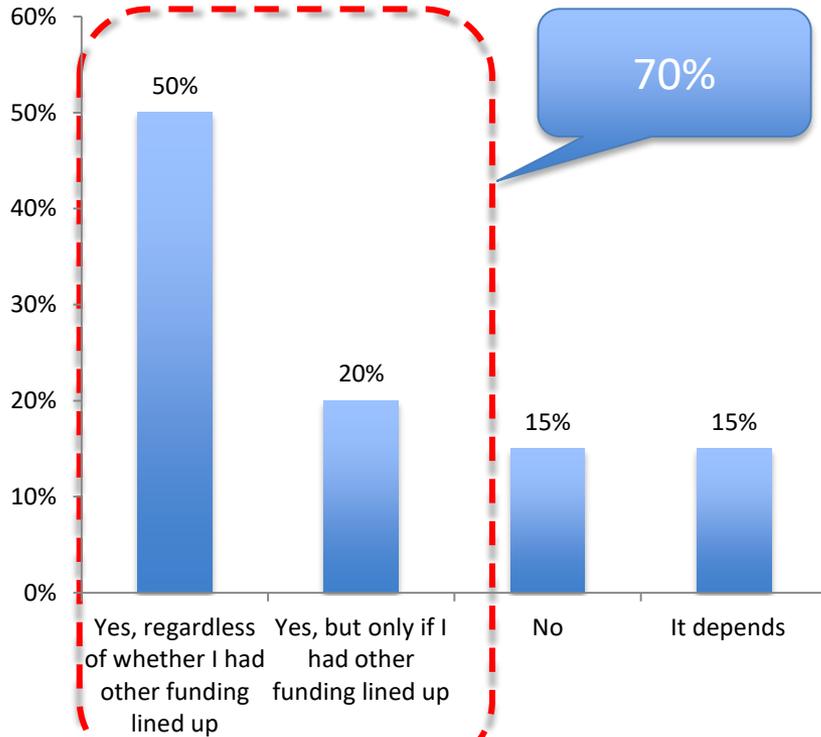
Virtual Newsroom N=6



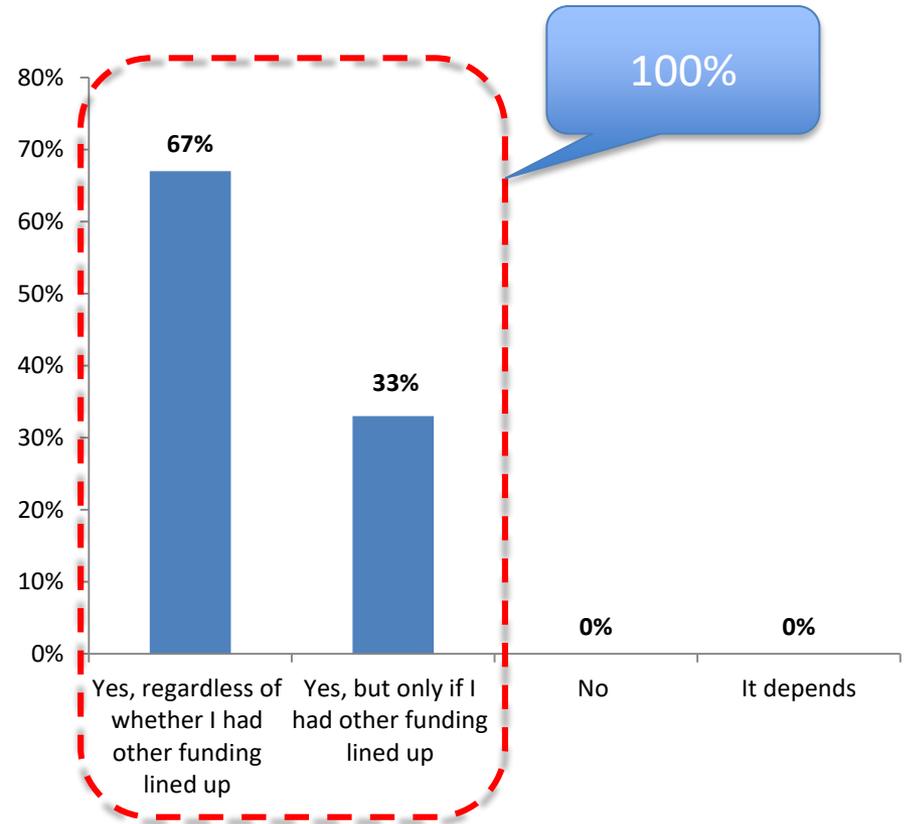
Reporting services vital to applicants

If you applied for a stipend in the future and didn't receive the stipend, would you still be interested in receiving reporting services?

Combined N=17



Virtual Newsroom N=6



Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Badly needed support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “More and more of us are working on our own, because we’re covered by news organizations anymore. Having a place that has resources is enormously helpful.” - Respondent #5• “...The more services that can be available for freelance investigative journalists, the better. [FIRE is] offering a unique service in how narrow and targeted it is.” - Respondent #3• “[FIRE] has been an invaluable boon in guiding my investigative reporting...[It] democratizes the investigative journalism field—gives a wider number of journalists the tools of investigation...” - Respondent #17
Comprehensive service	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “We already had another grant. We’d done large investigative projects where we had done the data and logged all the interviews ourselves. I thought, maybe we don't really need this. Now I realize having lawyers on your side is incredibly helpful. Ultimately the services have turned out to be even more helpful than we originally assumed. - Respondent #8

Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Comprehensive service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A lot of these other grants ... would fly you out for a week long training, but then after that, you were ... left to your own devices. It's nice that this is consistent help for the duration of your project. You have access to lawyers that can help you, and you have access to newsroom assistance that can help you with data entry and transcribing. This grant gives you the feeling that you're working in a newsroom.” - Respondent #10 • “[FIRE] offers all the tools to a freelance journalist that a newsroom would: all the databases you need for data and legal records. For me, that's been the key thing. But there's also other components [FIRE offers] that are not offered in newsrooms, like feedback on putting together a FOIA, and even one-on-one consulting and advising about how to manage your freelance career: how to do taxes, get deductions, that kind of thing.” - Respondent #6
Attentiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Other places will give you money, and they'll give you a desk and a phone line, and some friendly colleagues. Maybe you'll incidentally have a Lexus Nexus password. But in terms of really shaping a story, and the questions that FIRE asked were so much better and more detailed than anybody at any of those other [funding and support] organizations. I felt like the actual services were so much more detailed and tailored than other places [that] don't really help you dig deeper.” - Respondent #14 • “It was very inspiring for me to talk to [FIRE], and I have to confess, I even thought after these mentoring opportunities, well I have to create something like this in my country, because it is a complete novelty.” - Respondent #4

Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Helpful, precise advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "FIRE gives feedback about whether the story is worth pursuing, while [encouraging] freelancers who work with limited funds to continue to pursue stories. I think that's very important."- Respondent #11 • "I spoke with FIRE for 45 minutes or an hour, talking through the story ideas that came out of that original proposal... I used FIRE help with story shaping [and] where to pitch. It was a really helpful conversation...I've wanted that since I've worked at publications: a mentor or somebody you can call up and say what do you think of this?"- Respondent #14 • "I had not seen anything like this before... Usually, it's like a big commitment to a grant or big project, but I needed just a little bit of editorial direction and assistance. It was really, really helpful ...a fresh pair of eyes on it from someone [with] experience ..." - Respondent #15
Research assistance invaluable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The research help by IRE is invaluable. I think you came upon a very key need for freelance journalists that no one was meeting."- Respondent #6 • "There's a need for [FIRE] to exist. We needed data records... I don't think we would have survived if it wasn't for FIRE."- Respondent #8

Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Research assistance invaluable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...My research requests are really complicated, information that can only be gathered by people who have the ability to access Lexus Nexus, and other kinds of legal databases. At least for freelancers, no one can afford those. So, I think FIRE has to exist. ... It's very necessary.” - Respondent #2 • “Although I'm writing for [a major national outlet], they couldn't provide access to records or databases. They offer them [only] for their ... reporters.... At the heart of it, the only way I've been able to do this story is because of that access.”- Respondent #6
Matchmaking and referrals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I'd be going it alone a lot more, if it wasn't for FIRE. It would have taken a lot longer ... if I hadn't been able to connect with a state [open-records] expert through FIRE. They walked me through things pretty quick.” - Respondent #3 • “FIRE's been able to put me in touch with other reporters who are familiar with the region [where I am working]. FIRE's been good at keeping my attention on the story itself. Really valuable... quite impressive considering it's a pilot program.”- Respondent #11

Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The unique customization of FIRE services is extraordinary -- I don't know of any other support organization for this kind of reporting that focuses so well on the specific needs of grantees.” - Respondent #3 • “FIRE is the one institution trying to figure out what exactly our day-to-day life is like, and has tried to find ways to fill in holes that have been ignored-- the gaps that the foundations don't even know exist.”- Respondent #6
Antidote to isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I've just always been solo on my own laptop. Having perspective from [FIRE] was like, oh wow! It kind of opened up things I wouldn't have thought of, so it was really nice to just have, for the first time ever, someone edit me and help in kind of a strategic way. That was really nice.”- Respondent #9 • “We are in the era of the isolated journalist. ...Even in newsrooms, people are very isolated, with the gadgets, computers, social networks. [We need someone] to give us some advice, or to enlighten us about the certain path we want to or should follow. I think [FIRE] is a very good idea; I was very inspired by my experience.”- Respondent #4 • “For freelancers, encouragement is important, since we work all alone. I don't know one other initiative that works with freelance investigative reporters. It's crucial that [FIRE] continue their operations.”- Respondent #18

Comments from Surveys/Interviews

Category	Illustrative Quote
Collegiality, respectful engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I was treated as a partner, not as a candidate.” - Unidentified Respondent<li>• “FIRE's services have been extremely helpful. The overall editorial leadership took an active interest in the story and therefore was able to engage in a thoughtful way.” - Unidentified Respondent<li>• “FIRE didn't ask me for anything; they just gave me something. They were not expecting for me to present an outcome of the mentoring conversation I had. That's very positive for me. They were not expecting me to deliver in exchange, and in the world we are living now, that's rare. That's perfect.” - Respondent #4

Critiques and Response (1)

Based on reporters' comments from the surveys and interviews, FIRE has begun acting on the following topics and responses to modify its application process and delivery of reporting services moving forward.

Critique	Response
<p>Do a better job clarifying in advance the services you offer, what's involved—especially on website. Intelligence on whether to apply.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revamped website to address
<p>Your turnaround for decision-making was slow and took longer than stated</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little we can do yet. Guidelines now have hedged more, promised less. While we worked out some pilot administrative wrinkles, mostly RE disclaimers, we're still small staff. Won't promise shorter wait—pending funding for a new editorial manager
<p>Do more ongoing engagement by email, even if just to prepare for phone calls</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To guard director's time, we cannot commit to expand email contact yet. Must continue emphasizing single phone conversation for Editorial Consultancy. Making that clearer.

Critiques and Response (2)

Based on reporters' comments from the surveys and interviews, FIRE has begun acting on the following topics and responses to modify its application process and delivery of reporting services moving forward.

Critique	Response
I was taken aback / annoyed at having to answer follow up inquiries on my application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must continue practice; valuable intelligence but it's not fair to force so many applicants to submit upfront, nor feasible for our staff to process so widely. But to better manage expectations, more clearly signaled on Guidelines that some applicants should expect follow up questions.
Offer more stipends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pending funding.
Confusing expectations on "Help Desk"—how come I only got an hour? Why couldn't I get follow up?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New name "Editorial Consultancy" conveys one-off nature, revised website Guidelines better details what to expect, and new one-page tip sheet will thoroughly prepare recipients for the Editorial Consultancy. Reporting plan worksheets will build in timetable for follow up phone call.

Appendix: Testimonials & Quotes

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"[The] FIRE help desk service have been an invaluable boon in guiding my investigative reporting... Fundamentally, I think the FIRE helpdesk service democratizes the investigative journalism field—it gives a wider number of journalists the tools of investigation so they can both deepen the value and broaden the scope of their stories. A wonderful resource for emerging journalists, and an important service to ensure a wide range of organizations are brought to task." –Respondent #17

"There's a need for [FIRE] to exist, not only for the money, but because of the resources they provide. I don't really want to think about what would happen without it. We've received other funding for larger amounts of money, which has been helpful in making sure we can actually get to the places we need to get to, but before we can even do that travel, we needed data records... I don't think we would have survived if it wasn't for FIRE." –Respondent #8

"The unique customization of FIRE services is extraordinary -- I don't know of any other support organization for this kind of reporting that focuses so well on the specific needs of grantees. Even with those services though, as a freelancer it's financially challenging to allocate sufficient time to a project without direct funding." –Respondent #3

"If [FIRE] didn't exist, I guess we'd soldier on, but we'd be a little bereft, you know." –Respondent #16

"The research help by IRE is invaluable. I think you came upon a very key need for freelance journalists that no one was meeting." –Respondent #6

Appendix: Testimonials & Quotes

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“I was treated as a partner, not as a candidate.” –Unidentified Respondent

“FIRE's services have been extremely helpful. The overall editorial leadership took an active interest in the story and therefore was able to engage in a thoughtful way.” –Unidentified Respondent

“Help with FOIA and doing information requests would be really helpful. I would say that many journalists either feel kind of overwhelmed when filling those out, not necessarily for the federal government, but for the state governments.” –Respondent #2

“...My research requests are really complicated, information that can only be gathered by people who have the ability to access Lexus Nexus, and other kinds of legal databases. At least for freelancers, no one can afford those. So, I think FIRE has to exist. A lot of great reporting is done by lone people or smaller organization, and especially in an investigation, you really need the backing of a larger organization to help point you down pathways that have been tried before and have been successful. It's very necessary.” –Respondent #2

“FIRE didn't ask me for anything; they just gave me something. They were not expecting for me to present an outcome of the mentoring conversation I had. That's very positive for me. They were not expecting me to deliver in exchange, and in the world we are living now, that's rare. That's perfect.” –Respondent #4

“More and more of us are working on our own, because we're covered by news organizations anymore. Having a place that has resources is enormously helpful.”

-Respondent #5

Appendix: Testimonials & Quotes

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“I'd be going it alone a lot more, if it wasn't for FIRE. I think it would have taken a lot longer to get to the point... it would have taken a lot of research if I hadn't been able to connect with a state expert through FIRE. They walked me through things pretty quick.” –Respondent #3

“We are in the era of the isolated journalist. Not only the freelancer working at home, but even in newsrooms, people are very isolated, with the gadgets, computers, social networks. Sometimes it's not the editor that we are working with who is the best person to give us some advice, or to enlighten us about the certain path we want to or should follow. I think [FIRE] is a very good idea; I was very inspired by my experience.” –Respondent #4

“[FIRE] offers all the tools to a freelance journalist that a newsroom would: all the databases you need for data and legal records. For me, that's been the key thing. But there's also other components [FIRE offers] that are not offered in newsrooms, like feedback on putting together a FOIA, and even one-on-one consulting and advising about how to manage your freelance career: how to do taxes, get deductions, that kind of thing.” -Respondent #6

“Although I'm writing for [a major national outlet], they couldn't provide access to records or databases. They offer them for their newspaper reporters, but not for magazine writers.... At the heart of it, the only way I've been able to do this story is because of that access.” -Respondent #6

“Those of us who are in the freelance world, there's not an enormous amount that we have going for us. The one thing we do have is time and independence to do these weird stories where you have to be a fly on the wall forever, or pursue long shot things, or to do stuff that would be shot down in regular newsrooms. Only weirdos doing it from their bedroom in their PJs are well suited to do certain kinds of stories. As as one of those weirdos, I think it's useful to have support. People who are drawn to those sorts of things often don't have the requisite background in knowing where to dig and records requests and that kind of stuff.” -Respondent #12

Appendix: Testimonials & Quotes

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“To me, FIRE seems to care the most about helping journalists who don't necessarily have a home base in a newsroom. They provide support that you'd otherwise have if you worked in one, or were doing a project for one.”-Respondent #9

“I think Fire is critical because they speak up for independent and freelance journalists in a hands-on, concrete way. They've taken time to do surveys and figure out what is it like today to be a freelance writer doing investigative or deeply reported pieces, and to understand what resources are available. FIRE is the one institution trying to figure out what exactly our day-to-day life is like, and has tried to find ways to fill in holes that have been ignored-- the gaps that the foundations don't even know exist.”-Respondent #6

“When I was talking to [FIRE], I definitely found it helped focus and motivated me. I felt a bit stuck as to what direction I wanted to take my story in, and [FIRE] helped me feel less stuck.” -Respondent #7

“[FIRE] was actually a lot more helpful than I thought they would be. Originally, I was lackluster about the services because we already had another grant. We'd done pretty large investigative projects before where we had done the data and logged all the interviews ourselves. I thought, maybe we don't really need this. We certainly applied because of the money, not because of the services, but ultimately the services have turned out to be even more helpful than we originally assumed. But at the same time, this project was a no-go without the money.”
-Respondent #8

“We had a continuum of lawyers [through FIRE] who have written a correspondence demanding certain things, but have also helped by just getting on the phone. Having the attorney call and explain things is incredibly helpful. Before this grant, I would have said no, I wouldn't apply for something like help services without money, but now I realize having lawyers on your side is incredibly helpful.”-Respondent #8

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“I've just always been solo on my own laptop. Having perspective from [FIRE] was like, oh wow! It kind of opened up things I wouldn't have thought of, so it was really nice to just have, for the first time ever, someone edit me and help in kind of a strategic way. That was really nice.” -Respondent #9

“Personally, in freelancing, I really like the ability to pursue stories that really interest me, but it can be really tough without having someone to bounce ideas off of or to get guidance from. Having a mentor and a planning situation could be nice. I want to regularly check in with someone who has experience... it doesn't have to be an hour-long call, it could be fifteen minutes once a week. [FIRE] helped open things up and made things seem much more clear in a short amount of time. I feel like that bite-size mentorship would be kind of cool.” -Respondent #9

“A lot of these other grants that we apply for would fly you out for a week long training, but then after that, you were just kind of left to your own devices. It's nice that this is consistent help for the duration of your project. You have access to lawyers that can help you, and you have access to newsroom assistance that can help you with data entry and transcribing. One of the things that really holds freelance journalists back is that we don't have access to those things on a regular basis. It's just really excellent that this grant gives you the feeling that you're working in a newsroom and access to those types of tools.” -Respondent #10

“FIRE's been able to put me in touch with other reporters who are familiar with the region [where I am working]. FIRE's been good at keeping my attention on the story itself. I would not have gotten into my current project or been on top of following up on various reporting aspects. All of it has been really, really valuable... it's been quite impressive considering it's a pilot program.” -Respondent #11

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“What Fire recognizes is that more and more journalists still want to do journalism, but perhaps aren't able to work within news organizations. For me, I've been lucky [because] I've done contracts that hooked me up with the nonprofits, but there's only so many Pro Publicas and CIRs to work with. FIRE recognizes that people are doing this, and also that they might not necessarily be only doing this work. Freelancers might also be driving an Uber or a Lyft, or living off their wife. I might be living off my wife a little bit. That shouldn't dissuade people from embarking on big investigative stories. What happens with freelancers in particular is that we don't have the resources that reporters at big news organizations have. It's easier to get discouraged or think, *this is too big for me, I can't get it, I can't begin to do this, it's not worth pursuing*. In some respects, FIRE gives feedback about whether the story is worth pursuing, while providing editorial feedback that helps encourage freelancers who work with limited funds to continue to pursue stories. I think that's very important.” -Respondent #11

“I spoke with FIRE for 45 minutes or an hour, talking through the story ideas that came out of that original proposal... I used FIRE help with story shaping, because I had a couple of really good characters and ideas, but didn't know if they were an in-depth, hour-long investigative radio piece, or if they were a Time magazine profile. I didn't know where to pitch. It was a really helpful conversation.”-Respondent #14

“Other places will give you money, and they'll give you a desk and a phone line, and some friendly colleagues. Maybe you'll incidentally have a Lexus Nexus password. But in terms of really shaping a story, and the questions that FIRE asked were so much better and more detailed than anybody at any of those other [funding and support] organizations. I don't mean to be tearing them down at all, the others are really nice and generous. But they never got into the weeds about *what exactly do you need* and *what exactly are you trying to answer* and *can I be a resource*. So I felt like the actual services were so much more detailed and tailored than other places that want you to be a lot more together upfront in an application, but then don't really help you dig deeper necessarily or expect you to know where to dig.”-Respondent #14

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“What I found to be incredibly helpful was along the lines of story coaching, almost like the kind of conversations with an editor before you've really gone out on a story. When you're trying to conceive of the questions to ask, as you're trying to circle around who might this be for, and how might you pitch it, and what questions do you need to have answered in your own mind before you even tackle it. I've wanted that since I've worked at publications: a mentor or somebody you can call up and say what do you think of this? What interests you about this? What doesn't interest you? Can you help me sort through this mess of stuff going on in my head?”-Respondent #14

“I had not seen anything like this before, in the sense that you know I was applying for some editorial help, which I think was brilliant. Usually, it's like a big commitment to a grant or big project, but the thing I needed was just a little bit of editorial direction and assistance. It was really, really helpful so that was neat.... I sort of felt like I'd come to a bit of a standstill and was pushing my way through, and just wanted to have a fresh pair of eyes on it from someone who's got experience in this area.”-Respondent #15

“The most valuable thing I got through the help desk services was trying to think about what would get published. I think we fall in love with a story, but don't necessarily think about the other things.”-Respondent #17

“For freelancers, encouragement is important, since we work all alone. I don't know one other initiative that works with freelance investigative reporters. It's crucial that [FIRE] continue their operations.”-Respondent #18

“We are seeing people freelance more and more, and it makes me happy that people are recognizing and supporting independent media makers. What [FIRE] is doing is amazing and I hope they receive as much funding that they need to continue doing this for a very, very long time.”-Respondent #19

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“There's a need for [FIRE.] Absolutely. You know, it's hard to do in depth stories, and it's hard to get travel budgets and the support that we need. Years ago, I was a freelance photographer before I went to graduate school, and studied science and environmental journalism an eon ago. I've been writing for eighteen years now, but I've been a freelancer for much of my career in one of the mediums, and it's a lot harder now than it ever was before... It's just not easy for an adult human to make a living as a freelancer. We need every bit of help we can get. I know many, many colleagues who do different things to pay the bills, but if there's a project that you really want to do that's long-term project, you need help.” -Respondent #20