PEER REVIEW NOTES
September 2005

Katrina and Rita Notice for Reviewers

In reviewing an application from an institution affected by Hurricanes Katrina or Rita, you may have concerns about its resources (e.g., environment and subject populations). Please remember that applications must be judged for scientific merit and feasibility based on what was submitted. Affected institutions have already been relocated to temporary sites or have re-opened their doors; all are moving quickly to re-build their infrastructure. Further, an impressive national effort is underway to temporarily host investigators and trainees at institutions outside the affected area as needed. Concerns about resources/environment related to hurricane damage may be indicated in an SRA administrative note and should not factor into priority scores. As always, updated information submitted to the SRA in a timely manner can be considered. NIH staff will ensure that resources are available before awards are made.

Shortening the Review Cycle

A trans-NIH committee has been set up to identify ways to shorten the grant application review cycle. The goal is to give most applicants for investigator-initiated research the results of their reviews 1 ½ months earlier so they may have time—if needed—to revise their applications and resubmit in the following review round, instead of having to delay their research by 4 months and waiting out a review round. Shortening the cycle also will give the NIH institutes and centers the opportunity to sooner fund the most promising research. The Center for Scientific Review (CSR) will conduct pilots of accelerated reviews in two of its Integrated Review Groups and their 12 related study sections. Since there are many steps to the NIH grant application submission, referral, and review systems, CSR and its colleagues across NIH are looking into many different ways to shorten the review cycle while maintaining the quality of the NIH peer review system. Making better use of the electronic resources available now will play a key role.

On Time Critiques to Speed the Grants Process

The majority of CSR reviewers are now submitting their critiques via the Internet-Assisted Review (IAR) system before their meetings. This is a great help as we look to speed the NIH grants process by getting vital review results to the applicants and the NIH institutes sooner. Submitting critiques before the review meeting also helps ensure that applicants receive fair reviews. With these goals in mind, we ask all reviewers to submit their critiques via IAR before their meetings.

Electronic Review Pilots

The days it takes to travel to Washington and attend peer review meetings can be an unbearable burden for some potential reviewers, particularly those with clinical duties. CSR is working to address this burden, so we can recruit the best reviewers and NIH can fund the best science. After a favorable ruling by NIH lawyers, we are developing several electronic peer review platforms: (1) telephone enhanced discussions, (2) video enhanced discussions, and (3) asynchronous electronic discussions (electronic "chats"). We recently conducted a pilot of an online review meeting, where reviewers posted their comments about their applications, reviewer critiques, or other panel member comments on an electronic message board. This online discussion occurred over the course of several days. The reviewers then privately entered their scores online. CSR is now assessing this initial pilot and preparing to conduct varied online pilots during the current October/November 2005 review round. One online review pilot will include a short online

videoconference using remote workstation video cameras and microphones. The videoconference will focus on applications that need a face-to-face discussion.

We plan to use these new platforms (1) when it is necessary to involve the needed reviewers, such as clinical reviewers who may not be available to travel to a study section meeting; (2) when a group of reviewers indicates a preference; and (3) when it represents a new opportunity to involve highly qualified reviewers from abroad. We expect in-person reviews to remain the ideal, but CSR will seek to use the best platform for each review group so we can involve the best reviewers and help NIH fund the best research.

New Grant Application "Forms" and New Mode of Submitting Applications

NIH has announced plans to transition from the existing grant application forms (PHS 398 for most applications and PHS 416 for fellowships) to the SF424 Research and Related Form (SF424 R&R) and simultaneously transition to electronic submission through Grants.gov (http://grants.gov) by May 2007**.** Further details are found at http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-05-067.html.

These two changes will result in a number of differences in the process of both submission and review of grant applications. However, the fundamental principles of peer review will not be changed by the different "look and feel" of the grant application format.

NIH has announced the transition timeline for the following mechanisms:

- **December 1, 2005**: Small Business (R41, R42, R43, R44 and small business cooperative agreements); see this NIH Guide to Grants and Contracts notice for more details: http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-05-068.html
- **December 15, 2005**: Conferences (R13, U13)
- **February 25, 2006**: Academic Research Enhancement Awards (AREA – R15)
- **June 1, 2006**: Small Grants (R03) and Exploratory/Development Grants (R21)
- **October 1, 2006**: Research Project Grants (R01)

ALL applications submitted for these dates and afterwards, including all submissions for RFAs, PAs, PARs, and PASs, must use the SF424 (R&R) form and be submitted electronically through Grants.gov. The timetable for transitioning other grant mechanisms (career awards, program projects, fellowships, etc.) will be published at a later time with a target of 4-6 month advance notice.

To submit to any of the 26 Federal grant-awarding agencies through Grants.gov, an organization must be registered (see the Get Started section: http://www.grants.gov/GetStarted). For application submissions to NIH, both the organization and the Principal Investigator must also be registered in the NIH Commons (https://commons.era.nih.gov/commons). These are one-time-only registrations that will be valid for future submissions. Investigators and their organizations are encouraged to **start the registration process early**.

Reviewers will still use the Internet Assisted Review (IAR) process. Members of review committees will continue to receive CDs with the applications and related materials. CSR is also developing a "Print on Request" process that will allow reviewers to request printed copies of applications if they desire. While the "form pages" will be different and the order and arrangement of the information will be somewhat changed in the 424 (R&R), neither the Research Plan nor the judgments the reviewers are asked to make will be altered significantly.

> For further information about Grants.gov, the SF424 forms and related topics, go to http://era.nih.gov/ElectronicReceipt.
>
> Or direct your questions to—
>   Grants Info
>   Office of Extramural Research
>   National Institutes of Health
>
> 301-435-0714;
> Grantsinfo@nih.gov

The benefits of these changes, however, will be enormous: they will give consistency to Federal grant application submissions and provide the opportunity to shorten the time from submission to award. NIH is committed to these changes and is counting on the cooperation of investigators and their institutions.

New Payment System for Reviewers

The Scientific Review and Evaluation Award (SREA) system has been in use by the NIH for many years to manage payments for peer-reviewer expenses, including payments for hotel arrangements and reviewer honoraria, and reimbursements of their meeting related expenses. A 2004 report by the Office of Management Assessment identified vulnerabilities in the system across NIH and recommended changes that would improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and the accountability of the money spent running the peer-review system. Fundamental changes to the system are being finalized to start with meetings taking place after September 30, 2005. The system will still be known as "SREA" and will introduce the following basic changes:

1. Reviewers will no longer need to pay for their sleeping rooms and be reimbursed for these charges. Instead, sleeping rooms will be billed directly to NIH. Reviewers will still need to provide a credit card at hotel check-in to pay for ancillary fees such as internet access, movies, or any food billed to the room.
2. Reviewers will receive a "Flat-Rate" reimbursement for their meals and incidental expenses making the need for vouchers obsolete.
3. Payment of honoraria and the Flat-Rate reimbursements will be made by electronic funds transfer rather than by a paper check. This change requires reviewers to register on a U.S. Treasury Web site (Central Contractor Registration or CCR).
4. Scientific Review Administrators will utilize the services of meeting planners to aid in reserving hotels and arranging for the meeting room and sleeping room requirements for their reviewers.

More information can be found at the following Web site: www.srea.nih.gov. Please note that the meetings yet to be held in 2005 will represent a transition to the new system and that reviewers need to follow the guidance of their Scientific Review Administrators.

Two links on the SREA Web page will be of particular interest to reviewers: First, the "FAQ" link has answers to many questions that have come up since we began implementing the new system including numerous clarifications on how to get a DUNS number and register with CCR. The second link is labeled "Contact Us" which provides the opportunity to upload a comment or question about the process. The site will be monitored during business hours, and NIH will respond to your concerns. If you do not find the information you need, you may call 301-435-1131 to receive help during business hours.

We know we are asking our reviewers to take on an extra burden in the registration with CCR. We believe, however, that this one-time requirement will be more than offset by the advantages of increased efficiencies and reliabilities that will benefit everyone.

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