



**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**OFFICE OF RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT**  
**PROGRAM GUIDE: 1200.04**  
**CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

As of August 5, 2019, the Office of Research and Development Career Development Program Handbook (VHA Handbook 1200.04) has been replaced with this Program Guide. This Program Guide replaces all prior official VA-ORD guidance for the Career Development Program.

ISSUANCE DATE: October 6, 2025

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## **Summary of changes from the previous version:**

1. Added language to the Background and Evaluation Criteria sections reinforcing Veteran relevance and applicant commitment to Veterans and a VA research career.
2. Removed references to funding services, added references to ISRM, Broad Portfolios.
3. Removed references to “letters of intent” and “intent to submit” processes, replaced with language referencing pre-applications.
4. Updated required VA appointment levels for clinician and non-clinician awardees.
5. Removed outdated information regarding project modifications, referenced separate ISRM guidance on this process.
6. Simplified language describing research location, referenced the Off-site Research Program Guide for additional details.
7. Added guidance regarding other research activities during a mentored CDA.
8. Added language describing the Career Development Enhancement Award (CDEA), including the request process.

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## **1. PURPOSE**

The VHA Office of Research and Development's (ORD) Career Development Program is designed to attract, develop, and retain talented Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) researchers in areas of importance to VA. This Program Guide provides the structure of this ORD program. The functional aspects of review and administration are managed by the **Investigators, Scientific Review, and Management (ISRM)** unit within ORD.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

VA's Career Development Program was established to provide mentoring for junior researchers, so they can learn from renowned, experienced VA researchers. The program also supports sabbatical time (extended educational leave) for established investigators. Awardees from this program have become national and international leaders in their research fields. Awardees have also gone on to become valued VA research leaders with careers serving Veterans that go beyond their immediate scientific expertise. Awards are offered by ISRM Broad Portfolios, but the proposal may also align with the purview of an Actively Managed Portfolio.

Implicit in all Career Development applications is the understanding that the investigator plans to pursue and/or continue a career in VA benefiting Veteran healthcare. Applicants are expected to describe their motivation and commitment to Veterans and VA in their proposals.

## **3. SCOPE**

This Program Guide applies to mentored Career Development applicants and to established VA investigators who have secured educational leave from their local VA facilities.

## **4. ELIGIBILITY**

Career Development Awards are available to clinician and non-clinician scientists. Awardees must be US Citizens and VA employees. Nominees may apply for funding before becoming VA employees, but must be VA employees by the start date of funding:

**Clinician applicants** must hold a minimum 6/8ths paid VA appointment, with 2/8ths clinical care effort (and VAMC salary support) and the remaining 8ths salary support provided by the CDA for research effort.

**Non-clinician applicants** must hold a minimum 5/8ths paid VA appointment. Awardees in non-clinician appointments do not have VHA clinical privileges.

Awardees must be the recipient of a clinical doctorate, PhD, or equivalent terminal degree for their profession from an accredited University. Note that acceptable degrees for engineers may not be considered terminal. Applicants without qualifying degrees must have a waiver approved by the ISRM Leadership Council.

ISRM will accept an application prior to the investigator obtaining the qualifying degree provided the expected completion date is within one year. Clearly state the expected date of award of qualifying degree in the pre-application and full application and include a letter of support from the thesis advisor or similar official. Should the application be selected for funding, the PD/PI must graduate to receive the award. Delayed starts will not be accommodated (i.e., time allowed for completion of Just-in-Time (JIT) requirements will not be extended).

**VA Appointment/Hiring Considerations:** For newly recruited scientists, the employment application process needs to be coordinated through the local research office who will determine which VA Human Resources Management servicing office (local or centralized) will be processing the appointment. Title 38 and Title 5 Code of Federal Regulation employees are required to meet VA and Federal appointment hiring and citizenship requirements. Current VA employees interested in the Career Development Program need to clarify with their VA Human Resources Management servicing office (local or centralized) the implications of the CDA appointment and any potential changes to employment status and/or benefits. The Associate Chief of Staff (ACOS) for R&D, or responsible VA facility management official, works with HR to ensure that awardees are appointed appropriately throughout the duration of the award. The principal point of contact for nominees throughout the application process is the local VA R&D Office.

Additional eligibility requirements differ by type of award and are described in each mechanism's corresponding Request for Applications (RFA).

## 5. TYPES OF AWARDS

The Career Development Program is comprised of several types of awards, each corresponding to a different research and academic level within a scientist's career. Candidates may not apply for more than one award type simultaneously.

The mentored Career Development Awards include the CDA-1 and CDA-2. These are intended for candidates early in their research career, without a history of independent, nationally peer-reviewed research funding as a principal investigator. Applicants must not have been a PI or co-PI on an independent peer-reviewed research award (e.g., R01, Merit Review, or equivalent) supported by a federal, public, or private organization. Investigators with prior equivalent training awards (e.g., 3-year or longer career development awards; DP5, K01, K07, K08, K22, K23, K25, K76) are ineligible. Current and former recipients of VA Pilot Project Awards (I21), NIH Small Grants (R03) and Exploratory/Developmental Grants (R21) remain

eligible.

- a. **CDA-1**: This award provides an initial early mentored research experience, consisting of up to 2 years of salary support and a small research budget for direct costs. The CDA-1 is intended for individuals early in their research career who are no more than two (2) years past award of the terminal degree or clinical training experience immediately following the terminal degree. Applicants must express a clear commitment to a VA career and enlist the support of at least one VA mentor with current VA Merit Review funding. In the second year of the CDA-1, awardees are expected to compete for CDA-2 or other VA research funding.
- b. **CDA-2**: This award provides salary and project funds to support a 3 to 5-year program of research, career development, mentoring, and training. Applicants must demonstrate a high degree of potential in their area of interest and a strong VA commitment. Within the final two years of the CDA-2, awardees are expected to compete for Merit Award funding with the intent to establish themselves as independent investigators.
- c. **CDEA**: The Career Development Enhancement Award is a non-mentored award that provides an opportunity for the most accomplished VA scientists to learn new research skills at a unique facility for a period of up to one year. The ISRM portfolio supporting the majority of the candidate's VA research may approve funding to support educational leave approved by the investigator's local VA facility. Refer to VHA Handbook 1400.11, Extended Educational Leave. The application process for the CDEA is a Project Modification Request submitted for the investigator's active VA Merit Review award (see Appendix A: CDEA Application Guidelines).

Investigators may not apply for more than one award type simultaneously.

## **6. LOCATION REQUIREMENTS**

It is expected that CDA-1 and CDA-2 awardees will perform ORD-funded research within a VA facility or VA-leased space. If any of the proposed work cannot be done in VA space, a waiver to perform the research off-site must be obtained in accordance with VHA Program Guide 1200.16 Off-site Research.

Work performed under contract with an off-site/Core facility does not require an off-site waiver, as determined by the ISRM portfolio funding the work.

## **7. APPLICATION PROCESS**

CDA-1 / CDA-2: Applicants must be nominated by the Research Office at a VA Medical Center with an established research program. The applicant will work with

their mentor(s) and the local research office to prepare and submit a pre-application and an application in accordance with the corresponding RFAs.

CDEA: Applicants will work with their local research office to prepare and submit a Project Modification Request detailing the educational opportunity and any additional support being requested. See Appendix A: CDEA Application Guidelines.

## **8. EVALUATION CRITERIA**

Pre-applications will be reviewed administratively for policy compliance, portfolio purview fit, Veteran relevance, and major issues which could jeopardize the full application during scientific review.

Full applications will be reviewed through a two-tier system, scientific peer review and program evaluation. Final funding decisions are made by the ISRM Leadership Council based on recommendations from the portfolio director. Specific application review criteria and considerations are described in each award mechanism's corresponding RFA and include the applicant's commitment to Veterans and a VA career.

## **9. ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORTS AND METHOD OF EVALUATION**

Annual and final progress reports are required. Review criteria 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 <https://www.research.va.gov/resources/RPPR.cfm>.

Awardees or their local research offices are required to notify VHA Research Communications of all scientific publications or presentations, upon acceptance (see Publication Notification Process for VA Investigators, [http://www.research.va.gov/resources/policies/pub\\_notice.cfm](http://www.research.va.gov/resources/policies/pub_notice.cfm)). Publications must acknowledge VA research support and VA employment in accordance with VHA Directive 1200.19, Presentation of Research Results.

## **10. CHANGES TO FUNDED MENTORED AWARDS**

Requests for changes to an award must be submitted in accordance with established ISRM Project Modification Request policies and procedures.

## **11. OTHER RESEARCH ACTIVITIES DURING A MENTORED AWARD**

ISRM's intent is to ensure the awardee's development as an independent VA researcher, and investigators are encouraged to carefully consider whether other

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research activities during their award period support that goal.

Research roles during the awardee's VA time but outside the scope of the funded Career Development Award will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

ISRM does not place restrictions on what research roles a VA CDA-1/CDA-2 recipient may hold/perform in their non-VA effort time, however:

- Other research funding/support must be disclosed to ISRM so that it can be reviewed for overlap (scientific, budgetary, effort) and so that the VAMC research office can ensure any issues are addressed in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- Awardees should discuss other research roles with their ISRM Scientific Portfolio Manager (SPM) before committing to them.
- Awardees are reminded that if research or other responsibilities outside the CDA-1/CDA-2 negatively impact progress on ISRM-funded work, administrative measures may be considered to resolve the situation.

Activities outside the scope of the CDA will not be a consideration for award extensions.

Mentored CDA recipients in the final two years of their support period are permitted to reduce the level of effort required for the CDA when they have competed successfully for other peer-reviewed research awards or are included as supported personnel on another investigator's award.

Budgets for a competing research grant or a subproject on a multi-project grant should request appropriate amounts for the salary and associated costs for the CDA recipient's effort.

At the time the other funding begins, the effort and salary support on the CDA may be reduced to no less than 4/8ths and replaced by effort and corresponding salary from the other award so that the total level of research commitment remains at 6/8ths or more for the duration of the mentored CDA.

The CDA must be in its final two years before the reduction in effort to 6 person months (50% full-time professional effort) is permitted.

## 12. PROGRAM CONTACTS AND MAILING ADDRESS

Inquiries about the Career Development Program should be directed to program mailbox at [VHACADEReview@va.gov](mailto:VHACADEReview@va.gov).

### **13.REFERENCES**

- a. VHA Directive 1200.19, Presentation of Research Results.
- b. VHA Directive 1400.11, Extended Educational Leave
- c. VHA Program Guide 1200.15, Eligibility for VA Research Support.
- d. VHA Program Guide 1200.16, Off-Site Research.

**APPENDIX A: CDEA APPLICATION GUIDELINES**

The Career Development Enhancement Award (CDEA) is intended for established clinician and non-clinician investigators who are advanced in their independent research careers with a record of funded, creative, innovative, and scientifically significant work, and who are interested in acquiring new knowledge and/or research skills to further innovate their research programs directed at improving the health of Veterans.

**Eligible nominees:**

- (1) Must have completed at least 8 years of Merit Review funding,
- (2) Must have a current Merit Review Award from ISRM
- (3) Must be United States citizens

**Application process:**

The research office at the nominating VA Medical Center will submit a Request for Administrative Project Modification of the active Merit Review award with the following attachments.

- (1) The Extended Educational Leave (EEL) justification document, prepared in accordance with VHA Directive 1400.11, Extended Educational Leave.

**AND** any item below that is not already covered in (1) above.

- (2) A letter from the local VAMC Human Resource Management (HRM) office must be provided indicating that the nominee is currently employed by the VAMC. The letter must indicate whether the nominee was granted educational leave by the VAMC, and the duration of the leave must be clearly stated.
- (3) A letter of support from the Associate Chief of Staff for Research (ACOS) describing how the knowledge and/or skills to be acquired by the nominee will impact the research program at the local station; whether the nominee's proposed research plan was approved by the R&D Committee, whether adequate plans were developed to cover the nominee's research and research-related responsibilities during their absence, etc.
- (4) A letter of support from the Medical Center Director (and Chief of Staff for clinicians) documenting their commitment and approval for the nominee to pursue the objectives of the CDEA (the Chief of Staff must fully assess the impact of the nominee's absence on the respective clinical service and needs of the medical center);
- (5) A letter of support from the sponsoring mentor(s) and/or co-mentor(s) detailing the available resources that will be devoted to the nominee's project, commitment in helping the nominee to achieve their stated objectives and

goals, and evidence of a well-established research program related to the nominee's area of interest.

(6) Applicant's Narrative. It is the applicant's responsibility to demonstrate the need for protected time. The narrative should:

- a. Identify at least one highly successful named sponsoring mentor with a proven track record of research and knowledge in the area, methodology, technology, or skills to be acquired, as it relates to the research proposed and evidenced by funding and publications.
- b. Clearly describe the mentor's and/or co-mentor's expertise, established funded research program, including description of a strong record of publication and mentorship.
- c. Describe the mentor's commitment to the nominee's training, particularly as it relates to how these new skills will augment the nominee's current or future research projects; how the mentor will support the nominee's training by providing access to the necessary resources (e.g., reagents, equipment, technology, etc.).
- d. Include a description of the training activities designed to reach the objectives within the proposed time frame of the award.
- e. Describe the nature and frequency of the interaction between the mentor and nominee throughout the duration of the award.
- f. Describe the facilities and resources that will support the nominee's training program; specify whether the space is in a VA or non-VA facility.
- g. Explain how the new knowledge and/or skills will enhance/expand the scope of the nominee's current Merit Review program or significantly contribute to advancing the findings from a current award for a future Merit Review application should be included. Nominees should outline their plan to acquire new knowledge and/or skills including a timeline for each objective. The objectives, aims, and significance of the research to advance health care for Veterans should be clearly stated. A description of any new knowledge and/or enhanced research-specific skills to be acquired during the award period and how these skills and experiences will enhance/expand the nominee's ability to continue their research program or advance the findings from a current award for a future Merit Review application and contribute to VA overall research capacity should be clearly articulated.
- h. A detailed plan that outlines how the applicant's current administrative (if applicable), research, and/or other responsibilities (e.g., clinical, educational, etc.) will be managed in their absence.

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- (7) Biographical Sketch for the applicant and each sponsoring mentor. In addition to highlighting only the most recent publications, presentations, and activities relevant to the proposed research activities, all current, previous (awards ending within the past 4 years), and pending research support should be included. Also, include the role in the award, title of the award, supporting agency, performance period, and level of funding for each award (e.g., direct costs only). Applicants are encouraged to describe any personal or professional reasons for serving Veterans and/or their commitment to a VA research career in their personal statement.

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APPROVED:

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