NIH May Have to Move ASAP on AIDS Grants

Congress is considering a bill that will expedite the processing of AIDS grants; if NIH can move faster for AIDS, why not move faster on everything else?

IT presently takes the National Institutes of Health (NIH) about 12 months to process the average grant application. If a bill being considered on Capitol Hill passes as expected, NIH will have to speed things up for AIDS grants. Instead of 12 months, they will have 6. This is the stuff that challenges are made of.

How NIH will go about moving this particular mountain of paper is now being mulled over. As one might guess, officials in Bethesda are not wild about the prospect of retooling the grant application process, even for a problem as serious as AIDS. NIH may be one of the foremost biomedical research centers in the world, but it is also a part of the federal government, complete with its own bureaucrats, whose bible in this case is Public Health Service Form 398. The rounds of grant applications move through NIH three times a year with the inevitability of seasons. "So why discombobulate a system that works?" asks David Korn, chairman of the advisory council for the National Cancer Institute at NIH and dean of the medical school at Stanford. "It's hard to believe that any significant scientific work is going to be imperiled by a grant that is awarded in 9 or 10 months versus one awarded in 6 months." It is a sentiment shared by many on the NIH campus. NIH director James Wyngaarden says of the possible hurry-up order: "It wasn't our idea."

The idea comes from Congress, wrapped in the AIDS Research, Information, and Care Act (S-1220), a comprehensive and well-intentioned bill in which expediting AIDS grants is only a part. Sponsored by Senators Edward Kennedy (D–MA) and Orrin Hatch (R–UT), the bill won unanimous approval from the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources. A companion bill in the House sponsored by Representative Henry Waxman (D–CA) is currently being marked-up. The legislation states that all AIDS grant applications, even those that arrive unsolicited, must be processed within 6 months. A few loopholes are built in, but not many. NIH, for example, must inform Congress if it plans on extend-ing the time it takes. According to the committee report accompanying the Senate version: "There has been the feeling that more of our best institutions need to be involved, and that we need to move more quickly in the research effort."

So with an eye on the bill, NIH's Division of Research Grants is performing "a paper experiment" to see how it would satisfy the congressional mandate. The program even has a snappy acronym: ASAP for Accelerated Solicitation to Award Process. Last year, there were about 30,000 grants processed at NIH. About 400 were related to AIDS research, according to Katherine Bick, deputy director for extramural re-

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search at NIH. Next year, Bick guesses that there could be as many as 800 AIDS grants.

As the system works now, investigators are given at least 12 weeks to get their applications into NIH. The clock starts at the date of formal solicitation, announcements that are usually in the form of requests for applications, requests for proposals, or program announcements. Under ASAP, applicants for AIDS money will have only 8 weeks. AIDS researchers will just have to think a little faster. To ease the burden on investigators, NIH is considering issuing "presolicitations," or short, vague one-page announcements that would alert researchers to upcoming requests for applications and proposals.

To keep things moving, AIDS research grant applications will have to be more complete than their counterparts. This will mean including forms detailing collaborative arrangements as well as assurances from the applicants' institutional review boards that the proposed experiments satisfy protocols for human subjects, laboratory animals, and recombinant DNA techniques. Under the present system, investigators often send in grants with such assurances pending. In addition, AIDS investigators will have to provide not 6 collated copies of their applications, but as many as 30, according to Bick. Many applications easily run 40 pages. In an impromptu tabulation, *Science* discovered that 30 copies of a 40-page application weigh about 12 pounds and reach an impressive height of 6 inches. Bick concurs that this should make Federal Express very happy.

To expedite the process further, AIDS grant applications will arrive at a different address, where a process that Bick refers to as "triage" will take place. "The fatally flawed" and "the dead on arrival" will be culled from the grant herd. Normally, it takes NIH 12 weeks to distribute the applications it receives among staff at the various institutes and then get the grants into the hands of reviewers in the Initial Review Groups, or study sections. Under ASAP, NIH staff will have 2 weeks to do this. This is going to be challenging. "The system is very labor intensive. Machines can't do this. You need humans," Bick observes. "We can cut down on some of the delays, but we don't want to cut down on the intellectual input," she adds. To this end, the study sections reviewing AIDS grants will have the applications for 9 weeks, which is about 1 week longer than they have them now. However, the executive secretaries at NIH who shepherd the grants through the study sections will also have to write their summary statements (the so-called "pink sheets") during the same 9-week period. Normally, they have one extra month.

As the system presently operates, grant applications then spend 8 weeks with the various advisory councils that serve each of national institutes. Under Bick's plan for AIDS grants, the applications will pass through the advisory councils in 3 weeks. That seems a reasonable amount of time, since the councils do not take a detailed look at the bulk of applications. What they do is assure themselves that the broader policies of the institutes are reflected by the mix of grants, and that the money is being spread around in a relatively equitable fashion.

After the advisory councils' decisions, NIH will then have 2 weeks to mail the checks. Total time elapsed from solicitation: 6 months. If NIH can pull it off for AIDS grants, why not speed up the processing of all grants? Says a staff member for Kennedy's committee: "That's the next question we'll be asking." ■ **WILLIAM BOOTH**