

FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF'S DESK

Diversity-Building Research Training Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has an important and distinctive role to create a dynamic healthcare system for veterans. To ensure the successful creation of this system, the VA Office of Research and Development (ORD) has taken a proactive role in recruiting, training, and retaining a cadre of healthcare researchers who are highly qualified and who represent a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to help address health issues relevant to veterans. To bolster the cutting-edge, groundbreaking healthcare services and research opportunities currently available to veterans, VA ORD developed three new awards under the Diversity-Building Research Training Program, aimed at diversifying its research teams. The program was developed, in part, to support Presidential Executive Orders (EOs) 13256, 13230, and 13270, whose goals are to advance the development of human potential to strengthen the Nation's capacity to provide high-quality education and to increase opportunities for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to participate in and benefit from Federal programs. Institutions of higher learning that can offer a unique perspective and provide important insight into relevant cultural factors that may account for health disparities among veterans and who are committed to ensuring equal educational opportunities for all are highly encouraged to apply for these awards.

In March 2003, ORD convened a Blue Ribbon Advisory Committee, consisting of leading minority researchers and faculty from minority-serving institutions (MSIs) across the country. The Committee was charged with evaluating ORD's current programs and developing recommendations to design successful new programs. The Committee recommended that ORD develop mentoring programs to encourage diversity among its research teams by providing research-training opportunities to individuals from varying backgrounds in various stages of their

career development. The Committee also encouraged ORD to develop targeted outreach strategies to engage the leadership at MSIs, private foundations, professional societies, and the national VA research community, as well as increase VA's presence and participation at professional and educational meetings and conferences.

In response to the Committee's recommendations, ORD developed three awards that provide research-training opportunities to individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences from high school to the mid-career faculty level that will increase scientific career opportunities for these individuals and strengthen their contribution to biomedical and clinical research.

The Diversity-Building Research Training Program will partner VA Medical Centers with HBCUs, HSIs, TCUs, and other qualified institutions of higher learning that, again, can offer a unique perspective and provide important insight into relevant cultural factors that may account for health disparities among veterans. With an overall goal of increasing diversity within VA research teams and increasing funding for MSIs, the three new mentoring programs will—

- support institutional collaborations between VA, MSIs, and other qualified institutions of higher learning,
- provide applied training in research on VA-funded projects to participants ranging from high school students to predoctoral candidates, and
- offer a supportive career path for mentored research within VA for clinicians and scientists who have completed their clinical fellowships or doctoral training within the last two years.

Veterans represent a culturally and racially diverse group, and VA believes that the clinician-scientists caring for those veterans and conducting clinical research should mirror that diversity. In many ways, the Diversity-Building Research Training Program is modeled after the Disabilities Supplement that the

Rehabilitation Research and Development (RR&D) Service instituted years ago. RR&D has found that researchers who “live the life” have unique dedication to and insight into the issues facing patients who are similarly situated. VA believes that increasing the diversity among its clinician-investigators by proactively recruiting and training individuals from various backgrounds and experiences in its ranks will benefit all veterans.

By drawing on the best and brightest Americans—some of whom, for socioeconomic reasons,

may have had limited opportunities to learn about careers in medicine and biomedical sciences—VA will become a richer intellectual and cultural environment and will be closer to reaching its goal of Today’s VA Research Leading Tomorrow’s Healthcare.

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