



# SHRF Research Funding Peer Review Committee Guidelines

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## Overview of Programs and Peer Review

### 1.1 Purpose of Research Funding Programs

SHRF's grants and awards programs are key tools for achieving a legislative mandate to encourage, facilitate and disseminate health research in Saskatchewan in a strategic benefiting the people of Saskatchewan (*The SHRF Act, 2002*).

For program purposes, SHRF defines health research broadly to include biomedical research; clinical research in a wide range of health disciplines; health services and systems research; and research into the social, cultural and environmental determinants of health.

Within the broad scope of health research outlined above, SHRF's funding role is largely developmental. Its funding programs and opportunities aim to build health research capacity and foster research relevant to Saskatchewan. Current programs can be found on SHRF's website: [shrf.ca/Opportunities](https://shrf.ca/Opportunities).

### 1.2 Peer Review for Research Funding Applications

All applications to SHRF research funding competitions are adjudicated according to principles of peer review. Review committees evaluate applications according to scientific standards and SHRF-specified criteria related to the funding opportunity purpose and objectives and recommend meritorious applications to SHRF for funding.

Review committees also play an important role in providing feedback to SHRF about procedures, policies and programs, and about trends in the health research community.

Review committees are made up of active researchers and health professionals and may include non-academic reviewers with relevant perspectives for a funding opportunity, such as industry, government, community leaders, patients, etc.

Currently, SHRF has two standing review committees, described below. Other committees are formed as the need arises.

- Biomedical Establishment Grant Review Committee: adjudicates applications for Establishment Grants whose subject matter lies in the biomedical sciences.
- Socio-Health, Systems and Clinical Establishment Grants Review Committee: adjudicates applications for Establishment Grants in the areas of the social, cultural and environmental determinants of health, clinical and health services and systems research.

## Roles and Committee Membership

### 2.1 General

The SHRF Funding Programs team, consisting of the Director of Funding Programs, the Funding Programs Officer and the Programs Coordinator, provide administrative support to all peer review committees. Either the Director of Funding Programs or the Funding Programs Officer is designated as program manager for a given competition.

Each review committee consists of a chairperson (Chair), and up to 11 other members. Review committee members are selected to achieve a range of expertise and experience in relevant fields and aim for reasonable gender balance. Where in-province reviewers are part of a committee, SHRF strives for regional/institutional representation.

Review committee meetings are called by the Chair, with assistance from the SHRF program manager and Program Coordinator. A quorum consists of the Chair plus 50 per cent plus one of the review committee members.

### 2.2 Review Committee Chair

The Chair is a respected researcher with experience relevant to the adjudication area. The Chair is appointed by SHRF's Director of Funding Programs, in consultation with the program manager, normally for a term of up to three years, renewable.

Duties of the Chair include the following:

- Select lead reviewers for each application, with support from the program manager;
- Lead committee meetings to ensure reviews are thorough, fair, consistent, confidential and take into consideration all relevant criteria and standards;
- Vote to break a tie (further information section 5.2) in the final rank order, should that become necessary; and
- Advise the program manager on issues of eligibility and any other major issues that may arise with respect to individual applications or awards.

### 2.3 Review Committee Members

Review committee members are respected researchers or other individuals with expertise and/or experience relevant to the areas of review and are not members of the SHRF Board or staff.

Members are appointed by the Director of Funding Programs, on the advice of the program manager, normally for a term of three years, renewable. Appointments may be made for one or two years to ensure orderly committee turnover and inclusion of appropriate expertise.

Duties of the review members include the following:

- Review assigned applications according to scientific and ethical standards and to SHRF's stated criteria;

- Provide constructive review comments;  
**NOTE:** Review comments are anonymously shared with applicants. Comments should provide constructive feedback that can be used to improve future submissions, including comments from the review meeting discussion. Wording that may be construed as personal, derogatory or offensive should be avoided.
- Read all applications in the competition to participate in the general discussion and scoring of all proposals;
- Participate in the review committee meeting to discuss, rate and rank all applications in the competition; and
- Offer feedback to SHRF about the process and the funding program.

Members agree to undertake their role in good faith and abide by accepted standards of peer review and by other criteria and expectations prescribed by SHRF.

## 2.4 External Reviewer

External review members are respected researchers or other individuals with expertise and/or experience relevant to a specific application. They are not members of the SHRF Board or staff and are recruited from outside of the province, but within Canada. External reviewers are not part of the committee, do not attend the meeting and do not participate in the scoring of the application.

External members are appointed by the Director of Funding Programs, on the advice of the program manager, on a one-time basis, where there is a need for a specialized review to support the review committee members.

Duties of the external review member includes:

- Review assigned application according to scientific and ethical standards and to SHRF's stated criteria;
- Provide constructive review comments for review committee members.  
**NOTE:** Review comments are anonymously shared with applicants. Comments should provide constructive feedback that can be used to improve future submissions, including comments from the review meeting discussion. Wording that may be construed as personal, derogatory or offensive should be avoided.

## 2.5 Program Manager

The program manager is a SHRF staff member responsible for administering the funding program according to policies set by the SHRF Board and CEO. The program manager is supported in this work by the Funding Team, as appropriate.

Specific duties of the program manager related to the peer review committee process include the following:

- With input from the Chair and Director of Funding Programs, suggest review committee members for appointment;
- Assist the Chair in selecting lead reviewers for each application from among review committee members;

- Assist the Chair in selecting external reviewers, as required;
- Ensure committee members receive materials necessary to carry out a thorough and confidential review;
- Ensure that review materials are handled and distributed in a confidential manner;
- Advise the Chair and review committee members on points of procedure, eligibility, program requirements and other related administrative matters; and
- Respond, in consultation with the Chair and the Director of Funding Programs, to questions of eligibility and any other major issues that may arise with respect to individual applications or awards.

## Phase 1 – Review Assignment Background Information

Phase 1 of the review process has committee members complete information regarding conflict of interest and level of comfort in order for applications to be assigned. The procedures below go over confidentiality and conflict of interest policies, along with information regarding application eligibility screening and decisions.

### 3.1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is vital to maintaining the credibility of the adjudication process. All information in the applications, all review comments and discussions, and all scores and rankings will be kept confidential by the Chair, committee members, external reviewers, observers, partners and SHRF staff.

All individuals involved must not discuss individual applications, reviews or rankings with anyone not formally involved in the process. They will refer any comments or questions from colleagues and/or others about the review process to the program manager.

The identity of reviewers will not be revealed to applicants. However, a list of review committee members is published as part of SHRF's Annual Report. SHRF Annual Report can be found at [shrf.ca/publications](http://shrf.ca/publications).

### 3.2 Conflict of Interest

A conflict of interest is a conflict between a person's duties and responsibilities regarding the review process and that person's private, professional, business or public interests. There may be a real, perceived or potential conflict of interest when a committee member:

- Would receive professional or personal benefit resulting from the funding opportunity or application being reviewed;
- Has a professional or personal relationship with an applicant or the applicant's institution; or
- Has a direct or indirect financial interest in a funding opportunity or application being reviewed.

A conflict of interest may be deemed to exist or perceived as such when committee members:

- Are applicants within the competition and have ability to bias or influence the process to the benefit of their application;
- Are a relative or close friend, or have a personal relationship with an applicant;
- Can gain or lose financially/materially from the funding of an application;
- Have had long-standing scientific or personal differences with an applicant;

- Are closely professionally affiliated with an applicant as a result of having in the last five years:
  - Frequent and regular interactions with an applicant in the course of their duties at their department, institution, organization or company;
  - Been a supervisor or a trainee of an applicant;
  - Collaborated, published or shared funding with an applicant or have plans to do so in the immediate future; or
- Feel for any reason unable to provide an impartial review of the application.

**SHRF reserves the right to resolve areas of uncertainty and to determine if a conflict exists.**

Committee members in a conflict of interest with respect to any applicant listed on the application must not participate in any way in the evaluation of that applicant's proposal. The member must declare the conflict in the SHRF RMS, not review any materials from the application, leave the room during the review of the application, not score or comment on the application and will refrain from participating in discussions about the application. The same procedure is followed when the meeting is conducted using virtual meeting technology or teleconference.

Any committee member may identify a potential conflict of interest of another committee member. The Chair, in consultation with the program manager and/or the Director of Funding Programs, will decide whether a conflict exists. **Decisions by the Chair are final.**

When the Chair is in conflict of interest with respect to an application, the same procedures will be followed as a review committee member. A designate from the committee will be informed at the earliest convenience and will take on the role of Chair during the review of that application.

### 3.3 Eligibility Decisions

An initial eligibility screening will take place where SHRF funding staff ensures applicants can fulfill basic eligibility requirements for a funding opportunity. Immediately after the application deadline, the program manager and Program Coordinator will screen all applications for completeness and eligibility, according to program requirements and make a final ruling.

The program manager may take steps to verify applicants' qualifications for eligibility purposes and may seek the advice of the Chair and/or the Director of Funding Programs, as needed. **The Director of Funding Programs, in consultation with the program manager, makes the final ruling on eligibility issues.**

## Phase 2 – Completing Review

Phase 2 of the review process has committee members complete the preliminary work of reviewing applications. The procedures below go over assigning reviews, the review materials, review criteria and scoring.

### 4.1 Assigning Reviews

The Chair and the program manager assign each application two committee members, known as lead reviewers, who will provide an in-depth review to lead the committee's evaluation of the application at the review meeting.

To inform lead review assignments, committee members are asked to complete Phase 1 – Review Assignment Background Information on each application, which includes identifying a possible conflict of interest with the applicant(s), and if they are not in conflict, their level of comfort in reviewing the topic area (high, medium, low). This phase is done in the SHRF RMS.

Besides the lead reviewers, additional experts may be asked to provide advice to the committee on aspects of an application depending on the nature of the funding opportunity. This could include researchers, patients, health professionals, industry, community, government, etc. These experts may or may not:

- attend the meeting;
- participate in final scoring of an application;
- provide their evaluations to the lead reviewers prior to the review meeting; and/or
- provide feedback to the applicants.

### 4.2 Review Materials

The program manager supplies review materials to committee members at least one month before the review meeting.

Review materials include:

- A contract to be reviewed and signed by each member, identifying all important dates, deadlines and responsibilities for the review period;
- A list of committee members;
- Access to all applications in the competition, excluding those where a conflict of interest exists;
- An online review form and appropriate review criteria for each lead review assignment;
- A master list of applications showing lead review assignments and external reviewers, where appropriate;
- Relevant funding program information, including the SHRF Awards Guide and the funding opportunity application package;
- Detailed review instructions relevant to the funding opportunity; and
- A copy of these guidelines.



### 4.3 Review Criteria

Committee members shall follow scientific standards relevant to the field of study and consider additional SHRF review criteria, as appropriate.

Generally, reviewers shall consider the following criteria when assessing applications alongside additional program specific review criteria:

- Fit with the purpose and requirements of the funding program, as described in the SHRF funding opportunity application package;
- Originality of the proposed research;
- Quality and feasibility of the research design;
- Importance and potential impact;
- Suitability of the research environment;
- Potential of the applicant(s) to carry out the work;
- General soundness of the overall research plan;
- Appropriateness of the budget; and
- Adherence to principles of ethical research.

Where there are program specific review criteria, it will be provided by the program manager.

### 4.4 Scoring

Reviewers will assign a score to each application that reflects their assessment of its quality and merit for funding, using the scale below. Reviewers are encouraged to use the full range of scores in the rating scale. **SHRF is committed to excellence and will fund only proposals that achieve an overall committee rating of 3.5 or higher, indicating very good to outstanding research.**

Rating Scale:	
4.5 - 4.9	outstanding: highest funding priority
4.0 - 4.4	excellent: very high funding priority
3.5 - 3.9	very good: high priority, should be funded
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3.0 - 3.4	good: acceptable, but low priority
2.5 - 2.9	fair: not acceptable for funding but shows promise
2.0 - 2.4	poor: needs major revision
<2.0	seriously flawed

Lead reviewers are asked to submit their preliminary reviews at least two days before the review meeting, which includes the initial scores and preliminary comments. Once both lead reviewers have submitted their preliminary reviews, they will be accessible on the SHRF RMS for the other lead reviewer, the Chair and SHRF staff.

As applicable, external reviewers' evaluations are available for the lead reviewers on the SHRF RMS once the external reviewer has submitted and after the committee member has submitted their preliminary review.

## Phase 3 – Review Meeting and Post-Review

### 5.1 Review Meeting

The review committee members meet to discuss and rate all applications, indicating to SHRF which applications are worthy of funding, according to stated evaluation criteria. At the beginning of the meeting, the Chair and program manager will review procedures and update the committee on any outstanding matters from the previous year. The Chair will go through the policies and procedures to be followed at the meeting, including any program specific information that must be highlighted.

The review process for each application entails the following steps:

- Any review members with an identified conflict will be asked to leave the meeting during the discussion of the application;
- The Chair will ask the two lead reviewers (primary, then secondary) to announce their initial scores for the application (to one decimal place);  
*NOTE: If a committee member wants to provide additional information (positive or negative, public or private) about a candidate or a candidate's claims in addition to what is presented in an application, this information must be vetted through the committee Chair prior to committee discussion of the application. Any such information not vetted through the Chair will not be eligible for discussion during the review process.*
- If both initial scores are **3.4 or lower**, the application is not considered further, unless a committee member requests for the application to be discussed;  
**EXCEPTION:** If both lead reviewers for an **Establishment grant** application announce initial scores of 3.4 or lower but above 3.0, the application will be discussed briefly to identify key weaknesses and provide constructive feedback to the applicant for future submission.  
**NOTE:** If an application is not discussed, committee members will identify triaged on their score sheet using the letter "T" and no final score will be achieved during the meeting. The applicant will be provided the average of the initial lead reviewer scores and no rank will be assigned.
- The primary reviewer:
  - Provides a brief summary of the project (1-2 minutes, maximum);
  - Presents their assessment of the application, describing the strengths and weaknesses in relation to the review criteria and rating scale (1-2 minutes maximum);
  - Presents any additional points raised by external reviewers, if applicable (1-2 minutes maximum).
- The secondary reviewer:
  - Responds to primary comments, confirming areas of general agreement and addressing any points of disagreement (2-3 minutes maximum).
- After the lead reviewers overview of the application, all committee members are invited to comment on the application, with the Chair leading the discussion (5 minutes maximum);  
**NOTE:** Review committees may recommend a budget reduction based on fit between a proposed budget and proposed activities. By ensuring amounts recommended are consistent with the cost to undertake the proposed activities, peer reviewers maximize the use of funding. Reviewers may not reduce a salary award. If a grant budget is to be reduced, it must be agreed upon before scoring takes place.
- After general discussion is complete, the Chair asks the two lead reviewers to agree on a single consensus score. If the lead reviewers are unable to reach a consensus score, the average of their individual scores following the committee discussion is used;

- All committee members, including the lead reviewers of the application but excluding the Chair, will assign their own individual confidential scores within +/- 0.5 of the consensus score; **Example:** Consensus rating is 3.6, therefore scores could range from 3.1 to 4.1.
- After scoring is complete, the Chair asks if any committee member has any ethical or budget concerns. The SHRF program manager will make note of any concerns to take appropriate follow-up action. If necessary, release of grant funds will be conditional upon the applicant addressing these concerns to the satisfaction of the SHRF program manager.

After the committee has reviewed all applications, they will send their individually completed score sheet to the program manager or the Program Coordinator. The program manager will then average the committee members' scores to produce a final score for each application. The resulting rank-ordered lists constitute the committee's funding recommendations.

## 5.2 Breaking a Tie

If a tie occurs between application scores, the Chair (or Chair designate if there is a conflict) will be invited to break it and identify the final ranking for each application. Decisions will be made based on the Chair's reading of the applications and the committee discussion.

**Example:** If two applications score 3.9 and both have a rank order of 6, the Chair will break the tie and identify which application is 6<sup>th</sup> and which application is 7<sup>th</sup> in the rank order.

## 5.3 Post-Review Meeting

After the completion of application reviews, the Chair will invite committee members to offer feedback about review procedures and materials, program criteria and other matters that may be helpful to SHRF's research funding mandate. SHRF will also send out a survey to the Chair and committee members to share feedback on SHRF's review process.

Reviewers are asked to submit their final review comments to SHRF shortly following the review meeting. Comments should be updated to reflect the committee discussion prior to the final submission. Scores do not need to be updated in the review form as the final score has been recorded by the program manager following the review meeting and only this score is shared with the applicant(s).

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## Funding Decisions and Announcements

### 6.1 Funding Decision

The CEO approves funding based on the committee's recommendations, available funding and other relevant organizational policies.

### 6.2 Informing Applicants

All applicants are informed of their outcome in writing. No results are given by telephone.

**SHRF does not have an appeal process.**

Feedback to applicants include:

- the final score and ranking; and
- an anonymous copy of lead reviewers' comments, and external reviewer comments, if applicable, offering constructive feedback to the applicant.

### 6.3 Announcing Results

Recipients and their host institutions must keep the results confidential until SHRF has made an official public announcement. All recipients and their host institutions will be notified when this announcement has been/will be made.

Successful applicants will be announced following SHRF's Communication processes.