

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
RESEARCH CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

1. REASON FOR ISSUE. This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook announces the establishment by the Office of Research and Development (ORD) of a Career Development Program designed to streamline the research career track for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) scientists in Biomedical Laboratory, Clinical Science, Health Services, and Rehabilitation Research and Development Services. Review and administrative functions must continue to be managed by the individual services.

2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES. The Career Development Program retains the fundamental criteria and goals of the previous mentored programs for both clinician and non-clinician scientists. New award levels are described according to research experience and career development needs. At each level, the awards must provide salary support and/or project funding. Clinicians may forego salary, in which case the award must only provide project funding.

3. RELATED DOCUMENTS. VA Handbook 5007.

4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE. The ORD (12) is responsible for the contents of this Handbook. Questions may be addressed to 202-254-0207.

5. RECISSION. This VHA Handbook rescinds VHA Handbook 1201.2 dated November 9, 2001, VHA Handbook 1203.2 dated April 16, 2002, and VHA Handbook 1204.2 dated May 28, 2002.

6. RECERTIFICATION. This VHA Handbook must be reviewed for recertification on or before the last working day of July 2011.

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RESEARCH CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

1. PURPOSE

The Research Career Development Program is an award series under which both clinically and non-clinically trained post-doctoral researchers may gain mentored research time intended to advance awardees toward independence as funded Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) scientists. The program is designed to attract, develop, and retain talented VA researchers in areas of particular importance to VA. This Handbook provides the structure and procedures of this Office of Research and Development (ORD) program; the functional aspects of review and administration must be managed independently by the Biomedical Laboratory Research and Development (R&D) Service, the Clinical Science R&D Service, the Health Services R&D Service, and the Rehabilitation R&D Service.

2. BACKGROUND

Candidates must be nominated by a VA Medical Center, but do not need to be VA employees to be considered for the Career Development Program. Nominees who are not VA employees at the time of application must have a VA appointment by the start date of funding. For those clinicians who do not request salary support, no appointment is to be made (because they must already have at least 5/8ths VA appointments); only project funds are to be provided (see subpar. 4.b.(c)). The Associate Chief of Staff (ACOS) for R&D or responsible VA facility management official ensures that awardees are appointed appropriately during the award. For newly recruited scientists, the employment application process needs to be coordinated through the local personnel office. Title 38 and Title 5 Code of Federal Regulation (CFR) employees are required to meet the VA and Federal appointment hiring and citizenship requirements. Current VA employees interested in the Research Career Development Program need to clarify with their local VA Human Resources Management the implications of Career Development Award (CDA) appointment and any potential changes to employment status and/or benefits. In all cases, documentation of a nominee's current VA employment, or eligibility for the specific appointment prescribed by the award, must accompany the Letter of Intent (LOI). (see <http://www1.va.gov/resdev/> for details and instructions).

3. SCOPE

The Career Development Program is comprised of four awards [Career Development Award-1 (CDA-1), Career Development Award-2 (CDA-2), Career Development Transition Award (CDTA), and Career Development Enhancement Award (CDEA)], each corresponding to the different research and academic levels in a scientist's career. Candidates need not be VA employees to be considered for an award, but must be nominated by the VA Medical Center that is to appoint them. Clinicians and non-clinicians follow the same basic application procedures, and candidates are matched to the award level that best corresponds to their training and research proficiency. Nominees may apply at the level they deem most appropriate; however, the award level must be determined following peer review and may not necessarily match the level for which the candidate initially applied. At the conclusion of the CDA-1 award, awardees may

compete for advancement to a CDA-2. By the conclusion of the CDA-2 award, it is anticipated that the awardees are to compete for independent funding. The CDTA is for clinicians who are more than 5 years beyond clinical training and require additional mentored research time in order to become fully independent, or for clinicians who are seeking to make a mid-career transition into a new research area. CDTA funding is strictly limited and highly competitive. The fourth level, the CDEA, is for established VA scientists seeking educational leave to gain new research skills.

4. LEVELS OF AWARDS

a. **CDA-1.** This award provides an initial mentored research experience, consisting of up to two years of salary support, to highly qualified scientists with demonstrated abilities in key research areas who have not benefited previously from research fellowship-level training. Nominees must express a clear commitment to a VA career and enlist the support of at least one appropriately qualified VA mentor. At the conclusion of the CDA-1 award, awardees may compete for advancement to CDA-2.

(1) **Eligibility.** Non-clinician nominees need to be no more than two years beyond completion of their PhD or doctoral equivalent. Clinician nominees need to be no more than two years beyond clinical training (i.e., residency, internship, clinical fellowship, etc.). The suggested academic rank is Instructor. Nominees must not have been principal investigator (PI) or co-principal investigator (Co-PI) on a peer-reviewed independent research project supported by a national public or private organization.

(2) **Support and Conditions.** Awardees must be provided a minimum VA 5/8ths salaried appointment with assurance of a minimum 75 percent research commitment at the time of award. Some VA or university committee and teaching responsibilities are appropriate; however, awardees may not hold any significant administrative positions at VA or an affiliated university during the award term. Non-research and non-VA time commitments, especially those involving salary and/or other benefits, need to be kept to a minimum and must be a criterion of interest to ORD in evaluating annual progress reports. Upon conclusion of the award, it is anticipated that the awardees are to compete for independent funding, or for advancement to CDA-2 and to demonstrate a strong VA commitment.

(a) Non-Clinicians. Awardees need to be appointed under Title 5 CFR 213.3227(a) Schedule B at the GS-11 level.

(b) Clinicians. Eligible clinicians may be appointed under Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 7405 (a)(1)(D). For physicians and dentists, the appointment category is Associate Investigator and as such they are excluded from the pay provisions under VA Handbook 5007 Part IX. (see VA Handbook 5007, Part IX 3d).

b. **CDA-2**. This award provides salary and/or project funds to support a three to five year program of research career development and mentoring. Nominees need to demonstrate a high degree of potential in their area of interest and a strong VA commitment. By the end of the CDA-2, it is anticipated that the awardees are to have competed for independent funding.

(1) **Eligibility**. Non-clinician nominees need to be no more than five years beyond completion of their PhD or doctoral equivalent. Clinician nominees need to be no more than five years beyond clinical training (i.e., residency, internship, clinical fellowship, etc.). The suggested academic rank is assistant professor. Nominees need not have been PI on a peer-reviewed independent research project supported by a national-level public or private organization in excess of \$50,000 a year. Nominees need to have at least one first-authored research publication pertinent to the general proposed research area.

(2) **Support and Conditions**. Nominees may request salary support and up to \$50,000 of research project funding; however, clinicians have the option to request project funding only from the Career Development program. If the nominee intends to receive salary support, the proposed budget needs to include the nominee's estimated salary costs as well as other project expenses. Nominees must have a minimum VA 5/8ths salaried appointment at the time of award. Some VA or university committee and teaching responsibilities may be acceptable; however, the awardees may not hold any significant administrative positions at the VA or affiliated university during the award term. Non-research and non-VA time commitments, especially those involving salary and/or other benefits, need to be kept to a minimum and must be a criterion of interest to ORD in evaluating annual progress reports (see par. 8). Upon conclusion of the award, it is anticipated that awardees are to have competed for independent funding and are to demonstrate a strong VA commitment.

(a) **Non-Clinicians**. Appointments are made under Title 5 CFR 213.3227(a) Schedule B and limited to General Schedule (GS)-13 level. Awardees must have at least a 5/8ths VA appointment with 100 percent research effort.

(b) **Clinicians Requesting Salary**. For physicians and dentists, appointments may be made under Title 38 U.S.C. 7405 (a)(1) with salary determined by the local compensation panel. A 75 percent time commitment to VA-approved research is required. Awardees must be hired on full-time temporary, time-limited appointments for the duration of the award.

(c) **Clinicians Not Requesting Salary**. This option is for clinician scientists for whom no appointment is to be made in association with the Career Development program. Awardees must have at least a 5/8 VA appointment independent of this award, and must maintain at least 25 percent effort on research.

c. **CDTA.** This award provides up to three years of salary support for mid-career clinician scientists seeking to transition into careers as independently-funded VA investigators. Nominees must demonstrate the need for mentoring but need not have received a CDA-1 or CDA-2 previously.

(1) **Eligibility.** Nominees must be VA clinicians. They need to be no more than 10 years beyond completion of their last residency, internship, clinical fellowship, etc. Suggested academic rank is associate professor. To be considered competitive, nominees need to have a strong publication record with several first-authored research publications in areas pertinent to the proposed career development area. The narrative portion of an approved (submitted, though not necessarily funded) VA merit review project must be attached as an appendix to the CDTA application.

(2) **Research Support and Conditions.** Appointments for physicians and dentists may be made under 38 U.S.C. 7405 (a) (1) with salary determined by the local compensation panel. A 75 percent time commitment to VA-approved research is required. Awardees must be hired on full-time temporary, time-limited appointments for the duration of the award.

d. **CDEA.** This award provides an opportunity to the most accomplished VA scientists to learn new research skills at a unique facility for a period of up to one year.

(1) **Eligibility.** Nominees must have at least 6 years of sustained independent research funding and service to VA research (e.g., mentoring, committee service, etc.), have a strong publication record, and be PI of an active VA Merit Review project at the time of application. Academic rank needs to be the equivalent of professor at most institutions. Documentation of specific educational leave approved by the local VA medical center must be provided. Nominees who have received a CDEA within the previous ten years are not eligible.

(2) **Research Support and Conditions.** Awardees must devote 100 percent time to research, may not be involved in administrative roles during the award, and must identify a sponsor who is to facilitate their research program and provide training and consultation. ORD must provide up to six months' salary costs; for clinicians, funding is contingent upon matching support from the local VA facility.

5. LOCATION REQUIREMENTS

With the exception of the CDEA, all research must be conducted at the same location within the VA medical center (or other VA-approved space) as the awardee's primary mentor, or in close geographic proximity to the primary mentor at a VA facility. All nominees must be employees or prospective employees of the nominating VA facility, and their research is expected to enrich the overall research program of the sponsoring VA medical center. Awardees may not conduct their research in off-site locations unless they have explicit approval by the VA Central Office service director. Awardees may not set up an independent laboratory in non-VA space. (see VHA Handbook 1200.16).

6. APPLICATION PROCESS

The application process starts with an LOI. A full proposal may not be submitted without an approved LOI. Nominees need to work closely with the local VA R&D Office to prepare the LOI and application. Information on deadlines, guidance for preparing LOIs and proposals, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are posted on the ORD website at

<http://www1.va.gov/resdev> .

7. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Reviewers must evaluate the nominee's background and productivity, the appropriateness of the research and development plans presented, the suitability of the proposed mentors in relation to the nominee's goals, the relevance of the planned research to VA, the nominee's commitment to a VA career, the sponsoring site's commitment to the nominee, the feasibility and merit of the planned research, and anticipated long-term contributions to VA. Awardees are encouraged to develop research proposals in areas of particular importance to veterans' health care and that represent unique opportunities or particularly promising future lines of VA research.

8. ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORTS AND METHOD OF EVALUATION

Progress reports must be submitted annually. Criteria of interest include R&D progress, publishing productivity, scientific presentations, and VA and non-VA time commitments. Instructions and FAQs regarding annual progress reports are posted on the ORD website at

<http://www1.va.gov/resdev> .

9. CHANGES TO FUNDED AWARDS

Requests for changes to an award need to be submitted to the relevant ORD service director at least 60 days in advance of the requested change. ORD may, in exceptional circumstances, approve the transfer of an award to a different facility or approve a change in mentor at the same facility. Such approval must only be given if the request confirms that it is to satisfy the awardee's training needs and is in the best interests of the VA. The R&D Committee, the proposed mentor(s), and the new VA facility Director are required to endorse the transfer and ensure that sufficient VA space and support is to be available for the successful completion of the transferee's award. A letter of support from the proposed primary mentor including a description of the proposed training plan must be submitted with the request. Additional research funds must not be provided to cover any moving or relocation expenses.

10. PROGRAM CONTACTS AND MAILING ADDRESS

Inquiries about the Research Career Development Program need to be directed to the appropriate ORD service contact listed on the VA Research and Development website at

<http://www1.va.gov/resdev> .