

2023 RESEARCH COMPETITION GUIDELINES

THE GAME CHANGER FUND

BACKGROUND:

Via the “We Cross Cancer” Capital Campaign (Alberta Cancer Foundation 2022-2023; <https://wecrosscancer.ca>), donors across Alberta contributed \$5 million to invest in cancer research in Edmonton. Extensive consultation and engagement with Edmonton’s cancer research community and other stakeholders was undertaken in summer and fall 2022 to inform how the funds should be invested. This was a collaborative effort between the Alberta Cancer Foundation (ACF), Cancer Research & Analytics at Cancer Care Alberta (CR&A/CCA: Alberta Health Services) and the Cancer Research Institute of Northern Alberta (CRINA: University of Alberta).

We received clear feedback that the funds should be used strategically and creatively to support innovative cancer research – filling gaps, complementing existing funding sources, and supporting collaborations designed to transcend traditional boundaries in addressing cancer research questions of relevance to people facing cancer.

Building on what we heard, the Game Changer Fund was created.

FUNDING COMPETITION GOAL:

To support up to four cancer research teams (refer to Appendix A - Definitions/Glossary for bolded terms) based in Edmonton, Alberta to work on new and innovative ways to identify, describe, and tackle important cancer research questions. This funding opportunity is designed to enable each research team, led by a Principal Applicant, to capitalize on existing areas of research strength, with the goal of boosting cancer research impact, productivity and capacity using creative approaches or fresh perspectives on existing ideas that may not be feasible using other sources of research funding.

EXPECTATIONS:

Research teams (refer to glossary for definition) based in Edmonton, Alberta are invited to submit proposals describing the team, and the aims, objectives and desired outcomes of the proposed research that aligns with the goal of the competition.

Each research team may apply for up to \$1.25Million in total for up to four years. All funds must remain in Edmonton.

Cancer research team proposals will be reviewed and evaluated on scientific merit and feasibility, as well as descriptions of how expectations aligned with the goal of the funding competition will be met.



Specifically, applicants will be expected to describe clearly:

- how the funding will help support new and transformative or creative approaches for collaborative and interdisciplinary cancer research designed to boost the pace and impact of knowledge generation in Edmonton, Alberta;
- how the proposed work builds on existing strengths, expertise or resources in the cancer research environment in Edmonton, Alberta;
- the extent to which the proposed cancer research team proposal addresses questions, themes or directions that are of relevance to people facing cancer or the healthcare system that supports cancer care;
- the desired outcomes of the cancer research team proposal, and how the outcomes will contribute substantially to the goal of boosting cancer research impact, productivity and capacity in Edmonton, Alberta.
- inclusion of people from diverse disciplines, backgrounds and experience, and how they will be engaged in a meaningful way to achieve the aims and objectives of the cancer research team proposal;
- how the funding request leverages existing resources or sources of support, and how it will be used to help attract support from other sources in the longer term;
- how the funding will help fill gaps and create new opportunities for collaboration and capacity-building that are not feasible using other funding sources;

WHAT THE FUNDING COULD BE USED FOR:

In keeping with the goal and expectations of the funding competition, applicants are expected to make a convincing case for innovative and creative proposals that will boost cancer research impact, productivity and capacity in Edmonton, Alberta.

For example, funding could be used to create or augment a sustainable research platform that complements an existing area of strength, or to establish and test a shared tumour model system, or to harness the collective brain power of clinicians and scientists with diverse expertise and experience to identify new cancer research questions and generate pilot data, or to do something else that goes beyond what could be achieved using more traditional single project-based funding mechanisms.

Equipment and supplies, trainee stipends or other supports, hiring of temporary staff or temporary salary offsets for existing staff, contributions to start-up packages for new faculty members, engagement activities designed to promote new collaborations, compensation for patient & family engagement, contributions to technician time, and other eligible costs linked directly to achieving the aim, objectives and desired outcomes of each cancer research team proposal are all in scope for this funding competition.



Researchers may be a team member on a maximum of two research team proposals. An investigator may be a Principal Applicant on only one proposal, and may also be a team member on one other proposal. Applications will be screened at the Notification of Intent (NOI) stage to ensure that this condition is met.

WHAT THE FUNDING CANNOT BE USED FOR:

- Research team funding is intended to boost cancer research in Edmonton, Alberta. Principal Applicants not based in Edmonton, Alberta are ineligible. Proposals where the application does not make a convincing case for boosting cancer research in Edmonton will also be deemed ineligible.
- Research team funding is not intended to support discrete investigator-initiated research projects, unless those projects are designed to generate pilot data and are linked directly with a research platform or research theme established with the support of cancer research team funding.
- Research team funding cannot be used to support clinical trials or activities related specifically to commercialization of research discoveries.
- Research team funding is time-limited (up to four years) and therefore cannot be used to hire permanent staff or contribute directly to salaries/benefits of faculty. Hiring of temporary staff or temporary salary offsets for existing staff are allowed within the timeframe of the funding.
- Research team funding cannot be used to support facility renovations or structural alterations. If renovations or alterations are required for equipment purchases then a letter indicating the source of renovation costs and approval from facilities operations must be provided with the full application.
- Research team funding cannot be used to support ongoing maintenance or licensing of equipment or other services purchased under the auspices of the research team funding. If ongoing maintenance or licensing is required following completion of the research team funding, applicants should provide a letter describing how they will find funds to ensure that the equipment or other services will be maintained beyond the term of the research team funding, along with a description of what will happen if no further funding is obtained.
- Research team funding cannot be used for legal costs associated with generating or reviewing agreements, applications pertaining to intellectual property, patents or commercial product development.
- Research team funding cannot be used to support travel, registration fees, accommodation or other costs related to present research not directly related to work described in the application.



APPLICATION PROCESS:

Notification of Intent (NOI)

Purpose

Applicants will be invited to submit a brief Notification of Intent (NOI) within 4 weeks of the competition launch, via an online portal. The link will be made available via the competition landing page: [Game Changers - Alberta Cancer Foundation](#)

The NOI is required for registration purposes and to help with the identification of reviewers.

In general, the NOI will **not** be used to triage proposals, unless it is determined that the proposal, as presented in the NOI, is not eligible for the competition as per the criteria outlined on Page 3.

Applicants must submit an NOI by the deadline to gain access to the online system for submission of full proposals. Late submissions will not be accepted.

Two weeks after the NOI submission deadline, eligible applicants will be invited to proceed to full application within the online submission system. Generic feedback based on review of all NOIs will be made available on the online system to support all applicants.

Applicants deemed ineligible on the basis of information provided in the NOI will receive written notification that they will not be invited to proceed to full application. No appeals will be allowed.

Format

Each NOI must include:

- Name, affiliation(s), location and brief biosketch of Principal Applicant
- Each Principal Applicant must hold a permanent academic, research, research-related and/or clinical appointment with the University of Alberta and/or Alberta Health Services and be eligible to apply for, and hold, grant funding at their institution
- Biosketch specifications will be described on the NOI online submission system.
- Title of cancer research team proposal
- Aim, objectives and desired outcome of cancer research team proposal (one page maximum)
- Brief description (one page maximum) of the cancer research team proposal, including an overview of how the cancer research team proposal will achieve the goal and meet the expectations of the Game Changer Fund.
- Names and affiliation(s) of proposed cancer research team members and collaborators (if applicable)





- team members and collaborators may be added or removed in the full proposal, but full proposals must include at least three team members in addition to the Principal Applicant
- team members may include any health professionals or people from diverse research disciplines, however the majority of applicants must be from the Edmonton area.
- team members may include patient/family representatives and/or other stakeholders
- team members should have diverse backgrounds, expertise and experience
- if names of potential team members are not known at the NOI stage, it is acceptable to include affiliations or types of members to be included in the full proposal (e.g. Registered Dietitian, Patient/Family representative, Registered Nurse, Medical Oncologist, Post-Doctoral Fellow, Clinical Fellow, PhD student, AHS Data Scientist etc.)
- Names, affiliations and email addresses of 2-3 potential scientific reviewers
- Institutional signatures will not be required at the NOI stage.

FULL APPLICATION GUIDE AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

Research team proposals may be up to fourteen (14) pages maximum, including figures (font Arial 12, page margins 2.54cm all around, line spacing 1.08). References are not included in this page limit. Any proposals exceeding the maximum page limit will have the excess pages removed, and the review will be conducted on the first 14 pages of the proposal.

REVIEW PANEL

A Review Panel will be constituted. The panel will include two separate subject matter experts related to each application, people with lived experience of cancer, and other knowledge users or stakeholders as deemed appropriate.

Names and affiliations of Principal Applicants and cancer research team members, as well as research team proposal titles, will be shared with Review Panel members for the purposes of identifying any real or perceived conflicts of interest, based on [CIHR's Conflict of Interest definition](#). The 'Director, CRINA' and 'Scientific Director, Cancer Care Alberta' will determine if any real or perceived conflicts of interest exist, and will take action to resolve any areas of uncertainty and real or perceived conflicts.

Review Panel members will convene in-person in Edmonton to review all proposals using a rubric based on scientific merit, feasibility and the extent to which the application meets the goal and expectations of the funding competition. Following deliberations, the Review Panel will make funding recommendations to the Alberta Cancer Foundation.



EVALUATION CRITERIA

Criterion #1 – Scientific merit

The scientific merit of the proposal will be evaluated for the quality and importance of the research question and proposed research objectives. An appropriate understanding of the field should be established through a literature review. There should be a clear rationale for the proposed work. The research approach should be logical and achievable. The goal of the proposal should be to fill a significant knowledge gap and not simply validate other studies or be incremental in nature. As stated above, the proposals should be transformative or creative. The proposal must contribute new knowledge to the research area and have the potential to be impactful.

Criterion #2 – Feasibility

The objectives of the proposal need to be achievable by the research team. The application will be evaluated to determine the extent to which there is sufficient expertise on the team to accomplish the objectives of the proposal. The proposal must include timelines and milestones. It will be assessed for whether the objectives of the proposal can be completed within the proposed timeline and budget. If the proposal includes new infrastructure, can the infrastructure be established in sufficient time to complete the research objectives? If the proposal requires support (including access to space, patients, staff, data or other resources) or any other input from Alberta Health Services or health sector stakeholders, has buy-in from the appropriate people been obtained to ensure that the proposal objectives can be achieved?

Criterion #3 – Principal Applicant and Research Team membership and environment

The Principal Applicant needs to have the research qualifications and experience required to lead the team. The role of each team member in addressing the research goals needs to be clearly described. A clear plan for how collaboration will be fostered, managed and sustained through the period of the application needs to be provided. Mentoring of early career investigators and trainees should be addressed. The training environment will also be considered since trainees should be an important part of any proposal. Considerations of how the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion will be achieved should be addressed.

Criterion #4 – Why is this approach different?

The submission should describe how the research team funding will help support **new and transformative** approaches for collaborative and interdisciplinary cancer research designed to boost the pace and impact of knowledge generation in Edmonton, Alberta.



Submissions should make a compelling case for how the proposed new and transformative approach will accelerate cancer research – what makes it different from earlier approaches? What will be done that would be difficult or not feasible using more traditional funding opportunities? Why is this funding source necessary to support this work?

Criterion #5 – Alignment with existing areas of strength

How does the proposed work align with and/or complement existing areas of cancer research strength in Edmonton, Alberta? How will the cancer research team funding help fill gaps and create new opportunities for collaboration and capacity-building that are not feasible using other funding sources?

Submissions should describe the relevant existing area of research strength and explain how the proposed work will enhance that particular area in a way that will accelerate knowledge generation, boost research impact and/or make Edmonton’s cancer research environment more competitive.

Criterion #6 – Relevance to people facing cancer

How will the cancer research team ensure that it addresses questions, themes or directions that are of relevance to people facing cancer?

Submissions must make a convincing and compelling case that the proposed work is relevant and important to people facing cancer. For example, this may involve providing evidence of working closely or planning to work closely with patients, health care providers, clinicians or other groups to identify what really matters to people who have to deal with the day-to-day realities of cancer. Other evidence may be drawn from existing literature. It is **not** expected that the proposed work will describe a direct and predictable pipeline from “bench to bedside” within a relatively short period of time.

Criterion #7 – Team diversity

How will the cancer research team optimize inclusion of people from diverse disciplines, backgrounds and experience, ensuring that they will be engaged in a meaningful way to achieve the aims and objectives of the cancer research team proposal?

Submissions must include an authentic and compelling narrative that describes how the research team will function effectively, given the requirement for inclusion of people from diverse disciplines, backgrounds and experience. For new teams or existing teams that bring on new members, there may be a need to devote time, energy and resources to nurture the team – establishing trust and learning how to manage team dynamics.



Criterion #8 – Leveraging existing sources of support and positioning for future sustainability

How does the funding request leverage existing resources or sources of support, and how will that support in combination with funding for the cancer research team be used to help attract support from other sources in the longer term?

Existing resources or sources of support may include current or previous grants, labs and staff supporting academic research that are funded and/or maintained by Alberta Health Services or other system stakeholders, research equipment and technology. Submissions should include a description of how the proposed work will build from these prior/ongoing investments, recognizing the role of previous/ongoing funders and other stakeholders in creating an environment in which cancer research can flourish. Submissions should also describe how cancer research team funding will help position the team to be successful in attracting future grants or resources from other funding agencies or stakeholders in the future.

Criterion #9 – Summary



Applicants should conclude their submission with a compelling, yet realistic, summary paragraph describing the desired outcomes of the cancer research team proposal, and how the proposal will contribute to the goal of boosting cancer research impact, productivity and capacity in Edmonton, Alberta. The summary paragraph should be suitable for a lay audience, as well as scientific peers.

BUDGET & FUNDING

Level & Term of Funding

- Maximum funding amount of \$1.25M per application
- Maximum 4-year funding window to achieve outcomes, shorter timelines are allowed
- A maximum of one no-cost extension to the grant agreement may be requested and considered for approval

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

- Award recipients must acknowledge funding support from the Alberta Cancer Foundation in all presentations, media and publications that result from the funded proposal. 
- Interim progress reports will be required each year, in addition to annual financial summary reports. A final report will also be required within 90 days after the award is completed. 

APPENDIX A - DEFINITIONS/GLOSSARY

Research team: a group of people from diverse backgrounds and disciplines who come together under the leadership of a Principal Applicant to develop and tackle cancer research questions/directions/themes relevant to people facing cancer. Research teams use transformative approaches and creative ideas to accelerate the pace and impact of knowledge generation in any part of the cancer continuum, from discovery to end of life care. This approach is meant to achieve objectives that are not normally supported through the current operating grant structures.

Cancer research: work designed to generate new knowledge about how cancer occurs, what it does in and to the body, how it can be detected and treated more effectively with fewer side effects, or how quality of care and quality of life of people facing cancer can be improved.

Principal Applicant: a person eligible to hold a grant in their institution, and who is responsible for leading the research team, reporting on activities, and complying with all legal and financial requirements associated with research funding.

Team Member: contributes expertise and intellectual capital required to fulfill the aims and objectives of the research team proposal. Expertise and intellectual capital may be in the scientific arena, a health care delivery setting, having lived experience of cancer (either directly or through a loved one) or another area deemed essential to the success of the team. Trainees may be team members at the discretion of the Principal Applicant.

Collaborator: provides resources (direct or in-kind) required to fulfill the aims and objectives of the research team proposal.

