



DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
US ARMY MEDICAL RESEARCH ACQUISITION ACTIVITY
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FCMR-ABB-GE

June 17, 2021

MEMORANDUM FOR GRANTS DIVISION PERSONNEL AND PROGRAM CUSTOMERS

SUBJECT: Assistance Advisory Notice 12-02 (rev), Including Oral Presentations as Part of the Merit-Based Review Process

1. **APPLICABILITY AND PURPOSE:** This Assistance Advisory Notice (AAN) is only applicable to Program Announcements (PAs). This AAN revises the criteria and approval requirements for use of oral presentations in research and development applications in order to eliminate any potential for unfairness in the competitive process. The evaluation method must provide for an impartial review of the merits of applications. Applications must be evaluated in accordance with the method established in the PA.

2. **INTRODUCTION:** The merit review process has been established to comply with the Department of Defense Grant and Agreement Regulations (DODGAR 3210.6-R). Part 22.315 requires that financial assistance agreement awards be made using merit-based, competitive procedures to the maximum extent practicable. In limited cases, it may be advantageous to include oral presentations by Principal Investigators (PIs) as part of the competitive process. This AAN revises the criteria and approval requirements for the use of oral presentations.

3. **BACKGROUND:**

a. DODGAR Part 32 CFR §22.315 establishes the competitive procedures to be used in the award of financial assistance agreements. The evaluation method and selection criteria may be tailored to meet program needs; but for research and development awards, the two principal selection criteria, unless statute provides otherwise, must be (1) technical merits of the proposed research and development, and (2) potential relationship of the proposed research and development to Department of Defense (DOD) missions. The selection criteria must be structured to include these elements and address other requirements specific to the award mechanism.

b. A peer review process provides for a merit-based, competitive selection. The process may vary with the program requirements, but normally includes an initial review to determine if the application meets the requirements stated in the PA. A two-tier review process then follows and includes (1) a scientific peer review to evaluate the scientific merits against the evaluation criteria in the PA and (2) a

programmatic review to make recommendations for funding based on the scientific merits (as determined by the peer review), relevance to the DOD mission, and program factors listed in the PA.

c. As part of the peer review process, it may be advantageous to include oral presentations by the PIs in the evaluation process and selection determination. Oral presentations may be useful to augment or clarify written information. However, if not done properly, the use of oral presentations could result in improper selection and noncompliance with legal requirements.

4. POLICY:

a. It is the policy to include oral presentations by PIs in the review process only under the following conditions:

(1) Oral presentations must serve a useful purpose in evaluating applications. Oral presentations can be used to (1) augment or clarify written information requested in the PA, or (2) obtain information not ascertainable in written format.

(2) Use of oral presentations must be consistent with the intent of the award mechanism and must not affect the impartial review of the merits of applications. In the two-tier review process, oral presentations may be used in the scientific and/or program reviews, but should be structured appropriately in accordance with the intent of the award mechanism. For example, when used in the program review, oral presentations are not a substitute for, or addition to, the peer review for scientific merit. Oral presentations should not address any technical or scientific aspects of the application that could be considered an evaluation of scientific merit. Likewise, oral presentations in the scientific review should be structured to assist in evaluation of the scientific merit of the application and should not deal with program criteria.

(3) Oral presentations shall be used on **a very limited basis**. Including oral presentations in the evaluation process increases the administrative costs of the evaluation as well as the risk of improper evaluation. The requiring activity must provide to US Army Medical Research Acquisition Activity (USAMRAA) via the PA, details regarding the requirement on the use of oral presentations, and the related criteria to be evaluated. The Grants Review Board (GRB) will convene to review the requirements outlined in the PA. Concurrence of the PA from the

Chair of the GRB will constitute as an approval of the inclusion of the oral presentation requirement and/or travel arrangements being made for the PI.

(4) Oral presentations may include limited additional questions from the reviewers to the PI, after the PI has addressed the questions posted in the PA. The reviewers will develop any additional questions and submit them to the Grants Officer for approval. The Grants Officer must approve all questions in advance of them being posed to the PI. Questions shall be limited to the subject matter of the oral presentation. No questions shall be asked that are outside the subject matter of the presentation, provide information from another application, provide the PI with confidential information, or otherwise give the PI any competitive advantage in the pending or future awards. The review committee chair or designee will ask the approved questions.

(5) If the PI is unable to attend the scheduled oral presentation due to extenuating circumstances, rescheduling will be permitted on a case-by-case basis as determined by the Grants Officer. A PI's busy schedule or already scheduled engagements will not be acceptable reasons for rescheduling. The Grants Officer will make the determination whether or not to permit rescheduling and will establish the timeframe for rescheduling.

b. The Grants Officer shall be an active participant in all presentations. An attorney representative from the Office of the Staff Judge Advocate may attend on a case-by-case basis. Because of the unstructured nature of oral presentations, the Grants Officer's primary responsibility will be to ensure that the process remains impartial and consistent with the evaluation methods listed in the PA, including criteria used by reviewers to evaluate the oral presentation.

5. The point of contact is Jennifer Cramer, Chief, Grants Execution and Oversight, (301) 619-7145, or e-mail: jennifer.l.cramer9.civ@mail.mil.

//ORIGINAL SIGNED//
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