



Request for Applications Research Scholar Award

Program Description

One of the major barriers to the growth of the field of palliative care is the lack of training opportunities for early career investigators. The overarching objectives of the **Advancing the Science of Palliative Care Research across the Lifespan (ASCENT) Consortium** are to promote the development of a palliative care research workforce across a range of institutions and geographic locations and to build the evidence base for palliative care across the lifespan and a range of populations. The ASCENT Consortium therefore requests applications for its Research Scholar Award to provide early-career investigators the protected time and training required to develop and conduct the research necessary to be competitive for larger, extramurally funded awards. The ASCENT Consortium requests applications for the 2025 funding cycle of the ASCENT Research Scholar Award. Letters of Intent (LOI) are due by October 15, 2025. If invited to apply based on LOI review, Research Scholar Award applications will be due by January 14, 2026.

This request for applications (RFA) is limited to applications that support palliative care research for seriously ill patients and their caregivers in the below priority areas. Proposals may employ a range of research methodologies including but not limited to: clinical trials (as [defined by the NIH](#)), observational studies, secondary data analyses, health services research, qualitative research, and mixed methods research.

1. Improving communication between health care teams and persons with serious illness and their caregivers across the lifespan and across settings.
2. Developing and/or evaluating novel care delivery models addressing the needs of people with serious illness and their caregivers across the lifespan.
3. Assessing cost, quality, access, use, and outcomes of palliative care for people with serious illness and their caregivers across the lifespan.
4. Developing and/or using new methodological approaches (e.g., causal inference, trial design, incorporating artificial intelligence) or measures (e.g., pain, depression, spiritual distress) in palliative care research.
5. Improving pain and other physical (e.g., dyspnea, disability, cognition), psychosocial (e.g., depression, anxiety, loneliness), or spiritual (e.g., loss of meaning, existential distress) concerns of people with serious illness and their caregivers across the lifespan.

Note: The limited time and budget provided by this Consortium RFA constrains the types of clinical trials that can be proposed to activities related to creation of an intervention or preliminary testing (feasibility/acceptability) of an already developed intervention, which is [NIH Stage Model](#) Stage I.

Applicants proposing a clinical trial are strongly advised to consult the ASCENT Consultation Program, which will include office hours and guidance to help you prepare, after your LOI has been administratively reviewed. Consultation is available for those applicants who are invited to submit a full proposal.

Award Information

The ASCENT Research Scholar Award provides two years of support for salary and/or research activities to junior faculty in the amount of **\$150,000 per year (direct costs)**, plus 8% allowable facilities and administrative costs. (Total award not to exceed \$162,000 per year.) Awards are not renewable.

Eligibility

To be eligible for the ASCENT Research Scholar Award, applicants must meet the following requirements:

- Applicants must hold a clinical, research, or health-professional doctorate degree (MD, PhD, DO, DSW, DPH, PharmD, ND or equivalent)
- Applicants must have a full-time faculty position or equivalent at a college, university, medical or nursing school, health care system/setting or other fiscally responsible organization within the United States with Principal Investigator status by the time of the award start date.
- Applicants must be citizens or permanent residents of the United States.
- Applicants must be no more than 10 years out of their post-doctoral or post-graduate fellowship training. Exceptions to this policy will be made on an individual basis and potential applicants who would like to request consideration should contact the ASCENT Research Education Core via ASCENTadmin@cuanschutz.edu.
- Applicants must be able to commit a minimum of 50% of full-time professional effort conducting the application's proposed research and career development activities.
- Applicants must be able to commit to participation in ASCENT-supported training opportunities and meetings.
- Potential applicants are **not eligible** if they are current or former PDs/PIs on NIH research project (R01), program project (P01), center grants (P50), Project Leads of program project (P01), or center grants (P50), other major individual career development awards (e.g., K01, K07, K08, K22, K23, K25, K76, K99/R00, VA career development awards, foundation-funded career awards), or the equivalent.
- Potential applicants **are eligible** if they are current or former PDs/PIs of an NIH Small Grant (R03), Exploratory/Developmental Grants (R21), Planning Grant (R34/U34), Research Enhancement Awards (R15), Dissertation Award (R36), or SBIR/STTR (R41, R42, R43, R44) as are PD/PIs of Transition Scholar (K38) awards and individuals appointed to institutional K programs (K12, KL2) or T32 programs, or the equivalent. Applicants with questions about their eligibility should contact ASCENT prior to submitting an application.
- If an active recipient of an ASCENT Research Scholar Award is selected to receive—and accepts—a career development award from another source during their grant period, then the individual must relinquish salary and research support from ASCENT but may retain budgeted funds for travel to the Annual ASCENT Scientific Meeting in order to allow them to attend and present and will continue to have access to ASCENT resources and tools.
- Applicants should have a mentor or co-mentors who together have the relevant scientific expertise and research experience. If the applicant is unable to identify a palliative care researcher for their mentor, they should contact ASCENT prior to submitting an application.
- Applicants cannot simultaneously apply for both an ASCENT Research Scholar Award and Pilot and Exploratory Award in the same grant cycle.

Contingent on meritorious review, funding priority will be given to early career investigators who wish to establish themselves as a palliative care scientist in areas that reflect ASCENT goals. Applicants uncertain about their eligibility are strongly advised to contact ASCENT administration before preparing an application.

We anticipate awarding 10 Research Scholar Awards in this cycle. Applications are open to potential scholars from a range of disciplines across varied institutions and geographic locations focused on varied serious illness patient populations. This includes populations with disproportionately higher palliative care needs and/or challenges accessing palliative care services as [defined by NIH](#) (see also [NIH-Designated Populations with Health Disparities](#)).

Mentoring

Recipients of the ASCENT Research Scholar Award (hereafter referred to as “scholars”) will work with a mentor/co-mentor who has the relevant scientific research experience. The goal of the mentor is to ensure that funded scholars receive appropriate supervision, that research projects and career development activities move forward in an efficient and timely manner, that projects continue to address the core mission of the Consortium, and to connect scholars with other investigators in the field of palliative care.

To promote development of future research leaders, all scholars will also be assigned a mentor from the ASCENT Consortium based on alignment of palliative care research population, methodology, availability, and different mentor/mentee institution. This is in addition to mentors named in the Research Scholar Award application. Scholars will meet with their ASCENT mentor virtually at least quarterly to discuss career progress, challenges, and opportunities.

Grantee Requirements

Each recipient of an ASCENT Research Scholar Award, as a condition of accepting the award, will agree to the following:

- To attend (virtually) monthly career development training sessions, including research methods training workshops and works-in-progress presentations
- To budget for and attend (in person) the Annual ASCENT Scientific Meeting in the Washington, DC, metro area each year during their award period
- To present results of their ASCENT-funded research at the required annual meeting and once-annually in virtual works-in-progress sessions
- To prepare annual progress reports for each year of funding and a final report at the conclusion of the award period
- To complete brief, interim, 6-month milestone surveys querying progress, barriers, and ASCENT core training program engagement for the duration of the award
- To include standardized ASCENT funding acknowledgement and disclosure in presentations, publications, and other dissemination activities
- To follow all applicable NIH policy and compliance requirements including, but not limited to, [ClinicalTrials.gov registration](#), [NIA’s Clinical Research Operations and Management System reporting](#), and use of the ASCENT data management and sharing plan including, where feasible, the quantitative and qualitative data repositories.

- To respond in a timely matter to requests to participate in ASCENT Consortium evaluation activities when requested during the award and for 1 year following the award

How to Apply

Online application forms and complete instructions for the ASCENT Research Scholar Award are available on the ASCENT website at ascentpalliativecare.org. Applications must be submitted electronically via ASCENT application portal by the close of business (5:00 PM PT) on the specified deadline date.

The ASCENT Research Scholar Award has a two-step application process:

STEP 1: Eligible candidates are required to complete an online application and upload a letter of intent (LOI) along with their biosketch using the current NIH format, no later than October 15, 2025, at 5:00 PM PT. The LOI should not exceed 800 words and should briefly describe the applicant's previous experience, research plan, training plan, mentorship team, and career potential. Applicants who meet eligibility requirements, have an identified mentor/s, and whose research focus is in an ASCENT priority area, will be invited for full proposals.

STEP 2: If an applicant is selected for further consideration, they will be asked to submit a full proposal no later than January 14, 2026, at 5:00 PM PT. Applicants will have access to the ASCENT Lab, our Consultation Program, which includes office hours and information about available resources.

Full Proposal Preparation

The format of the full application is based on an NIH career development award (e.g., K23) and will include all items and sections outlined below. Applicants should follow the NIH font and format specifications (i.e., font size of 11 points or larger; single-spaced; no more than 15 characters per inch; no more than 6 lines per inch, and at least one-half inch margins for all pages), and should include a page number and the applicant's name on each page. The Applicant's NIH-format biosketch and Letter of Intent are all submitted during Step 1 of the application process, while the remaining documents are submitted in Step 2.

1. **Biosketch** | Upload applicant's and mentors' biosketches in the current NIH format.
2. **Project Abstract** | Provide a concise statement of no more than 300 words describing the proposed project.
3. **Lay/General Audience Summary** | Describe your study in no more than 300 words using consumer-friendly, jargon-free, and abbreviation-free terms.
4. **Applicant Information and Career Development Plan** (maximum 3 pages)
 - a. Include the applicant's commitment to a career in palliative care
 - b. Provide evidence of the applicant's potential to become an independent investigator
 - c. Describe how the award will contribute to the applicant's career objectives
 - d. Provide a summary of career development activities that will facilitate the applicant's development as a palliative care researcher
5. **Research Plan** (maximum 5 pages) | The following sections must be included:
 - a. Specific Aims (maximum 1 page)
 - b. Significance

- c. Innovation
- d. Approach
- e. References (not included in page limit)
6. **Protection of Human Subjects (if applicable).** See below for details.
7. **Training in the Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR, maximum 1 page)** | Many institutions with NIH funding for early career investigators have institutionally endorsed or mandated programs for training in the RCR. To avoid duplication of responsibilities based on institutional requirements, all funded scholars must describe plans for training in RCR, including plans to complete their local RCR training, if applicable. In the rare case that an institution does not have such training available, applicants must describe their approach to this training, including plans to complete recognized programs (e.g., CITI training in RCR) within recommended frequencies (e.g., 8 hours of RCR for every 2 years of NIH funding). This section should include plans for training in Good Clinical Practice for proposed clinical trials.
8. **Budget & Budget Justification** | Applicants should follow the online directions on the ASCENT website for how to submit the budget for their proposed project. Project expenses should be in accordance with budget guidelines and justified, if necessary.
9. **Letters of Support** | 2 letters that assess the applicant's scientific ability and potential:
 - a. 1 letter should come from the applicant's proposed mentor/co-mentors confirming their role, and addressing the applicant's scientific ability and potential. Please include a grid that lists past mentees, their position when mentored and their current position, and their mentor's role in their career development.
 - b. 1 letter should come from the Chair of the applicant's department, Dean, or equivalent. indicating the sponsoring institution's commitment of at least 50% protected research time for the applicant, if funded. Additionally, the letter must provide assurance that the applicant will have adequate space and facilities to conduct his/her research.
10. No appendices will be accepted.
11. No supplemental materials will be accepted after the deadline unless requested by staff for administrative purposes or when needed for the reviewers.
12. Adherence to all NIH research requirements (e.g., [Form I](#), [Financial Conflicts of Interest](#), [Data and Safety Monitoring Board](#)) is expected.
13. NIA will determine whether a Safety Officer or Data and Safety Monitoring Board are required. If a clinical trial is proposed, the applicant will be required to adhere to the ASCENT Data and Safety Monitoring Plan and utilize the ASCENT appointed Safety Officer or Data and Safety Monitoring Board.

Protection of Human Subjects

If the research involves human subjects, applicants must provide a section immediately following the research plan that addresses:

1. **Risks to Human Subjects**
 - a. Describe and justify the proposed involvement of human subjects in the work outlined in the Research Strategy section.
 - b. Describe the characteristics of the subject population, including their anticipated number, demographics, and health status, if relevant, in alignment with [NIH Policy on Inclusion of Women and Minorities as Subjects in Clinical Research](#)
 - c. Describe and justify the sampling plan, including retention strategies and the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of any subpopulation.

- d. If relevant, explain the rationale for the involvement of special vulnerable populations, such as fetuses, neonates, pregnant women, children, prisoners, institutionalized individuals, or others who may be considered vulnerable populations. Note that ‘prisoners’ includes all subjects involuntarily incarcerated (for example, in detention centers) as well as subjects who become incarcerated after the study begins.
 - e. If relevant to the proposed research, describe procedures for assignment to a study group. As related to human subjects protection, provide details about all planned interventions such as dose, frequency, and administration.
 2. **List any collaborating sites where human subjects research will be performed and describe the role of those sites and collaborating investigators in performing the proposed research.** Explain how data from the site(s) will be obtained, managed, and protected.
 3. **Sources of Materials**
 - a. Describe the research material obtained from living individuals in the form of specimens, records, or data.
 - b. Describe any data that will be collected from human subjects for the project(s) described in the application.
 - c. Indicate who will have access to individually identifiable private information about human subjects.
 - d. Provide information about how the specimens, records, and/or data will be collected, managed, and protected, as well as whether any individually identifiable private information will be collected specifically for the proposed research project.
 4. **Potential Risks**
 - a. Describe all the potential risks to subjects posed by participation in the research (physical, psychological, financial, legal, or other) and assess their likelihood and seriousness to the human subjects.
 - b. Where appropriate, describe alternative treatments and procedures, including the risks and potential benefits of the alternative treatments and procedures, to participants in the proposed research. When alternative treatments or procedures are possible, the rationale for the proposed approach should be clear
 5. **Recruitment and Informed Consent**
 - a. Describe plans for the recruitment of subjects (where appropriate) and the process for obtaining informed consent. If the proposed studies will include children, describe the process for meeting requirements for parental permission and child assent.
 - b. Include a description of the circumstances under which consent will be sought and obtained, who will seek it, the nature of the information to be provided to prospective subjects, and the method of documenting consent. When appropriate, describe how potential adult subjects’ capacity to consent will be determined and plans for obtaining consent from a legally authorized representative for adult subjects not able to consent.
 6. **If a waiver of some or all of the elements of informed consent will be sought, provide justification for the waiver.** Informed consent document(s) need not be submitted unless subsequently requested the ASCENT program.
 7. **Protections Against Risk**
 - a. Describe planned procedures for protecting against or minimizing all potential risks identified, including risks to privacy of individuals or confidentiality of data, and assess their likely effectiveness.
 - b. Where appropriate, discuss plans for ensuring necessary medical or professional intervention in the event of adverse effects to the subjects.

- c. Where appropriate, describe plans for handling incidental findings that may be uncovered as a result of the research, such as incidental findings from research imaging, results of screening tests, or misattributed paternity.
- 8. Potential Benefits of the Proposed Research to Human Subjects and Others**
- a. Discuss the potential benefits of the research to participants and others.
 - b. Discuss why the risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits to research participants and others.
 - c. Please note that financial compensation of subjects should not be presented as a benefit of participation in research.
- 9. Importance of the Knowledge to be Gained**
- a. Discuss the importance of the knowledge to be gained as a result of the proposed research.
 - b. Discuss why the risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the importance of the knowledge that reasonably may be expected to result.
- 10. All studies involving human subjects will need a single IRB plan consistent with the ASCENT Consortium sIRB policy indicating whether they will use their institution's sIRB or will require use of the University of Colorado's (CU) sIRB.** Regardless of which IRB is used, CU as the ASCENT prime site is considered a site for the sIRB given the nature of collaborative awards from NIH and any required funds should be budgeted for this additional site accordingly. Applicants must include a letter from their IRB/OHRPP confirming they are either serving as sIRB or will cede to the ASCENT/CU sIRB.
11. Studies with an NIH-defined clinical trial will be required to comply with the requirements specified in [NOT-AG-24-081: NIA Clinical Research Enrollment Policy](#).

Peer Review of Applications

The ASCENT Scientific Review Committee (SRC) will review the proposals. The SRC is composed of scientists with expertise in palliative care, patient-oriented research, health services research, communication, epidemiology, research design and biostatistics. In addition, the SRC includes lay reviewers with personal lived experiences of serious illness.

Review Criteria

Applications will be reviewed using current NIH templates and scoring systems, including evaluation of human subjects plan, and budget. Specific review criteria will include: Alignment with request for applications and ASCENT priorities; Potential of the applicant to progress to a K award; PI and mentorship team; Career Development Plan, including activities both within and outside the Consortium; and Research Project, including significance, innovation, and impact. Lay-reviewers will evaluate the proposal's lay summary and relevance to the lived experience of serious illness.

Specific scoring considerations include the following:

- 1. Candidate:**
 - Quality of the candidate's academic and clinical record
 - Potential to develop as an independent investigator in palliative care
 - Commitment to a career in palliative care research
- 2. Career Development Plan:**

- Likelihood that the career development plan will contribute substantially to the scientific development of the candidate
- Appropriateness of the content and duration of the proposed didactic and research phases of the award
- Consistency of the career development plan with the candidate's career goals and prior research experience

3. Research Plan:

- Scientific and technical merit of the research question, design and methodology
- Relevance of the proposed research to the candidate's career objectives
- Appropriateness of the research plan to the stage of research development and as a vehicle for developing the research skills as described in the career development plan
- Considerations of sex as a biological variable

4. Mentor/Co-Mentors:

- Appropriateness of mentor(s) research qualifications in the area of this application
- Quality and extent of mentor's proposed role in providing guidance and advice to the candidate
- Previous experience in fostering the development of more junior researchers
- History of research productivity and support
- Adequacy of support for the proposed research project

5. Environment and Institutional Commitment:

- Adequacy of research facilities and the availability of appropriate educational opportunities
- Quality and relevance of the environment for scientific and professional development of the candidate.
- Candidate institution's commitment to the scientific development of the candidate and assurances that the institution intends for the candidate to be an integral part of its research program
- Candidate institution's commitment to an appropriate balance of research and clinical responsibilities including the commitment of 50 percent of the candidate's effort to research and research related activities

6. Budget:

- Justification of requested budget in relation to career development goals and research aims

Note: All projects proposed for funding after the ASCENT scientific review process will require approval by NIH prior to initiation.

Resubmission

Applications that are not funded may be revised and resubmitted for the next ASCENT funding cycle. However, only one resubmission is allowed. Resubmitted applications will be reviewed in the same detail and will compete on an equal basis with all other new applications. Resubmitted applications will include all the above elements plus a 1-page introduction to the revised application that summarizes substantial additions, deletions, and changes to the application and responds to the issues and criticism raised in the prior review.

Contact

Please email ASCENTadmin@cuanschutz.edu with any questions.