

**Tips for Seeking Funding for Public Health Systems Research
From the 2005 Public Health Systems Research Leadership Forum**

As public health systems research (PHSR) is an emerging field with limited funding opportunities, researchers need to be equipped with effective strategies for seeking financial support for the study of key public health infrastructure questions. To this end, the Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice (Council) convened a panel of representatives from federal agencies and philanthropic foundations to speak during the Fifth Annual PHSR Leadership Forum on December 13, 2005. The speakers included:

George Flores, MD, MPH
Senior Program Officer, Disparities in Health
The California Endowment

Jon F. Kerner, PhD
Deputy Director for Research Dissemination &
Diffusion
Division of Cancer Control & Population
Sciences
National Cancer Institute (NCI)
National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Dennis Lenaway, PhD, MPH
Director, Office of Standards and Emerging
Issues in Practice
Office of the Chief of Public Health Practice
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
(CDC)

Debra Joy Pérez, PhD, MA, MPA
Program Officer
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
(RWJF)

They shared the following advice about approaching their organizations for PHSR funding:

Identifying Opportunities

- Review funders' websites to gain an understanding of their priorities. Look at past grants to determine the types of organizations and activities that receive funding. (Some funders are seeking diversity in geography and topic area, so they might be less likely to fund a project very similar to one they have already financed.)
- View the National Library of Medicine's resources related to health services research (HSR) and public health. The website – <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrph.html> – includes links to sites listing funding opportunities (HSR Information Central and Partners in Information Access for the Public Health Workforce) and a database of HSR projects in progress (HSRProj).
- Learn about potential research partners in your state by visiting Cancer Control PLANET – <http://cancercontrolplanet.cancer.gov>. NIH is planning to expand this effort to cover health topics beyond cancer.

Building Relationships

- Make a phone call or send an email to the program director or officer in your area of interest. Although in some federal agencies, program staff members are not able to commit dollars, they might provide useful comments on your abstract. For example, program staff at NIH might recommend to which study section the request should be submitted.
- Be persistent. It is important to build a relationship with staff at funding agencies and to position your organization as an ally or resource to them.

Understanding Your Audience

- Make sure your proposal would be understood by someone who is not familiar with your field. Your reviewers may not understand some public health terms. For example, it may be better to frame your work as implementation research, rather than PHSR. You may want to have someone who doesn't know your field review the proposal before you submit it.

- Be aware of biases that might be held by those reviewing your proposal. For example, some peer review processes favor proposals from individuals with MDs or PhDs. As a young investigator, you may want to consider having someone with more senior credentials as a co-principal investigator.

Educating Funders About an Emerging Field

- Continue to submit applications. It is often difficult to receive funding in new areas (or, as Dr. Kerner put it, "the leading edge is often the bleeding edge in peer review"). However, the more proposals reviewers see, the more they will learn about the field.
- Spread your enthusiasm for PHSR with other researchers. For example, if health economists appreciate the relevance of public health infrastructure questions to their work, they could join efforts to generate interest in the field.
- Create balance in your proposals between innovation and replicability. While most funders are interested in funding innovative activities, increasingly funding organizations are looking for projects that have a lasting impact—that are sustainable and/or can be translated into other settings.
- Identify individuals within funding organizations who can serve as champions for PHSR by helping to persuade their colleagues to pursue funding in this area. As part of a project on public health finance, RWJF is funding an effort to increase awareness about PHSR among policymakers, funders, and other public health system stakeholders. This project may result in tools for marshalling support for PHSR. (For more information, see <http://www.sph.emory.edu/PHSR>.)

Information About These Funding Organizations

The California Endowment sees itself as a change agent, working to trigger improvements in access to culturally competent care and the elimination of health disparities. The foundation values involving the community, for example, by employing community members to collect data. Proposals must demonstrate the benefit to California. (<http://www.calendow.org>)

CDC will be concentrating the leadership for PHSR within the agency in the newly created National Center for Health Marketing. Some of CDC's current interests, including its work on accreditation, may elevate the demand for PHSR. (<http://www.cdc.gov>)

NIH offers some opportunities for PHSR through its funding of dissemination and implementation research projects (see <http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-06-039.html>; <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-06-072.html>; <http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-06-071.html>). This effort is designed to study how to successfully implement evidence-based interventions in a variety of settings—including within public health systems. In addition, ***NCI*** funds research in several public health related areas, such as tobacco, fitness, diet, health communications, and screening. (<http://www.cancercontrol.cancer.gov>)

RWJF is working to build the infrastructure for PHSR, by funding projects to identify datasets and to raise awareness about PHSR. The foundation has funded PHSR projects and recognizes the need for a strong cohort of researchers in order to improve public health agency performance and impact. (<http://www.rwjf.org>)

To learn more about the PHSR Leadership Forum and other related Council efforts, please visit <http://www.phf.org/Link/tools.htm#PHSR>. If you have questions or comments, please contact Council staff (jkronstadt@phf.org).