



Funding Opportunity: **HIRN SPARKS Award (2026)**

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Supporting Promising and Rapid Knowledge Studies

Key Dates

Posted Date:	July 23, 2026
Application Due Date:	October 20, 2026
Scientific Review:	November 2026
Earliest Start Date:	January 2027
Expiration Date:	October 21, 2026

Section I. Funding Opportunity Purpose

The [Human Islet Research Network \(HIRN\)](#) announces the HIRN SPARKS Award, a funding opportunity designed to capture and support outstanding, innovative research ideas that advance the mission of HIRN. HIRN was built to bring investigators together across disciplines, institutions, and consortia to accelerate progress in type 1 diabetes (T1D) research. When that collaboration works, it does exactly what it was designed to do: it sparks new ideas. SPARKS is a direct reinvestment in the HIRN network. It is a way to ensure that the new questions, collaborations, and insights generated by the community can be pursued rather than lost. The goal of the SPARKS Award is straightforward: to capture the best ideas generated within HIRN, and to fund them efficiently when resources allow.

Applications are due by Tuesday, October 21, 2026. Favorably reviewed applications are held in a fundable pool. Projects not funded in the current cycle may be held for future funding as resources become available. Submission and favorable review do not guarantee funding (see Section III).

The SPARKS award process uses peer-review to evaluate applications. Applications should reflect the same level of scientific rigor expected of any competitive submission. Incomplete or underdeveloped proposals that lack a clear scientific premise may be returned without review or, if reviewed, unlikely to be placed in the fundable pool. Similarly, repeated resubmissions of substantially similar applications that do not demonstrate meaningful improvement may be returned without review. Review resources are limited and applicants are expected to submit only well-developed proposals.

Section II. Funding Opportunity Description

II-1. Background

In 2014, NIDDK established the Human Islet Research Network (HIRN; www.hirnetwork.org) to support collaborative research in T1D. HIRN is jointly supported by NIDDK and the Special Diabetes Program. Its overall mission is to better understand how human beta cells are lost in T1D and to find innovative strategies to protect or replace functional beta-cell mass in diabetic patients. HIRN is configured as a modular network of research consortia, each focused on human disease biology, the use of human cells and tissues, and the development of tools and disease-modeling platforms.

The current HIRN consortia include:

1. The Consortium on Beta Cell Death and Survival (HIRN-CBDS)
2. The Consortium on Modeling Autoimmune Diseases (HIRN-CMAD)
3. The Human Pancreas Analysis Consortium (HIRN-HPAC)
4. The Pancreas Knowledgebase Program (HIRN-PanKbase)

II-2. Rationale: Reinvesting in the Network

A central strength of HIRN is its ability to bring together diverse investigators around shared scientific challenges. These interactions routinely generate new hypotheses, unexpected collaborations, and novel technical approaches. However, such ideas often arise between funding cycles or outside the scope of existing awards, leaving no ready mechanism to support them or spearhead novel area of enquiries. The SPARKS Award is designed to fill this gap by providing a flexible, rapid, and recurring funding channel that reinvests in the network's own scientific output. If a new idea is likely to lead to an ambitious new project that will require multiple years of support and significant budgets to complete, the SPARKS award can be used to generate enough supportive data for a future application to the NIH or any other research agency. By supporting ideas that emerge from within HIRN, the SPARKS Award strengthens the network, rewards collaboration, and ensures that the community's most promising concepts can move forward.

II-3. Objectives and Scope

The SPARKS Award supports original, innovative research projects that address significant problems or barriers in T1D research and that fit conceptually within the mission and goals of HIRN. There is no prescribed theme. Applicants are encouraged to propose any compelling idea, including novel, exploratory, or high-risk/high-reward projects, that advances HIRN's mission. Projects should align with the overall goals and mission of HIRN.

Non-responsive activities include clinical trials (as defined by NIH) and research exclusively using animal models. Such applications will not be reviewed. Research using non-human cells, tissues, or model systems is permitted only when clearly and directly relevant to human T1D.

Section III. Award Information

- **Funding Instrument:** This award is issued as a subaward from HIREC, not as a direct NIH grant.
- **Application Types Allowed:** New.
- **Funds Available & Number of Awards:** The number of awards and total funds available vary by cycle and depend on the availability of funds. The number of awards is not fixed.
- **Award Budget:** Application budgets are capped at \$350,000 total cost (direct plus indirect) per project, for a single year. Facilities & Administrative (F&A/indirect) costs are reimbursed at the applicant institution's federally negotiated rate. Applications at lower funding levels are welcome and may be particularly appropriate for trainees, early-career investigators, or rapid proof-of-concept studies.
- **Award Project Period:** The maximum project period is 1 year.

III-1. How Funding Decisions Are Made

The SPARKS Award uses a two-stage, "just-in-time" style process that differs from a traditional grant competition. Applicants should understand the following:

1. Applications must be submitted by the deadline and will be reviewed for scientific and technical merit.
2. The HIREC will facilitate the application and review process, HIRN NIDDK Program Officers will select and invite reviewers.
3. *Favorable review does not guarantee funding.* Applications judged to be of high scientific merit are placed into a fundable pool. Applications remain in this pool for up to two years (and may be retained longer if the idea remains scientifically current).
4. *Funding depends on available resources and requires approvals.* Awards are made only when funds become available within the HIRN Opportunity Pool and after all required approvals are in place, including HIREC and NIDDK approval. It is possible for an application to be reviewed favorably and never funded if sufficient funds do not become available during the period it remains in the fundable pool. Applicants should not assume that a favorable review will result in an award.
5. *Selection is based on the best ideas and available funds.* When funds become available, the HIRN NIH Program Officers will select from the fundable pool based on scientific and technical merit and relevance to HIRN's mission. Selection is driven by the strength of the idea. However, because available funds are finite in any given cycle, the amount requested may affect whether a given project can be supported at a particular time. For example, if only a limited amount of funding is available, a strong application requesting more than the available amount may not be funded in that cycle unless the applicant is invited to revise the budget and scope. Applicants should request the funding genuinely required to accomplish the proposed work.
6. *Budget justification is deferred.* A full budget justification is not required at initial submission. If an application is selected as a candidate for funding, the HIREC will contact the applicant to request a detailed budget justification and any additional information needed to issue the award.
7. If selected for an award the HIREC may request additional information similar to an NIH "Just in Time" request. If the applicant is a trainee and has left their HIRN Investigators lab we will require supplemental information to verify that they have the resources to execute the project at their new institution.
8. *Additional documentation may be required.* If selected for funding, applicants may be asked to provide additional information. This may include, but is not limited to: detailed budget justification, authentication of key biological and/or chemical resources, data management and sharing plans, institutional assurances (IRB, IACUC), other support documentation, and verification of applicant resources if the investigator has changed institutions. Applicants should be prepared to provide this information promptly upon request.

Section IV. Other Award Budget Information

- Allowable Costs: Salary/personnel effort, research supplies, and other costs directly required to conduct the proposed research.
- Indirect Costs (F&A): Reimbursed at the applicant institution's federally negotiated F&A rate. There is no reduced or capped rate for this opportunity.
- Total Cost Cap: The \$350,000 cap is a total-cost (direct + indirect), single-year ceiling. Applicants must construct budgets so that the combined direct and indirect costs do not exceed \$350,000.

Section V. Eligibility Information

V-1. Eligible Organizations

Higher Education Institutions

- Public/State Controlled Institutions of Higher Education
- Private Institutions of Higher Education

Nonprofits Other Than Institutions of Higher Education

- Nonprofits with 501(c)(3) IRS Status
- Nonprofits without 501(c)(3) IRS Status

For-Profit Organizations

- Small Businesses
- For-Profit Organizations (Other than Small Businesses)

Foreign Institutions and Components

- Non-domestic (non-U.S.) Entities (Foreign Institutions) are **NOT** eligible to apply.
- Non-domestic (non-U.S.) components of U.S. Organizations are **NOT** eligible to apply.
- Foreign components, as defined in the NIH Grants Policy Statement, are **NOT** allowed.

V-2. Eligible Individuals

APPLICANTS

Because the SPARKS Award is a reinvestment in the HIRN network, applicants must be affiliated with HIRN. Specifically:

- The contact PI (Program Director/Principal Investigator) must be a current HIRN member or HIRN Associate Member in good standing as of the application due date (October 20, 2026).
- Eligible applicants include HIRN-affiliated faculty, staff scientists, and postdoctoral fellows (including personnel supported by a HIRN grant). Both independent investigators and non-independent HIRN-affiliated researchers (e.g., postdoctoral fellows) are eligible to serve as the contact PI.
- Graduate/predoctoral students may not serve as the contact PI but may be included as named project personnel.
- Candidates must hold a Ph.D., M.D., M.D./Ph.D, or equivalent degree signifying comparable research experience to the Ph.D, M.D., or MD/Ph.D.
- Applicants must obtain an eRA Commons ID and an Open Research and Contributor ID (ORCID).
- Multiple PDs/PIs (MPIs) are allowed.
- The proposed project should represent an original idea that advances the mission of HIRN. There should be no scientific or budgetary overlap with the applicant's currently funded research (i.e., no proposal of an aim or component of an already-funded project).

Joining the Network: Opportunities to join the HIRN network open periodically through membership drives and new funding announcements from NIH and HIREC. Investigators interested in becoming affiliated with HIRN may visit www.hirnetwork.org for upcoming pathways.

Citizenship/Residency:

There is no citizenship requirement for applicants. An applicant may be a citizen or a non-citizen national of the United States, have been lawfully admitted for permanent residence (i.e., possess a currently valid Permanent Resident Card USCIS Form I-551, or other legal verification of such status), or be a non-U.S. citizen with a valid visa. For non-U.S. citizens with temporary U.S. visas, visa status must allow the applicant to conduct the proposed research at the applicant institution for the duration of the award period (up to 1 year).

The applicant institution is responsible for determining and documenting that the candidate's visa will allow him or her to remain in the U.S. for the full award period.

Section VI. Application and Submission Information

VI-1. Requesting an Application Package

Applicants may access the application package on the HIRN website under "Funding," at: https://hirnetwork.org/funding_announcement/SPARKS

VI-2. Content and Form of Application Submission

Applications are submitted directly to the HIREC, not to the NIH. Applicants must follow the instructions in the HIRN Application Guide (Appendix I). Conformance to these instructions is required and will be strictly enforced. Applications that are out of compliance may be returned without review.

A complete application consists of the following components:

1. Face Page (PHS 398 Face Page, Form Page 1)
2. Structured Abstract / Project Summary (see VI-3)
3. Research Plan (up to 5 pages; see VI-4)
4. NIH Biosketch (5-page maximum) for the applicant and any key personnel
5. Budget (PHS 398 Detailed Budget, Form Page 4) — *a full budget justification is NOT required at initial submission; see Section III-1*
6. Supporting Documents (see VI-5)

VI-3. Structured Abstract / Project Summary (1-page maximum)

The structured abstract is the most important priming document for reviewers and should present a clear, cohesive, and self-contained overview of the proposed work. This is the applicant's opportunity to convey the idea in detail and with impact. A strong abstract reads as a unified narrative and not a list of loosely related ideas. The abstract must be organized under the following headers:

- Objective & Significance: The problem, its importance, and its relevance to HIRN's mission.
- Innovation: What is novel or transformative about the idea.
- Approach (Summary): The overall strategy and how success will be determined.
- Alignment with HIRN: How the project advances the goals of HIRN and, where relevant, relates to one or more HIRN consortia.

Reviewer note: The abstract should be readable as a single coherent case for the project. Clarity and cohesion will be considered as part of review.

VI-4. Research Plan (up to 5 pages)

The Research Plan must use the following headers, which map directly to the review criteria (Section VII). Careful attention to headers and the page limit is required.

- Importance of the Research (Significance & Innovation): Describe the problem or barrier addressed, the strength of the scientific premise, and what makes the project innovative.
- Rigor and Feasibility (Approach): Describe the overall strategy, methodology, and analyses. Present strategies to ensure a robust and unbiased approach. Address potential problems, alternative strategies, and benchmarks for success. Where relevant, address consideration of biological variables (e.g., sex) and, if human subjects are involved, plans for inclusion. Applicants should clearly define the expected outcomes and deliverables of the proposed work, even when the project is designed to generate preliminary data for future proposals.

- Expertise and Resources (Investigators & Environment): Briefly describe the qualifications of the applicant and key personnel, and the suitability of the institutional environment and available resources.

Figures, illustrations, and bibliographic citations are permitted but must fit within the 5-page limit.

VI-5. Supporting Documents

- Collaborators: Signed statements must be provided by all collaborators and/or consultants listed as "Key Personnel," confirming participation and describing their roles.
- Letters of Support: Letters attesting to the applicant's abilities or future potential are NOT allowed and will NOT be accepted. Any application containing such letters will be returned without review.

VI-6. Human Subjects / Clinical Trials

- Clinical trials are NOT permitted. Studies meeting the NIH definition of a clinical trial are non-responsive and will not be reviewed. For the current definition, see <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/glossary.htm#C>.
- Human subjects research is permitted, provided it does not constitute a clinical trial. Clinical research that does not meet the NIH definition of a clinical trial is welcome.
- Applications involving human subjects must comply with all applicable IRB and human subjects protection requirements prior to award.

VI-7. Resource and Data Sharing

Applicants are required to comply with NIH guidance on data and resource sharing. Post-award, recipients are expected to comply with HIRN consortium-specific resource sharing, data sharing, and confidentiality policies, and to share resulting data, tools, and resources with the network in a timely manner.

Section VII. Application Review Information

VII-1. Review Criteria

Consistent with the HIRN program mission and current NIH review policy, all applications are evaluated for scientific and technical merit using external peer review under the three-factor framework below. The HIRN NIH Program Officers will oversee the review process by selecting reviewers for each submitted application.

Overall Impact. Reviewers will provide an overall impact score reflecting their assessment of the likelihood that the project will exert a sustained, powerful influence on the research field, in consideration of the factors below.

Factor 1: Importance of the Research (*Significance, Innovation*)

- Does the project address an important problem or critical barrier to progress in the field? Is there a strong scientific premise? How innovative is the proposed work?
- **Scored 1–9.**

Factor 2: Rigor and Feasibility (*Approach; includes Inclusion where applicable*)

- Are the overall strategy, methodology, and analyses well-reasoned and appropriate? Has the applicant presented strategies to ensure a robust and unbiased approach? Are potential problems, alternative strategies, and benchmarks for success presented? Where human subjects are involved, are inclusion plans appropriate?
- **Scored 1–9.**

Factor 3: Expertise and Resources (*Investigators, Environment*)

- Are the applicant and key personnel appropriately qualified? Is the environment and are the available resources adequate for the proposed work?
- Evaluated as appropriate, or gaps identified; gaps require explanation. Considered in overall impact; no individual score.

Additional Review Considerations (as applicable):

- **Vertebrate Animals:** Evaluated per standard NIH criteria when live vertebrate animals are involved.
- **Biohazards:** Evaluated for potential hazards to personnel or the environment.
- **Human Subjects:** Where applicable, protections and inclusion are assessed.

VII-2. Review and Selection Process

- Applications are evaluated for scientific and technical merit by external peer reviewers identified and selected by the NIDDK.
- All reviewed applications receive a written critique.
- Applications judged to be of high scientific and technical merit are placed into a fundable pool and remain eligible for funding for up to two years (and may be retained longer at the HIREC's discretion if the idea remains scientifically current).
- The HIREC reserves the right to return applications without external review if they are incomplete, non-responsive, or clearly underdeveloped
- Appeals of peer review will NOT be accepted for applications submitted in response to this funding opportunity
- When funds become available, the HIRN NIH Program Officers will select applications from the fundable pool based on scientific and technical merit, relevance to HIRN's mission, and the amount of funding available (see Section III-1). Final funding decisions are subject to NIH NIDDK and HIREC and approval.
- Favorable review does not guarantee funding. An application may be reviewed favorably and never funded if sufficient funds do not become available.
- Selected candidates will be contacted to provide a detailed budget justification and any additional required information prior to award.

VII-3. Resubmissions

- Applicants may revise and resubmit a previously reviewed application. However, repeated submissions of substantially similar applications that do not demonstrate meaningful improvement may be returned without review.

VII-4. Notification

Applicants will be notified by the HIREC of the outcome of scientific review (favorable / not funded / not placed in fundable pool). Applicants placed in the fundable pool will be separately notified if and when they are selected as candidates for funding.

Section VIII. Award Administration

- Awards are issued as subcontracts from the HIREC (City of Hope) using HIRN Opportunity Pool funds. All awards are subject to the terms and conditions of the parent HIRN cooperative agreement (U24DK104162), the NIH Grants Policy Statement, 45 CFR Part 75 / 2 CFR Part 200, and applicable NIH and NIDDK policies.
- Recipients are required to submit a progress report at the conclusion of the award period, and to comply with HIRN data and resource sharing expectations.

- Availability of funds for this initiative is contingent on the availability of funds within the parent HIREC cooperative agreement and applicable NIDDK approvals.

Section IX. Agency / Program Contacts

Human Islet Research Enhancement Center (HIREC) at City of Hope
Scientific and administrative questions to hirnec@coh.org

Appendix I. Application Guide (Checklist)

The following items are collected as part of the application:

- PHS 398 Face Page (Form Page 1)
- Structured Abstract / Project Summary (1 page max)
- Research Plan (5 pages max; required headers)
- NIH Biosketch (5-page max) — applicant and key personnel
- PHS 398 Detailed Budget (Form Page 4) — *justification deferred*
- Collaborators. If applicable, signed statements must be provided by all collaborators and/or consultants listed as “Key Personnel” confirming their participation in the project and describing their specific roles.
- **Letters of Support.** Support letters attesting to the applicant’s abilities or future potential are NOT allowed and will NOT be accepted. Any application containing letters of support will be returned without review for noncompliance. Submission of these letters will trigger return without review.