

**DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT-MEDICAL
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT COMMAND (DHA R&D-MRDC)
CONGRESSIONALLY DIRECTED MEDICAL RESEARCH PROGRAMS
FISCAL YEAR 2025 (FY25) RARE CANCERS RESEARCH PROGRAM (RCRP)**

DESCRIPTION OF REVIEW PROCEDURES

The FY25 RCRP called for applications in response to program announcements (PAs) for three award mechanisms released in May 2025:

- Concept Award (CA)
- Idea Development Award (IDA)
- Resource and Community Development Award (RCDA)

The RCRP received pre-applications for the IDA and RCDA in July 2025 and screened them in July and August 2025. The screening followed the pre-application evaluation criteria specified in the PAs to determine which investigators to invite to submit full applications. The RCRP received applications in October 2025, and they underwent peer review in December 2025. The RCRP conducted programmatic review in March 2026.

The RCRP received applications for the CA PA in August 2025, and they underwent peer review in October 2025. The RCRP conducted programmatic review in March 2026.

In response to the CA PA, the RCRP received 328 compliant applications and recommended funding 17 (5.2%) for a total of \$2.4 million (M).

In response to the IDA PA, the RCRP received 511 pre-applications and invited 227 of these to submit a full application. The RCRP received 197 compliant applications and recommended funding 14 (7.1%) for a total of \$6.9M.

In response to the RCDA PA, the RCRP received 70 pre-applications and invited 30 of these to submit a full application. The RCRP received 28 compliant applications and recommended funding 5 (17.9%) for a total of \$5.5M.

Table 1 shows submission and award data summarized for the FY25 RCRP.

Table 1. Submission/Award Data for the FY25 RCRP*

Mechanism	Pre-Applications Received	Pre-Applications Invited (%)	Compliant Applications Received	Applications Recommended for Funding (%)	Total Funds
CA	N/A [†]	N/A [†]	328	17 (5.2%)	\$2.4M
IDA	511	227 (44.4%)	197	14 (7.1%)	\$6.9M
RCDA	70	30 (42.9%)	28	5 (17.9%)	\$5.5M
Total	581	257 (44.2%)	553	36 (6.5%)	\$14.8M

*These data reflect funding recommendations only. Pending FY25 award negotiations, final numbers will be available after September 30, 2026.

[†]Letters of intent received at the pre-application stage.

THE TWO-TIER REVIEW SYSTEM

The DHA R&D-MRDC developed a review model based on recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences report *Strategies for Managing the Breast Cancer Research Program: A Report to the Army Medical Research and Development Command*. The report recommended a two-tier review process that reflects not only the traditional strengths of existing peer review systems but is also tailored to accommodate program goals. The Command adheres to this proven approach for evaluating competitive applications. An application must be favorably reviewed by both levels of the two-tier review system to be funded.

THE FIRST TIER—Scientific Peer Review

The RCRP conducted peer review online for CA applications in October 2025 utilizing 16 panels of researchers and clinicians. The panel members based their evaluations on the criteria specified in the PAs. The RCRP conducted a peer review via teleconference for the IDA and RCDA in December 2025 utilizing 17 panels (128 scientists and 29 consumer reviewers). Each peer review panel included a Chair, an average of eight scientific reviewers, an average of two consumer reviewers, and a nonvoting Scientific Review Officer. The panelists' primary responsibility was to review the technical merit of each application based upon the evaluation criteria specified in the relevant PA.

Individual Peer Review Panels

The Chair for each panel presided over the deliberations. The panels discussed each individual application. The Chair called on the assigned reviewers for an assessment of the merits of each application using the evaluation criteria published in the appropriate PA. Following a panel discussion, the Chair summarized the strengths and weaknesses of each application, and the panel members then rated the applications confidentially.

Application Scoring

Evaluation Criteria Scores: Panel members rated each application based on the peer review evaluation criteria published in the appropriate PA. The panel members used a scale of 10 to 1, with 10 representing the highest merit and 1 the lowest merit, using whole numbers only. The purpose of obtaining the criteria ratings was to (1) place emphasis on the published evaluation criteria and provide guidance to reviewers in determining an appropriate overall score and (2) provide the applicant, the Programmatic Panel and the Command with an informed measure of the quality regarding the strengths and weaknesses of each application. The evaluation criteria scores were not averaged or mathematically manipulated in any manner to connect them to the global or percentile scores.

Overall Score: To obtain an overall score, panel members used a range of 1.0 to 5.0 (1.0 representing the highest merit and 5.0 the lowest merit), with scoring permitted in 0.1 increments. The RCRP averaged the panel member scores and rounded them to arrive at a two-digit number (1.2, 1.9, 2.7, etc.) that corresponds to the following adjectival equivalents used to guide reviewers: Outstanding (1.0–1.5), Excellent (1.6–2.0), Good (2.1–2.5), Fair (2.6–3.5) and Deficient (3.6–5.0).

Summary Statements: The Scientific Review Officer on each panel was responsible for preparing a Summary Statement reporting the results of the peer review for each application. The Summary Statements included the evaluation criteria and overall scores, peer reviewers' written comments, and the essence of panel discussions. The RCRP staff used this document to report the peer review results to the Programmatic Panel. In accordance with DHA R&D-MRDC policy, Summary Statements are available to each applicant after completion of the review process.

THE SECOND TIER—Programmatic Review

The FY25 Programmatic Panel conducted programmatic review in March 2026. The panel included a diverse group of basic and clinical scientists and consumer advocates, each of whom contributed special expertise or interest in rare cancers. Programmatic review is a comparison-based process that considers scientific evaluations across all disciplines and specialty areas. Programmatic Panel members do not automatically recommend funding applications that received high scores in the technical merit review process; rather, they closely examine the eligible applications to allocate as wisely as possible the limited funds available. The programmatic review criteria published in the PAs were as follows: ratings and evaluations of the scientific peer review panels, relevance of the study to the FY25 RCRP definition of rare cancers, relative impact to the field of rare cancers, program portfolio composition and adherence to the intent of the award mechanism. After programmatic review, the RCRP sent the applications recommended for funding to the Deputy Director, DHA R&D-MRDC, for approval.