

A Request for Proposals for Merit Peer Review Services for Scientific and
Education Research Applications

RFP #15666

Questions and Answers

July 29 – 8/26/14

1. **The Staffing and Project Management section of the RFP includes a heavy emphasis on individual staff having experience in biomedical research. We have experienced staff members who have years of strong, documented experience managing multiple peer review panels in the biomedical and health fields. These staff members do have research experience in a variety of subjects, including publications, but not necessarily in biomedical expertise or to the depth stated in the RFP for biomedical research. Is the research experience ascribed to individual staff members within the RFP a requirement or a preference, especially if staff members collectively bring health, biomedical and peer review expertise in these fields?**

The RFP states: “The bidder **should** have access to a sufficient number of staff who have **experience in biomedical or health-related research** and have demonstrated scientific excellence through their own research publications. These staff will possess appropriate scientific credentials; a record of academic publications within disciplines related to the NYSDOH program area; specific teaching and/or research experience; and prior experience in peer review procedures and health sciences administration.”
[emphasis added]

2. **To help in determining who among our management staff will serve as the Project Manager, we would like to know whether there is a range of “research experience and expertise beyond the postdoctoral level” (p. 3) that could be acceptable, e.g., federal research review experience, and research on scientific methodology, best practices, peer review ethics, and more.**

The RFP states “The Project Manager **should** have research experience and expertise beyond the postdoctoral level **and** a minimum of three (3) years of professional experience **overseeing all aspects** of independent scientific and technical merit peer review.” **[emphasis added]**

3. **Is it a requirement that the contractor have only one online portal for document receiving, administration, and delivery? The RFP states on p. 4 that the contractor will: “Develop and maintain a secure web-based portal to receive and distribute applications and reviewer materials, record and submit critiques and scores, and return final peer review critiques to NYSDOH,” and, on p. 12, there is a paragraph describing NYSDOH’s anticipation of access to all data at all stages.**

No. The RFP does not require that there be a single portal as long as all materials related to the peer ***review process are transmittable through a secure web-based portal.***

- 4. Does the page 23 provision “Accessibility of State Agency Web-based Intranet and Internet Information and Applications” apply to our established peer review software system, which will have a specific version modified for NYSDOH peer review RFA requirements but which still will be maintained on our servers?**

No.

- 5. Can you describe NYSDOH expectations of compliance checking by the contractor? The RFP (p. 4) notes that the contractor will screen applications using established criteria for human subjects research, vertebrate animal research, publications, intellectual property, and other. We have also noted the human and animal research forms often attached to the spinal cord and breast cancer RFAs in the past. Does NYDOH anticipate the contractor will create its own checklist based on established NY laws and general criteria given for considerations (in discussion with NYSDOH), or has NYSDOH already established/formalized a specific criteria list that they would like the contractor to utilize?**

Page 4 of the RFP outlines the scope of work, while pages 5-10 discuss particular elements of the peer review process in a more detailed and chronological manner. A simple checklist or spreadsheet can be created by the contractor and used to document compliance with various criteria required by the RFA’s application instructions (to be established in discussion with NYSDOH). The compliance requirements are derived from the RFA’s requirements for required completion of particular application forms, conformance to page limitations, etc. and may vary for each RFA.

The RFAs require that awarded applicants comply with provisions that are specific to the funding program and previously established by the Board regarding human subjects, vertebrate animals, publication and intellectual property rights. These are outlined in the sample contract that is attached to each RFA. Previous SCIRB and HRSB RFAs referred to this attachment as Program Policies and Conditions. The peer reviewers will be required to document possible concerns in these areas for each application, some of which may necessarily impact the application score. This is not a compliance check required to be conducted by the contractor.

However, the contractor may be required to screen the application forms related to human subjects and vertebrate animals research for inclusion of sufficient detail according to the application instructions. This too may vary for each RFA. A penalty is assessed for non-compliance. It may not be necessary to screen all applications. Compliance checks are required only for those applications that score well enough in peer review to be considered by the Board.

- 6. Can you provide further clarification on the two compliance checks done at separate times in the review process? The RFP notes on page 4 that initial, pre-review compliance screening should be done for the human, animal, IP, and publications criteria, but also for “other application requirements and standards.” However, on page 9, The RFP states that compliance checking for page limits, missing sections and other information will be done after reviewers’ scores are calculated for an application. Often reviewers find instances of noncompliance, which should be recorded and considered, but we are wondering if p. 9 is describing a second, full compliance check by staff members of all applications, and if there is a specific reason why, or whether all compliance checking can be done when applications are received.**

There is only one compliance check required. See the answer to Question # 5 above.

- 7. Under what type of situations does NYSDOH prefer to hold in-person meetings versus electronic meetings? The RFP (p. 4) states that “at a minimum, the contractor will convene the panel discussion via telephone conference.” There are positives and negatives for in-person meetings v. teleconferences v. video conferencing, especially for large, long, panel meetings. Does NYSDOH have a preferred format that it has found useful in the past for review efforts?**

The NYSDOH has experience with and acknowledges the pros and cons of several effective methods for conducting peer review. NYSDOH is not committed to any particular format. As such, the RFP (pages 11-12) requires that a portion of the Technical Proposal describe a detailed Approach that will be undertaken by the bidder: “Provide a detailed plan to fulfill the Scope of Work (Section C.2.). Describe the specific approaches, tasks, activities and related operations to be employed in the provision of electronic peer review panel meetings of varying sizes in each year of the contract. Provide the rationale for the proposed approach, explaining efficiencies gained and other relevant issues. Acknowledge potential problem areas that could be encountered using this approach and identify steps that will be taken to address them if they arise. Provide evidence of the organization’s previous experience and ability to accomplish the Scope of Work (Section C.2.) using this approach. Preference will be given to bidders that can demonstrate the ability, using this approach, to recruit and retain the number of experienced peer reviewers from outside of New York State with the high expertise necessary to review as many as 60 applications on diverse topics in one peer review meeting.

Provide evidence of the number and quality of peer review projects successfully completed using the proposed approach with a description of the projects. Briefly outline alternate methods of peer review that the bidder has found to be successful that could be employed if the NYSDOH determines that electronic peer review panel meeting should not be used for a specific set of applications.” Also see the answer to Question #10.

- 8. For any in-person panel review meetings that may occur, how many staff members does NYSDOH anticipate may participate, and is there a preference for location of the meeting?**

NYSDOH anticipates that two NYSDOH staff may attend a peer review meeting. There is no restriction or preference regarding in-person meeting locations other than that they are within the continental United States.

9. Please clarify the honorarium payment for reviewers participating in electronic reviews. Since the maximum number of applications assigned to reviewers is the same whether the meeting is in-person or by electronic review, can we assume that the \$1,200 per review panel day applies whether or not the reviewer attends an in-person meeting vs. a teleconference meeting?

The first full paragraph on page 7 and the second paragraph of RFP Section 2.a. Cost Component form should read “The contractor will provide honoraria/payment to the reviewers at a rate of \$1,200 per in-person review panel day for each scheduled meeting day and \$500 per travel day, if necessary. The Chairperson will receive \$1,500 per in-person panel day and \$500 per travel day, if necessary.

The contractor will provide honoraria/payment to the reviews at a rate of \$200 per teleconference hour. The Chairperson will receive \$250 per teleconference hour.”

Thus, in example, for a four (4) hour teleconference reviewer honoraria/payment will be \$800 ($\$200 \times 4 \text{ hours} = \800) and the Chairperson’s honoraria/payment will be \$1,000 ($\$250 \times 4 \text{ hours} = \1000).

10. Will we be expected to pro-rate honoraria/payments for partial review panel days, travel days or teleconference hour?

Yes. NYSDOH will resolve specific pro-rating policies with the awarded contractor. At this time, NYSDOH envisions the following:

- Teleconferences will be pro-rated to the half hour
- The length of a “full review panel day” will be established by the panel meeting agenda
- A pro-rated in person panel day can be combined with payment for a travel day.

11. To help us gain a better understanding of desired panel sizes, please provide the background and reason for the difference in panel sizes between an electronic meeting and in-person meetings as specified on page 6 under Peer Review Panel Recruitment.

The experience of NYSDOH has been that large review panels and large numbers of applications to be reviewed per panel are not conducive to electronic meetings. However, this does not mean that large panels and/or large numbers of applications received will require an in-person meeting. Also see the answer to Question # 7.

12. Is the contractor expected to arrange and pay for all meals for traveling reviewers or only lunch and refreshments on the day(s) of the in-person panel meetings? As part of their travel expenses, are reviewers allowed a per-diem or reimbursement for

breakfast, dinner, taxi cab rides, car rental, parking, and mileage (for travel to/from airport)?

The RFP (page 7) states: “In the event of an in-person peer review panel meeting, the contractor will also be responsible for activities and costs associated with arrangements for the in-person meeting. The contractor will also arrange and pay for the travel, meals, refreshments and lodging for its staff and reviewers.

All related costs should be included in the contractor’s bid price except for reimbursement of reviewer honoraria, travel and lodging. These expenditures will be reimbursed by NYS DOH as pass-through costs.

If required, reimbursement rates will mirror those of New York State employees (see <http://www.osc.state.ny.us/agencies/travel/travel.htm>). The contractor will also arrange for the lodging of NYSDOH staff as part of the accommodations made for its staff and reviewers. However, the contractor will not be responsible for payment of per diems for NYSDOH staff.”

The contractor may choose to arrange for all meals or just those that occur during the scheduled meeting and reimburse the reviewers using the per diem rules. For guidance on acceptable pass through costs, please refer to the Travel Manual at the website provided above.

13. The RFP mentions that NYSDOH may request contract management reports - what does NYSDOH see this consisting of? The RFP notes (p. 5, p. 19), that NYSDOH may request periodic reports of contractor activities. We assume that these reports are unrelated to the panel scores, evaluation reports, and research compliance reports. Would these contract activities reports also be unrelated to the state consultant Services Form B reports, MWBE reports, and similar compliance reports noted under the RFP, and if so, can you provide more details on the periodicity and content of the reports?

The RFP does not require reports beyond what is stated in the RFP Section C.2. ‘Scope of Work and the various contract compliance reports required by law. There is no specific requirement for a “contract management report” as a deliverable due under the contract resulting from this RFP.

Page 5 references reports due as part of the deliverable for each peer review cycle as described in Section C.2., Scope of Work.

RFP Section E.5. Payment, which is in part on page 19 of the RFP, references the same reports as page 5 and adds “...**may** be required to submit periodic reports of contractor activities conducted in support of the peer review process.” The intent of this phrase is to alert bidders to the fact that additional information related to the deliverable may be requested to inform the Board’s award recommendation. There is no expectation that such reports would be requested on a regular basis. **[emphasis added]**

14. Based on the NYSDOH's past history with both breast cancer and spinal cord injury research RFAs, what has been the typical budget or cost range for contractual management of these peer review panels, on either an RFA or funding mechanism scale?

The requirements of this RFP are different from past RFPs. Therefore, a comparison to past peer review activities is deemed not relevant.