

Maryland Pediatric Cancer Research Commission
Ad-Hoc Meeting | July 17, 2025 | Time 9:00 a.m. - 10:00 a.m.
Virtual Meeting

MEETING MINUTES

Attendees:

Members Present

Dana Christo
Ruth Hoffman
Dr. Kathryn Ruble
Dr. John Shern
Dr. Piotr Walczak
Dr. Curt Civin
Dr. Aziza Shad
Dr. Donald Small

Members Absent

Beth Siever
Dr. Jeffrey Dome
Dr. Elizabeth Kromm

Maryland Department of Health (MDH) Staff Present

Jody Sheely
Katherine Natafgi
Dr. Sadie Peters
Tyra Hudgens
Erica Smith

Others Present

Pansy Watson

1. Welcome and Introductions

Dr. Peters convened the meeting at 9:04 am and Katherine Natafgi called roll. Seven members were present, which provided a quorum. Staff from MDH and the Maryland State Ethics Commission introduced themselves. No members of the public were present. Dr. Peters then introduced co-chairs Ruth Hoffman and Dr. Curt Civin. Ruth Hoffman reviewed the agenda and emphasized that the main goal of the meeting was to determine how many grants could be funded from the \$5 million allocation after accounting for non-grant costs.

2. Peer Review Expenditures

The group discussed having two versus three reviewers per proposal, noting that a minimum of two would be desired, and three would be ideal. Dr. Walczak inquired about the cost per reviewer, to which Dr. Civin responded that reviewers are typically paid around \$1,000 per grant or session, and going too low could compromise quality. Dr. Shad mentioned her experience on another advisory board, where two reviewers are standard, with a third brought in only for conflicts. This might be able to be implemented by the Peer Review Organization as part of the grant review process, without the necessity for Commission involvement.

3. Annual Grant Expenditures

The group discussed how to structure grant funding and peer-review costs to maximize research support while staying within procurement guidelines. They agreed that keeping the peer-review contract at or below \$50,000 would streamline the MDH solicitation and contracting process and broaden eligibility to both for-profit and non-profit organizations to provide peer review services to the Commission. A proposed model estimated costs at \$34,000 for reviewer compensation and \$16,000 for administrative overhead. It was clarified that the \$50,000 limit applies to the total contract amount, not the annual amount. Members raised questions about review complexity, level of reviewer compensation, and whether the overhead estimates were realistic. Despite higher reviewer costs compared to other states, the group felt the overall contract size was reasonable and potentially attractive to review organizations.

Dr. Ruble moved to keep the peer review costs under \$50,000, which Dr. Small seconded. Based on the above review cost estimates, a budget of \$50,000 should enable the Peer Review Organization to review a maximum of 20 full grant applications (including a maximum of 20 initial applications and yearly progress reports from approximately 12 awardees). The motion passed unanimously, with all commission members voting in favor.

4. Other Expenditures

Dr. Civin confirmed that the Commission vote at our last meeting was that individual grant awards would be capped at approximately \$200,000 per year for up to two years, with the commission aiming to fund around 12 grants from the \$5 million budget. However, they agreed that the Commission should remain flexible—to be able to adjust the number and/or size of awards slightly based on proposal quality and to retain the option to use funds to support other activities, such as a symposium, with monies remaining after allocations to administrative costs, promotional costs, grant review costs, and grant awards.

To manage a review workload of 20 grants (maximum), the group debated limiting the number of submissions, particularly per institution. Dr. Small opposed proportional submission caps, noting that larger institutions like Johns Hopkins produce more research. Dr. Civin suggested setting a flat cap per institution (e.g., 10 proposals), expecting only major institutions to reach that limit. Suggestions to streamline the grant review process included category-specific limitations and requiring Letters of Intent (LOI) to help screen applications early.

Ruth Hoffman outlined projected fixed costs: \$52,900 over three years for MDH staff and \$25,000 for promotional efforts. An additional \$150,000 that might remain after two years of supporting scientific grant activities was discussed as potential flexible funding for activities like hosting a symposium.

Dr. Small moved to approve these expenses as written, and Dr. Ruble seconded, with the motion passing unanimously.

5. Next Steps

Dr. Peters outlined next steps, including fund certification and starting procurement processes for the peer-review organization and promotional activities. The ongoing discussion about institutional limits and a potential LOI process was tabled until the next meeting in August.

6. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

7. Adjournment

Citing no more items on the agenda, Dr. Civin requested a motion to adjourn the meeting. Dr. Walczak moved to adjourn the meeting, Dr. Ruble seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned at 10:02 AM