Myotonic Dystrophy FOUNDATION

Request for Applications: 2026 Early Career Scholar Grant

Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation
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Contracting Officer:	Tanya Stevenson, Chief Executive Officer, MDF
Location:	United States, Canada, and eligible international sites
Date Issued:	March 14, 2025
Proposals Due:	September 5, 2025
Selection Notification:	by December 19, 2025
Period of Award:	January 1, 2026 – December 31, 2027
Anticipated Award:	$95,000 per year for 2 years; $190,000 total
Number of Awards:	To be determined based on applicant mix and available funds

Synopsis

The Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation (MDF) is accepting applications for two types of Early Career Scholar awards to support the retention of early career researchers in the DM field.

1. **Early Career Scholar – Basic/Translational Science:** Supports projects in basic research, translational research, or DM care. Applicants must provide a letter from their chair or clinical chief confirming protected time from teaching.
2. **Early Career Scholar – Clinical Research:** Supports clinical research projects in DM. Applicants must provide a letter from their chair or clinical chief confirming protected time from clinical duties.

Both awards are contingent on available funding.

Goal

By funding projects targeting basic, translational, and/or clinical research or care in myotonic dystrophy, the MDF seeks to retain early-career scholars who are passionate about DM research.

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Background

Early career scholars pursuing a research career often struggle to obtain research funding and face job insecurity as they are reliant on short-term funding.[i] This funding insecurity can impact research, as projects are not pursued or completed. This can be especially difficult with clinical research and can lead to a lack of retention in medical research fields. The number of clinician–investigators, in particular, is in decline due to the duration of clinical training, limited or interrupted opportunities for research, high levels of educational debt, and significant competition for research funding.[ii] The global pandemic has exacerbated these challenges.[iii],[iv] The MDF recognizes the importance of recruiting and retaining basic science early career researchers, as well as the critical need to recruit and retain clinical early career researchers focusing in DM.

Grant Focus Areas

Myotonic dystrophy is a chronic and multi-systemic disease that affects the lives of DM patients and their families every day. There are two major types of myotonic dystrophy: type 1 (DM1) and type 2 (DM2). Both types of myotonic dystrophy are inherited, autosomal dominant disorders affecting all areas of the body. The primary clinical manifestations are progressive muscle wasting and weakness affecting the lower legs, hips, hands, shoulders, neck, and face in DM1 and progressive muscle wasting and weakness affecting the proximal leg, hips, shoulders, and neck muscles in DM2. Research indicates that as many as 1 in 2,100 individuals in the United States are affected by myotonic dystrophy or at risk of passing the disease to the next generation.[v]

People with this disorder may have prolonged muscle contractions (myotonia) and may not be able to relax certain muscles after use, affecting grip and speech, for example. They may also develop cataracts, cardiac conduction defects, and infertility. Many patients demonstrate CNS effects, including white matter abnormalities that are associated with central fatigue, excessive daytime sleepiness, and difficulties in executive function. A severe and infantile form of DM, congenital myotonic dystrophy, is characterized by weak muscle tone (hypotonia), breathing and swallowing problems, delayed development, and CNS involvement that results in intellectual disability.

Opportunity for DM Research

Recognizing that the symptoms and the severity of DM vary widely among affected people and often severely impact activities of daily living, mobility, and independence, **the MDF is soliciting scientific proposals for two types of Early Career Scholar awards,**

1. an "Early Career Scholar- Basic/Translational Science" award and
2. an "Early Career Scholar- Clinical Research" award.

These awards include research focused on improving treatment, care, and support of DM patients and their families, as well as all basic science aspects of DM.

Duration of the Award

The awarded grants are for two years, with second-year funding dependent on the successful completion of the first year's stated objectives. Applicants may apply once per calendar year. Once receiving an award, grant recipients are not eligible to apply for three calendar years. Applicants may only apply for one type of MDF grant at a time and may only receive one grant during the duration of their award. The Small Grants Program is an exception to this rule (Please see the RFP for more information).

Payment

Awards are made to the applicant's organization on behalf of the grant recipient. Awards are $190,000 for salary, benefits, travel, and research support, paid over two years. The MDF awards may not be used to fund institutional capital cost recovery, overhead, or other indirect costs.

Second-year funding of the award is contingent upon documentation of satisfactory progress. A progress report satisfactory to the MDF is required four weeks after the end of each award year. The Foundation can cancel the award for non-compliance with any of the eligibility rules herein, or due to non-performance.

Applications

Eligibility Requirements

Applications are limited to those from academic institutions and/or non-profit research institutes. For-profit organizations are not eligible for this RFA. Applications from non-U.S. academic institutions or non-profit organizations are permitted, as long as they are accredited academic medical centers or research institutes.

1. *Principal Investigator requirements*. The submitting principal investigator must:

- Be employed at an appropriate educational, medical, or other non-profit research institution and be qualified to conduct and supervise a program of original research.

- Have both administrative and financial responsibility for the grant.
- Have access to organizational resources necessary to conduct the proposed research project.
- For the Early Career Scholar- Clinical Research award, the applicant will need to include a letter of commitment from their chair or clinical chief that they will have protected time from clinical service for the study.
- For the Early Career Scholar- Basic/Translational Science award, the applicant will need to include a letter of commitment from their chair or clinical chief that they will have protected time from teaching for the study.
- Successful applicants must hold a Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Science, or equivalent degree. The terminal degree must have been received no more than ten years prior to the time of the award*. If you have completed both residency and a Ph.D., your eligibility is based on when you completed residency, and you must have completed your residency no more than ten years prior to the time of the award*. If you completed a fellowship of any kind after residency, your eligibility is still based on the date you finished residency. *Exceptions to the ten-year limit include any periods of family or medical leave.

2. *Study Requirements.* Applicants or teams of applicants must have proficiency in the knowledge, resources, and skills necessary to carry out the proposed research. Proposals may be submitted for basic, clinical, or applied research directly related to myotonic dystrophy in:

- Pathogenesis
- Molecular basis underlying phenotype differences (Type 1, 2, congenital)
- Development of diagnostics and biomarkers
- Progression/natural history studies of the disease
- Identification and validation of drug treatment endpoints
- Standards of care and care integration, including nursing, social work, and psychology
- Epidemiology, economics, and support services
- Therapeutic development, particularly, but not limited to, early-stage projects where success can leverage larger investments

Research on DM2 is prioritized for these awards.

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Submission Process and Requirements

Proposals must be submitted in 12-point font. Proposals must be submitted via the Proposal Central application system by September 12, 2025, at 5 PM Pacific Time. The proposal must include the following sections:

Applicant

- Professional Profile
- ORCID ID
- NIH-style applicant bio sketches (not to exceed 4 pages each)

Applicant Institution Information

- Applicant Institution Profile
- IRS EIN or TIN Number
- Signing Official Email
- Financial Official Email

Abstract

- Abstract of Research Plan. A complete, scientific description of the proposed work that may be separated from the application. This abstract will not be made public (one-half page).
- Lay Summary. A general, non-scientific description of the proposed work. If funded, the lay summary is to be used and published in appropriate places by the MDF (one-half page).

Budget

- Detailed budget (Authorized expenses include: Salary and fringe benefits, equipment and supplies, and travel expenses- up to a maximum of $2,500 per year/ Unauthorized expenses include: Institutional costs, indirect expenses, educational fees, payments to governing body members, illegal or inappropriate payments, and non-research purposes.)
- Budget description and justification, including explanations of how uncovered salary/benefits or research costs will be met (1 paragraph)
- Description of other sources of funding (1 paragraph)

Publications

- List of current publications

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Attachments

- Applicant Statement. Including the applicant's name, contact information, a listing of current funding, a description of other pending applications for research funding during the funding period, and a description of how previous experience and research interests will align with this project to address important questions related to myotonic dystrophy, and demonstrable, long-term commitment to research related to myotonic dystrophy (1 page).
- Description of environment. Including facilities, equipment, and any leveraged funding (2 paragraphs).
- Key Personnel Bio-Sketches. NIH-style bio sketches of all participating team members (not to exceed 4 pages each).
- Research Plan. This must include the following information (total should not exceed 6 pages):
    1. Background and hypothesis (1 page)
    2. Specific aims of the project (1 page)
    3. Translational significance of the project (one-half page)
    4. Preliminary data (1 page)
    5. Methods, data analysis plan (including interpretation, expected results, significance, statistical analyses, and assessments of statistical power whenever applicable), and pitfalls/alternative strategies (2 pages)
    6. Anticipated collaborative agreements, if applicable (one-half page)
- References.
- Support Letters. Letter of recommendation from an individual with knowledge of the applicant and preferably knowledge of the project.

Review and Selection

All applications must be received by 5:00 PM Pacific Time on Friday, September 5, 2025. The MDF Scientific Advisory Committee will score and prioritize candidates based on the following criteria:

- The impact the proposed research could have on the quality of life of people living with DM. Reviewers will rank proposals based on the case for impact made by the applicant in the "Lay Summary" component of the application (approximately 25% of the total score).
- The strength of the early career researcher's commitment to the research and the likelihood that they will pursue independent research that continues to advance knowledge relevant to improving the quality of life of people living with DM. This will

be assessed based on the information provided by the applicant in the "Statement from the Applicant" component of the application and via the submitted letters of support (approximately 50% of the total score).
- The feasibility and scientific quality of the proposed research. This will be assessed by a subject matter expert selected by the Foundation based on the research description provided by the applicant. Applicants may suggest expert reviewers in their field for the Foundation to consider engaging for this evaluation (approximately 25% of the total score).

Proposals deemed infeasible or of low overall scientific quality will receive a low-priority funding score regardless of the proposal's scores on the other dimensions.

Applicants are welcome to consult with the MDF Chief Scientific Officer, Dr. Andy Rohrwasser (Andy.Rohrwasser@myotonic.org) for refinement of their proposals before submission. Technical issues should be directed to the MDF Research Grants Manager, Dr. Nadine Ann Skinner at nadine.skinner@myotonic.org.

After initial screening by MDF staff members, the Scientific Advisory Committee and selected experts will review applications and recommend final candidates to the MDF Board of Directors. The MDF Board of Directors will consider the Scientific Advisory Committee recommendations and select final grant awards. Awards are made at the sole discretion of the MDF Board of Directors and are contingent upon the availability of funds. Availability of funds does not signify a commitment to award any grants. If no applicant is deemed of sufficient scientific merit, expertise, and/or skill, the MDF may choose not to award a grant during this funding cycle.

Reporting and Publications

Progress Reports

Each grant recipient must submit six-month progress reports to MDF during the course of the two-year grant period:

- Six-month **progress reports** to be received by the MDF twice per year during the award period.
- A **final report** (including an abstract in lay language) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the second year.

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Expense Reports

Each grant recipient must submit expense reports to the MDF during the course of the two-year grant:

- An **interim expense report** (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the first year.
- A **final expense report** (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the second year and should be submitted along with a check for any unexpended funds on the grant. The grant recipient may reallocate up to 10% of the total grant award budget between line items without prior approval.
- A request for a "**no-cost extension**", if required, must be submitted in writing at least two weeks before the end of the grant year for which the extension is requested and may be granted for no more than six months.

Publications and Conferences

- Early Career Scholar award recipients are encouraged to submit at least one scientific paper for publication, within six months of the conclusion of the research, reporting the research findings. All publications, exhibits, and press releases directly resulting from MDF funding shall carry a credit line to the MDF.
- If the grant recipient is aware that a press release is being prepared about the work or the grant recipient has been contacted by a journalist, please let the MDF know this is taking place. Grant recipients should encourage their university press offices or outside journalists to contact the MDF so that publicity can be coordinated. Press releases regarding the study funded by the MDF shall be emailed to grants@myotonic.org.
- MDF encourages an open-access policy that enables the unrestricted access and reuse of all peer-reviewed published research funded, in whole or in part, by the MDF. MDF shall pay reasonable fees required by a publisher or repository to effect immediate, open access to the accepted article. This includes article processing charges and other publisher fees. While not needed to fulfill the open-access policy requirements, grantees are encouraged to deposit funded research consisting of their submitted manuscript, and its subsequent versions, on a preprint server.
- Early Career Scholar recipients must attend virtually or in-person at all MDF Annual Conferences and biennial IDMC conferences and present at the MDF Annual Conference (those that attend in person are eligible for additional travel expenses to be paid by the MDF).

- The title of each study funded by MDF, together with the lay language abstract of the research, the names of the grant recipient, and the institution, will be published on the MDF website, in MDF newsletters, in annual reports and wherever else MDF deems appropriate. The grant recipient will always be clearly acknowledged. The lay summary description should not contain information the grant recipient does not wish to disclose to the general public.
- Grant recipients are required to provide one (1) 500-750 word research article to be potentially included in the MDF Dispatch News for the greater DM community each grant year.

Timeline

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Selection Notification:	by December 19, 2025
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[i] 1. Janus Laust Thomsen, Dorthe Jarbøl, Jens Søndergaard. Excessive workload, uncertain career opportunities and lack of funding are important barriers to recruiting and retaining primary care medical researchers: a qualitative interview study. *Family Practice*. 2006;23(5):545-549. doi:10.1093/fampra/cml034

[ii] 2. Hall AK, Mills SL, Lund PK. Clinician–Investigator Training and the Need to Pilot New Approaches to Recruiting and Retaining This Workforce: *Academic Medicine*. 2017;92(10):1382-1389. doi:10.1097/ACM.0000000000001859

[iii] 3. Kliment CR, Barbash IJ, Brenner JS, et al. COVID-19 and the Early-Career Physician-Scientist. Fostering Resilience beyond the Pandemic. *ATS Scholar*. 2021;2(1):19-28. doi:10.34197/ats-scholar.2020-0104PS

[iv] 4. Levine RL, Rathmell WK. COVID-19 impact on early career investigators: a call for action. *Nat Rev Cancer*. 2020;20(7):357-358. doi:10.1038/s41568-020-0279-5

[v] 5. Johnson NE, Butterfield RJ, Mayne K, et al. Population Based Prevalence of Myotonic Dystrophy Type 1 Using Genetic Analysis of State-wide Blood Screening Program. *Neurology*. Published online January 20, 2021:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425. doi:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425