Maryland Pediatric Cancer Research Commission
Meeting #7 | November 6, 2025 | 3:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m.
Virtual Meeting
MEETING MINUTES

Attendees

Members in Attendance:

Dana Christo
Michelle Urzynicok
Ruth Hoffman
Kathryn Ruble
Beth Siever
John Shern
Piotr Walczak
Curt Civin
Jeffrey Dome
Aziza Shad
Donald Small

Members Absent:
Elizabeth Kromm
Brigitte Widemann

Commission Staff:
Sadie Peters
Kate Natafgi

Additional Attendees:
Ken Lin Tai
Pansy Watson
Tyra Hudgens
Pamela Williams
Jody Sheely

1. **Welcome, Agenda Review, and Roll Call**
    a. Co-chair Ruth Hoffman, called the meeting to order at 3:02 PM and provided an overview of the agenda.
    a. Kate Natafgi called roll. Eleven members were present, representing a quorum.
    b. New member Michelle Urzynicok introduced herself and provided a brief overview of her background and interests.
    c. Members reviewed the minutes from Meeting #6. With no edits required, Don Small moved to approve the minutes and Aziza Shad seconded the motion. The Commission approved the minutes unanimously.

2. Progress on Questions about Requests for Applications (RFAs)

a. Items from Peer Review RFA Subcommittee

- Ruth Hoffman presented updates from the Peer Review Organization (PRO) RFA Committee. The subcommittee revisited the role of lay reviewers in the grant review process. In a previous meeting, it was discussed that lay reviewers' comments might be included without their scoring. Ruth Hoffman invited Michelle Urzynicok, a lay member of the Commission, to share her perspective. Michelle Urzynicok expressed strong support for including lay reviewer scores alongside scientific reviewers, emphasizing that parents and caregivers bring valuable insights. She referenced her experience with MIB Agents, a pediatric osteosarcoma nonprofit organization that successfully integrates lay reviewers in its grant process.

- Several commission members shared perspectives on how best to balance lay and scientific input. Curt Civin and Piotr Walczak noted that in other review processes, scientific reviewers typically have final decision-making authority but agreed on the value of lay perspectives. Piotr Walczak added that lay input could be particularly relevant to certain cancer types. Don Small and Jeff Dome acknowledged the importance of lay reviewers, but noted that highly technical grants, such as those focused on molecular therapies, may be beyond a layperson's expertise. Jeff Dome suggested a hybrid approach in which the PRO assembles two scientific reviewers and one lay reviewer into a study section, with final voting including all three. John Shern recommended requiring the PRO to assemble review panels composed of two experts and one lay reviewer, which Ruth Hoffman confirmed is already a requirement under the PRO RFA.

- Kathy Ruble asked whether scientific RFAs include lay summaries to help non-scientific reviewers understand the proposals. Ruth Hoffman confirmed that applications must contain sufficiently detailed lay summaries to ensure accessibility for all reviewers. Curt Civin suggested that lay reviewers participate in the scoring of all grants, rather than individual ones, to avoid logistical challenges in securing multiple lay reviewers. Aziza Shad expressed support for including lay reviewers in both the comment and scoring processes. Consensus was reached that lay reviewers would contribute to both final discussion and voting. Sadie Peters noted that the PRO RFA, with its requirements for reviewers would be approved as a complete document.

- Ruth Hoffman also sought feedback on several procedural elements of the RFA. The Commission had no objections to proposed language requiring the PRO's initial review of grants within 45 days, inclusion of

interim financial and progress reports, and a final review addressing return on investment and advocacy relevance. Curt Civin offered to share example reporting templates for use in the RFA, but cautioned against including excessive financial language in the scientific sections.

b. Follow-up from MDH Procurement regarding Scientific Grant RFA

- Sadie Peters reported feedback from the Maryland Department of Health (MDH) Prevention and Health Promotion Administration's Operations Office (PHPA Operations) indicating that the Commission must use a Request for Proposals (RFP) format, rather than an RFA, to comply with current legislation allowing laboratories, which might be for-profit entities, to apply for funding. The RFP approval process is typically 18 months or longer because of the many levels of review in various state procurement and finance offices. Ruth Hoffman stated that she would contact the original bill's sponsor to explore the feasibility of amending the statute to limit eligibility to nonprofit organizations, noting that a legislative amendment may be a faster option than the 18-month RFP approval process.

- Sadie Peters also shared PHPA Operations' concerns about the RFA including "no-cost extension" language, recommending that it instead appear in the final contract award. Piotr Walczak suggested labeling the extension as an exception, while Don Small emphasized the importance of clarifying that funds may be carried over for budgeting purposes. Jeff Dome asked whether unspent funds could revert to the state's general fund, and Ruth Hoffman confirmed that this remains possible during a significant state budget deficit. Members briefly discussed potential approaches to address the statutory requirement allowing for-profit laboratory eligibility.

3. Regulations Updates

- Sadie Peters noted that the Commission has made significant progress on the draft regulations, addressing most questions related to the Commission's functions. As it is now likely that the process will proceed through an RFP rather than an RFA, Sadie Peters noted that change may need to be reflected in regulations. Sadie Peters also noted that the regulations are nearing completion but several key details, such as whether for-profit organizations are indeed eligible and whether funds can be transferred to grantees at the start of the project without evidence of expenditure require further input from the Commission and clarification with MDH procurement leadership.

- Sadie Peters then outlined the remaining steps in the process, including internal and external reviews, a 30-day public comment period, and final publication in the state register. Peters emphasized that regulation review often slows during the legislative session, so full promulgation is unlikely before April 2026.

- Curt Civin recommended proceeding with the assumption that the process will use an RFP format to maintain progress on the regulations, with adjustments to be made later if necessary. Ruth requested a hold on the process until she was able to communicate with the legislative champion for advice on the best way forward.

4. Recusal Procedures

Co-chair Curt Civin initiated a detailed discussion on when Commission members should recuse themselves during the grant review process. Pansy Watson, assistant counsel from the State Ethics Commission, provided guidance throughout the discussion.

- Commission members agreed that recusal is not necessary during the development of the RFP/RFA or during the initial administrative stage when applications are submitted to the PRO. Conflicts of interest would primarily arise during the secondary review stage, when Commission members review and confirm the PRO's ranked proposals.

- Pansy Watson explained that conflicts emerge once members recognize their own research or that of close collaborators within their own institutions, even if applications are anonymized. At that point, members must recuse from discussion and voting on those specific applications to avoid both actual and perceived conflicts. To protect confidentiality and prevent bias or perception of bias, members suggested conducting the first round of secondary review privately, allowing each reviewer to independently rank proposals before group deliberation.

- If a member identifies their own work during review, they may note the conflict (e.g., "conflict on proposal #12") while continuing to review other applications. This approach maintains participation while upholding ethical standards. Pansy Watson affirmed this would be an acceptable and practical method that preserves the Commission's ability to meaningfully engage in the review process.

a. Scope of Secondary Review:

- Curt Civin and Don Small discussed that the secondary review should not overturn the PRO's scientific rankings but could address broader considerations such as geographic distribution, institutional balance, or alignment with legislative priorities. Don Small noted that a full reranking would require all Commissioners to conduct in-depth reviews of every proposal, which is impractical. Members agreed that the secondary review should focus on policy-level adjustments, not redoing scientific evaluations.

- The group also discussed the possibility of adjusting funding distribution (for example, dividing funds among additional awardees if proposals are closely ranked). Pansy Watson confirmed that members with identified

conflicts should recuse from related funding allocation discussions, but that such decisions could otherwise proceed as long as members adhere to predetermined standards and a quorum of Commission members participate.

b. Conflicts Requiring Resignation:

- Pansy Watson clarified that once a Commission member's institution receives a grant, a conflict of interest arises under state ethics law and thus requires that member to resign from the Commission. Unlike some boards, this Commission does not allow holdover participation once a conflict exists. However, a former member may later seek reappointment if they fully disclose their conflict during the re-appointments process. Reappointment is not guaranteed and depends on the Governor's Appointments Office's (GAO) timeline and discretion.

- In response to questions from members, Pansy Watson emphasized that conflicts must be actual, not potential; members cannot preemptively disclose hypothetical conflicts. If reappointed after full disclosure, a member may resume service.

- Curt Civin noted that these requirements may result in several members from major research institutions stepping down once awards are made. To maintain quorum and continuity, the Commission may need to consider expanding its membership to include individuals from institutions or organizations less likely to apply for grants (e.g., National Institutes of Health or out-of-state experts). Pansy Watson agreed this could reduce conflicts, though Curt Civin cautioned that external members might be less engaged in Maryland-specific initiatives.

The discussion concluded with general agreement that the Commission will continue refining its recusal and ethics procedures during the legislative session, ensuring transparency and compliance while maintaining effective participation in the grant review process.

5. Membership Updates

Curt Civin informed the Commission that the GAO is issuing updated appointment letters to stagger commissioners' terms. Members reported inconsistencies in the information recently received. Sadie Peters noted that the GAO is still making corrections and will provide an official list of members and revised term dates once finalized.

6. Next Steps

- Recusal Plan: Curt Civin requested that a summary of the Commission's recusal plan, as discussed during the meeting, be documented for reference.

- Commissioner Terms: Jeff Dome inquired whether there is a limit to the number of terms a commissioner may serve. Curt Civin stated that he did not see mention of term limits in the governing statute. The statute authorizing the commission limits members to two (2) consecutive three (3) year terms.

7. Public Comment

There were no comments from any members of the public present in the meeting.

8. Adjournment

As all business was concluded, Curt Civin asked for a motion to adjourn. Aziza Shad moved that the meeting be adjourned. Beth Siever seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at: 4:29pm.