I. Introduction

The application process for a BLRD and CSRD Collaborative Merit Review application begins with the preparation and submission of a Letter of Intent (LOI). The primary purpose of the LOI is to provide BLRD and CSRD with the opportunity to determine if proposed studies will jointly address a critically important area of concern that is prevalent in the Veteran population; and whether or not the proposed studies fit within the BLRD and CSRD purview.

In addition, submission of the LOI allows BLRD and CSRD the opportunity to access and provide feedback on the clinical and/or scientific focus and design of the collaborative merit reviews, the proposed innovations, and the overall impact on the veteran population.

II. BLRD and CSRD Collaborative Merit Definition

The purpose of the RFA is to invite applications for collaborative I01 projects from multi-disciplinary and multi-site teams to transform the current state of understanding for biomedical and clinical science further and faster. This RFA is a co-announcement by both Biomedical Laboratory and Clinical Science Research and Development Services and encourages collaboration among investigators along the translational pathway. This opportunity for funding is intended to support high-impact research that is highly focused on translation of scientific findings and evidence in priority areas of VA research from the pre-clinical to clinical space with an emphasis on advancing potential healthcare solutions.

Priorities for this RFA include, but are not limited to:

- Suicidality and Suicide Prevention
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Post-Traumatic Epilepsy
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Pain Management
- Opioid Addiction
- Mental Health Conditions
- Rare head and neck cancers
- Military service exposures
For a collaborative set of collaborative IOIs, each site has its own Program Director(s)/Principal Investigators(s), and the program provides a mechanism for cross-site coordination and communication. Collaborative studies are appropriate to address research questions beyond the capacity of a single-site investigation, particularly to accommodate collaborations among sites with diverse expertise, perspectives, and contributions.

An important goal of this RFA is to accelerate translational outcomes into clinical trials; however, observational/non-interventional studies that have the potential to develop into clinical trials may be proposed. The collaborative studies may consist of any combination of clinical (including trials) and/or preclinical studies across Biomedical Laboratory or Clinical Science Research Services (i.e., combinations of all Biomedical Laboratory, all Clinical Science, or a combination of the two Research and Development Services applications). Applications should be submitted to either the Biomedical Laboratory or Clinical Science Research and Development Services according to purview. The combination of collaborative merits by Service purview should be driven by the projects proposed and is at the discretion of the team of investigators.

At least 3 applications must be submitted as part of the collaborative research project. A shared Overall Research Strategy is required for the collaborative applications. Each research application is presented individually for scientific peer review; however, the BLRD and CSRD Collaborative Merit Review Award will also evaluate the applications for their potential to contribute more than the sum of the individual IOI’s.

III. LOI Approval Considerations

The BLRD and CSRD Collaborative Merit Review LOI must:
   a. Fall within the BLRD and CSRD purviews.
   b. Address, expand, improve, or transform the understanding of the etiology, pathogenesis, and/or genetics of diseases and conditions important to the health and well-being of Veterans. The proposed overall project must have translational potential for the improvement of the healthcare of Veterans, or an individually tailored treatment that will directly improve the healthcare of Veterans.
   c. Have the potential to add to and improve the knowledge base in specific research areas.
   d. Provide BLRD and CSRD an opportunity to plan for appropriate resources that allow for an efficient and effective review process.

IV. Components of the LOI Submission

Only one LOI is required for the collaborative project. The LOI must contain the following three required components (A-C):
A. VHA Research & Development Letter of Intent Cover Page (VA Form 10-1313-13)

This form is available on the forms page of the VA Research website.

B. Completed LOI Template

The template is available on the BLRD and CSRD webpage. Please clearly and succinctly address all of the requirements.

C. PI’s Biographical Sketch

The biographical sketch template is available on the VA Research Intranet. If you cannot access the intranet, please contact your local research office. Note: As this is an LOI for a proposed Collaborative Merit Review, a biosketch of each individual project PI must be included.

V. Submission of the LOI

BLRD and CSRD will review and respond to submitted LOIs at any time; however, an LOI must be submitted no later than the date specified in the RFA. LOIs must be e-mailed to VHABLRD-CSRD@va.gov by the local VA facility research office. Applicants may not upload LOIs directly to the mailbox. Questions relating to the LOI preparation and submission process may also be directed to VHABLRD-CSRD@va.gov. Applicants are strongly encouraged to submit LOIs as early as possible.

LOIs with the following issues will be administratively withdrawn:

a. Multiple submissions on behalf of the same PI;
b. LOIs lacking the requisite information;
c. LOIs submitted by investigators that are not eligible to receive VA funding.

LOIs meeting all of the administrative requirements are subject to disapproval if:

a. Do not fall within the purview of BLRD and CSRD and/or research priority area;
b. Lacks innovation/impact or that do not address topics of interest for BLRD and CSRD;
c. Are overly represented by ongoing ORD-funded studies.

VI. Approval

The LOI approval letter must be submitted with the full application package (in the Letters of Support attachment, 08b_VA_Letters.pdf). A submitted collaborative merit application must not deviate significantly in specific aims from the original approved LOI. BLRD and CSRD may administratively withdraw from review any application that substantially deviates from what was described and approved at the LOI stage.
An approved Collaborative Merit Review LOI is valid for a maximum of three (3) submissions of an application (initial submission and up to two resubmissions) during a period that encompasses four (4) consecutive review cycles following the initial approval of the LOI.

Effective: October 2019