Ready! Set! Submit! Application Preparation and Submission

Session Transcript: 2022-2023 NIH Grants Conference

Note: Technical issues with the audio portion of the recording have left gaps in the transcript.

Gina Matrassi: Thank you for joining today's presentation, Ready, Set, Submit! Grant Applications, Preparation & Submission. My name is Gina Matrassi, your moderator for this session. I am a Systems Policy Analyst in the Office of Policy ... our presenters for today: Kasima Garst from OPERA and Laurie Roman from eRA. Take it away, Kasima.

Kasima Garst: Thank you, Gina, and welcome, everyone. We have a lot of great content for you today, and we're going to try and ... as much as ... and answer as many ... So I wanted to inform you of some take-home ... that we hope you will get from our presentation today. And ... start off to summarize. So the first and foremost, we'd like to encourage everyone to remember PATSA, so think pasta with a Boston accent. So the key to ... and submission at NIH is to plan ahead to stay ahead. Plans are in place. You have all of your Commons IDs as you start to begin to register and to apply for your application submission. It's going to be really critical that you read your funding opportunity announcement, the application instructions and keep in mind the order of precedence of the priority of those instructions between the application guide, the notice of funding opportunity and any guide notices that may be associated with those opportunities. You also need to make sure you know and understand the submission system that you will be using for your organization to submit your application and how to make sure that you can build your team and understand the assignments related to how you're going to actually fill out those applications in order to get them submitted. NIH always recommends that applicants submit as early as possible to ensure that you can have an on-time submission. We always say early is measured on a clock ... on a calendar and not a clock. And also, the most important thing to keep in mind is, after you have successfully submitted your application, you want to make sure that you see that grant image in the eRA Commons. If you can't see the grant image, then we can't see it either. So if ... certainly can't fund it ... be able to see that image and correct any ... before the application due date. And finally, we'll also outline some of the different items and validations that our system and staff and reviewers will also check to ensure for compliance with NIH policies related to applications and the instructions as well. So to get started, we want to just, again, highlight the most important resources that we have for you in this journey of application submission. First and foremost, there is the NIH Grants and Funding web page and particularly the How to Apply Application Guide. The How to Apply Application Guide in its entirety and the associated links therein is truly our full application guide for NIH grants application submission. So this page is outlined in a couple of different areas that we would like to highlight for you today. First, at the top, there are general application process information. This is where we have resources on information related to our systems, the registration requirements, and other submission policies, as well as resources on how to prepare ... and your application for submission. We also have on the right resources such as our annotated form sets and other information related to our different submission systems and other ... the center we have our application form, and this related to how you fill out the individual forms within your application package. We also have filtered application instruction views ... help provide ... highlighting related ... the instructions for different mechanism focuses, such as research ... awards and fellowships. These are ... but have special call-outs that highlight the instructions that may be unique to those different mechanisms. This presentation is going to talk and highlight some of the key areas related in the area I highlighted below in the slide, related to how to prepare and write your application. So those ... that are associated with that are outlined on the slide. Most importantly, there is the authorized organization representative, who will be the user that is able to do business on behalf of the applicant organization with the federal government. eRA Commons, of course, is also required for application submission to NIH. And in particular, we highlighted the signing official role, which is analogous to the AOR in grants.gov, although it may be different users. But these are the individuals that are authorized to do business with NIH on behalf ... [Indistinct]. On this slide, we highlight many of the different organizational registrations that are required to do business and to submit grant applications to NIH. The key thing to note is that there are many systems, and some of them have dependencies on one another. Your organization must be registered ... First and foremost, there is the Unique Entity Identifier, UEI. This really is ... And the key thing to keep in mind there is that ... System for Award Management, or SAM. You can ... awards with other entities without a complete SAM registration. But any applications have ... But you'll also need to have what I highlighted there with the star on the slide is that eRA Commons, you'll also have to have some very important individual user registrations as well. And last but not least, there is also the Small Business Administration registration, which is required for all small business applications for funding to the NIH as well. So lots of things to keep in mind, and the resource that is linked on the slide has lots more detailed information on those for you. So this next slide outlines the different submission options that are available for submitting your grant application to the NIH. Applicants can utilize eRA's ASSIST system, a system-to-system solution provider, excuse me, and grants.gov workspace to submit those applications. You can think of them kind of like TurboTax, where they'll ultimately prepare your application forms and complete those forms within those systems. But then they are submitted and routed through grants.gov all the way to NIH. What is now highlighted on the slide is that approximately 52 percent of NIH grant applications come in through a system-to-system solution provider, approximately 43 percent come in through eRA ASSIST and approximately 6 percent come in through Grants.gov Workspace. These next highlights that I'm calling out on the slide outline some of the different features of ASSIST and Grants.gov Workspace. Particularly for eRA ASSIST, it is managed by NIH and our eRA colleagues. Laurie will talk more about that when she goes through the submission process and shows some of the ASSIST screenshots for you. But what is really great about ASSIST is that it leverages eRA Commons accounts and the information that we have as part of your registration in order to prepopulate some really helpful information to help reduce the administrative burden as you are completing your application. We also support all NIH competing applications, single project and multi-project, in ASSIST, and we're also able to pull some other really helpful information, such as from clinicaltrials.gov and integrate with other NIH messaging, such as tips and Systems Alerts. Grants.gov Workspace is managed by grants.gov, of course, and it does require some additional user registrations in order to use grants.gov Workspace to complete your application. No prepopulation exists for existing Commons profile. And using Grants.gov Workspace means you will be tracking your application in multiple systems. And also to keep in mind that Grants.gov Workspace only supports NIH single-project competing applications, not multi-project application submission. We don't have a whole lot of details on different system-to-system provider solutions because each system may have different features and functions. But they are able to submit if the system will support it ... the individual S2S will support it, single and multi-project application submission. Regardless of the submit method that you use, all applications will be subject to the same registration requirements, will be completed all the same data elements for the same forms for that application forms package and routed through grants.gov as I mentioned before. It's also important to note that regardless of the submission method that you use, you'll be validated against the same NIH business rules and any other validations associated with your application. And also very importantly, the assembled application image will be in a consistent format for review consideration and users will ... review users will not be able to tell which submission method that you utilized to submit your application. And as I mentioned before as well, all will be tracked in eRA commons. So you need to still make sure that you can see that application image as you expect it in the eRA Commons. There is not a single universal set of application forms that can be downloaded from our form library or websites for application submission. You must use the application forms package that has been specifically curated and attached to your funding opportunity announcement and is accessible through your submission system. Each application forms package includes a customized subset of forms supported by NIH, which are needed for that specific opportunity. For example, a training grant application will have different forms than a small business grant application. Application forms are accessed using your chosen submission method, and it's important to check with your institutional business officials to make sure that you know which method that your institution utilizes and then also which is appropriate for the type of funding opportunity, single or multi-project. So I'm going to turn it over to Laurie now to talk a little bit more about the application process itself. Take it away, Laurie.

Laurie Roman: Hey, thanks. So let's now get into the basics on what you need to do to submit a successful application. It is certainly more than just filling out a set of forms. And so really, we like to think of it as the NIH eight-step process ... [Indistinct]. Our teams back at NIH have been putting a lot of effort into making the searches at the NIH Guide for Grants and Contracts very robust. Just again, take this opportunity to also say that basically, you have to use a funding opportunity announcement to submit your applications. That funding opportunity announcement will have the set of forms that Kasima just mentioned that you will need to complete. We do not mandate the kind of science that you need to do. And by that, we do have what are called parent announcements, and these are really agnostic in terms of the kind of science or the area of science that can come in on those applications or those funding opportunity announcements. But we also have very boutiquey programs, and those will often be solicited under what's called a RFA, Request for Applications. So that's just as a way of interpreting some of that acronyms. So the thing that I, again, want to highlight is really important to read the entire funding opportunity announcement, not once, not twice, but several times. You want to start off at the beginning because you really need to look at ... the participating organization. Also remember that NIH is made up of 24 institutes and centers that are involved in the extramural awarding process. And so if your application is on, for example, [Indistinct] you want to make sure that the National Institute of Aging supports that funding opportunity announcement because an application cannot be assigned to a funding opportunity announcement if there is not an IC who has that area of science as part of their mission statement. You also want to look at related notices. These are often updates. And so if there's been a change, like a correction of a typo, changes of dates, changes of contact information, those will be revealed to you by looking at those notices. They also highlight policy changes. So we advertise for now several months in advance of our rollout of the data management and sharing plan. And then of course, making sure that you know what the key dates are. Those are the opening date, the due dates and, of course, the expiration date. And then the FOA is really made up of eight sections. We have a theme here going on. So the first is a general descriptor. The second talks about what kind of, whether it accepts resubmissions, renewals, revision. The eligibility is defined in Section III. And then ... [Indistinct] to me, which is the actual instructions at the FOA level, what needs to be included in the application as well as submitting information. Review information is in Section V, and you really want to make sure you read that well in advance of starting to prepare your documents because you really want to understand how your application will be reviewed, what criteria will be used as you write your application because you want to address those in the context of the text of your proposal. And then so step two is really planning for this submission. This is where the PATSA comes in, planning ahead to stay ahead. You want to find out, who are your collaborators going to be? Who's going to be doing what in the application? Are all your registrations in place, and are they active? Again, touching on what Kasima said, choosing your submission method, well, you want to contact your sponsored research office because they may have already made that decision for you. If they've invested a number of development dollars or dollars in procuring services if a system-to-system provider, then that's certainly what you'll need to be using. Some systems have very elaborate processes in place for capturing all of the information presubmission as well as post-award, so check with your sponsored research office. And then who's going to be doing what? Who's going to be putting the budgets together? Who's going to be responsible for capturing all the information and all the biosketches? Who's going to do data entry? Make sure everybody is on the same page, knowing when the dates are, and then again, how you're going to be dealing with errors and warnings following submission and then, of course, who will be reviewing the application once it's submitted and assembled and available at eRA Commons? So then you're going ... Once you've contacted your sponsored research office, you know what you're going to be doing, you want to log in through your system early, not on the application due date. You want to make sure that everything is working. In ASSIST, the language is to initiate the application. In Workspace, it's creating the workspace. For S2S, it's going to be dependent on the system provider. So this is ASSIST. So in this case, I've gone in, and I've logged in as a signing official. You'll see what we call content management. This will change on a regular basis, if there's something we want the community to be aware of. But once you put in your credentials, you're then basically going to be taken to an initiation page. The next step in the process is building your teams. In both ASSIST and Workspace and I'm sure S2S providers allow you to grant access to multiple users so those folks can go in and work on the part of the application that they need to work on. And so in ASSIST, that tool is called Manage Access. In Workspace it's called Participants. So in addition to the individual with the role of the PDPI, who is basically in charge of the science component of the application, you'll need to gather eRA Commons credentials for other individuals. Anyone who needs access to ASSIST will need to have an eRA Commons credentials. So the person ... the signing official who's registered can go in and affiliate those individuals with their account, so with the organizational account, individuals are affiliated with that account. So individuals, as I mentioned the PDPI absolutely has to have a Commons account. If you have a multi-project application, component needs will need to have an eRA Commons number. The same is true for sponsors on fellowship, candidates for diversity and re-entry and primary mentors on individual mentored career development applications. And again, the advantage of this manage access or Workspace Participants is you can restrict those individuals from seeing specific areas of the application, such as budgets, so it's a very nice tool. And so now we're really getting into the parts of putting the application together. And again, to highlight what Kasima said, there are basic information about how to put together your application in the guide, which is available on How to Apply. There is specific information about attachments that can be found in the funding opportunity announcement. These will be specific opportunity or FOA-specific attachments. And then lastly, of course, there are the notices. Or in some cases, those are also noted as notices of special interest. This is a really helpful resource here. The annotated form set, this gives you, basically field-by-field instructions on what needs to go there. Fields that are indicated by yellow are required by the schema of the form.

Kasima Garst: All right. Thanks, Laurie. So as Laurie mentioned, we have these great annotated forms, resources, and they highlight the different required fields and elements. But also within the funding opportunity announcements and the application [Indistinct] itself, we do highlight the different attachments that may be required in those form fields as you're filling out those applications ... highlight some of the differences that we have related to our application attachments that are attached to the forms. The key thing to keep in mind is that you should use simple, PDF-formatted files for all attachments. Any forms with fillable fields or signatures must be flattened prior to being attached to your application forms for submission. And we also remind that you that you should disable any security features such as password protection as this can impact our ability to process your application. Use the most recent form versions of any format pages or other templates that are required as part of your application submission, particularly for that required ... biosketch or any other support format templates. And specifically for the biosketch, you can find the currently required version on our NIH Forms Library on the Grants and Funding web page. You must also keep file names to 50 characters or less and pay attention that if there are any requirements within the application guide or a funding opportunity announcement that specify a required file name. For example, we did have some required file names for those other attachments when we had applicants with human fetal tissue or even particularly with some of the data management and sharing cost areas. So you'll want to be making sure that you pay attention if there are any requirements for file names or how things are specified. You should also, to that same effect, you should use meaningful file names, especially for those other attachments. And for the other attachments and other files, you'll sometimes see those become bookmarks within the application-assembled image as well. So you'll also want to be sure to use appropriate file names as well. Do not include any headers or footers in your PDF attachment. We will put some header and footer information in the application image as a whole. Section headings, of course, are encouraged. For example, for the research strategy, if you might have section headers for significant ... and so forth. It's important to also follow any specified page limit requirements. We ... in place for certain ... such as for the recent strategy or program plans. However ... Systematically [Indistinct] are required and may be enforced through staff checks. So we'll talk about that more in some upcoming slides. Follow any guidelines [Indistinct] hyperlinks and URLs. In order to preserve the integrity of the peer review process, we have our existing policies related to the limitation of the use of hyperlinks and URLs in order to try and prevent unfairness in peer review for applicants ... stuff or include information that is outside of the page limits of the application and also for the security and protection of our peer reviewers and to make sure that everything is acceptable and within those bounds. We also wanted to take a minute to highlight some of the new changes that are part of our FORMS-H transition. As you all may be aware ... required for competing applications submitted for the new 2023 NIH ... and manage sharing implementation. We have links to the [Indistinct] ... to the Data Sharing web page and the NIH Grants Policy Statement Resources. So in this Grants Conference, we also ... Data Management and Sharing sessions. So we encourage you to check out those presentations as well. [Indistinct] announcement will specify if the application is required to submit and address a Data Management and Sharing, or DMS, plan within the application. And the applications are required ... that are required to address this plan will attach that plan in the other plan's attachment on the forms indicated on the slide. I'm not going to go into too much detail on those areas because Laurie is going to show you some great screenshots and details on that on the upcoming slides. But the main thing is, if your application is required to address a DMS plan ... attach that new plan in the other plans attachment, and then you're also going to specify any budget information on ... in the budget justification as appropriate. eRA is also going to have some submission validations in place to prevent [Indistinct] ... requirements are not met. So it's very ... pay attention to these requirements and refer to the application instructions. The DMS plans are not evaluated as part of the peer review process and will ... be included in the assembled application image unless otherwise specified in the funding opportunity and will be evaluated as part of a scored criterion, such as of the approach. So, Laurie, why don't you go ahead and walk through some of those details for everybody?

Laurie Roman: Sure! So it's always nice to see what this is going to look like. So I want to, again, just reiterate a couple of the things that Kasima just mentioned with sort of the visual. And so what we've done [Indistinct] form set is, we've added a new field called Other Plans to four PHS, Public Heath [Indistinct] ... will be required ... will be ... this particular policy. What I'm trying to say is that for fellowship applications and for training applications ... is not required and will not be allowed to be attached. And this is clearly indicated in the funding opportunity announcement. So then concentrating on Rs and Ks, that plan is going to be attached in the appropriate section. So for the research plan, they're going to be attached in Other Plans. And again, this is a one-to-two-page text ... there's a template that's made available that can be used. It will be converted to a PDF and added here as [Indistinct] ... and again, this is ... We have across-form validation. So if ... can be required to enter a data-management-sharing cost line item on the detailed budget, and that's the phrase ... The data management is the actual element that should be added. You also need to explain or justify that cost [Indistinct]. There will be a business-rule validation, so we know what ... if the plan is attached at the FOA level, so we're going to make you put it there if [Indistinct], and then if you enter that ... You've entered a budget item, [Indistinct] it can ... We've worked with several of the system-to-system providers who recently ... There was an awareness that they hadn't coded for $0, so the work around is to add one. Now, of course, you'll all be wondering, what's going on with the modular budget? Modular budgets clearly do not have line items, and so what you will need to do is include that dollar amount in the additional narrative justification. I seem to have lost the ability to navigate, so ... yeah, thank you. And again, just to reiterate, the DMS plan is not going to be assembled into the grant image and will not be available for the peer review process. So of course the DMS plan will be viewable to internal staff and you all as part of the grant folder, but will not be able to ... We will not be putting that Data Management and Sharing plan in the grant folder that is available to the reviewers. You can see from the table of contents that the plan is not incorporated. We do add a date stamp on the plan, the funding opportunity announcement, and this received time and the grant tracking number so that you can show the fact that the Data Management and Sharing plan was part of the manifest of the submitted application. Next slide please. So for step six ... your application. We do the following three things. You want to run the business rules ahead of time. And again, I'm providing the language here for ASSIST and Workspace. [Indistinct] completed all fields and that everything there is correct and consistent across the application. You want to preview the application, and that is you [Indistinct] processed or through web services in Workspace and S2S, you [Indistinct] how the application will be [Indistinct] to-do because we've all, having spent some time in the division of [Indistinct] seen things like kids' homework. We had a famous one of track changes, and we've had applications submitted with a fabulous cranberry margarita recipe that unfortunately we can't ... the application was not awarded. [Indistinct] the image and that ... if you file anything, you need to then take remediation ... next slide. So the application is going to be submitted by the AOR or the signing officials, individual who has credits set at grants ... We're going to go in and prepare the application for submission and submit it ... grants.gov. You pass grants.gov validation, you will get a [Indistinct] 42098 in this particular screenshot and in the application. [Indistinct] deadline ... 5 o'clock local time, and that's Eastern Seaboard time ... sorry, sorry, sorry. That's 5 o'clock local time. So if you're in California, it's 5 o'clock local time. And again, all registration sand SAM renewals must be completed before the deadline ... has to be free of all ... We do not allow corrections after the deadline. And again, early is on a calendar, not a clock. And you want to submit early, and that allows you then some time to correct any unexpected errors or warnings. Next slide. So the next step in the final part of the whole submission part is tracking your application. This is probably one of the most important steps. And that is [Indistinct] ... It looks like ... the individuals here that can go and make that check [Indistinct] official, AOs, PIs, anyone that's delegated by the PI. We do send out notifications via e-mail, but they are not perfect. So it is your responsibility to go in and check. Next slide. Highlight again, you have to correct errors. Errors stop the processing the application. Warnings, that's up to your ... or just warnings, for example if you [Indistinct] ... has ... more ... You've gotten ... We're just going to ... again, you ... [Indistinct] application ... practically perfect in every way. Next slide. And so, again ... are identified, you need to ... changes in your local copy, you will then resubmit the application as a change corrected, which is a type of submission. And you will need to enter the previous [Indistinct] number in field 4C. It must be done before the deadline, before the submission due date ... processed. So once an application is error-free, we're going to basically assemble it into an image. We're going to insert headers and footers. We're going to generate a table of contents and book ... important sections of the application. We are going to be ... If it's a complex application, we are going to be creating summary tables. And we are posting that assembled image to the PI's Commons account. We are, lastly, sending notifications. And then again, you have 2 business days to view those things, and you can reject ... Your SO can reject those within that viewing window, after which the application moves forward in the process and cannot be rejected. You only really can submit a change, [Indistinct] submission due date ... submission is going to be late. And with that, we are going ... back over to Kasima.

Kasima Garst: Thank you so much, Laurie. And after you have gone through all those very important ... your image is correct, your submission is officially complete and with the NIH. If you don't reject it within that 2-business day viewing window, it is automatically moved forward for us for further processing. Any subsequent application changes are subject to the NIH policy on late submission of grant applications and the NIH policy on post-submission application materials. We are running out of time, so we want to make sure that we address some of the questions that are in the chat for you. Please look at the answers that we've provided. We see that there are many questions related to Data Management and Sharing instructions. I urge you to check out the session that should already be available and the slides from the Data Management and Sharing experts within OER and the application form instructions. The key thing to keep in mind for everybody is that the Data Management Sharing plan has not replaced the Resource Sharing Plan, only that it is now separated out. So anything else required for the Resource Sharing Plan is still there, such as sharing of model organisms. But the Data Management and Sharing plan is now just a separate attachment. So refer to those application instructions. And because we're running out of time, please feel free to stop by the OPERA Grants Policy and the eRA booths for more information and reach out to the resources that we have here on our help desk and contact slide. So with that, I'm going to turn it back over to Gina to close out our session, and thank you, all.

Gina Matrassi: Thank you, Kasima and Laurie, for sharing your expertise and answering questions.