Request for Applications: COVID-19 Fund to Retain Clinician Scientists

Goals: The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closing of many schools and childcare centers as well as limitations on in-home care, which has challenged the productivity, work boundaries, and mental health of early career clinician scientists, among many other groups. To help address this, the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine has received a grant award from the Walder Foundation in collaboration with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in response to the Covid-19 Fund to Retain Clinician Scientists initiative (https://www.ddcf.org/funding-areas/medical-research/fund-to-retain-clinical-scientists/). The goal of this Doris Duke Charitable Foundation initiative is to support the advancement of promising research by early-career clinician scientists whose productivity has been challenged by increased family caregiving responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This initiative, together with a supplement from institutional funds, will support 12-17 one-time awards of $30,000-50,000, to early-career clinician scientists.

Per requirements of the funder, the supplements provided by this award are to be used to support the effort of “extra hands” (e.g., technician, research coordinator, etc.), grant-writing support, and/or buy out of required clinical time of the principal investigator so that more time can be spent on research. As recipients of these awards are expected to have a main research grant to support their research program, research costs, such as supplies, sequencing, core facility costs, etc. as well as costs for care giving, are not allowable.

Eligibility: Based on requirements of the funding organization, a faculty member must be a clinician investigator and meet all of the following criteria to be eligible for an award:

- Conducting an original and rigorous research program that has the potential to address a health issue that poses a significant clinical burden.
- Hold an MD, DO, PhD, or foreign equivalent degree from an accredited institution.
- Have a full-time, post-training Instructor or Assistant Professor faculty appointment at the medical school (this does not include subspecialty fellows who have been given an Instructor appointment for clinical duties but have not yet established an independent research program). Associate Professors are eligible only if they have been at this rank for less than one year.
- Engaged in research as primary professional activity and devote a minimum of 50% effort to research.
- Demonstrate a compelling, time-sensitive need for the supplement to regain research momentum because of increased family caregiving responsibilities caused by COVID-19. Typically, caregiving would be childcare, partner care, and/or eldercare.
- Have an intra or extramural career development award or research project grant with annual direct costs sufficient to provide both research and salary support. The supplements provided by this initiative are intended to supplement ongoing research projects. The supplements are not meant to be used as bridge funding.

Application process: An application of no longer than 4 pages (single-spaced, Arial 11 with 0.5-inch margins) should address the following topics:

- Training and accomplishments as a clinician investigator
- Brief overview of research program
- Description of family caregiving responsibilities that were exacerbated during and/or after the pandemic
- How increased caregiving and other pandemic-related responsibilities have impeded the progress of your research program
- Plan for how the grant award will be used to expand your research capabilities
- How the grant award will help to re-establish and/or propel your research program.
Additional materials to be provided include:

- NIH biosketch
- Listing of current and recently-completed extramural support for your research program
- Letter from department chair endorsing the application and confirming that you dedicate 50% or more effort to research
- Budget together with a budget justification indicating how the funds will be used; there is an expectation that the funds will be expended over a one-year period

Review of applications: Applications will be reviewed by a group of accomplished clinician investigators who are actively engaged in funded research. The review process will aim to identify investigators who are most vulnerable based on their stage of career development, scientific potential, pandemic-related responsibilities, and disruption to their research program. The specific criteria for evaluation of the applications will include:

- Evidence for the trajectory of the principal investigator towards developing and/or sustaining an independent research program before the onset of the pandemic
- Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on family care-giving responsibilities
- Impact of family caregiving and other pandemic-related responsibilities on the principal investigator’s research program
- Planned use of the grant award and its potential to positively impact the revitalization and trajectory of the principal investigator’s research program
- Plan and timeline for continuing to develop and sustain an independent research career
- Scientific merit and impact of the principal investigator’s research program based on publications and related accomplishments and record of funding.

Requirements of awardees: This program will identify and create a cohort of early-career clinician scientists whose research programs have been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to their caregiving responsibilities. To complement the individual grants that will be awarded, additional activities will be developed to further enhance the career development of this faculty cohort, and awardees will be expected to participate in these activities. The first activity will be a 1-day retreat, which will identify needs of the cohort and additional activities that will help to reinvigorate their research programs and facilitate their career development. Potential activities include: (i) monthly sessions to address topics of interest to the cohort; (ii) prioritization for participation in the Grant Writers Groups sponsored by Dr. Rick McGee as well as individual coaching related to grant writing by Dr. McGee; (iii) regular individual meetings with the Director and/or co-Director to discuss progress, issues faced reinvigorating their research program, mentoring-related needs, and related issues. Awardees will also be expected to provide information/data related to publications, grant awards, promotion, etc. after completion of the award to help track the impact of the award on their career development.

Application Submission: Applications may be submitted via the NUCATS Institute’s secure Competitions system at https://competitions.fsm.northwestern.edu/grants/COVID-19-Fund.

Timeline: Completed applications will be due by 5 PM December 17, 2021. Notice of awards will be made on or before February 18, 2022.

Two rounds of funding are anticipated with 60% of awards made in the first round. A second RFA will be released in April 2022. For questions regarding the RFA and submission of the proposal, please contact Keith Herzog at NUCATS-Funding@northwestern.edu.