Maryland Pediatric Cancer Research Commission
Meeting #8 | December 3, 2025 | 1:00 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.
Virtual Meeting
MEETING MINUTES

Attendees

Members in Attendance:
Michelle Urzynicok
Ruth Hoffman
Kathryn Ruble
John Shern
Piotr Walczak
Curt Civin
Aziza Shad
Donald Small

Commission Staff:
Sadie Peters
Kate Natafgi

Members Absent:
Dana Christo
Beth Siever
Elizabeth Kromm
Brigitte Widemann
Jeffrey Dome

Additional Attendees:
Pansy Washington
Tyra Hudgens
Jody Sheely

1. **Welcome, Agenda Review, and Roll Call**
   - Co-chair Ruth Hoffman, called the meeting to order at 11:03 AM and provided an overview of the agenda.
   - Kate Natafgi called roll. Eight members were present, representing a quorum.
   - Members reviewed the minutes from Meeting #7. With no edits required, Dr. Donald Small moved to approve the minutes and Dr. Aziza Shad seconded the motion. The Commission approved the minutes unanimously.

2. **Progress on Questions about Requests for Applications (RFAs)**
   - Ms. Hoffman provided an update on efforts to address delays associated with the grant award process. She explained, as had previously discussed at the last Commission meeting, that the existing statute allows both nonprofit and for-profit entities to apply for grant funding, which necessitates use of a Request for Proposals (RFP) process rather than a Request for Applications (RFA). Transitioning to an RFP would require review by multiple Maryland oversight entities, including representatives from the Office of the Attorney General, and would result in an estimated minimum delay of 18 months to get the solicitation.
   - To avoid this delay, Ms. Hoffman reported that she contacted Senator Jackson's office and spoke with his Chief of Staff, Mr. Don Rau. Mr. Rau agreed that amending the statute to limit eligibility to nonprofit organizations would be a faster and more feasible approach than switching to an RFP process. Ms. Hoffman emphasized that the proposed amendment would be minimal and would likely involve removal of language permitting for-profit applicants. Any statutory change would take effect on October 1, 2026, consistent with the standard effective date for legislation.

   - Ms. Hoffman stated that she will continue meeting with Senator Jackson's team to identify a legislative sponsor in the General Assembly and to advance the proposed amendment. She also noted that discussions are underway to potentially secure an additional $5 million in funding through the budget process.

   - Ms. Hoffman further identified Title V Maternal and Child Health Block Grant funds as a potential supplemental funding source. She explained that this strategy would involve reallocating a portion of unspent Title V funds at the end of the fiscal year to the Pediatric Cancer Research Trust. This approach would be designed to be revenue neutral and would likely require separate legislation.

   - Dr. Curt Civin raised several concerns for consideration. He cautioned that highlighting funding reallocations could pose risks in the current federal funding environment and could draw unwanted attention to existing appropriations, potentially increasing the risk of funds being swept or clawed

back. He also noted that restricting eligibility of the grant funding to nonprofit organizations could be perceived by industry stakeholders as excluding private sector participation and favoring academic institutions.

- In response, Ms. Hoffman noted that the current statute includes language preventing transfer of funds back to the state's General Fund, which offers some protection, though it is not absolute. She stressed the importance of ensuring this language remains intact during any amendment process. Ms. Hoffman further clarified that if the language were amended, while for-profit entities would not be eligible to serve as lead applicants under an RFA, they could still participate as collaborators or subcontractors. The group discussed that this flexibility could be addressed in the RFA rather than in statute to avoid making the legislation more complicated.

- Dr. Civin proposed exploring whether a portion of the available funds could be awarded through an RFA as soon as regulations are finalized, with the remainder distributed later if necessary. He suggested this approach as a way to accelerate funding while legislative and regulatory processes continue. Dr. Peters and Ms. Jody Sheely (MDH) advised that this option would be constrained by the timing of final regulatory promulgation, noting that regulations typically are not advanced during the legislative session and require multiple procedural steps that cannot be expedited.
- Several Commission members expressed concern about the length of time that funds have remained unspent and emphasized the importance of advancing the process as quickly as legally possible. While acknowledging regulatory constraints, members encouraged continued efforts to pursue all viable options to minimize further delays and move funding forward.

3. Regulations Updates

- Commission members discussed whether for-profit entities could participate in the grant program as subcontractors or collaborators rather than as Primary Investigators. It was noted that under current procurement rules, only nonprofit organizations may apply through an RFA, while both nonprofit and for-profit entities may apply through an RFP. However, for-profit entities with an established nonprofit or charitable arm could potentially apply if they can provide evidence that they meet the federal nonprofit designation requirements.

- Members explored whether, if regulations were promulgated by February, the Commission could release a portion of the funds immediately through an RFA while pursuing statutory changes, with the remaining funds released later through either an RFA or RFP. Several members expressed concern about the feasibility and legality of splitting funds across solicitation mechanisms. MDH staff noted that procurement law generally restricts dividing funds intended

for the same purpose into multiple solicitation types but agreed to seek further clarification from procurement and legal counsel.

- Commission members expressed significant concern about the regulatory timeline and ongoing delays in releasing funds. There was strong consensus that the Commission should push to release the RFA as soon as legally possible, regardless of whether statutory amendments are pursued. Members requested that MDH staff reengage procurement and fiscal leadership to raise these issues, advocate for expediting the regulatory process where feasible, and then regroup with the Commission Co-Chairs to discuss next steps.

- Dr. Peters explained that while the regulations are close to completion, they remain a barrier to issuing the RFA. She noted that a few substantive issues remain unresolved, including definitions related to laboratory eligibility and finalization of the recusal process. Dr. Peters emphasized that regulations cannot be submitted for promulgation until these issues are resolved and that MDH shepherds, but does not control, the regulatory timeline.

- The Commission discussed whether laboratories could be defined in regulation in a way that limits eligibility to nonprofit entities, thereby allowing use of the RFA process without statutory amendment. Dr. Peters and Ms. Sheely advised that regulations must align with existing statutory language and that excluding entities currently permitted by statute could be subject to legal challenge. Dr. Peters agreed to consult with the Office of the Attorney General and procurement officials to determine whether clarifying or narrowing definitions within regulation is permissible.

- Members further discussed the statutory language referencing laboratories and whether it was intended to include private research companies or academic and nonprofit research laboratories. Several members noted that ambiguity in interpretation has contributed to the current procurement challenge. MDH staff agreed to bring these concerns back to procurement and legal teams to seek clearer guidance that would allow the Commission to move forward.

- Throughout the discussion, Commission members reiterated concern about the length of time funds have remained unspent and emphasized the importance of continuing to apply pressure through both regulatory and legislative processes to accelerate grant deployment.

4. Recusal Procedures

- Dr. Peters and Dr. Civin presented proposed recusal procedures for the Commission's grant-making activities, noting that the framework was developed in coordination with the Maryland State Ethics Commission. The procedures are intended to ensure compliance with State ethics law while

allowing the Commission to carry out its statutory responsibilities.

- Dr. Civin explained that no recusals would be required during the development of grant-making guidelines or during the application submission phase, as no funding decisions are made at those stages. Applications are submitted directly to MDH and reviewed by an independent peer review organization rather than by Commission members.

- Dr. Civin and Dr. Peters further explained that recusals would be required during the secondary review and funding recommendation phase, when the Commission reviews peer review scores and makes recommendations. A conflict of interest exists if a Commission member, the member's institution, or an affiliated entity is involved in an application, including as a collaborator. Members with conflicts must not participate in discussion or voting on affected applications and must step out of the meeting (into a virtual waiting room) during deliberation of those items.

- Ms. Pansy Watson of the Maryland State Ethics Commission provided clarification on ethics requirements. Ms. Watson explained that quorum is defined as a simple majority of members eligible to participate fully in discussion and voting on a given matter. Members with conflicts may not participate in any portion of the discussion related to conflicted applications.

- Ms. Watson further explained that if recusals result in the loss of quorum, State ethics law permits a participation exception. Under this exception, MDH staff, rather than the Commission, would determine which members with the least significant conflicts may participate solely to restore quorum and allow business to proceed.

- Dr. Peters also described post-award requirements. If a Commission member's institution receives a grant award, that member must resign from the Commission. The member may seek reappointment but would remain subject to recusal requirements. Ms. Watson noted that reappointment may not be appropriate if conflicts would substantially limit the member's ability to participate in Commission business.

- Dr. Civin expressed concern about the practical implications of recusals and emphasized the importance of maintaining quorum to avoid delays in funding decisions. He requested that the quorum definition and participation exception be clearly documented to ensure transparency and consistency.

- Several Commission members expressed general agreement with the proposed recusal framework and requested that the procedures be explicitly

memorialized in Commission bylaws or written guidance. Dr. Peters confirmed that MDH would ensure the recusal procedures are documented and reviewed for consistency with regulations.

5. **Membership Updates**
   - Commission members discussed the anticipated impact of grant awards on Commission membership and quorum.

   - Dr. Civin noted that once grants are awarded, multiple members may need to resign due to institutional conflicts, which could significantly affect the Commission's ability to conduct business.

   - Ms. Hoffman emphasized the importance of proactive planning to avoid future quorum issues and operational delays. She noted that identifying potential replacement members in advance would be prudent given the length of the gubernatorial appointment process.

   - Dr. Shad asked for clarification regarding Commission term lengths and whether upcoming delays might coincide with the end of members' terms. Dr. Peters explained that most Commission appointments are three-year, staggered terms and that members whose terms expire may reapply for reappointment.

   - Dr. John Shern expressed concern about the length of time funds have remained unspent and stated that continued delays are problematic given the amount of work already completed. He agreed with Dr. Civin that the Commission should pursue any legally permissible options to accelerate the funding process.

   - Several members suggested identifying potential future Commission members with pediatric oncology expertise who would be less likely to have institutional conflicts, including individuals from federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health or the Food and Drug Administration.

   - The Co-Chairs encouraged Commission members to submit names of potential candidates to MDH staff so that a pool of qualified individuals could be developed in advance to ensure continuity of Commission operations and maintenance of quorum as grant awards are made.

6. **Public Comment**
   There were no comments from any members of the public present in the meeting.

7. **Adjournment**
   Citing the time and conclusion of the agenda, Dr. Civin requested a motion to

adjourn. Dr. Shern moved to adjourn, and Dr. Shad seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 12:24 p.m.