Request for Applications

# Pilot Awards for HIV Research

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| Concept Proposals Due: | Friday, July 17, 2026 |
| Required Consultation: | Wednesday, July 22, 2026 |
| Full Applications Due: | Thursday, September 10, 2026 |
| Earliest Start Date: | December 2026 |

## Funding Opportunity Description

The Third Coast Center for AIDS Research (TC CFAR) pilot award program prepares faculty members to successfully compete for their first R01 or equivalent award from the NIH for investigator-initiated HIV research. Applications from all disciplines in HIV science (e.g., basic biology, clinical research, epidemiology, behavioral science, implementation science, etc.) are welcome. Early stage and new investigators, as well as R01-funded investigators from other fields who are expanding their work to include HIV, are encouraged to apply.

### Scientific Focus

The Developmental Core invites HIV-specific proposals from across the translational science spectrum. While applications on any topic aligned with NIH's goals for HIV research will be responsive, the Core also highlights several special emphasis topics for the current competition:

- Accelerated Aging and Related Comorbidities
- Artificial Intelligence
- Cure Research
- Dissemination Science
- GLP-1 Agonists
- Implementation Science
- Implementing HIV Services Outside of Traditional Clinical Settings (e.g., pharmacies)
- New Approach Methodologies (e.g., organoids)
- Non-pharmaceutical Interventions

Meritorious applications may study any topic that advances the TC CFAR's overall aims and the NIH's goals for HIV research. The NIH Director's 2025 statement on the agency's strategic direction identified ending the HIV epidemic in the United States as a key priority.[1] To meet this goal, the NIH will leverage implementation science to improve HIV prevention and care outcomes via existing interventions and will continue to support translational research on HIV prevention, treatment, cure, and comorbidities. Potential applicants are encouraged to refer to recent TC CFAR pilot awards as a non-exhaustive list of examples of fundable topics.

### Eligibility

The pilot program is designed to support the scientific and career development of TC CFAR faculty members (i.e., investigators at Northwestern University (NU), the University of Chicago (UC), Rush University (RU), or the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), who are allowed to apply for R-level NIH awards).

- **Applicants.** The PI of a pilot award must be an early stage or new investigator (i.e., not yet PI on an R01-equivalent NIH grant) or an established PI from another field who is new to HIV (i.e., history of R01-equivalent funding outside of HIV research). Investigators currently with a K award or preparing for one are encouraged to pursue pilot funding as long as the project is distinct from the research activities of the K award.

- **Mentors.** Early stage and new investigators are required to include an established TC CFAR faculty member (i.e., PI of an R01-equivalent grant in HIV) as the mentor on the application. The Developmental Core will expect the mentor to support the mentee and interact with the Core throughout the application process, including confirmation that the mentor approved the full pilot application before submission. Mentors are also expected to support the project throughout its planning and execution phase. Secondary mentors from external universities are allowed, when relevant. R01-funded PIs who are new to HIV are strongly encouraged to include an HIV mentor on the application who can help ensure the project is responsive to NIH priorities for HIV and leverages CFAR resources. The Developmental Core can help identify appropriate mentors before the concept proposal deadline.

**Funds Available and Application Timelines**

- Direct costs are limited to $60,000. Smaller budgets may be awarded commensurate with the proposed study.
- The TC CFAR intends to fund 7+ meritorious pilot awards.
- Awards will be made from the TC CFAR P30 grant and/or institutional commitments. Awards made from the P30 will include federally negotiated F&A in addition to the direct costs budgeted for pilot project activities.
- Funding is contingent upon NIH support for the TC CFAR, which is expected to continue through 2030.
- The maximum project period is one year. Proposals for shorter projects are encouraged.
- Regulatory approvals or exemption determinations from the designated IRB or IACUC offices must be in place before an application will be prioritized for funding. Proposals must include documentation that the applicant has started any required approval processes. IRB reliance agreement and IACUC congruence agreements between NU and partner sites may be necessary.
- The Developmental Core intends to call for pilot award applications again in early 2027.

**Scope of Work**

Pilot awards should generate preliminary data that will form the basis of a proposal to the NIH. Utilizing existing data, biorepositories, and infrastructure such as ongoing cohorts or TC CFAR scientific core resources, is highly encouraged. Limited participant recruitment and primary data collection are allowed as long as they are feasible within the scope of the budget and project timeline.

Please note that: 1) All pilot project activities must take place domestically; and 2) CFARs cannot fund studies that meet NIH's definition of a clinical trial.

**Review Criteria**

The primary criteria for evaluation of the application are scientific merit and the concomitant likelihood that the pilot project will lead to independent NIH funding for HIV research. All required components of the application may affect the overall impact score. Reviewers will use a standardized scoring system, the modified NIH peer review framework, and additional criteria specific to this competition:

- **Competitiveness for NIH HIV funding**. Does the work align with TC CFAR and NIH priorities? Will the preliminary data increase the probability of obtaining HIV funding from NIH?
- **Plan for mentorship and career development**. Do the applicant and mentor provide clear plans that support the awardee's eventual goal of leading investigator-initiated NIH grants in HIV research?
- **Feasibility.** Can the project be completed within the proposed timeline? Is the awardee leveraging appropriate local resources and expertise?
- **Transdisciplinary nature of the research**. Proposals that successfully bring more than one scientific discipline to bear on research questions of interest are encouraged.

## Required Concept Proposals and Pre-submission Consultations

A 2-page concept proposal and preliminary details of the planned project will be **due on Friday, July 17, 2026**, and will be collected via REDCap. https://is.gd/ThirdCoastCFAR_PilotApp

Requested information will include:

- A 2-page draft of the aims, study design, and approach
- Checklist to identify types of regulatory approvals that will be needed
- Preliminary plan for personnel and institutions involved in the project

REDCap will generate a unique link and return code for each proposal. Applicants should save their unique information as it will be needed to submit the final proposal.

### Required Pilot Consultations

**On Wednesday, July 22, 2026**, the Developmental Core will require brief, consultations (15-20 minutes each) with applicants to provide feedback on the scientific direction of the concept proposal for this competition. Mentors are strongly encouraged to join. Invitations for specific meeting times will be sent after the concept proposal deadline. Applicants are asked to hold the relevant window of time on their calendars.

- Proposals in the basic sciences: 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
- Proposals in the clinical, behavioral, and implementation sciences: 2:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

## Full Applications

The application is an abbreviated NIH R01-style format. Use the CFAR or NIH forms as indicated in the table below. Proposals must use NIH formatting standards (single-spaced, 0.5 inch margin minimum, Arial, Helvetica, Palatino Linotype, or Georgia typeface in black in at least 11 point size).

Applicants will submit final proposals through REDCap, using the unique link and return code generated during the concept proposal phase. **Applicants and their mentors should set clear internal timelines for the mentor to provide feedback on the proposal and sign off on the final version.**

**Full proposals must be time-stamped by REDCap by 11:59 p.m. on Thursday, September 10, 2026.**

| REQUIRED COMPONENTS FOR FULL APPLICATION | FORMAT AND NOTES |
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| **Introduction**<br>Required in some cases and only when indicated by the Developmental Core:<br>• When submitting a revision of a previously unfunded project. Respond to critiques from the prior submission and explain changes that have been made to improve the proposal.<br>• When the PI has already had a CFAR pilot award. Provide an update on NIH submissions resulting from the first pilot award and explain how a new award will prepare the PI for a competitive application to the NIH.<br>• When the PI is requesting a second year of funding for an ongoing pilot award. Explain why the current award will not yield results needed for an application to the NIH. Explain how additional funds will make the subsequent application to the NIH exceptionally strong. | 1 page limit<br>No form |
| **Project Summary / Abstract**<br>Serves as a succinct and accurate description of the proposed work when separated from the application. | Limited to 30 lines<br>No form |
| **Project Narrative**<br>Use plain language understandable by a general audience to describe how the work will contribute to knowledge that will enhance health. | 3 sentence limit<br>No form |
| **Specific Aims**<br>State concisely the goals of the proposed research and summarize the expected outcome(s). | 1 page limit<br>No form |

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| **Research Strategy**<br>Similar to an NIH R01-style application, include the following sections:<br>• Significance: Explain the importance of the research, the scientific premise, and gaps in current knowledge. You may include preliminary data, if available (not required), in this section or the approach section.<br>• Innovation: Explain how the work will shift current paradigms, or the use of novel technologies/methods, approaches, and theoretical concepts.<br>• Approach: Describe the overall strategy to achieve the specific aims. Describe the experimental design and methods in sufficient detail to allow the reviewers to see how you will achieve robust and unbiased results. Discuss potential problems and alternative strategies. Include a table with a timeline by month for key activities, demonstrating feasibility of the proposed worked within a 1-year (or less) project period. | 5 page limit<br>No form |
| **Bibliography**<br>Include title and names of all authors. Follow same formatting and type size rules as for the research strategy. | No limit<br>No form |
| **Biosketches**<br>Biosketches are required for the PI and mentor. Include biosketches for other investigators only if they play a key role on the project. | Use NIH template |
| **Mentorship Plan and Letter of Support**<br>The letter from the primary mentor for the pilot award should serve as a clear plan for the type of guidance and support they will provide throughout the project as well as future applications to the NIH. The letter should also confirm that the mentor reviewed and endorses the final version of the full pilot proposal. Support from optional secondary mentors may be described in the primary mentor's letter. | No form |
| **Plans for Future NIH Proposal Submission**<br>Explain how this pilot project will add value to plans for future NIH proposals, citing the specific NOFOs and targeted date for submission. If the applicant has previously received CFAR funding (e.g., pilot, supplement, or other mechanism), provide information on any NIH grant submissions to date, and explain how this new proposal for additional funding will support a successful NIH grant submission in the future. | 1 page limit<br>No form |
| **Regulatory Approvals**<br>Upload a screenshot that confirms any necessary approvals or exemption determinations from an IRB or IACUC have been requested. Full approvals or exemption determinations must be provided to the CFAR before an application will be prioritized for funding.<br>If the project already has IRB or IACUC approval or an exemption determination, upload the official notice. | No form |
| **Human Subjects Research**<br>Upload a single Word document that describes plans to work with human participants / subjects. Refer to NIH guidance G.500 PHS Human Subjects Information so that all questions are thoroughly addressed. | No limit<br>Use CFAR form |
| **Detailed Budget for Direct Costs**<br>• Direct costs are limited to $60,000.<br>• In the budget workbook, provide a separate sheet for each institution's budget. Use federally-negotiated rates for fringe benefits and F&A. Regardless of the pilot PI's institution, all subcontracts will be issued by Northwestern, as NIAID does not allow third tier subcontracts.<br>• Allowable expenses include salary and fringe benefits for the research team, supplies, participant incentives, assays, consultants/service agreements, and core services. Identify all services to be purchased from core facilities and provide the | Use CFAR budget workbook |

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| name of the facility.<br>• The budget must include appropriate effort for the pilot PI.<br>• Salary for the mentor should not be included unless they have an additional role on the project.<br>• Investigators on K awards may be restricted from accepting salary.<br>• Salary may be requested for a graduate student or postdoctoral scientist with a clear justification of the work they will do on the project. Training and tuition can be included as direct costs per institutional policy.<br>• Travel and equipment are not allowed unless essential for execution of the research.<br>• Publication costs are not permitted.<br>• When allowable, use a service agreement rather than a subcontract, to support partners that are not conducting human subjects research for the project. | |
| **Budget Justification**<br>• Provide a separate budget justification for each institution that will receive funds.<br>• Describe and justify each line item on the budget. | No limit<br>Use CFAR form |
| **Other Letters of Support**<br>Other letters of support may be included. They are strongly suggested when the applicant plans to use data, specimens, or services that are not widely available. Proposals that rely on participation from a community partner are required to include a letter signed by an authorized official, confirming the organization's intent to contribute to the project. | No limit<br>No form |
| **Appendices**<br>Appendices are permitted but not required. Applicants may include study instruments, draft interview guides, or consent forms in their submission. Note that reviewers are not required to read appendices; all information required for the peer review process must be contained within designated sections of the pilot application. | No limit<br>No form |

## Post Submission / Just-in-Time Requirements

Applications will be prioritized for funding in fall 2026. Before an application can be prioritized for funding, the PI must provide all relevant regulatory approvals and plans to the CFAR Administrative Core. Examples include:

- IRB approval notice or exemption determination
- IACUC approval notice or exemption determination
- Conflict of Interest disclosures and management
- Vertebrate Animal Section, if the model is not already in use by other TC CFAR investigators

## Post Award Timelines and Requirements

### NIH CFAR Program Requirements for Pilot Awardees

- Pilot projects must be completed within one year. Due to the requirements of the NIH CFAR program, the TC CFAR is unlikely to approve no cost extensions.
- In order to monitor progress and evaluate the long-term outcomes of the TC CFAR pilot program, investigators will be required to provide updates on: progress of pilot activities and to notify the DC of subsequent proposals to the NIH; publications and presentations that use data from the pilot; and notices of award from NIH for HIV grants funded for five years after completion of the pilot.
- Awardees must acknowledge the Third Coast Center for AIDS Research in any publication or applications that result from awards. For example: "This *[insert: abstract /publication/ presentation/ grant proposal]* was (partially) supported by a pilot award from the Third Coast Center for AIDS Research (CFAR), an NIH-funded center (P30AI117943), with co-funding from the following Institutes and Centers: NIAID, NCI, NHLBI, NICHD, NIA, NINR, NIDA, NIHMD, NIDDK, and NIDCR. The content is

solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health."

- All publications that benefit from support provided by the Third Coast CFAR must comply with the NIH Public Access Policy.

**Administrative Responsibilities of the Pilot Principal Investigator's Department/Unit**

The Third Coast CFAR functions as the sponsor for pilot awards and will work with NU's Sponsored Research office and relevant offices at UC, RU, and UIC to set up a funding mechanism for the pilot award PI. The award recipient is responsible for working with the research administration within their department/division/unit to manage this award. Management includes procurement, expense reports, deployment of unit personnel on this project, communication with other departments/units to assure proper deployment of personnel on this project, reconciliation of general ledger reports and expenditures, tracking of budget balances, and other activities in support of completion of project aims.

## Developmental Core Contact Information

The Developmental Core provides strong support for new investigators and established investigators new to HIV research. Please contact the Core with questions or requests for assistance at any point in the application process. Messages may be directed to the Developmental Core leader/s best suited to respond, based on their institutional affiliation or scientific focus.

**Elena Martinelli, PhD**
Developmental Core Director (Basic Science)
Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases)
Northwestern University
elenamartinelli@northwestern.edu

**Kathryn Macapagal, PhD**
Co-Director for Behavioral and Implementation Sciences
Associate Professor of Medical Social Sciences (Implementation Science), Northwestern University
kathryn.macapagal@northwestern.edu

**Sybil Hosek, PhD**
Co-Director for Biobehavioral Sciences
Professor of Medicine
University of Illinois at Chicago
shosek@uic.edu

**Moira McNulty, MD**
Co-Director for Clinical and Implementation Sciences
Assistant Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases)
University of Chicago
Moira.McNulty@uchospitals.edu

**Ali Keshavarzian, MD**
Co-Director for Basic and Translational Sciences
Professor of Medicine (Gastroenterology)
Rush University
ali_keshavarzian@rush.edu

**Justin Schmandt, MPH**
Developmental Core Administrator
Associate Director, Third Coast CFAR
justin.schmandt@northwestern.edu

[1] National Institutes of Health. Advancing NIH's Mission Through a Unified Strategy. https://www.nih.gov/about-nih/nih-director/statements/advancing-nihs-mission-through-unified-strategy Accessed April 24, 2026.