

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: Veterans Health Administration

VISN 21 Sierra Pacific Network -- Early Career Award Program (ECAP)

REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS and APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS (8 pages total)

(Application Due: June 30th, 2022)

I. REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS (pages 1-2)

1. Purpose

VISN21's two-year Early Career Award Program (V21 ECAP) is intended to assist early career/stage research investigators in their VA careers and enable them to successfully compete for further peer-reviewed research funding such as VA Career Development Award, Merit Review, and/or other federal or non-federal grants. This award provides two years of salary support for mentored research to highly qualified early career/stage research investigators with demonstrated research abilities and strong interest and potential for a research career. Preference will be given to applicants who demonstrate a clear and strong commitment to a VA career and to VA research, e.g., research that benefit Veterans and Veteran care, research conducted at VA, research that directly involves Veterans. Applicants must express a clear commitment to a VA career and to VA research; have VA medical center institutional support (Service Chief and facility Director) for any remaining salary support not provided by V21 ECAP; and enlist the support of at least one appropriately qualified VA-employed mentor located in VISN21.

This program has the purpose of identifying and nurturing mentee-mentor team relationships, improve VISN21 cross-collaborations, and enhance research networking VISN21-wide. V21 ECAP will host an annual VISN21 ECAP conference and a VISN21 Mentor-of the-Year recognition award.

VISN21 network serves Veterans in northern and central California, Nevada, Hawaii, the Philippines and U.S. Territories in the Pacific Basin. With a total of 67 sites of care, VISN 21 provides a continuum of comprehensive health care services through seven VA Medical Centers, nine co-located Community Living Centers and 41 Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). VISN 21 is remarkable in several ways – one of which is its academic affiliations. All seven VISN 21 health care systems have highly successful clinical affiliations with prestigious universities in the areas of medicine, nursing and allied health professions. VISN 21 hosts the largest number of Centers of Excellence in VHA, receives the most research funding in VHA, and has expansive and collaborative relationships with its Department of Defense and many other important partners. VISN 21 is committed to ensuring that Veterans have full access to the highest quality of care, and that patients and staff alike have high levels of satisfaction. To achieve this commitment VISN21 leadership has identified the need to develop career researchers at all of the VA Medical Centers in order to bring cutting edge solutions to the Veterans it serves and the clinicians who dedicate their efforts.

2. Eligibility

Eligible applicants are clinicians or PhD (or equivalent) who are VA-paid employees at 5/8ths or more in VISN21 by the start date of the ECAP award. Applicants need not be VA employees at the time of application, but they must be a VA-paid employee, and therefore also a U.S. citizen, by the start of award.

Applicants must have commitment letters from their VA Service Chief and VA Medical Center Director, and from their Supervisor (e.g., Division Chief or Department Chair) at their academic affiliate, if applicant will have a faculty appointment during the ECAP award. The VA institutional commitment letter must demonstrate commitment to the applicant's VA research career plans and employment for the candidate after the award ends. Specifically, it must indicate that, should the V21 ECAP be awarded, the applicant will spend approximately 75% of their paid VA

FTE for research activities; any remaining VA salary (up to 25% of paid FTE) will be paid from another specified source; and the ECAP applicant is anticipated to be retained at the VA sponsoring facility at the end of the ECAP award. The letter from their academic affiliate Supervisor, if relevant, should express support for such a commitment. Two reference letters are required, from professional colleagues, former/current teachers, former mentor, etc. Referees are expected to state whether or not the applicant waives their right to see the letter and to submit directly to the applicant's home VA medical center's R&D Office.

Candidates are required to be within 5 years of graduation from an accredited PhD or MD program, or within 5 years of their most recent post-graduate training (clinical fellowship, residency, postdoctoral fellowship, etc.), or to be within 5 years of sustained research activity. The expected academic rank upon award of ECAP is Instructor or Assistant Professor. Applicant must demonstrate substantive commitment to research to benefit Veterans, a history of research training and research accomplishment. Applicants are expected to submit a VA CDA-2 application or Investigator-initiated research application(s) before the end of the award.

3. Funding

VISN21 ECAP two-year award funds are for salary support; such funds support 1) up to 8/8ths salary support for non-clinicians (no clinical privileges) and 2) up to 6/8ths salary support for clinician (doing clinical work) applicants. The remaining 8ths for clinician applicants would be devoted to their facility duties, such as direct patient care, administrative duties, and teaching.

Appointment level and salary will be determined locally according to current standards. Applicant must have a commitment letter from their VA Medical Center Director and Service Chief indicating that any remaining VA salary will be paid from another specified source and the ECAP applicant will be hired / retained at the VA should the VISN21 ECAP be awarded. Awardees will be encouraged to apply for and receive additional research funds. If salary awards, such as the VA Career Development Award, commence before the end of the two-year funding period, the awardee and his or her medical center will surrender the unused V21 ECAP funds. Applicants should be prepared to start their appointment on October 1, 2022. Deferred start dates will not be available except in cases of extended leave.

4. Review and Selection Process (see details in the ensuing Application Instructions below)

Applications will be reviewed by a committee of VISN 21 researchers representing all VISN 21 VA health care systems. Applicants will be notified of the review outcome in August, 2022. Funding will begin on October 1, 2022. Deferrals will be considered only in cases of extended leave.

Information on the program and the application process can be found on the VISN21 website (updated periodically): <https://www.visn21.va.gov/ecap.asp>

5. Questions

Contact Jennifer.lee23@va.gov and mark.riddle654@va.gov with any additional questions.

II. APPLICATION AND SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS (pages 3-8)

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

- Arial 11-point font or larger, and 0.5-inch page margins are to be used in the Research Proposal. The Career plan and Research plan are together limited to 10 pages (not including References).
- Applications must be submitted by the applicant's home VA Medical Center's R&D Office.
- The R&D Office must submit the full application, on behalf of the applicant, **due no later than midnight on June 30, 2022.**
- Contact early your home VA Medical Center's R&D Office to establish the lead time needed for the R&D Office to submit your full application, by the submission deadline, to Geoffrey.goodale@va.gov.
- Applicants must submit the full application, comprised of the following two documents (detailed application instructions on next page) in a **single PDF file named: ECAP22APPL_ last name_ first name_ yourVAMC.pdf**, in the order in which they appear in these instructions below.
 - 1) Completed V21 ECAP Applicant Information Form, and
 - 2) Research Proposal
- Please note that funding for selected proposals will start October 1, 2022, and deferrals considered only in cases of prolonged leave.

Applications must be complete and comprehensive upon submission. Applications will be returned if they are illegible, fail to follow instructions, or if the material presented is insufficient to permit an adequate review. The responsibility for a complete and timely submission lies with the applicant and the R&D Office at the sponsoring VISN21 VA medical center.

If the application is funded and before the work begins, the work proposed must be approved by the appropriate local subcommittees and the R&D Committee. Applicants are encouraged to work with their ACOS/R&D to avoid delays and misunderstandings. No additional or replacement information will be accepted after submission of the proposal unless explicitly requested.

APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS

The proposal should be prepared using Arial 11-point font or larger, printed on 8.5x11 inch white paper with at least 0.5-inch margins at each edge. Pages should be numbered consecutively in the lower right corner and should include the Applicant's name and page number (e.g., Smith-1 to Smith-22). Applications that exceed specified page limits, fail to comply with font size or margin specifications risk being returned without review. Appendices will not be reviewed. Do not attach full CV.

The application should be submitted as a single PDF file with the file name: **ECAP22APPL_ last name_ first name_ yourVAMC.pdf**

- A. Complete the **Applicant Information Form** and include in the full application submission.
- B. The **Research Proposal** (see below Instructions).

Organize your Research proposal in the following order of 10 items.

The Career plan and Research plan are together limited to 10 pages.

1. Summary Description of Proposed Research (1-page limit)

Provide a lay language summary and Include the following: Applicant's name and project title; three or more key words; information about the Applicant's research background and current research interests; hypotheses to be tested; specific objectives; relevance to veterans' health and health care; subject population; procedures to be used; and significance of potential new findings. It should include enough information so that the proposal can be referred to appropriate reviewers.

2. Budget and budget justification

Provide the grade and step and the salary and fringe benefit cost expected to be set by the local professional standards board for award years one and two. The award will pay at least 75% (6/8ths) of the salary; up to 75% for clinicians and up to 100% for non-clinicians. Awardees must be full time VA employees and maintain 75% research effort. No research support, except for salary, may be requested.

3. Career Plan, including description of mentors (their roles and time commitment) and research career development plans.

Note: Career Plan and Research Plan are together limited to 10 pages, except References

- a. Research background, including training, experience, prior funding, and other accomplishments.
- b. Research interests.
- c. Percentage efforts planned to be devoted to each of clinical, research, teaching and administrative duties (as applicable) at the VA and the affiliate.
- d. Relationship between the Applicant's interests and skills and those of the proposed mentor(s).
- e. Potential impact of the proposed career development experience on the improvement and/or evaluation of veteran health care and/or health policy.
- f. Expected results of the experience in terms of the benefit to VA and to the Applicant in terms of their research program.
- g. Specify aspects and degree of commitment to and/or goals for professional advancement in VA.
- h. Specific formal and informal training activities and objectives, & specific new skills to be attained. For example, research seminars, conferences, workshops, mentorship across VISN21 VAMCs and their academic affiliates.
- i. Future research plans and ambitions (explain how the proposed award enhances these plans).

4. Research Plan (specific aims page, significance, innovation, impact, methods/approach, timeline of deliverables, anticipated limitations and potential solutions)

Note: Career Plan and Research Plan are together limited to 10 pages. Page limits include all text, figures, charts, graphs and diagrams (not References).

The research plan should be organized into four major sections: Objectives, Background and Significance, Work Accomplished, and Work Proposed. Use the Narrative to explain 1) what you propose to do; 2) why the proposed work is important; 3) what similar work has been done; and 4) how the proposed work will be done. The following outline is suggested as a general guideline only; section lengths may vary.

- a. Objectives. Describe the objectives of the proposed career development experience, including a statement of the problem to be investigated, rationale for the proposed research and/or training. Hypotheses or key

research questions, if applicable, should be clearly stated, and the long-term and more immediate objectives of the proposed work explained. For long-term objectives, expected intermediate goals should be identified, and an anticipated timetable for achieving short-term objectives (i.e., the objectives to be accomplished if the work proposed is funded) outlined.

b. Background and Significance. Briefly describe the current status of research relevant to the present application and how it relates to stated hypotheses or research questions. Critically evaluate existing, relevant knowledge and explicitly state the gaps that the proposed research and/or training experience would help fill. Cite only relevant and recent literature. The Background section should reflect awareness of the critical issues related to the proposal. It should not be exhaustive.

i. *Significance/Innovation*. Explain the potential importance of the proposed work and describe the unique ideas or potential contributions that might result from the career development experience.

ii. *Relevance and Impact to Veterans Health*. Describe the relevance and impact of the proposed work to the national VA research priorities, e.g., women Veterans' health, and patient care mission specifically and health issues in general.

c. Work Accomplished. Preliminary results are not required. Describe any preliminary/previous studies conducted by the Applicant that are pertinent to the application. The information should help reviewers evaluate the experience and competence of the Applicant to pursue the work described in the proposal. The experience/competence of key collaborators may be briefly described. If available, up to three publications and/or submitted or accepted manuscripts by the Applicant may be provided in weblink form.

d. Work Proposed. Describe the eligible study population, design, methods, and procedures associated with specific projects, including how data would be collected, analyzed and interpreted. New methodologies should be clearly described with a rationale for why they are preferred over existing methodologies. Provide a timetable describing the sequence of activities. Specific projects and activities should be directly linked to the stated objectives. Potential problems and limitations of proposed methods/procedures should be addressed and possible alternative procedures to achieve the specific aims discussed. If humans or animals are to be studied, a power analysis should be used to justify the number to be studied. Include a separate section entitled "References" for list of references (this does not contribute to the 10-page limit noted above).

5. Human/Animal Studies information (not included in the 10-page limit for the Career Plan and Research Plan, together).

If the project involves human subjects, create a section heading titled "Human Subjects." Applicants must address the involvement of human subjects and protections from research risk relating to their participation in the proposed research plan. In this section, provide information to address all four evaluation criteria below as they apply to the research proposed.

a. Risk to Human Subjects

(1) *Human Subjects Involvement and Characteristics*. Describe the proposed involvement of human subjects in the work outlined in the Research Design and Methods section. Describe the characteristics of the subject population, including their anticipated number, age range, and health status. Identify the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of any subpopulation. Explain the rationale for the involvement of special classes of subjects, such as pregnant women, prisoners, institutionalized individuals, or others who may be considered vulnerable populations.

(2) *Sources of Materials*. Identify the sources of research material obtained from individually identifiable living human subjects in the form of specimens, records, or data. Indicate whether the material or data will be

obtained specifically for research purposes or whether use will be made of existing specimens, records, or data.

(3) *Potential Risks*. Describe the potential risks to subjects (physical, psychological, social, legal, or other) and assess their likelihood and seriousness to the subjects. Where appropriate, describe alternative treatments and procedures, including the risks and benefits of the alternative treatments and procedures to participants in the proposed research.

b. Adequacy of Protection against Risks

(1) *Recruitment and Informed Consent*. Describe plans for the recruitment of subjects and the process for obtaining informed consent. Include a description of the circumstances under which consent will be sought and obtained, who will seek it, the nature of the information to be provided to prospective subjects, and the method of documenting consent. The informed consent document is not required at this time.

(2) *Protection Against Risk*. Describe the planned procedures for protecting against or minimizing potential risks, including risks to confidentiality, and assess their likely effectiveness. Where appropriate, discuss plans for ensuring necessary medical or professional intervention in the event of adverse effects to the subjects. In studies that involve interventions, describe the plan for data and safety monitoring of the research to ensure the safety of subjects.

c. Potential Benefit of the Proposed Research to the Subject and Others. Discuss the potential benefits of the research to the subjects and others. Discuss why the risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits to subjects and others.

d. Importance of the Knowledge to be Gained. Discuss the importance of the knowledge gained or to be gained as a result of the proposed research. Discuss why the risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the importance of the knowledge that reasonably may be expected to result.

If the project involves animals, create a section heading entitled “Animal Subjects.” In this section, provide information to address all five evaluation criteria below as they apply to the research proposed.

a. Risk to Animal Subjects. Provide a detailed description of the proposed use of the animals in the work outlined in the Research Design and Methods section. Identify the species, strains, ages, sex, and numbers of animals to be used in the proposed work.

b. Justify the use of animals, the choice of species, and the numbers to be used. If animals are in short supply, costly, or to be used in large numbers, provide an additional rationale for their selection and numbers.

c. Provide information on the veterinary care of the animals involved.

d. Describe the procedures for ensuring that discomfort, distress, pain, and injury will be limited to that which is unavoidable in the conduct of scientifically sound research. Describe the use of analgesic, anesthetic, and tranquilizing drugs and/or comfortable restraining devices, where appropriate, to minimize discomfort, distress, pain, and injury.

e. Describe any method of euthanasia to be used and the reasons for its selection. State whether this method is consistent with the recommendations of the Panel on Euthanasia of the American Veterinary Medical Association. If not, present a justification for not following the recommendations.

6. Interview guides and/or surveys for proposed research

7. Applicant’s and mentors’ (a) Biosketches and (b) Other Support

(a) Include these forms also for consultants or content mentors who might not be part of the formal mentoring team, but who would provide expertise in key areas, and whose effort would be 5% or greater. Either the VA or the NIH format may be used. Each biosketch is limited to no more than five pages. List complete citations of only the most relevant publications and accepted manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals. Do not include abstracts or manuscripts that are submitted or in preparation, or non-refereed publications.

(b) Applicant's and Mentor's Total VA and Non-VA Research Support (Current and Pending): Total research support is defined as all financial resources, whether Federal, non-Federal, commercial or institutional available in direct support of the individual's research. Examples are VA merit review or locally funded awards, NIH grants, private or foundation research grants, cooperative agreements, contracts, and university awards. All currently funded and pending support should be included for each individual.

If there is overlap present, the Applicant should provide a single summary of any potential overlap between the research in the proposal and any active or pending research, including that of the mentor(s), with respect to the science, budget or time commitment. Overlap occurs when duplicate or equivalent budget items, such as equipment or salary, requested in the application are already funded, requested in a pending application, or provided for from another source. This summary should be listed next to the active grant or award where there is overlap.

- i. If the applicant or mentor has no active or pending support, "None" should appear after the individual's name.
- ii. For each grant or award
Source/Project No. -name of the awarding agency and the project number, if assigned Project Title -full title (and the sub-project number, if appropriate)

(a) Role: State the investigator's role in the project (principal investigator, co-investigator, principal investigator of sub-project, etc.)

(b) Dates of Approved/Pending Project: Indicate the inclusive dates of the project as funded or proposed.

(c) Annual Direct Costs: For active awards, provide the current year's direct cost budget and for pending applications provide the initial budget period.

(d) Percent Effort: For an active project, provide the level of effort (whether salaried or unsalaried) as approved for the current budget period. For pending projects, list the level of effort proposed for the initial budget period.

(e) Major Goals: Provide a brief statement of the overall objectives of the project. If it is a sub-project on a center grant or contract, provide the objectives for the sub-project only.

8. Facility Resources. Describe the facilities where the work will be conducted, including office and research space, by specifying the exact location with room numbers. Specify whether the space is in a VA or non-VA facility. Describe pertinent resources and major pieces of equipment available to the Applicant, avoiding facility inventories. If applicable, describe clinical and animal facilities available. *Do not describe resources that are available but not used for the proposed research.* Rationale must be included for any work to be conducted outside a VA facility and is subject to approval or denial.

9. Mentor Letters of Commitment. Each mentor should submit a letter describing the mentoring plan, including the following. Mentors are expected to provide updated letters for resubmissions.

- a. The mentor's proposed role in training
- b. Planned training activities (coursework, seminars, scientific meetings, etc.)

- c. Nature of the interactions between mentor and Applicant
- d. Percentage of the mentor's effort that would be devoted to the Applicant
- e. The degree and type of interaction that the Applicant would have with other researchers in the mentor's program or elsewhere at the medical center
- f. Explicit description of the mentor's current obligations, including the number of residents, fellows and other trainees that the mentor is currently supervising in research as well as past trainees, with inclusive dates in table form
- g. Description of the mentor's time distribution between research, patient care, teaching, and administration
- h. Plan for the applicant to achieve independence

10. Institutional Letters of Commitment and References Letters

- a. The appropriate Service Chief at the sponsoring VA medical center in VISN21 must submit a statement describing the Applicant's proposed clinical and other non-research duties upon receiving the Career Development award. The applicant's expected percent effort in non-research activities should not exceed 25% of time.
- b. The VA medical center Director's letter at the sponsoring VA medical center in VISN21 should indicate support for the applicant, acknowledgement of the amount of the awardee's salary provided by the local facility, and commitment of the medical center to the applicant's career development should be described in detail (including how space needs will be met and an endorsement of the applicant's time commitment to research).
- c. (If applicable) Letter from the Department Chair or Division Chief of the applicant's academic affiliate supporting the applicant's ECAP application and research effort for the ECAP, if applicant will hold a faculty appointment during the ECAP award.
- d. Two reference letters should be obtained from professional colleagues, former/current teachers, former mentor, etc. Reference letters need not be limited to the applicant's institution or affiliated academic institution. Referees are expected to state whether or not the applicant waives their right to see the letter and to submit directly to the applicant's home VA medical center's R&D Office, who will then submit letters to geoffrey.goodale@va.gov by the submission deadline.

Questions:

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