

NLHRF Grant Reviewing: Information, Guidelines, and Criteria

General.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Health Research Fund (NLHRF) was established in 2025 and aims to build a comprehensive multi-disciplinary health research ecosystem in Newfoundland and Labrador. All areas of health research and scholarship within the province are eligible to apply and receive NLHRF grants, and applications from all health subject areas are encouraged.

As NLHRF funding is highly competitive, a detailed assessment of research proposals plays a key role in deciding which grant applications are funded. This assessment is the responsibility of the NLHRF Grants Review Panel, which is composed of representatives from across the University as well as those external to MUN.

The main objectives of the review process are: i) to rank applications in order to best distribute limited funds in support of the development, success, and excellence of our province's health research programs and ii) to provide applicants with constructive written feedback on the strengths and limitations of their proposed plan of research.

Please see the [NLHRF webpage](#) or consult the NLHRF Program Director for further information.

Review Meetings.

Initial Contact. Members of the Grants Review Panel are contacted well in advance to verify their availability to review, and to schedule the Grants Review Panel meetings. In-person attendance is preferred, but a virtual option may be made available.

Review Assignments. Applications are distributed by the NLHRF Program Director. Each Grants Review Panel member is asked to report any potential conflicts of interest using a provided spreadsheet which includes the list of investigators and co-investigators, the title, and key words (and other application components if required). This information is used to finalize the reviewer assignments.

Applications are assigned to two reviewers who will each provide a written assessment of the merits of the application. Each member of the panel will be assigned a number of applications to review in detail, the number depending on how many applications are received. While detailed assessment of applications is a priority for the assigned reviewers, all members of the panel are expected to familiarize themselves with at least the main features (i.e. summary page) of each application. This will not only facilitate panel discussion and aid in arriving at a consensus score but also helps in the fair scoring of applications from widely different fields. Panel members are expected to respect confidentiality regarding specific grant applications and not communicate with anyone outside of the panel and staff involved with review.

Review Meeting Procedures. A meeting is scheduled at least several weeks following the review assignments. One meeting over the course of 2 full days (9-5) is typically required, but one or more alternate meeting times may be identified in the case of a member needing to cancel. Reviewers are asked to submit written reviews and an initial score for their assigned grants to the NLHRF Program Director at least **five business days** in advance of the review meeting. This information is forwarded to the Chair and Scientific Officer, including a table to record the grant scores and determine which grants will be streamlined.

1. All members of the Grants Review Panel are required to be present for the deliberations and scoring of grants, except in the case of reviewers temporarily leaving the meeting due to conflict of interest.
2. For each application, the 2 assigned reviewers present their individual scores, and panel discussion leads to arrival at a consensus score (by agreement or compromise). The Chair directs the process, keeping track of the scores, coordinating the discussion, and noting the main points of concern raised in the discussion.
3. Each panel member (not including the Chair and Scientific Officer) then records their individual scoring of the application. All individual scores must be within ± 0.3 of the consensus score. If you plan to use the full scale, you must have contributed significantly to the discussion.
4. At the end of the meeting each panel member's scoring form is to be signed and submitted to the NLHRF Program Director. The final application score will be determined as the average of the individual scores.

Written reviews.

Please use the provided template to complete reviews. An extensive restating of the research plan or principal investigator's record is not necessary. The review should be balanced, outlining the strengths as well as the limitations of the application. Comments should include constructive criticism that could be helpful to future submissions for funding. The review need not be lengthy: point-form may be used where appropriate (if due attention is given to clarity of the comments).

Note: When possible, please use non-gender specific language to refer to applicants. The review should **not** state the fundability of the project or the identity of the reviewer. Reviewers should also **not** include any statements about their level of subject-area expertise in written reviews. *Reviewers **may not use AI technology to assist with evaluating applications or writing reviews.***

Reviews should assess applications and provide comments based on the following criteria:

1. Content & Presentation of the Proposal
2. Approaches and Methods
3. Significance and Impact
4. Budget
5. Expertise, Experience, and Resources

Specific questions to consider include the following:

Content and Presentation of the Proposal

- Is the research proposal well organized and written in a manner that is clear to a non-expert?
- Is the background section adequate? Is the rationale for the project valid? Compelling?
- Is the main purpose of the research (main aim, objective, question, or hypothesis addressed) clearly stated and compelling?

Approaches and Methods

- Is the methodological approach appropriate and well explained?
- Do the proposed methods and overall research plan appear to be feasible?
- Are considerations of sex and gender incorporated into the research design and practices when appropriate?

Significance and Impact

- Are the significance/relevance of the project and its potential outcomes clearly stated (or otherwise evident)? What is the likely impact of the project?
- Is the potential benefit to human health clear (addressing factors that influence health, improving delivery of health services in NL, or addressing priorities in the NL Health Accord)?
- How likely is this project to lead to an externally funded program of research?
- How likely is this project to be productive in terms of research publications or other outcomes?

Budget

- Was the budget appropriate? Does it require further clarification/justification?
- Is there obvious overlap with other funded or requested projects (not conceptual)?

Expertise, Experience, and Resources

- Does the primary applicant have a strong record of publications, funding, or other relevant research outcomes relative to peers in their discipline and at their career stage?
- In the case of collaborations, is the contribution of each investigator clear and appropriate?
- Does the research team have appropriate experience and/or training for the proposed research?
- How does the project fit with the previous body of work of the Principal Investigator or research team?
- Does the applicant have (or have they applied for) other funding or resources that would affect the feasibility of the proposed research?

Other general considerations:

- What did you like the most about this application? What did you like the least?
- What specific changes could help to improve the application?

Scoring.

Purpose. All applications must be scored because i) this provides useful feedback to each applicant, and ii) it is unknown how far down the list of applications funding will proceed (e.g. affected by available funds and success of some applications with other agencies).

Scoring system. Scoring will be based on a five-point scale as modeled after CIHR (see table below). An application's score will determine its relative ranking among applications: that is, its priority for funding. In addition, the absolute level of the score is used to distinguish applications that are considered fundable (scores greater than or equal to 3.5) from those that are deemed not fundable (scores less than 3.5). The full scale should be used to assign a score relative to the standards of the relevant field of study.

Table: CIHR 5-point scoring system (with modified descriptors).

Score	Descriptor	Fundable?
4.5 - 4.9	Outstanding	Yes
4.0 - 4.4	Excellent	
3.5 - 3.9	Good to Very Good.	
3.0 - 3.4	Low priority or problems; requires revision.	No
2.4 - 2.9	Major problems; requires major revision.	
0.00 - 2.4	Fundamentally flawed.	

Precise scoring of applications can be quite challenging, especially when the areas of research submitted for review are so broad and dissimilar. Please keep in mind that the NLHRF Grants Review Panel represents a cross section of those with expertise in the health field and members are asked to work as a group to decide how to best distribute limited funds in support of the development, success, and excellence of our province's health research programs, and to provide constructive feedback on the research proposals received.

Streamlining. The purpose of the Grant Review Panel deliberations is to help determine the priority level for funding an application and to provide an opportunity for additional feedback on the application beyond that provided within the written reports of the two assigned reviewers. If both assigned reviewers are in agreement that an application is in the bottom 50% and the panel is in unanimous agreement, the application can be "streamlined": that is, it need not be discussed further by the panel. However, it is imperative that applications that are close to being funded receive a score, and that streamlined applications receive appropriate written feedback that clearly outlines the limitations of the proposal.

Conflicts of Interest.

Reviewers will be provided with an opportunity to declare potential conflicts of interest before review assignments are finalized. Additional conflicts of interest may be realized during the review process. In the vast majority of cases, conflicts of interest can be avoided through the appropriate assignment of applications, and/or by excusing a panel member with a conflict from the room during the discussion and scoring of the application in question. When in doubt about a potential conflict of interest, raise it to the panel's attention. The appropriate course of action can be settled through consultation with the Chair.

Conflicts of interest would include if the reviewer:

- has a current grant/project funded with the Principal Investigator or a listed Co-Investigator.
- has published with the Principal Investigator or Co-Investigators within the last 3 years.
- would receive professional or personal benefit resulting from the application being approved or rejected.
- Is a member of the same discipline/division/department as the Principal Investigator
- is a relative or close friend or has a personal relationship with any of the applicants.
- has had long-standing scientific or personal differences with any of the applicants.
- has been a supervisor or a trainee of the Principal Investigator in the previous 6 years.
- feels for any reason unable to provide an impartial review of the application.

Feedback.

The NLHRF welcomes any comments or feedback you may have on our grant application and review processes. In particular, it would be helpful to know if there is anything we can do to clarify the process or make it easier. Please send any comments to: rgsresearchmanager@mun.ca.