

**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 VA scientists in Biomedical Laboratory, Clinical Science, Health Services, and Rehabilitation Research and Development Services. Review and administrative functions will 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 will provide salary support and/or project funding. Clinicians may forego salary, in which case the award will only provide project funding.
- 3. RELATED DOCUMENTS:** Guidelines for applying and Frequently Asked Questions are posted at <http://www.research.va.gov/> . VA Handbook 5007 contains provisions pertinent to the appointments described in this handbook.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Office of R&D (12) is responsible for the contents of this Handbook.
- 5. RECISSION:** This VHA Handbook rescinds Overview of Capacity Building for Health Services Research Handbook 1204.2 and Program Announcement dated 02/05/02; RR&D Career Development Program Handbook 1203.2; and Associate Investigator Program Handbook 1201.2.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION:** This VHA Handbook will be reviewed for recertification on or before the last working day of December 2010.

Jonathan B. Perlin, MD, PhD, MSHA, FACP  
Under Secretary for Health

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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 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 policy of this Office of Research and Development (ORD) program; the functional aspects of review and administration will 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. OVERVIEW

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 would 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 will be determined following peer review and may not 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 will compete for independent funding. The CDTA is for clinicians who are more than five 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 will be strictly limited and highly competitive. The fourth level, the CDEA, is for established VA scientists seeking educational leave to gain new research skills.

## 3. CDA APPOINTMENTS

The appointment and eligibility requirements for each award are detailed below (see 4.) 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 will be made (because they must already have at least 5/8ths VA appointments); only project funds will be provided (see 4.b.(c).) The Associate Chief of Staff (ACOS) for Research & Development (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 should be coordinated through the local personnel office. Title 38 and Title 5 employees are required to meet the VA and Federal appointment hiring and citizenship requirements. Current VA employees interested in the Research Career Development Program should clarify with their local VA Human Resources Management the implications of 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://www.research.va.gov/> for details and instructions).

#### 4. LEVELS OF AWARD

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 should be no more than 2 years beyond completion of their PhD or doctoral equivalent. Clinician nominees should be no more than 2 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% 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 the VA or affiliated university during the award term. Non-research and non-VA time commitments, especially those involving salary and/or other benefits, should be kept to a minimum and will be a criterion of interest to ORD in evaluating annual progress reports. Upon conclusion of the award, it is anticipated that the awardees will compete for independent funding or for advancement to CDA-2 and demonstrate a strong VA commitment.

(a) **Non-Clinicians.** Awardees should be appointed under Title 5 Code of Federal Regulations (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 3.d.

b. **CDA-2.** This award provides salary and/or project funds to support a 3- to 5-year program of research career development and mentoring. Nominees should 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 will have competed for independent funding.

(1) **Eligibility.** Non-clinician nominees should be no more than 5 years beyond

completion of their PhD or doctoral equivalent. Clinician nominees should be no more than 5 years beyond clinical training (i.e., residency, internship, clinical fellowship, etc.). The suggested academic rank is assistant professor. Nominees should 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/year. Nominees should 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 should 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, should be kept to a minimum and will be a criterion of interest to ORD in evaluating annual progress reports (see paragraph 8). Upon conclusion of the award, it is anticipated that awardees will have competed for independent funding and will demonstrate a strong VA commitment.

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

(b) **Clinicians Requesting Salary.** For physicians and dentists, appointments may be made under Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 7405 (a)(1) with salary determined by the local compensation panel. A 75% 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 will 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% effort on research.

c. **CDTA.** This award provides up to 3 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 should 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 should 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 Title 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 7405 (a) (1) with salary determined by the local compensation panel. A 75% 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 six years of sustained independent research funding and service to VA research (e.g., mentoring, committee service etc.), have a strong publication record, and be principal investigator of an active VA Merit Review project at the time of application. Academic rank should be the equivalent of professor at most institutions. Documentation of specific educational leave approved by the local medical center must be provided. Nominees who have received a CDEA within the previous 10 years are not eligible.

(2) **Research Support and Conditions.** Awardees must devote 100% time to research, may not be involved in administrative roles during the award, and must identify a sponsor who will facilitate their research program and provide training and consultation. CDEA awards are contingent upon approved educational leave from the local VA facility. ORD will provide one half of up to one year's salary cost. The remaining salary cost must be borne by 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 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 should work closely with the local VA Research and Development Office to prepare the LOI and application. Information on deadlines, Guidance for preparing LOIs and proposals, and Frequently Asked Questions are posted on the ORD website: <http://www.research.va.gov/>.

## 7. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Reviewers will 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 healthcare 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 research and development progress, publishing productivity, scientific presentations, and VA and non-VA time commitments. Instructions and Frequently Asked Questions regarding annual progress reports are posted on the ORD website at <http://www.research.va.gov/>.

## **9. CHANGES TO FUNDED AWARDS**

Requests for changes to an award should 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 will only be given if the request confirms that it will 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 director of the new VA facility are required to endorse the transfer and ensure that sufficient VA space and support will 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 will not be provided to cover any moving or relocation expenses.

## **10. PROGRAM CONTACTS AND MAILING ADDRESS**

Inquiries about the Research Career Development Program should be directed to the appropriate ORD service contact listed on the VA Research and Development website at <http://www.research.va.gov/>.