

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Academic Affiliations
Washington, DC

PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT

**Predoctoral Associated Health Rehabilitation Research Fellowship
Program for Academic Year 2009-2010**

1. PURPOSE

This program announcement provides background information, policies, and procedures to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities and eligible students for submitting applications to the Office of Academic Affiliations (OAA) for approval as a Predoctoral Associated Health Rehabilitation Research Fellowship Program site and approval of a fellow at the approved site.

The purpose of this fellowship program is to facilitate doctoral level research with direct relevance to the rehabilitation of Veterans with disabilities and to enhance rehabilitation research capacity within VA. Providing an opportunity for interested students to develop expertise in clinical research will prepare fellows to assume leadership roles in rehabilitation research and clinical care after receiving doctoral degrees.

The fellowships are designed for graduate students who have completed doctoral course work in a rehabilitation-related health discipline, broadly defined, and who are prepared to work on basic science or clinical dissertation research relevant to recovery of function from disabling diseases or injuries of Veterans.¹ Students pursuing doctorates in health sciences such as engineering, kinesiology, neurosciences, nursing, occupational and physical therapy, psychology, and speech and hearing sciences, among others, are encouraged to apply. Up to 10 fellowships may be awarded.

2. GENERAL BACKGROUND

VA Rehabilitation Research supports investigations pursuing improved functional independence and quality of life for Veterans with disabling conditions experienced as a consequence of trauma or disease. Areas of high research priority include amputations, orthopedics, orthotics, and prosthetics; dementia and cognitive disorders; geriatric rehabilitation; mobility; rehabilitation outcomes; serious psychiatric disorders; single or multiple impairments of

¹ *To be relevant to VA care of Veterans, a clinical research project should involve a Veteran population. However, there are situations in which inclusion of non-Veteran populations would be appropriate:*

(1) The study compares an intervention with a Veteran population and a non-Veteran population. Studies that compare VA to non-VA care are acceptable.

(2) The local sample is not large enough to provide adequate statistical power. Thus, a sample from a VA nursing home may need to be supplemented with a community-based sample to provide adequate statistical power. An additional justification for a non-Veteran sample might be to have an adequate number of women or minority patients in the sample.

(3) The study intervention or measurement tool is not available at a VA site, yet is relevant to a Veteran population. Generally, the goal in these studies is to show that the intervention or measurement tool is efficacious in a non-VA site before incurring the high cost of implementing a pilot at a VA site.

vision, hearing, and communications; spinal cord injury and other neurologic disorders; and traumatic brain injury.

VA has a significant need for doctorally prepared researchers in rehabilitation and a mission of assisting in the education of health professionals for VA and the nation. Many VA employees are prior VA trainees and this program may provide an excellent recruitment pool.

3. POLICY

a. Fellows must agree to a full-time (40 hours per week) appointment at a VA facility during the fellowship period. Funding for this fellowship starts October 1, 2009. However, upon request, OAA will approve funds to start in August or September to coincide with the academic year.

b. Completion of proposed research must be achievable within the one-year time frame of the fellowship program and must be relevant to VA care of Veterans with disabilities. VA relevance generally means including VA patients or using VA databases in the research sample. (See footnote on page one.)

c. The annual stipend for the Predoctoral Associated Health Rehabilitation Research Fellowship Program is \$26,330 (\$12.66 per hour) or more, depending on locality adjustment. OAA will provide approved VA facilities with funding for stipends, VA's share (7.65%) of Federal Insurance Contribution Act (FICA), and VA's share of health and life insurance premiums. Fellows must pay the employee's portion of premiums for these programs.

d. Other expenses connected with the fellow's recruitment, educational activities, or travel must be funded from other sources. There are no funds available for paying research participants.

e. Fellows accepted into this program must identify their VA appointments in all reports, publications, and presentations that are related to the fellowship and the supported research. Failure to do so may result in termination of the fellowship award or program by OAA. Fellows should provide OAA with abstracts for all publications and presentations based on the supported research. These may be posted on the OAA website.

f. There is no employment obligation following completion of the fellowship program, but fellows are strongly encouraged to seek VA employment and VA facilities are encouraged to employ them whenever possible.

4. VA FACILITY ELIGIBILITY

a. The VA facility must have resources, environment, and clinical programs to support proposed research of the applicant. The facility should be committed to supporting the career path of the fellow whenever possible.

b. The fellowship program director must be a VA employee and will be responsible for administrative oversight of the program. Doctoral preparation is desired but not required. The program director may, but does not have to, be the primary preceptor.

c. The preceptor must be doctorally prepared and have research and clinical expertise relevant to the applicant's research proposal. The preceptor may be a VA employee at the facility or on the faculty at the university, holding a paid or without compensation (WOC) appointment at the VA facility.

d. The VA facility must have a current affiliation agreement with the academic program of the applicant before the fellowship program begins. The academic program must be accredited by the nationally recognized accrediting body for the health care discipline.

5. APPLICANT ELIGIBILITY

a. Applicants must be United States citizens. No exceptions will be approved.

b. Applicant must be enrolled in a doctoral program in a rehabilitation health care discipline. Applicant must be classified as a doctoral candidate, have completed the doctoral program's required coursework, and passed the comprehensive examination prior to the beginning of funding. If the applicant does not meet these requirements at the time of application, a letter from the academic program should be included with the application to explain what the applicant must do to obtain candidate status, when the coursework will be completed, and when the comprehensive examination will be given. The letter should also state the expectation that these requirements will be met by the intended start date of the fellowship program. An applicant who is selected for the fellowship program will not be allowed to start the program until documentation is received by the Office of Academic Affiliations that the requirements have been met.

c. Proposed research must be

(1) relevant to VA care of Veterans. (See footnote on page one.)

(2) able to be completed within the one-year time frame of the fellowship.

(3) approved by the applicant's graduate school dissertation committee, the VA's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the VA facility's Research and Development (R&D) Committee. If it is not possible to obtain approval by the dissertation committee, the IRB, and the VA R&D Committee prior to submission of the application, letters should be included from appropriate officials indicating that approval is anticipated prior to October 1, 2009. Documentation of approval must be sent to OAA as soon as possible.

(4) If selected, the applicant may not begin the fellowship until OAA receives documentation from the academic program or the VA facility that these have been accomplished.

6. APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

a. A **Letter of Intent** to submit a proposal must be submitted to OAA by **May 1, 2009**. The purpose of this letter is to allow OAA to develop a panel of reviewers with expertise in the content area of the proposal. The letter is to be entered electronically on OAA's **Intranet** site, http://vaww.oaa.med.va.gov/AH_REHAB_RFPs/. (Please note – the entries must be made from within the VA firewall). Each applicant will need to sign in using an e-mail address and a password. The following information will comprise the Letter of Intent.

(1) Applicant's name

(2) Applicant's university and graduate department

(3) Name of VA Fellowship Program Director

(4) Name of Preceptor

(5) A brief, succinct statement of the content area and goals of the research

b. The full proposal must be submitted electronically by **May 28, 2009**. The full proposal will be uploaded at the same OAA web site as the Letter of Intent, http://vawww.oaa.med.va.gov/AH_REHAB_RFPS/.

c. The application **must not exceed 30 pages** including the transmittal memorandum, core narrative, and appendices and must contain the information listed below. Curricula vitae do not count toward the page limit. Pages must have at least one-inch margins all around and the font size must be no smaller than 11 point Times Roman or Arial/Helvetica font or no smaller than 12 characters per inch if using Courier font.

- (1) Transmittal letter from the facility Director stating:
 - (a) that the facility is prepared to support the fellowship program.
 - (b) that the research proposal has been approved by the local IRB, Research and Development Committee, and appropriate subcommittees. If this approval is pending, state current status and expected date of approval. Documentation of approval must be sent to OAA as soon as possible.
 - (c) the name, routing symbol, e-mail address, telephone number and fax number of the fellowship program director at the VA facility and the preceptor.
- (2) Brief, **one page** summary of the proposed project, highlighting the questions being addressed, methodology, and relevance to the VA healthcare mission.
- (3) Core narrative, not exceeding 20 pages, with the following information:
 - (a) Applicant's name and background, including undergraduate education, graduate education, name of dissertation advisor and chair.
 - (b) Description of the proposed research including:
 - Title of the project
 - Introduction and statement of problem
 - Research questions or hypotheses
 - Background and brief literature review
 - Design and methodology, including instrumentation and procedures
 - Data analysis plan
 - (c) Statement of how the proposed research is relevant to VA care of Veterans with disabilities.
 - (d) Statement of how research results might be useful to researchers, managers, clinicians, and Veterans.
 - (e) Proposed time line for completion of major stages of the research process.
 - (f) Name and title of proposed preceptor, brief description of the preceptor's background as related to proposed research and record of mentoring rehabilitation professionals. Curriculum vitae should be included in appendix and does not count toward page limit.
 - (g) List of names, position titles, and roles or contributions of individuals in the VA facility who will collaborate with the preceptor in providing clinical and research opportunities for the fellow.

- (h) Description of VA facility resources and environment that demonstrate support for the applicant's research activities. Commitment of the VA facility to support the fellow after dissertation completion is strongly encouraged.
- (4) Appendices, which **must not exceed 15 pages**.
- (a) Biographical sketch, résumé, or curriculum vitae of program director, preceptor, and applicant. These are not included in page limit, but brief biographical sketches are much preferred to lengthy vitae.
- (b) Letter from chairperson of the graduate department where the applicant is enrolled stating that:
- the applicant is a doctoral candidate or is expected to be by October 1 or the beginning of the fellowship and what remains to be achieved for this status;
 - the applicant is ready or expected to be ready by October 1 to pursue research for the dissertation; and
 - the applicant's research design has been approved by a dissertation committee or is anticipated to be approved by October 1, 2009.
- (c) Letter from the VA facility Research Office stating that the dissertation research proposal has been approved by the local IRB, Research and Development Committee, and any appropriate subcommittees. If approval is pending, current status and anticipated date of approval should be stated. Documentation of approval must be submitted as soon as possible.
- (d) Letter from the VA facility Designated Education Officer (DEO) indicating knowledge and support of the application.
- (e) Letters of support and other relevant information. Include letters of support from the proposed fellowship program director, the preceptor, other individuals who will be involved in the fellowship program, and the VA facility clinical leader of the applicant's profession.

7. REVIEW PROCESS

- a. Proposals will be reviewed by an ad-hoc committee of scientists, researchers, educators, and clinicians selected by OAA.
- b. The following criteria will be used for evaluating the applications:
- (1) VA Facility (25 points)
- (a) Resources and environment of the host VA facility showing research and clinical care programs supportive of the applicant's research proposal.
- (b) Evidence of a commitment from the VA facility and affiliated institution to support the career path of the Predoctoral fellow. (Commitment of VA facility to support fellow after dissertation completion is strongly encouraged.)
- (c) Preceptor's track record in area of research as demonstrated by publications, awards, and previously funded research.
- (d) Preceptor's previous experience in mentoring.

- (2) Applicant (25 Points)
 - (a) Professional and research record to date
 - (b) Proposed career goals
 - (c) Evidence of dedication to the care of Veterans
- (3) Research Proposal (50 Points)
 - (a) Scientific merit of proposed research questions, design, and methodology
 - (b) Relevance and applicability to the rehabilitation of Veterans with disabilities
 - (c) Able to be completed in 1-year time frame of the fellowship program

8. PROGRAM EVALUATION

a. The Rehabilitation Research Predoctoral Fellowship Program must be evaluated at the end of the fiscal year by each fellow, the host VA facility staff, and the preceptors. Evaluation criteria for this program will include the following:

- (1) Completion of fellow's program and attainment of the fellow's goals and objectives
- (2) Fellow's satisfaction with the program
- (3) Preceptor's satisfaction with fellow's role, fellow's progress, and the program in general
- (4) Facility leadership (Chief of Staff, Associate Chief of Staff for Education or Research, Clinical Service Chief) satisfaction with the program and its impact on the VA facility
- (5) Recommendations for program improvement
- (6) The outcome of the fellow's dissertation research and potential utilization in the care of Veterans
- (7) Recruitment of the fellow to VA employment or continuing involvement with VA activities

b. Evaluation reports will be submitted to the Office of Academic Affiliations (14) before completion of the program.

c. Fellows should send OAA a copy of all publications and an abstract of all posters and presentations based on the VA supported research. These may be posted on the OAA web site or cited in VA public affairs documents.

9. APPOINTMENT AND PAY

a. The per annum training rate for the Predoctoral Associated Health Rehabilitation Research Fellowship Program is \$26,330 or more, depending on locality adjustment. OAA will provide approved VA facilities with funding for stipends, VA's share (7.65%) of Federal Insurance Contribution Act (FICA), and VA's share of health and life insurance premiums. Fellows must pay the employee's portion of the premiums. Other expenses connected with the fellow's recruitment, educational activities, or travel must be funded from other sources.

b. Appointments will be made under 38 U.S.C. 7405(a)(1) for a period not to exceed one year with termination at the end of the one-year training period. Actual salaries for these Predoctoral fellows will be the proportionate amount of the above cited per annum training rate determined in the manner prescribed by VA Handbook 5007, Part II, Chapter 2, paragraph 2.m. For PAID coding purposes, these fellows will be identified by the use of Pay Plan, N; Series Code, 0601; Title Code, 54; Assignment Code, T5; Title, Rehabilitation Research Trainee; Subaccount, 1051; FTE, 0.5; Grade/Step, 00/N.

c. Predoctoral fellows may be detailed to other educational institutions without loss of pay, but not for more than one-sixth of the time of their fellowship. (*Reference: VA Handbook 5007, Part II, Chapter 2, Paragraph 2.m.*)

d. General Schedule annual and sick leave policy applies to fellows under this program. Fellows are eligible for life and health insurance benefits. Fellows should be strongly encouraged to use their annual leave before the end of the fellowship program so a lump-sum payment for accrued annual leave will not be required. The Office of Academic Affiliations pays for stipend support, but not for lump-sum payment for unused leave.

e. Fellows are eligible for life and health insurance benefits but are required to pay the employee's portion of the premium.

f. Fellows will be protected from personal liability while providing professional services at a VA health care facility under the Federal Employees Liability Reform and Tort Compensation Act, 28 U.S.C. 2679 (b)-(d).

10. SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS AND CONTACT

The full proposal should be submitted electronically on the OAA web site, http://vaww.oaa.med.va.gov/AH_REHAB_RFPs/. **The proposal must be submitted by May 28, 2009.** Applications submitted after May 28 will not be reviewed.

Questions regarding this program announcement should be referred to Robert A. Zeiss, Ph.D., Director of Associated Health Education, Office of Academic Affiliations, at Robert.Zeiss@va.gov or at 202.461-9493 or to Debbie Singh at Dilpreet.Singh@va.gov or 202-461-9491

11. SCHEDULE

Letter of Intent due in OAA	May 1, 2009
Application due in OAA	May 28, 2009
VA facilities notified of approval or non-approval	July 20, 2009
Fellowship begins (unless all approval criteria are not met or unless an August or September funding is approved by OAA)	October 1, 2009
Evaluation report due to OAA	September 30, 2010, or on final day of fellowship