

Competitive Medical Research Fund (CMRF) Policies

Effective September 2026

The UPMC Health System established the Competitive Medical Research Fund (CMRF) in 1985 to provide modest research support for projects across the broad range of biomedical sciences. These funds are used to support new investigators as they conduct the preliminary studies necessary to develop the hypotheses, preliminary data, and methods that support submission of highly competitive applications to extramural funding sources.

The following pages provide important information specific to the CMRF application process, including general policy guidelines regarding applicant eligibility, regulatory committee approvals, funding levels, the application process, and the review timeline. **Carefully review these policies and address any questions to Dr. Anthony Brickner, Director, Office of Research, Health Sciences (OORHS) prior to preparing and submitting applications (Email: agb10@pitt.edu).**

Key Personnel Definitions

Principal Investigator (PI) - The individual who conceives the project and has the authority and responsibility for directing the proposed research.

Co-Investigator (Co-I) - An individual involved with the PI in the scientific development or execution of the project. A Co-I typically devotes a specified percentage of time to the project and is considered senior/key personnel. The designation of a Co-I does not alter the PI's roles and responsibilities.

Consultant - An individual who provides professional advice or services but is not part of the scientific development or execution of a project.

General Eligibility Requirements

CMRF awards provide funds for relatively junior, independent scientists from the University of Pittsburgh to develop the hypotheses, preliminary data, and methods necessary to successfully compete for extramural biomedical funding.

Applicants must fulfill the following **eligibility requirements**:

- The applicant must hold an academic faculty rank of at least Assistant Professor or Research Assistant Professor. **Full professors, post-doctoral researchers, instructors, and clinical fellows are ineligible for CMRF funding.** Applications from Associate Professors will be considered only if they can convincingly demonstrate that they have very recently begun independent research activities. Applicants whose primary appointments are not in the Schools of the Health Sciences may apply if the proposed project has clear health/biomedical relevance.
- **Previous recipients of HHS (e.g., NIH, AHRQ, CDC) R01 or K99/R00 funding are ineligible to apply for CMRF funding. Previous recipients of American Cancer Society (ACS) Research Scholar Grants are also ineligible to apply for CMRF funding.**
- An applicant's current and previous **external** research support (e.g., support awarded for supplies, salaries for technical personnel, or equipment) must not exceed a total of \$250K direct costs. The PI's salary support and fringe benefits, as well as postdoctoral awards, are not counted toward this total. Up to two career development awards other than K99/R00

awards and ACS Research Scholar Grants may be excluded from these totals (see below for NIH K awards).

- **Previous recipients of CMRF funding as PI are ineligible to apply as the PI on another CMRF award.**
- **Multi-PI applications are ineligible for CMRF funding.**
- Applicants need not be U.S. citizens to be eligible for CMRF funding. If an investigator is an Assistant Professor who previously had an appointment at a rank no higher than Assistant Professor (or equivalent) at a foreign institution, an exception may be made to the “\$250K limit.” Specifically, if significant foreign awards were made that are not portable to the U.S. and for which there is limited ongoing activity on the part of the CMRF applicant, the applicant will be eligible for consideration as a new investigator. Questions about eligibility should be directed to Dr. Brickner.

CMRF Eligibility and NIH K Awards

Investigators who have received NIH career development awards other than the K99/R00 award (*e.g.*, K01, K08, and K23), or similar awards from private foundations that primarily provide salary support with limited funds for supplies, technical personnel, and equipment may be eligible to apply for a CMRF award if the proposed research focus is different from the career development award. The applicant must clearly demonstrate that the research proposed in the CMRF application is different from, though it may be related to, research outlined in the K/career development application. Similarly, the recipient of a career development award from an organization other than NIH may not request CMRF funding for the funded project; funds may be requested for a related project. Investigators must submit the NIH abstract of their K (or other career development) application as an appendix and must explicitly address differences between the two research projects in item #2 of the Eligibility Clarification Page (page 4 of the CMRF Application Packet).

Application

CMRF awards will support direct costs only; no indirect support will be provided. The monies awarded may not be used for salary support for the PI or any other named faculty rank investigator, but investigator effort on the proposed CMRF project must be entered on the budget page and must be cost shared by the department or other entity that will support such effort. The CMRF Cost Sharing Agreement Page must be signed by the PI’s department chair or appropriate responsibility center director (*e.g.*, division chief or institute director) who can authorize cost sharing against an Entity-02 or -04 institutional account. This signature certifies acceptance of PI cost shared effort. The institutional account number against which the effort will be charged must be provided. Applicants who are currently a recipient of a mentored career development award (*e.g.*, K12, K23, *etc.*) may subsume the effort devoted to their CMRF project under the career development award as long as the proposed CMRF project is consistent with the career development award. Please contact Dr. Brickner for verification of eligibility to subsume effort related to this announcement.

General Policies and Guidelines

Applicant and Key Personnel Guidelines

In any given application cycle, an applicant may be the PI on only one CMRF application. A CMRF applicant (PI) may serve as Co-I on no more than one additional CMRF application in a given cycle. If not an applicant (PI) in the round, an individual may serve as a Co-I or consultant on no more than two CMRF applications in a given cycle.

Biosketches (NIH common form) are required for the PI and each Co-I listed in Key Personnel. “Other Support” information (which must include annual direct costs and duration of the award) is required for the PI. In addition, applicants who work within the laboratory of a more senior investigator must include a biosketch and Other Support information for this person, even if the more senior investigator is not listed as a Co-Investigator on the CMRF project. During the review process, OORHS may request funding information from additional individuals, including, but not limited to, consultants and mentors. Please note that the term “Mentor” is reserved for appropriate individuals cited in an applicant’s career development award application (*e.g.*, K award).

IACUC, IBC, IRB, hESCRO, and CORID Approvals

Applicants may not submit copies of approved Institutional Review Board (IRB), Institutional Animal Care & Use Committee (IACUC), Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC), human Stem Cell Research Oversight Committee (hSCRO), or Committee for Oversight of Research and Clinical Training Involving Decedents (CORID) protocols with their CMRF applications. Inclusion of such supplemental materials would provide unfair advantage for applicants whose protocols include additional experimental or other descriptive information. **Please note, however, that in the event that the CMRF application is funded, OORHS must have copies of approval letters from all applicable regulatory offices at the University of Pittsburgh before funds can be released. Obtaining such approvals for a project may take several weeks, and in some cases longer.** These approvals must be specific for the CMRF grant application submitted and the PI on the CMRF application must be the named PI on the protocol. The use of IACUC, IBC, IRB, hSCRO and/or CORID approval for research projects other than those proposed in the grant application is not permitted and will result in a delay in awarding CMRF funds until the appropriate approvals are obtained and submitted to OORHS.

Funding Levels and Award Periods

The standard CMRF award is up to \$30,000, to be expended over a period of up to 24 months. However, a maximum of \$50,000 may be requested if the PI makes a compelling case that the proposed goals cannot be achieved with the standard \$30,000 award. Justification for an award of over \$30,000 will be reviewed carefully as part of the merit evaluation of the application.

If the costs of the proposed project would exceed the CMRF award, the source of funds that will enable the completion of the project must be specified.

Frequency and Timing of Solicitations

Annual solicitations will be issued each September, with an early January deadline for submission of applications and a July 1 award date (pending approval of relevant regulatory protocols) for selected applications.

Pre-review Process

OORHS staff will perform preliminary evaluation of all submitted applications to ensure adherence to CMRF policies and instructions. Applications deemed incomplete, or those not following the directions outlined in these Policies and the CMRF Grant Application Instructions, will be withdrawn from consideration without review or appeal. There will be no opportunity for applicants to provide supplementary materials after the submission deadline, unless specifically requested by OORHS.

Procedure for Review

The CMRF Review Committee reviews all eligible applications. This committee is composed of scientists from within the University of Pittsburgh, UPMC, and local Veterans Administration medical science communities. At least two reviewers with relevant expertise will provide written critiques for any given application, and those applications scored by reviewers within the top 50% of applications received will be discussed. If additional expertise is needed for a given application, reviews are solicited from *ad hoc* reviewers. The committee has responsibility for evaluating each application, for providing written critiques of each application, and for making recommendations for awards to OORHS and to the UPMC Board of Directors.

Review Criteria

The most important review criteria for all applications are **scientific merit, health or biomedical relevance, need for funding, and the potential for subsequent peer-reviewed major grant support**. Reviewers also evaluate applications for **grantsmanship** and **completeness**.

Independence of the junior faculty member is also a key review criterion. If the CMRF application is for research that is an extension of an ongoing project (for which either the applicant or someone else is the PI), the applicant must indicate how the proposed project differs from the ongoing project. In addition, applicants who work in the laboratory of a senior investigator must clearly indicate how funding will be used for an independent research project and not merely to fund the project or personnel of the senior investigator. It is incumbent upon the applicant to convince the reviewers that the research differs significantly from that of the senior investigator. A letter from the department chairperson demonstrating **departmental commitment** to the career development of the applicant is a required component of the application, and demonstration of this commitment will be one of the criteria used in evaluating the application.