



Merit Review Training

Merit Reviews

What is a Merit Review?

A Merit Review is a process that involves the thorough and consistent examination of applications based on an unbiased evaluation of scientific or technical merits or other relevant aspects of the proposal.

Purpose of a Merit Review

To provide a fair and credible forum for making sure that only the applicants who offer the greatest potential for furthering the program's goals, objectives, and purpose are selected for funding.



Outcomes and Other Purposes for the Review Process

- Provide an evaluation on the merits of an application submitted, based on the criteria/guidelines provided in the IHS Grants Notice of Funding Opportunity.
- Provide recommendations for possible funding of the recipient application to the IHS Program Staff.
- Provide technical assistance and feedback to potential IHS recipients on the strengths and weaknesses of their proposed project.
- The results of the merit review are of an advisory nature. The program office and approving official make the final determination for funding.



Policy

- Merit Reviews must be viewed as credible and fair.
- Any circumstance that might introduce a conflict of interest, or the appearance thereof, or of prejudices, biases, or predispositions into the process must be avoided.
- Merit Reviews are performed by experts in the field of endeavor for which support is requested.

Pre-award requirements are located at 45 CFR part 75 subpart C.



I Can Be A Reviewer

- As a supplement to any of the above review mechanisms, an individual(s) who possesses particular knowledge or expertise pertinent to an application or group of applications **may be used as a consultant/reviewer to review and provide advice with respect to the application(s).**
- Use of such an individual is subject to applicable federal regulations and policies, including standards of conduct, conflict of interest statutes, and policies governing the use of consultants, whether the services are obtained through the personnel process or the acquisition process.



I Can Be A Reviewer

- Nominations for reviewers may originate at any organizational level. The Grants Management Office may provide support and advice to the Program Office, but cannot make the final determination.
- The appointing official may approve the use of individual consultants.
- The official responsible for selecting reviewers; the appointing official, should be from the cognizant program office.



I Can Be A Reviewer

In addition, no two non-federal individuals reviewing a group of applications may be from the same organization or institution.

When selecting reviewers and determining whether to use federal or non-federal personnel, the appointing official must consider:

- whether a specific type of reviewer is mandated by statute or regulation;
- the type(s) of knowledge and expertise required;
- the availability of qualified reviewers to complete the entire review process;
- the peer reviewer may not have any direct relationship with the applicant organization,
- and may not have any conflict of interest in the award of a grant to that organization.



Who Cannot Become A Reviewer

Individuals with the following types of functions or having the specified interests **may not serve as a reviewer** for a particular application or group of applications:

- The award approving official;
- Any IHS employee responsible for encouraging the submission of the application(s);
- Any IHS employee who has provided substantive pre-application advice or technical assistance to an applicant;
- Any IHS employee who may later serve as a Project Officer (PO) for an award resulting from the NOFO or application;



Who Cannot Become A Reviewer

- Any IHS employee of the servicing grants management office;
- Any IHS employee or other individual responsible for making post-award assessments of project performance or recipient compliance (including audits);
- Any IHS employee (including special government employees as defined in 18 U.S.C. 202(a) and 5 CFR 2635.102(l)) with a real or apparent conflict of interest in an application.
- Any IHS employee who might be substantially involved in the project under a resulting cooperative agreement;



Who Cannot Be A Reviewer

If the employee's financial interest is employment in a position with the potential applicant organization; or,

Any consultant, whether in a direct relationship with the IHS or serving as a consultant to an organization under contract to the IHS, who has a conflict of interest with respect to an application. The conflict of interest may be actual or apparent, and may be based on an employment relationship, professional relationship, personal relationship, or business relationship with an applicant organization and/or the proposed PI/PD, or other project personnel.



Federal Employees As Reviewers

The cognizant program office officials **CANNOT** serve as reviewers on proposals funded out of their respective offices.

A Federal employee may be from an office within the Indian Health Service considering the application for funding **other than** the cognizant program office.

Example:

OPHS - Apples and Oranges Health Review

*** An OPHS staff person cannot serve as a reviewer***



Who Cannot Be A Reviewer

- In addition, no two non-federal individuals reviewing a group of applications may be from the same organization or institution.
- Any IHS employee who reviews or evaluates an application in any capacity as part of his or her official duties and responsibilities.
- The above exclusions apply to any individual currently performing the functions, who has performed those functions within the 12 months immediately preceding the review, or an individual serving as a line of authority over an individual with those functions.



Conduct Of The Merit Review Committee (MRC)

- The merit review must be performed as soon as possible after each application submission deadline (including those for single-source applications required to undergo merit review) or acceptance for review of an application based on an unsolicited request for funding.
- The Division of Grants Management (DGM) is responsible for establishing all “Key Dates” for the award process; such as the Application Deadline Date, Merit Review Date, Earliest Anticipated State Date for applications etc.
- Dates will be determined based on the overall workload of processing all awards for IHS for the current fiscal year.



Who Are The MRC Members

Chairperson

- Presides over the MRC meeting;
- a non-voting member of the MRC;
- prepares the Executive Summary Statements.

Program Official

- Serves as an advisor on programmatic related issues.

NOTE: POs are not allowed to provide any information that would create a bias in the minds of the Reviewers. No comments or personal knowledge of the applicants can be shared.



Who Are The MRC Members? (cont'd)

Grants Management Specialist

- Provides orientation to the MRC;
- Ensures that the MRC is a fair and credible process and;
- Serves as an advisor on grants management related issues.

Reviewers

The MRC panel includes 3 or more reviewers who are professionally and technically qualified to conduct the merit review



Reviewers

- Each Reviewer will evaluate all applications on their panel, except those with which they have a conflict of interest
- Evaluation includes reading all of the application, providing comments demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, and providing scores based on those comments
- Reviewers are expected to use the same level of effort on each application
- The Chair will determine the order the applications will be discussed, and the order Reviewers will present their evaluations of each application



Reviewers

- The first reviewer to present on an application will introduce the application to the panel
- Each reviewer will review the entire application
- Conducts a thorough critique of all strengths and weaknesses of the application
- Participate in discussion based on their critique



The results of the merit review are of an advisory nature. The program office and approving official make the final determination for funding.



Prior to MRC Meeting

Reviewers should read the entire MRC package, noting responsibilities, expectations and timelines.

Reviewers must sign the Conflict of Interest - Confidentiality form, indicate which, if any, applicants pose a conflict / potential conflict for them and submit the form to the Program Official.

The MRC and panel(s) will be configured in the Application Review Module (ARM), and login details will be distributed to all users by ARM.



Applications

All reviewers will have access to each application via ARM. All reviewers are expected to enter scores and comments on each application in their panel.

Training for the ARM website will be provided during the Review Kick-off call.

Documentation for ARM is available via the Support and Reference Documents link on the ARM website.



Kick-Off Call

The MRC kick-off call has three parts:

- The Division of Grants Management will provide an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the committee participants, the expectations of each participant, and the guidelines for the review
- The Program Office will provide an overview of the program, will describe key points in the evaluation criteria, and examples of the quality of comments expected
- The ARM team will provide a demonstration of ARM for reviewers and the chair, and answer any technical questions any participant has



Discussion Calls

The chair is responsible for scheduling discussion calls during the review period. Each call should cover 3 – 5 applications. Scheduling the calls in this manner helps reviewers manage their time.

The chair determines the order in which the applications are discussed, and the order in which the reviewers present on each application.

The chair will ensure anyone with a conflict of interest is not on the call while that application is being discussed.

All reviewers assigned to a panel must join each discussion call.

Only discuss information presented in the application (no assumptions).

Individual scores are kept confidential (only discuss score ranges).



Scoring Applications

** Reviewers **must** make sure that their numeric scores are supported by the strengths and weakness outlined in their critiques.

Notes:

A high application score **must** be reflected by numerous strengths in the critique, and a low application score **must** be reflected by numerous weaknesses in the critique.



Scoring Applications cont'd

- Reviewers cannot re-write the proposal. **It must be scored as is** based on the content of the application and the Notice of Funding Opportunity guidance.
- Reviewers can only make recommendations for improvement in their critiques, but this will not change the score. This is designed to highlight the weaknesses of the application and assist the chairperson in addressing the weaknesses in the Executive Summary Statement.
- The Chairperson is responsible for making sure all reviewers completely score all assigned applications in ARM.
- Once the ORC is completed, the Chairperson will be given a Word document with all critiques to create the Executive Summary Statements.



Comments

- The reviewers must enter their comments in ARM before each MRC discussion call. All reviewers are required to enter comments along with their scores.
- The Chairperson is responsible for ensuring that scores entered are reflected in the comments the reviewers have written. If the chair feels the scores are not supported by the comments, they will return the evaluation to the reviewer for further work.



Conclusion of the MRC

- DGM generates the Ranking and Approval List (RAL) and provides a copy to the Program for funding decisions.
- PO enters funding decisions and funding amounts in the RAL
- GMS works with Finance and the PO to make awards in GrantSolutions.
- All applicants that have been disapproved or approved but unfunded must be notified by the Program Office within 30 days after the approving official has signed the Ranking and Approval List (RAL).
- Approved but unfunded applications will be held by DGM for one year.



Executive Summary

- The ARM staff will supply the Chair with a Word document with all comments. The Chair will create the Executive Summary Statements from those comments.
- The Chair gives the Program Officer the final Executive Summary Statements (ESS).
- The Program Officer sends the ESSs to applicants that did not receive awards, with a letter explaining the outcome of their application's review.
- The Program Officer uploads each application's ESS into the Application Notes for that application.



Reviewer Payments

- Reviewer payments are handled by a contractor employed by the ARM team.
- Once the review is completed, vouchers are sent to the review panelists (reviewers and chairs) so they can claim payment.
- The review panelists work directly with ARM's contractor for payment. The ARM team and Indian Health Service are not directly involved in these payments.



The Division of Grants Management would like to take this opportunity to thank you for being a part of this Grants Management sponsored training. DGM is dedicated to Empowering our IHS grant community with the required knowledge and training needed for continued compliance of IHS policies, Indian laws, and HHS legislative and regulatory requirements.

Thank you for your interest in the
Application Review Process

