

**GUIDANCE FOR REQUESTING ACCEPTANCE INTO THE BIOMEDICAL
LABORATORY R&D (BLRD) PROGRAM FOR NON-CLINICIAN SCIENTISTS
(Eligibility)**

UPDATED 10/1/2021

1. This Guidance supplements and supports VHA Handbook 1202.1—Merit Review Award Program (specifically, para. 4, section a – Eligibility to submit a Merit Review proposal). This Guidance does not apply for entry to clinical Science (CSR/D), Rehabilitation (RRD) or Health Service R&D (HSRD)

2. **Mission Statement:** VA research is an intramural program. The goal of the non-clinician eligibility program is to allow local research services to recruit highly qualified scientist to enhance its research environment and to conduct research to advance Veterans' health.

3. **Duration of eligibility:** General acceptance into the BLRD non-clinician intramural program is granted for three years. The Principal Investigator of a current BLRD Merit Award, a BLRD Research career Scientist (RCS) or a Senior RCS is considered eligible, and for three years beyond the end date of either the Merit Review project(s) or Research Career Scientist (RCS) term. However, if an investigator's Merit Review Award or Research Career Scientist (RCS) funding has lapsed for three years, the investigator must reapply for eligibility. A person who has left the VA must re-apply for eligibility. A no-cost extension of an award does not extend the duration of eligibility. Funding through any other VA ORD Service (CSR/D, RRD, HSRD) does not confer eligibility to submit applications to BLRD.

4. **Who may apply:** An applicant need not be a current VA employee. However it is required that individuals, who are approved for VA funding will accept a paid VA appointment (minimum of 5/8ths), conduct their research at the VA Medical Center, participate in the activities of the local research service, and be available for national service, such as service on VA merit review panels.

An applicant must be a current U.S. citizen to submit an application for acceptance into the non-clinician eligibility program. If an applicant is not yet a U.S. citizen, but is on a clear path towards citizenship, s/he must submit documentation from the Immigration and Naturalization Service to show a firm date for citizenship interview or swearing in as a U.S. citizen.

This program is only for non-clinician investigators with a doctoral degree (PhD or equivalent).

This program is not for clinicians. The BLRD Service considers a clinician as a licensed practitioner with a doctoral degree (MD, DO, DDS, etc.) who treats patients at a VA Medical Center (VAMC). Please refer to VHA Handbook 1202.1 for further guidance. **(NOTE: For budgetary purposes, a clinician may not request salary from a Merit Review Award.**

Applicants who are junior investigators and early in their faculty appointments are encouraged to apply. A junior investigator must be within 10 years of obtaining a doctoral degree and be an independent PI. Junior investigators will be evaluated separately from established investigators in the eligibility process.

5. **What to submit**: An eligibility request package consists of:

- a. The cover page (**please use template provided**) must provide information about the applicant and reaffirm his/her desired to join the VA intramural research program. The cover letter must be signed by the applicant, the ACOS/Research, Chief of Staff, and Medical Center Director.
- b. The nomination letter is a memo addressed to the BLRD Director and signed by the ACOS/Research. This letter must address the following elements:
 - i. confirms that the applicant is a non-clinician (i.e., not licensed to practice)
 - ii. confirm that the applicant, if funded through BLRD Merit Review, will accept a VA appointment of at least 5/8ths and conduct the VA funded research in VA space.
 - iii. explain how the applicant will add to the vitality and capabilities of the local research program and how the applicant's work may contribute to VA's programmatic interest, in addition to the training of VA clinician-scientists.
- c. A description of the research to be submitted in an application for Merit Review Award Program; the proposed research description is limited to one page and must include the following:
 - i. The significance and long-term goal of the proposed project/study.
 - ii. The objective of the study or the hypotheses to be tested.
 - iii. An explanation of clinical relevance and relevance to Veterans' care issues.
 - iv. The Specific aims of the study.
- d. A full Curriculum Vitae (CV) to include the following:
 - i. All past and present academic appointments with inclusive dates.
 - ii. All past (last 10 years), present, and pending research support with inclusive dates, applicant's role (e.g., PI, co-I), award type (e.g., R01, R21, K08), project title, grant number, and a brief description of the overall focus of the research.
 - iii. A list of all peer-reviewed publications including those in-press.
 - iv. A description of any life events which explain breaks in positions, publications, or support may be included.
- e. Proof of citizenship if the applicant was not born in the U.S. For a naturalized citizen, a black-and-white copy of the naturalization certificate must be included. For a person born on an overseas U.S. military base, appropriate documentation should be supplied.

Please combine items 5a, b, c, and d above into one PDF document, titled "Nomination for Non-Clinician Entry: (nominee's full name).

Item 5e, if needed, should be in a separate PDF document titled "Proof of Citizenship for (nominee's full name). This will be kept confidential and not forwarded to reviewers.

6. **When to submit**: The deadline for the Spring round is **December 1st** of the previous year with the submission window opening on November 1st. The deadline for the Fall round is **June 1st** of the same year with the submission window opening on May 1st. All request packages, including the nomination letter template with the required signatures, are due on these dates. **Nominations submitted outside the dates stated above will not be accepted.**

7. **How to submit:** All the requested documents should be submitted to the official eligibility mailbox at VHACOBLRDCSRDEligibility@va.gov
Please do not send nomination packages encrypted.

8. **Evaluation:** Nominations will be evaluated twice a year by a review panel convened under the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) consisting of senior VA and non-VA scientists. Evaluations will be made on the basis of the applicant's qualifications and potential for enhancing Veterans' care and the VA Medical Research Program. The FACA review panel's recommendation will be forwarded to the BLRD Service Director for approval. Acceptance is determined by the Director based on the evaluation of the review panel, programmatic balance, relevance to the priorities of the VA and the potential of the investigator to advance Veterans' health.

Successful nominees in recent years typically have strength in three or more of the following attributes:

- a. Research Vitality and independence
 - i. Principal Investigator in one or more currently funded research grants/awards from national agencies (i.e National Institutes, National Science Foundation, American Heart Association).
 - ii. Senior or corresponding author in the majority of original manuscripts, published in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals.
 - iii. Upward career trajectory, as evidenced by a rapid rise in ranks and responsibility within their institution of primary appointment.
- b. Alignment with VA Mission, as supported by a research narrative, hypothesis, and specific aims that are both viable and address current VA research topics to advance the health of Veterans. Current focus areas include: Suicide, Post traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Gulf War and other deployment related illnesses, opioid addiction and precision oncology.
- c. History of, or a potential for, significant contribution to the National or local VA program, as evidenced by leadership in a local program, committee service (national and local) and/or mentorship of VA clinician-scientists.

9. **Questions:** Questions may be addressed to Dr. Mario Rinaudo, M.D at mario.rinaudo@va.gov
or at VHACOBLRDCSRDEligibility@va.gov