Advancing Chronic Disease Health Disparities Research: The RCMI at University of Houston

Investigator Development Core (IDC)
2026 Pilot Grant Program
Request for Proposals (RFP)

I. KEY DATES

RFP Release Date	September 8, 2026
Webinar + Q&A Session	September 15, 2026 11:00am – 12:00pm CT
Applicant Office Hours	Sept. 25, Oct. 7, Oct. 20 11:00am – 12:00pm CT
Proposal Due Date	November 6, 2026
Scientific Merit Review	December 2026
Internal Funding Decisions	December 8, 2026
NIH Approval & Award Activation	March 2027
Earliest Anticipated Award Start Date	March 31, 2027

Webinar + Q&A Session
September 15, 2026
11:00am – 12:00pm CT
Register in advance for this Q&A Session

Applicant Office Hours
Fri. Sept. 25, Wed. Oct. 7, Tue. Oct. 20
11:00am – 12:00pm CT
Register in advance for Office Hours

II. OVERVIEW

The Research Centers in Minority Institutions (RCMI) at the University of Houston focuses on advancing chronic disease health disparities research. Chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and chronic respiratory disease are the leading causes of illness, disability, and death in the United States and impose a substantial and growing burden across the life course. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that 129 million Americans have at least one major chronic disease and approximately 130 million adults have multiple chronic conditions. These conditions and their consequences are not distributed uniformly. Chronic disease burden is shaped by cumulative biological, behavioral, environmental, economic, and health-care exposures, producing persistent differences based on race, geography, disability, and socioeconomic circumstances. Without effective prevention, earlier detection, and sustained management, the burden will increase as the population ages. By the year 2050, cardiovascular disease is projected to affect more than 184 million adults, or 61% of the adult population, while obesity may affect 61% of adults and 33% of children. These trends underscore the need for innovative pilot studies that address the origins, accumulation, and consequences of chronic disease

across developmental stages while testing approaches capable of reducing preventable differences in outcomes.

III. RCMI BACKGROUND

The RCMI Program is intended to strengthen the scientific infrastructure and research capacity of institutions that award doctoral degrees in the health professions or health-related sciences. RCMI centers support rigorous basic, clinical, behavioral, and translational research; develop investigators through structured mentoring and professional development; expand access to advanced research resources; and foster collaborations that address complex health problems. Through these integrated investments, the RCMI Program supports NIMHD's vision to advance the science of minority health and health disparities research by enabling all investigators within the program the opportunity to engage in rigorous, mentored research experiences focused on diseases that disproportionately affect populations experiencing health disparities.

IV. PILOT GRANT PROGRAM

The purpose of the RCMI Pilot Grant Program is to stimulate innovative, rigorous research that advances understanding of the multilevel mechanisms contributing to chronic disease health disparities and develops actionable approaches to prevention and or management across the life course. The program will support promising studies that generate preliminary data, strengthen investigators' research capabilities, foster interdisciplinary and community-engaged collaboration, and position investigators to compete successfully for larger external awards with the potential to improve chronic disease outcomes.

This request for proposals (RFP) calls for projects that:

- Address chronic disease health disparities through basic, clinical, behavioral, and/or translational research;
- Investigate important gaps in chronic disease prevention, mechanisms, diagnosis, treatment, management, or outcomes;
- Examine biological, behavioral, clinical, environmental, or other contextual factors that contribute to differences in chronic disease burden and outcomes across the life course;
- Develop or test innovative approaches to prevent chronic disease, improve disease management, or reduce preventable differences in outcomes;
- Accelerate the translation of scientific discoveries and evidence into clinical practice, community settings, or population-level benefit;
- Demonstrate scientific rigor, innovation, and feasibility within the proposed pilot project period;
- Leverage appropriate interdisciplinary expertise, community or clinical partnerships, and RCMI research resources, as relevant to the proposed study;
- Generate preliminary data, proof-of-concept findings, methodological advances, or other products that support subsequent research; and

- Articulate a credible pathway and timeline for submission of a competitive NIH application, such as a K award, R-series grant, or other appropriate funding mechanism.

Elevating Talent in the Academy

The RCMI Pilot Grant Program also serves as a mechanism for investigator-development, research training, and mentoring. Accordingly, awardees are expected to participate in the Elevating Talent in the Academy program, which is designed to strengthen scientific rigor, support successful project completion, and enhance readiness for independent, externally funded research. Through structured mentoring, targeted professional development, peer learning, and access to RCMI scientific and research resources, awardees will receive support for executing their pilot projects, addressing research challenges, disseminating findings, and translating preliminary results into competitive external grant applications. Participation in designated program activities and progress reviews is an expected component of the pilot award.

Pathway to Subsequent Funding

Pilot Grant Program awardees are expected to use their preliminary findings, methodological advances, and collaborations generated through their projects to pursue subsequent NIH funding. Applicants must identify an appropriate target funding mechanism such as a K award, R-series grant, or other relevant National Institutes of Health (NIH) or National Science Foundation (NSF) mechanism and provide a realistic plan and timeline for developing the subsequent application. Ideally, awardees should be prepared to submit the proposed application within six months after the pilot funding period ends. Priority will be given to proposals that articulate a credible pathway from the pilot project to a competitive NIH application and demonstrate how participation in the RCMI's research training and mentoring activities will support that progression.

V. PROPOSAL GUIDANCE & PROPOSAL REVIEW CRITERIA

Consistent with NIH practice and applicable law, the RCMI program will not use the race, ethnicity, or sex of prospective program participants or faculty as an eligibility or selection criteria. The race, ethnicity, or sex of candidates will not be considered by NIH in the proposal review process or when making funding decisions.

Eligible Applicants

All Principal Investigators must have an eRA Commons account. Principal Investigators should work with their departmental officials to either create a new account or affiliate their existing account with the applicant organization in eRA Commons. Obtaining an eRA Commons account can take up to 2 weeks, so applicants should request an account as soon as possible.

Applicants must meet the following requirements:

- The Principal Investigator must hold an eligible appointment at the University of Houston (Central) and qualify as an Early-Stage Investigator or New Investigator, as defined by NIH. Eligible academic titles and appointments will be determined in accordance with University of Houston policies governing principal investigator status.

- Postdoctoral fellows and individuals in other non-tenure-track positions may apply only if they are eligible to serve as a Principal Investigator under University of Houston policy and have the institutional support, protected time, and mentoring necessary to complete the proposed project.

- Proposed projects may not be concurrently funded by another source or merely continue previously funded work. A proposal may build upon prior research if it introduces a substantively new direction, question, method, population, or scientific component. All projects must align with NIH's unified strategy and represent distinct, innovative research relevant to chronic disease health disparities.

- Each investigator may submit only one proposal as Principal Investigator during a funding cycle.

- Previous RCMI Pilot Grant Program awardees are not eligible to receive a second pilot award as Principal Investigator through this funding mechanism. They may participate in other roles when their involvement provides complementary expertise and does not constitute scientific or budgetary overlap with a prior award.

VI. AWARD SIZE, NUMBER & DURATION OF AWARDS

Award Size

Individual pilot awards will range from $30,000 to $50,000 awards, consistent with the funding parameters of NIMHD. Funds will be administered by the RCMI at UH and allocated to awardees through the University of Houston's established internal procedures. Up to five meritorious proposals can be advanced to NIMHD for funding consideration during this cycle, subject to the availability of funds. Applicants should budget for one-year awards. Indirect costs are not permitted.

VII. PROPOSAL SUBMISSION GUIDELINES & COMPONENTS

Submission Guidelines

Proposals must be prepared according to the requirements outlined below and submitted as a single PDF file by the Principal Investigator no later than **November 6, 2026, at 11:59pm (CT).** Proposals that are late, incomplete, or do not follow the required order will not be accepted for review.

Completed proposals should use the naming convention: PGP Submission FA26 - PI Last Name. Required signatures from the appropriate department chair(s) and affiliated pre-award research administrator within the applicant's college **MUST** be included before submission. Proposals without these signatures will not be accepted for review.

To submit a proposal, the Principal Investigator must first request access to the secure online submission portal by completing the RCMI Pilot Grant Program Portal Access Request Form. The Portal Access Request Form must be completed 24 hours prior to the submission deadline to guarantee access. Once credentials are generated, the Principal Investigator will receive an email containing a secure link to upload the final single-PDF proposal.

NOTE: Following submission deadline, proposals will undergo an administrative screening for compliance. If any administrative changes, budget modifications, or clarifications are requested by RCMI staff, applicants must respond and fully address these requests within 48 hours of notification. Failure to meet this 48-hour response window may result in the proposal being disqualified for scientific review.

All applications must adhere to applicable federal regulations set forth in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Uniform Guidance, including provisions governing federal award compliance, equity standards, and international research agreements. Up to date NIH policy changes as per OMB Uniform Guidance can be found here.

Proposal Components & Order of Documents in the Proposal

1. Cover Sheet
    a. Provide names, role, institution/organizations, and email addresses for the following:
        i. Principal Investigator
        ii. Key Personnel
        iii. Community Collaborators (if applicable)
    b. Indicate the research compliance requirements involved in the proposed project.
    c. Cover sheet must be signed at the time of proposal upload by the following individuals:
        i. Primary Investigator
        ii. Primary Investigator's affiliated pre-award personnel who generated the budget using the University of Houston's Division of Research budget template. This signature indicates that they prepared and approved the budget.
        iii. Primary Investigator's department chair or program director (depending on the college)

2. NIH Common Form Biosketches (generated in SciENCV, 5 pg. max)
    a. Required for Principal Investigator and Key Personnel

3. Abstract (30 lines max)
    a. Provide a concise scientific summary of the proposed project. Abstract should include:
        i. Specific Aims

ii. Study Design
iii. Approach
iv. Long-term objectives

4. Project Narrative (3 sentences max)

5. Specific Aims (1 pg. max)
    a. Provide a clear, concise summary of the aims of the proposed work and its relationship to your long-term goals. State the hypothesis or hypotheses to be tested.

6. Research Strategy & Timeline (4 pg. max)
    a. Include the following sections:
        i. Significance
        ii. Innovation
        iii. Approach
    b. Present the project timeline using a month-by-month format (e.g., Month 1, Month 2, Month 3)

7. References (No page limit)

8. Planned Enrollment Table
    a. Use the current NIH Target/Planned Enrollment Table, as applicable

9. Budget and Budget Justification
    a. Use the University of Houston's Division of Research budget template, as applicable
    b. The budget justification (~2 pages) should provide a detailed description and justification for all budgeted items with separate fields for itemizing costs.
    c. The total budget cannot exceed $50,000. Indirect costs are not permitted.
    d. **Applicants are required to budget for travel to the RCMI Annual Meeting** (2-day meeting held in Spring 2027 – dates to be announced).

Responsible Conduct of Research, Human Subjects, and Animal Training

NIH funding requires that investigators and all key personnel MUST comply with the Responsible Conduct of Research requirement. Additionally, projects that involve human subjects or data from living humans are required to submit the study protocol for review from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and provide documentation of the determination from the IRB. Projects that involve animal use are required to submit the animal care protocol for review from an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) and provide documentation of the approval of the protocol from the IACUC.

Format

Use 11-point Arial font, single-spaced lines and ½-inch margins on all sides. Figures and table captions may use a minimum of 8 pt. font.

NOTE: Additional proposal components of traditional NIH R-series grants (e.g., FORMS-I documents) should be prepared by the Pilot Grant Program due date. These materials will NOT be submitted with the Pilot Grant Program proposals. These materials will be requested by RCMI staff for submission to NIMHD for proposals advanced for funding consideration.

These documents include, but are not limited to:

- Data Management and Sharing Plan (required for all proposals)
- Resource Sharing Plan (if applicable)
- Authentication of Key Biological Chemicals (if applicable)
- Human Subjects & Clinical Trials Information (if applicable)
- Vertebrate Animal Documents (if applicable)
- Select Agent Research Documents (if applicable)

Budget Guidelines

Projects may not exceed a 12-month project period. All project expenditures must be incurred within the approved period of performance. Funds may not be carried forward beyond the project period.

The earliest anticipated project start date is **March 31, 2027**. Project start dates are contingent upon completion of institutional and NIMHD administrative requirements and therefore may differ from the anticipated start date.

Required Budget Costs:

- $1,500 dedicated to travel to the annual NIMHD RCMI conference for the Principal Investigator

Allowable Budget Costs:

- Salary support for research personnel
    - Faculty Principal Investigators may request up to $5,000 for salary support for 1 faculty member during the PGP award period.
- Computational services
- Consulting fees consistent with NIH policy (e.g., vendor verification in DHS E-Verify system)
- Data collection fees (e.g., transcription), instruments, surveys, and supplies
- Laboratory fees, supplies (disposables), and reagents
- Human participants compensation
- Animals and/or biological materials
- Software (with sufficient justification)
- Electronics (up to $1,000 with NIMHD approval)

Unallowable Budget Costs:

- Indirect costs

- Subawards
- Equipment
- Food or beverages
- Maintenance fees
- Office supplies
- Travel (outside of the RCMI Annual Conference)
- Tuition
- Open Access Fees
- Journal Subscriptions
- Professional Memberships
- Advertising

VIII. PROPOSAL REVIEW CRITERIA & PROCESS

Proposals will be evaluated using the current NIH scoring system. Reviewers will consider Factors 1, 2 and 3 in the determination of scientific merit and provide an overall impact score to reflect their assessment of the likelihood for the project to exert a sustained powerful influence on the research field(s). A proposal does not need to be strong in all categories to be judged likely to have major scientific impact.

Reviewers will assign criterion scores for the following sections:

- **Factor 1: Importance of the Research**
  Reviewers will evaluate Significance and Innovation and will assign a numerical criterion score (1–9).

- **Factor 2: Rigor and Feasibility**
  Reviewers will evaluate the Approach, scientific rigor and feasibility, and will assign a numerical criterion score (1–9).

- **Factor 3: Expertise and Resources**
  Reviewers will evaluate the Investigator and Environment to determine whether the expertise and resources are appropriate for the proposed research. Factor 3 is evaluated for sufficiency rather than assigned a numerical score.

Reviewers will also determine whether the proposed budget is appropriate as submitted or recommend modifications based on the RFP budget guidelines and/or perceived project needs. The Investigator Development Core Director and/or RCMI Principal Investigator reserve the right to remove items in a proposed budget that are not supported by the parent U54 RCMI funding mechanism and/or Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Uniform Guidance.

Fall Pilot Grant Program Scientific Review Group (SRG) Meeting

The RCMI Investigator Development Core will convene a Scientific Review Group (SRG) in December 2026 to evaluate proposals using a peer review process modeled on the NIH scientific review process. Each proposal will be evaluated by at least two independent scientific reviewers who will assess the proposal based on the review criteria described above.

Following disclosure and management of any conflicts of interest, the SRG will discuss each proposal selected for discussion. The assigned reviewers will summarize the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal, followed by discussion among the full review panel. All reviewers will then submit final Overall Impact scores.

Scientific Review Group Summary Statements

Applicants will receive written reviewer feedback following completion of the scientific review process. Proposals advanced for funding consideration will undergo additional programmatic and administrative reviews. Final funding decisions are contingent upon all required institutional and NIMHD approvals, and the issuance of a formal Notice of Award (NOA).

IX. COMPLIANCE & CONGRUENCY REVIEW

NOAs cannot be released by NIMHD until all required compliance and congruency reviews have been completed. Failure to receive and maintain the appropriate institutional approvals in a timely manner will result in the forfeiture of this award.

Compliance review by the Research Integrity and Oversight office is required for all research submitted to this program. The review must be conducted in a timely manner, or the recommendation of the proposal to NIMHD for funding consideration will be revoked. Compliance review includes human subjects, animal usage, biological materials (rDNA, human samples, microorganisms, etc.), malign foreign talent recruitment, conflict of interest, and radiation (radioactive materials, lasers, and x-rays).

All projects involving human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the NOA will be issued by NIMHD.

All projects involving the use of animals in research must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) before the NOA will be issued by NIMHD.

All projects involving biological materials must be reviewed and approved by the Biological Safety Manager and the Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC) before the NOA will be issued by NIMHD.

All projects involving radiation must be reviewed and approved by the Radiation Safety Officer (RSO) & Laser Safety Officer (LSO) and authorized by the Radiation Safety Committee (RSC) before the NOA will be issued by NIMHD.

Congruency reviews including malign foreign talent recruitment and conflict of interest will also be conducted in line with NIH proposal submissions.

We encourage you to prepare your compliance materials in line with your FORMS-I documentation prior to submission of a Pilot Grant Program proposal. We will provide you with instructions to link your proposal to your compliance documentation and FORMS-I materials when we notify you of the advancement of your proposal to NIMHD for funding consideration.

If you have additional questions about this RFP, please contact the RCMI at UH Investigator Development Core at UHrcmi@uh.edu. Additional questions may also be directed to the RCMI at UH Investigator Development Core Director, Dr. Stacey Gorniak.

CONTACT US
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