SHRF Peer Review Committee Guidelines

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1. Overview of Programs and Peer Review

1.1 Purpose of Research Funding Programs

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

All SHRF-funded research must have relevance for human health and is intended to support health research in Saskatchewan. SHRF defines human health research broadly as encompassing biomedical science research, clinical research, health services and systems research, and research on the cultural, social and environmental determinants of population health.

Within the broad scope of health research outlined above, SHRF's funding role is largely developmental. Its funding programs aim to build health research capacity and foster research relevant to Saskatchewan. Current programs can be found on SHRF's website: 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, persons with lived experiences, etc.

2. Roles and Committee Membership

2.1 General

The SHRF Programs team, consisting of the Director of Programs and Partnerships, the Programs and Peer Review Manager, the Programs and Engagement Manager and the Programs and Peer Review Coordinator, provide administrative support to SHRF's funding programs. Either the Director of Programs and Partnerships, the Programs and Peer Review Manager or the Programs and Engagement Manager is designated as Program Manager for a given funding opportunity. SHRF peer review committees will be primarily supported by the Programs and Peer Review Manager and the Programs and Peer Review Coordinator.

Each review committee consists of a Chair, and up to 11 committee members. Committee members are selected to achieve a range of expertise and experience in relevant fields and SHRF aims 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 Programs and Peer Review Manager and Programs and Peer Review Coordinator. A quorum consists of the Chair plus 50 per cent plus one of the committee members.

2.2 Committee Chair

The Chair is a respected researcher with experience relevant to the adjudication area. The Chair is appointed by SHRF's Director Programs and Partnerships, in consultation with the Programs and Peer Review Manager.

Duties of the Chair include the following:
- Adhere to all SHRF application and peer review policies and procedures;
- Select lead reviewers for each application, with support from the Programs and Peer Review 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 in the final rank order, should that become necessary; and
- Advise the Programs and Peer Review Manager on issues of eligibility and any other major issues that may arise with respect to individual applications.

2.3 Committee Members

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 Programs and Partnerships, on the advice of the Programs and Peer Review Manager. 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.

Duties of the committee member include the following:
- Adhere to all SHRF application and peer review policies and procedures;
- Review assigned applications according to scientific and ethical standards and to SHRF's stated criteria;
- Provide constructive review comments to applicants;
  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 committee meeting to discuss, rate and rank all applications in the competition; and
- Offer feedback to SHRF about the process and the funding opportunity.

2.4 External Reviewer

External reviewers are respected researchers or individuals with expertise and/or experience relevant to a specific application. They are not members of the SHRF Board or staff and are usually recruited from out of 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 reviewers are appointed by the Director of Programs and Partnerships, on the advice of the Programs and Peer Review Manager, on a one-time basis, where there is a need for a specialized review to support the Peer Review Committee.

Duties of the external reviewer include:

- Adhere to all SHRF application and peer review policies and procedures;
- Review assigned application according to scientific and ethical standards and to SHRF's stated criteria; and
- Provide constructive review comments for committee members and applicants.
  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 Programs and Peer Review Manager

The Programs and Peer Review Manager is a SHRF staff member responsible for administering SHRF's peer review processes according to policies set by the SHRF Board and CEO. The Programs and Peer Review Manager works in consultation with the Program Manager, who supports the application processes of the funding opportunity, and the Programs and Peer Review Coordinator, who oversees the RMS and administrative tasks for the funding opportunity both at application and review stages.

Duties of the Programs and Peer Review Manager includes:
- Adhere to all SHRF application and peer review policies and procedures;
- With input from the Chair and Director of Programs and Partnerships, suggest committee members for appointment;
- Assist the Chair in selecting lead reviewers for each application from among the committee membership;
- Assist the Chair in selecting external reviewers, as required;
- Ensure committee members receive materials necessary to carry out their responsibilities;
- Ensure that review materials are handled and distributed in a confidential manner;
- Advise the Chair and 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 Programs and Partnerships, to questions of confidentiality, conflict of interest, applicant eligibility and any other major issues that may arise with respect to the peer review process.

3. Peer Review Process

Most of the review committee work occurs on SHRF's Research Management System (RMS). Committee members will each have their own Personal Profile and access to the Reviewer Home Page. The Reviewer Home Page will have all the information needed to complete review responsibilities, including committee information and deadlines, review materials and the different phases that need to be completed. Resources are available for committee members on how to use the RMS, including an RMS Reviewer Manual and How-To Videos. This section goes over the different phases of the review, giving an overview of the responsibilities for each.

3.1 Pre-Review – Invitation, Contract and Honoraria Form

The Programs and Peer Review Manager will begin reviewer recruitment following the funding opportunity eligibility deadline. They will recruit and send out invitations based on the number of applications, research pillars and research topics, working towards creating a multidisciplinary committee that will be able to appropriately review the applications.

After contact is made with potential committee members through email and the individual agrees to review, the committee member will be sent a formal invitation clearly stating the responsibilities and deadlines of the committee. This invitation is a contract between SHRF and the committee member, where if the committee member accepts the invitation, along with all shared information, they agree to complete all responsibilities and adhere to set deadlines.

Along with the acceptance of the formal invitation, committee members who may receive an honorarium for their work on the committee will be asked to complete an Honoraria Form. This form is used by SHRF's Finance Team regarding specific procedures for accepting an honorarium. The form is to be completed and returned to SHRF prior to the end of the committee.

3.2 Phase I – Review Background Information

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

3.2.1 Application Eligibility Decisions

An initial eligibility screening will take place where the Programs Team ensures applicants have fulfilled basic eligibility requirements for a funding opportunity. Immediately after the full application deadline, the Program Manager and Programs and Peer Review Coordinator will screen all applications for completeness and eligibility, according to program requirements. The Program Manager will make a final ruling on any eligibility issues related to the application completeness and will follow up with the Programs and Peer Review Manager if there are any decisions that they need to be aware of for the peer review process.

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 Programs and Partnerships, as needed. **The**

Director of Programs and Partnerships, in consultation with the Program Manager, makes the final ruling on applicant eligibility issues.

3.2.2 Confidentiality

SHRF is subject to provincial legislation on privacy and access to information, specifically *The Local Authority Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. Documentation submitted to SHRF by the applicant may be provided to the review committee, external reviewers and observers, only as it relates to the review of the application. Confidentiality is vital to maintaining the credibility of the adjudication process. SHRF works to ensure that personal and application information remain confidential unless the party which supplied the information has consented to release such information. Committee members, external reviewers, observers and SHRF staff must ensure that:

- All information submitted by the applicant will be kept confidential;
- All review documentation must be stored in a secure manner to prevent unauthorized access. Following the review process, all documentation must be destroyed in a secure manner. Any loss or theft of the information must be reported to SHRF;
- There is no discussion regarding individual applications, reviews or rankings with anyone not formally involved in the process. Review deliberations will be kept confidential and comments made during the review meeting must never be discussed or disclosed with individuals not involved with the process. Any comments or questions from colleagues and/or others about the review process are to be directed to the Programs and Peer Review Manager; and
- Applicants are not asked for additional information outside what is included in the application.

Additionally, the below requirements are to be followed by any individuals involved in the review process:

- Identity of successful applicants and the details of the review outcomes must remain confidential until the decisions are announced by SHRF to the applicant and publicly; and
- Observers must be as unobtrusive as possible to minimize disruption and must not remove from the meeting any written notes or documentation related to review assignments, ratings or comments on applications.

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.

3.2.3 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. A committee member cannot be involved in the review of an application if they are in a conflict of interest.

The policy will be interpreted and applied in a way that best reflects the following:

- To protect the fairness and impartiality of the review process and to protect the public interest;
- To ensure transparency and consistency in any measures taken to manage Conflict of Interest;

- To ensure that all funding organization review process participants are accountable for their actions;
- To promote public confidence in the research enterprise; and
- To foster a culture of trust in the research community.

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 a committee member:
- Is an applicant within the competition and can 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.

<u>SHRF reserves the right to resolve areas of uncertainty and to determine if a conflict exits.</u>

Conflicts are declared through the RMS following the submission of applications. Committee members will be given the full list of applicants and their institutions on the application, the scientific title and summary. After reviewing this information, the committee member will identify if there is a conflict or not. If yes, they will then give a reason for the conflict for SHRF staff to review.

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

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 meeting during the review of the application, not score or comment on the application and will refrain from participating in discussions about the application.

When the Chair is in conflict of interest with respect to an application, the same procedures will be followed as when a committee member is in conflict. 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.

3.2.4 Level of Expertise

When a committee member does not have a conflict of interest with an application, they will review the application's scientific title and summary and identify their level of expertise. The levels of expertise are as follows:

- 5 – Expert; Has a comprehensive and authoritative knowledge in the research topic and/or methodology
- 4 – Highly Knowledgeable; Well-informed in the research topic and/or methodology
- 3 – Knowledgeable; Is comfortable and informed in the research topic and/or methodology
- 2 – Minimal Knowledge; Somewhat informed in the research topic and/or methodology
- 1 – None; No background in the research topic and/or methodology

This information will be used by the Chair and Programs and Peer Review Manager at Phase II when they assign applications to committee members.

3.3 Phase II – Completing Review

Phase II of the review process has committee members complete the work of reviewing applications and providing initial scores and comments. The procedures below go over assigning reviews, review materials, review criteria and scoring.

3.3.1 Assigning Reviews

The Chair and the Programs and Peer Review Manager assign each application two committee members, which will be known as the lead reviewers (i.e., primary, secondary) on the application. The lead reviewers will provide an in-depth review at the review meeting to guide the committee's evaluation of the application. To inform lead review assignments, the Chair and Programs and Peer Review Manager will review committee member's responses from Phase I.

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 evaluations to the committee members prior to the review meeting; and/or
- Provide feedback to the applicants.

The Programs and Peer Review Manager will inform the committee members of any additional reviews that may be provided to them to support them and the review process.

3.3.2 Review Materials

The Programs and Peer Review Manager supplies review materials to committee members at the different phases of the review. These materials can be found on the SHRF RMS Reviewer Home Page. Review materials may include:

- Detailed review instructions relevant to the funding opportunity;
- A copy of these guidelines;
- A committee member list;
- A master list of applications showing lead review assignments and external reviewers, where appropriate;
- Relevant funding program information, including the SHRF Funding Guide and the funding opportunity application package;
- 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; and
- Access to initial lead and external review forms after initial lead review submission.

3.3.3 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 purpose and requirements of the funding program, as described in the 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 Programs and Peer Review Manager.

3.3.4 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**.

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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 funding priority
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3.0 - 3.4        Good: Acceptable, but low funding priority
2.5 - 2.9        Fair: Shows promise, not acceptable for funding
2.0 - 2.4        Poor: Needs major revision
<2.0             Seriously flawed
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Lead reviewers are asked to submit their initial scores and comments prior to the review meeting. An exact date will be given to the committee at the time of the invitation, but usually it will be between three to five business days before the review meeting. Once the lead reviewers have submitted their initial reviews, the review comments and scores will be accessible on the SHRF RMS for all committee members (unless there is a conflict).

As applicable, external reviews are available for the committee members on the SHRF RMS once the external reviewer has submitted their review. Lead reviewers will not be able to see the external review until after they have submitted their initial review for that application.

3.4 Phase III – Review Meeting

3.4.1 Review Meeting

The 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 Programs and Peer Review Manager will review procedures and update the committee on any outstanding matters. The Chair will go through SHRF policies and procedures to be followed at the meeting, including highlighting any program specific information.

After the Chair has completed going over the policies and procedures, the committee will begin discussions on the applications. The review process for each application entails the following steps:

1. Committee members who have identified conflict of interest with the announced application will be asked to leave the meeting during the discussion of the application.
2. The Chair will announce the application to be reviewed, giving the application ID, name of Principal Applicant, scientific application title and who the lead reviewers are on the application.

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 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.

3. The Chair will ask the lead reviewers to announce their overall initial score for the application, starting with the primary reviewer, followed by the secondary.
    o If both initial scores are **3.4 or lower**, the application is not considered further and is triaged, unless a committee member advocates for the application and request that it be discussed.
4. After announcing initial scores, the primary reviewer will give a brief overview of the application to the committee members, sharing the following from the application:
    o A brief summary of the project (1-2 minutes, maximum);
    o Their assessment of the application, describing the strengths and weaknesses in relation to the review criteria and rating scale (1-2 minutes maximum); and
    o Present any additional points raised by external reviewers, if applicable (1-2 minutes maximum).
5. Following the primary reviewer overview, the secondary reviewer will do the following:
    o Respond to the primary reviewer comments, confirming areas of general agreement and addressing any points of disagreement (2-3 minutes maximum).
6. After the lead reviewers complete their overviews of the application, the Chair will open discussion to all committee members to comment on the application (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. If a grant budget is to be reduced, it must be agreed upon before scoring takes place.
7. After the discussion is complete, the Chair will ask the 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.
8. The Chair will then announce the consensus score and 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 will range from 3.1 to 4.1.
9. After scoring is complete, the Chair asks if committee members have any ethical concerns to be brought up with SHRF for the applicant. The Programs and Peer Review 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 Programs and Peer Review Manager.

After the committee has reviewed all applications, the Chair will ask if committee members would like to discuss any applications further (being aware of conflicts prior to any discussion) or need confirmation on any consensus scores. Following this, committee members will do a final check of all applications and scores and then submit them in the RMS. The Programs and Peer Review Coordinator will pull the final scores from the RMS for each application, where the Programs and Peer Review Manager will calculate applicant final scores from all committee members score. The resulting rank-ordered lists constitute the committee's funding recommendations.

3.4.2 Breaking a Tie

If a tie occurs between application scores, the Chair (or Chair designate if the Chair has a conflict) will be invited to break the tie 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 6th and which application is 7th in the rank order.

3.5 Post-Review

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 send out a survey to the Chair and committee members to share feedback on SHRF's review process and technologies.

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 Programs and Peer Review Manager following the review meeting and only this score is shared with the applicant(s).

4. Funding Decisions and Announcements

4.1 Funding Decision

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

4.2 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.

4.3 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.