Research Career Scientist
Frequently Asked Questions

I. RCS PROGRAM QUESTIONS

Q. Where can I find more information about ORD's RCS program?

A. For more information about the RCS program, please refer to ORD Program Guide 1200.20. For updated instructions on applying for the RCS award, please refer to the appropriate Broad Portfolio NOSI and the RCS RFA and RCS preapplication RFA posted on the VA intranet site at: http://vaww.research.va.gov/funding/rfa.cfm.

Q. What is the deadline for the receipt of RCS applications?

A. Deadlines for the receipt of RCS preapplications and full applications are included in the RCS RFA.

Q. I need to prepare a RCS application, where do I find the most up-to-date application information?

A. Please refer to the RCS RFAs on the VA intranet site for information about the electronic submission of RCS applications. Please note that preapplications are required for new, resubmission and renewal RCS applications.

Q: How can we ensure the applicant is "eligible" for a RCS award?

A: Eligible applicants must meet the following criteria:
- A minimum 5/8th VA-paid appointment at the time of application.
- A competitively funded VA-ORD Merit Award from any of the Broad Portfolios, Actively Managed Portfolios, or ISRM Programs (includes competitively funded Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) Merit Awards – Program (QUE), Evidence-based Policy Evaluation Center (EBP), Partnered Evaluation Initiative (PEC), VISN Partnered Implementation Initiative (PII), Data Science Learning Health System (DSL)) at the time of application.
- An active research program performed in VA space for at least the previous three (3) years. It is expected that RCS awardees will work to maintain active VA funding during the term of the RCS award.
- National, peer reviewed research/QUERI support (e.g. VA, National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF), or Department of Defense (DoD)) as a Principal Investigator (and not as Co-investigator) for at least a total of six (6) years. NOTE: This does not have to be six (6) consecutive years.
- The PD/PI must be current with all requirements related to intellectual property (VA invention documents and certifications), submission of annual progress reports (Research Performance Progress Reports (RPPRs)) and Final Reports, clinical trials registration, and clinical trials results reporting for current and previous awards.

II. RCS APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Q: What should be submitted in the budget pages for a RCS application?

A. Please complete the budget period for the 5-year RCS award period and as part of the Budget Justification, include a Summary Budget Worksheet. Applicants who wish to be considered for the SRCS award should still complete the budget for a 5-year award due to limitations of the SF424 and Summary Budget Worksheet. If the SRCS award level is approved, ORD will adjust the budget to a 7-year period.

Q: Is there a limit to the number of RCS applications submitted by a station during a fiscal year?

A: Each station is allowed to submit 2 (new or revised) RCS applications per broad portfolio during a fiscal year. This limit does not include renewal applications.

Q: What documents are required from the applicant's eRA grant application as proof of VA support? Do I need to complete VA Forms for grants which were submitted electronically?
A: For currently funded VA Merit proposals submit include the face page and specific aims pages from the eRA application and the Notice of Intent to Award or VA-ORD email Notice of Award. If there are multiple, current VA awards include all in a single appendix. See the RCS RFA for more details.

Q. How do I apply for a SRCS award?

A. Consideration for a SRCS award is based on the recommendation of the RCS Review panel and is awarded at the discretion of the Broad Portfolio Director.

Q. If I receive a SRCS award, do I also receive a promotion to GS15?

A. No, assignments to a higher GS level are a separate and distinct process. You must submit an application for consideration for assignment to GS-14 or GS-15. Please refer to the Centralized Positions page on our website.

Q. Do letters of recommendation have to be written by VA staff, affiliated staff, or by colleagues from outside organizations?

A. RCS applicants are encouraged to request letters of recommendation from recognized leaders in the applicant's research area, including internationally recognized experts and should be generated within 6 months of the application deadline. It is preferable that letters come from outside the applicant's VA or affiliated medical school.

Q: To whom should the letters of support be addressed?

A. Letters of support should be addressed to the appropriate Broad Portfolio Director.

III. MID-TERM PROGRESS REPORT QUESTIONS.
Note: Mid-term progress reports are no longer required for RCS awards as of 10/1/2024. Awardees must submit annual Research Performance Progress Reports (RPPRs) through eRA commons instead.

IV. RCS RENEWAL QUESTIONS

Q. We are finalizing a RCS renewal application and we need to include the mid-term evaluation report for the Progress Report attachment. Can we request a copy of the awardee's mid-term evaluation report?

A. If a mid-term progress report was submitted prior to October, 1, 2024, you may request a copy of the awardee's mid-term evaluation report, through the RCS mailbox: rcs.materials@va.gov and in the Subject line: Mid-Term Progress Report Request, the name of the awardee and the station. Otherwise, refer to the VA-ORD-SF 424 or guidance on preparation of a progress report if a mid-term progress report was not submitted.

Q. My Merit Review award ends 6 months after my RCS renewal application is due. Do you think this would hurt my chances of keeping my RCS?

A. The lack of national peer-reviewed research funding beyond the start date of the RCS award is detrimental to the success of a RCS application. The applicant is advised to secure research funding before submitting an application for a RCS award.

Q. Will I be notified if my RCS Award will be ending?

A. You can expect to receive a renewal reminder before your RCS award is due to end. Please respond to this e-mail if you will NOT be renewing your RCS award or if your station has changed.

V.   EVALUATION OF RCS APPLICATIONS

Q. How are the applications for the RCS awards evaluated?

A. Each RCS application is assigned two reviewers and the reviewers provide a written critique for the following five review criteria: (1) Research Contributions; (2) Collaborations; (3) Mentoring/Training; (4) Administrative Service; and (5) Professional stature. Applications are discussed and scored by all panel members, except by those members who are in conflict. Each application receives a priority score and two votes. The first vote is to recommend the award at the RCS level. The second vote is to recommend advancement to the SRCS level.

Q. How is the overall score of an RCS application determined? Is the final score the mean or weighted sum of the different evaluation categories?

A. The overall RCS score is the combined evaluation of the applicant as a scientist as well as their VA citizenship. Weak applicants can be excellent scientists but poor VA citizens or excellent VA citizens but only moderately productive scientists.

Q. Can I submit supplemental information while my RCS application is under review?

A. The most important supplemental information you can provide is information about pending grant submissions and the status of journal publications under review when the application was submitted. Supplemental information must be submitted to the RCS mailbox: rcs.materials@va.gov by the applicant's research office.

VI.   RCS AWARD TIMELINE

Q: What is the process after the panel meets and final scores are released?

A. RCS Review Panel recommendations are reviewed by the Portfolio Directors in consultation with the Scientific Program Managers and approved by the ISRM Leadership Council before a final funding decision is made. The research office will receive an official notification of the funding decision through eRA commons which is not subject to appeal.

Q. My RCS application was submitted at the start of the Merit Review cycle. When can I expect to hear if my RCS application will be funded?

A. See the RCS RFA for review and award dates.

Q: If the applicant is not selected for a RCS is some reason provided?   Is there anyone I can speak to?

A. The summary statement provides the applicant with feedback on areas requiring improvement. For additional feedback, please contact the RCS Program Manager indicated in the summary statement.

Q. If I submit my S/RCS renewal early, when will the award take effect?

A. See the RCS RFA for review and award dates. The start date of Med Health and BBMH RCS awards will typically be April 1/October 1.

IV.   POST-AWARD MODIFICATIONS

Q: If I transfer to another site, does my S/RCS transfer with me?

A: Like any other ORD funded project, a station transfer must be requested using the ORD Request for Administrative Project Modification form. The justification text must include the following information:

- Details about the PI's new research situation at the new station (including VA eights) and (if applicable) the academic rank and tenure status at the affiliated institution.
- A list of possible collaborators and opportunities for training and mentoring at the new station
- A list of the awardee's administrative activities at the new station; and
- A copy of the awardee's MOU between the new station and the academic affiliate clearly indicating the level of professional effort and their time commitment at each institution.
- If transferring a VA Merit award then the appropriate ACOS assurance documents must be attached as well as any off-site requests.