

## 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)



# Identifying Coordinating Centers for Health Equity Research

## THE FUNDING OPPORTUNITY<sup>1</sup>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) announces a new opportunity aimed at identifying partners for a program focused on supporting action-oriented research. This program will work to identify new and transformative solutions to dismantle structural racism as related to RWJF's [strategic framework](#) and [systems change approach](#).

The goals of the new program, Health Equity Research for Action (HERA), are threefold:

1. to implement a new model for health equity research, grounded in systems thinking;
2. to support and disseminate research that can help identify structural solutions to racial and health inequities; and
3. to support continuing development of innovative methods, strengthen influence and positioning, and increase the connection of the work to policy and systems change among health equity researchers.

This (invited) Request for Applications will start the process to identify and fund up to three grantees to co-design and lead the HERA research program. Our goal is to design the program with grantees and advisors to help ensure the program is responsive to the needs of community, equity researchers, and movement leaders working to advance racial and health equity.

Initially, three selected grantees will work together to design, initiate, and execute HERA research activities which will include: setting a bold vision and designing the infrastructure for

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<sup>1</sup> All funding opportunities are contingent upon final funding confirmation from the Foundation. In addition, the Foundation may elect to modify or terminate this funding opportunity if an event or events beyond the Foundation's reasonable control (e.g., change in law; civil disturbance; epidemic, pandemic; or other medical emergency; labor dispute; natural disaster; quarantine; terrorism; war; or other unforeseen events, including, but not limited to, emergencies and nonemergencies) is threatened, occurs; or is continuing that, as determined by the Foundation in its sole discretion, makes the awards under this request for proposals illegal, impossible, impracticable, or otherwise inadvisable under the circumstances.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

action-focused health equity research that is informed by community and movement leaders; establishing a research agenda based on the strategic framework; managing, developing, and implementing open calls for research proposals that address the underlying causes of structural inequities; and ensuring the research is actionable and shared with health equity movements, networks, organizations, and leaders also working on systems-change. The HERA model is intended to be adaptable and expandable; additional grantees, priorities, and/or partners may be added in the future.

## ***Why This, Why Now***

As an evidence-based organization, RWJF has a long-standing record of funding research and believes in its importance as a component of leading social change. Transforming the health science knowledge system—how we produce, share, and use health evidence — is a core area of focus for RWJF to achieve *three generational goals*: 1) Healthy and equitable community conditions; 2) Economic inclusion for family wellbeing and 3) Healthy and accountable healthcare systems (see Figure 1). For too long, the health science knowledge system has left out diverse voices, methodologies, and perspectives, limiting our ability to make evidence-based decisions and achieve health equity. Our vision for the health science knowledge system is bold – a system rooted in equity and justice that addresses the wide-ranging barriers to health; a system where knowledge is transdisciplinary and co-created with communities, and diverse ways of knowing are embraced and valued in evidence-based decision making. HERA aims to make research more impactful, transparent, and community-connected, which is essential to strengthen health science to better serve everyone and contribute to a healthier future for all.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)



**Figure 1.** RWJF strategic framework

We believe HERA has real potential to advance RWJF’s and our partners’ understanding of the solutions for inequities in our [systems approach](#) while contributing to authentic, transformative change in the health science knowledge system. We anticipate that the new HERA infrastructure will help shift the knowledge system to include an increase in epistemic equity in health science knowledge and increase awareness among other funders to examine current power structures that have led to research processes unable to effectively examine the root causes of health inequities. HERA was created from the learning from programs that RWJF has undertaken in recent years to center equity in its signature research programs: [Evidence for Action](#), [Health Data for Action](#), [Policies for Action](#), and [Systems for Action](#). These four programs were developed during a time when RWJF evolved its organizational mission to build a national Culture of Health, with a focus on advancing health equity through a focus on social determinants of health.

It has become clear that deeper structural problems perpetuate inequities and diminish opportunities for people to live their healthiest lives possible. To truly understand and propose suggestions to disrupt these complex structural factors like racism, research must go beyond documenting health disparities to investigate *why* these disparities exist and how structural factors embedded in institutional policies and decisions across sectors operate to continually benefit some groups and disadvantage others. We need solutions-oriented research that can influence policy, and it is critical that the research challenges normative approaches and develops collaborative partnerships across all working in the systems, including health equity movement leaders and community power networks. Now more than ever, it is important that this

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

program and the research produced is meaningful and supportive of the evidence needs of those audiences on the ground engaged in advocacy and policy change.

RWJF has invested significant time and resources to better understand what it would take to more deeply embed the approach described above as a core focus of its signature research programs going forward. RWJF has also learned important lessons from other initiatives, such as other health equity research programs, and the [Change Leadership Initiative](#), which supported and trained leaders across four national programs in various stages of their personal and professional trajectories. The Foundation recognizes the importance of investing in strong infrastructure and using a diffused network and hub and spoke approach – whereby programs are less siloed and have more connection points and engagement.

## ***Project Overview***

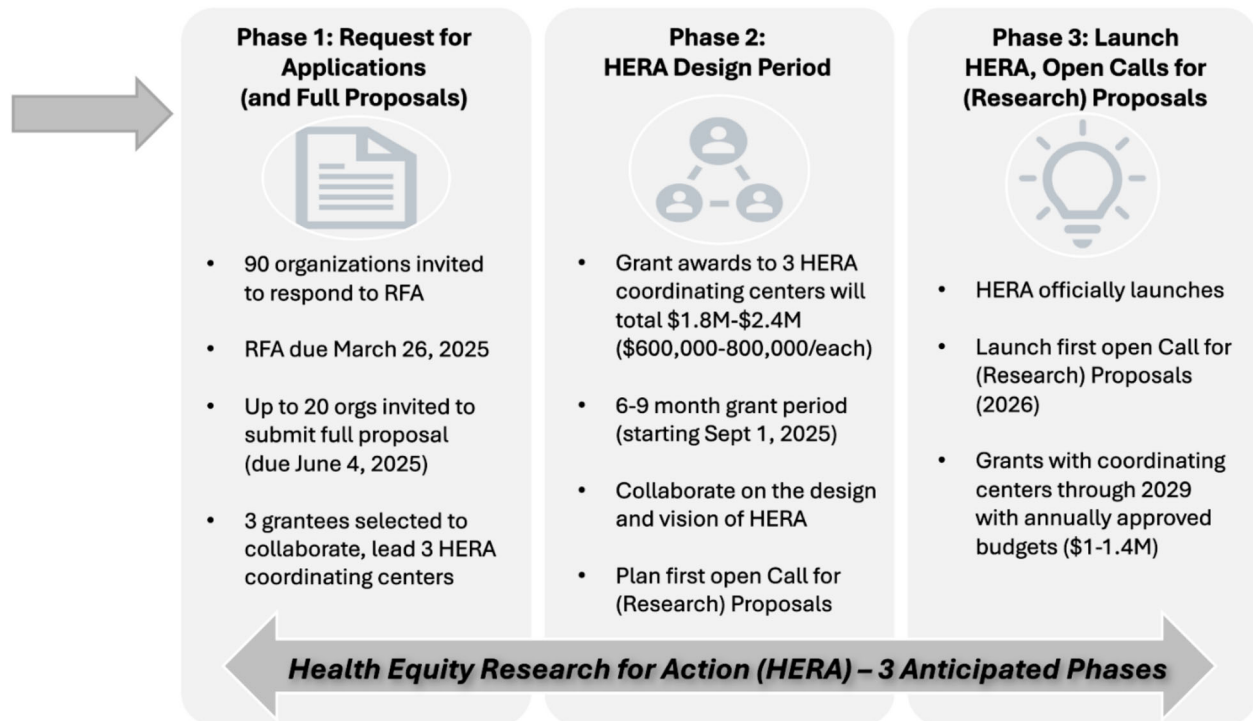
RWJF strongly believes that together, with our grantees and other partners, we can build a world where health is no longer a privilege, but a right. Evolving our research programs to align with system needs and a core focus on equity is a necessary condition to achieve our vision. Our aim is to advance the health science knowledge base, while modeling a justice-driven focus that leads to both equity and action. As we evolve our research programs, we need partners to help co-design then lead this important work (Figure 2 illustrates the three anticipated phases).

**Phase One** (this invited RFA): This RFA is for applicants interested in co-designing and implementing the overall HERA model, working together to design and refine the HERA infrastructure as well as the specific roles and responsibilities of the three selected HERA grantees (“coordinating centers”).

The selected grantees will work in close partnership with each other and RWJF as coordinating centers operating in a networked manner. Each coordinating center will have expertise and a commitment to supporting transformative health equity research; have strong research and community networks; align with different health equity leaders and partners; and serve as thought partners for sharing and disseminating findings to relevant audiences.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)



**Figure 2.** HERA – three anticipated phases

In phase one, we are asking interested organizations and parties to respond to this RFA and submit a letter of interest. The focus in this phase of review will be to assess the organizational fit of applicants to design and implement the HERA research program.

- Of the 90 applicants invited to respond to this RFA, a review committee will invite up to 20 to submit a more detailed proposal, which will focus more on the approach to the work.
- Upon completion of the phase one application and review processes, RWJF will award planning grants totaling \$600,000-800,000 to each of up to three grantees for a 6-9 month period (beginning September 1, 2025).

**Phase Two** (design and planning period): The selected grantees (coordinating centers) will have 6-9 months to identify a joint research advisory committee, co-design the overall HERA model, agree on an approach for staffing and capacity building to support sub-grantees, and develop an equitable process for the first open call for (research) proposals. We envision the research advisory committee will help establish funding strategies and provide guidance throughout the course of the initiative. Advisory committee members will include representatives

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

from various sectors (e.g., community organizations, academia, government, healthcare, public health, economic systems, communications, community development).

- Beginning in phase two, the three selected coordinating centers will meet regularly with RWJF during the planning period (likely in-person and remote) and must have the capacity to work in deep partnership with others throughout this project.
- An important component of the design period will be to work with RWJF on establishing the process to create a research agenda for HERA based on the systems outlined within the [strategic framework](#).
- Therefore, it is important for the selected coordinating centers to have broad expertise and an understanding of how these priority systems within the strategic framework are related, interconnected, and are ripe for actionable systemic and policy change.
- The HERA model is intended to be adaptable and expandable. The selected coordinating centers will identify additional partners needed to support HERA's infrastructure, such as communications, learning, and backend administration.
- Eventually, coordinating centers will serve a key role in synthesizing and supporting learning across bodies of knowledge and supporting a coordinated approach to increase the visibility of the research and will help to support action.

**Phase Three** (launch HERA model and open calls for research proposals): In the following years after the planning period, each of the coordinating centers will receive yearly grants in the range of \$1,000,000 - \$1,400,000 each to continue to lead and support the HERA program. The scope of work for ongoing program activities would be determined in the planning period and may include: applicant solicitation and selection of new research grantees; developing and refreshing the research agendas that align with RWJF's strategic framework; creating a bold vision and theory of change for health equity research for the field; facilitation of grantees' program experience; and continued development of the program's close partnership with the other coordinating centers and RWJF. Each center will also gather, synthesize, and share research evidence to inform system actions and the broader field of health equity research.

- Supported by RWJF, the three HERA coordinating centers will implement and manage open calls for research proposals on an ongoing basis. We anticipate awarding approximately \$10 million per year in research grants.
- The first open calls for proposals will be released in 2026.

## FUNDING DETAILS

- **Type of Award:** Awards from this RFA will be structured as planning grants.
- **Number of Awards:** Up to three planning grants will be awarded.
- **Amount of Award:** Each planning grant will be between \$600,000-800,000.
- **Award Duration:** Awards will be 6-9 months. All three awards will be for the same duration.



# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

- **Use of Funds:** Award funds should cover the actual costs of the project including personnel and other direct costs. If the grantee is a public charity, grant funds will also cover indirect costs to support the applicant organization's general operations. In keeping with RWJF policy, funds may *not* be used to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, and for lobbying or political activities. Additional budget guidelines are provided in the online application materials.
- **Payment of Awards:** Payment of the award generally will be based upon spending against approved budgets or milestones (not invoices).

## OPEN ACCESS

In order to ensure RWJF-supported research is made accessible to a wide and diverse audience, awardees who publish findings in peer-reviewed publications must do so in open access journals and/or must include funds in their budgets to cover the cost of making the resulting publications open access (typically \$2,000–\$5,000 per manuscript). See our [Open Access policy](#) for more information.

## SELECTION CRITERIA

The review committee is excited to engage a diverse range of applicants. Organizations well versed in systems change and/or health equity research are especially encouraged to apply.

Applicant organizations must:

- Have a strong understanding and support for systems-led health equity research, particularly in the prioritized systems outlined in the [strategic framework](#).
- Provide information that demonstrates your capacity to co-design and manage this work. It is important for the review committee to understand that you have the staffing and/or partnerships necessary to manage this effort and that you have the expertise, credibility, and managerial experience necessary to lead a large body of work.
- Demonstrate diverse methodological expertise with a proven background in research aimed at achieving equity goals, racial equity values, and health equity principles.
- Demonstrate ability to develop and implement a systems-oriented research agenda in close partnership with other grantees and partners with different and complementary skills/knowledge.
- Exhibit commitment and creativity to support and disseminate action-oriented research that can help identify structural solutions to racial and health inequities.
- Have comfort with creating and participating in a collaborative culture.
- Be based in the United States or U.S. territories and focus on work taking place in the United States.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

## MONITORING AND REPORTING

Award recipients are expected to meet RWJF requirements for the submission of narrative and financial reports, as well as periodic information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. We may ask grantees to participate in periodic meetings and give progress reports on their awards. At the close of each award, each grantee is expected to provide a written report on the project and its findings suitable for wide dissemination.

## HOW TO APPLY

Applications must be submitted via the RWJF online system. You will receive an email invitation with a link to the RWJF online system and additional instructions. To begin your application, select the link in the email and follow the instructions.

### Narrative

- In the online system, applicants will be asked to submit a letter of intent (“narrative”).
- A review committee will review and discuss the letters of intent and will invite up to 20 organizations to submit a more detailed application, which will focus on the applicant’s proposed approach to the work.

**Please note you will be asked to upload your written narrative as a PDF** to the Narrative section of the online system. The narrative cannot exceed 6 pages. Please use Arial font at size 11 with line spacing at 1.5.

The letter of intent (narrative) should contain the following information:

- Tell us a little about your organization/network (e.g., mission, goals, activities, etc) as it relates to advancing health and racial equity research.
- How does your work/expertise align with the goals and objectives of HERA? Are there specific systems that you have the interest in working in (e.g., community development, economic supports for families, healthcare)?
- Describe your relationships with organizations and networks/partners that are advancing equity and racial equity in the specific priority system(s) you are interested in.
- Briefly describe what most excites you about HERA and the unique strengths your organization would bring as a coordinating center for this project.
- Briefly describe or share a visual of partners or staff who could help manage this program.



# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

## Additional Information

- More information and detailed instructions will be shared with applicants that are invited to submit a full proposal (all applicants will be notified by April 30, 2025).
- Please direct inquiries to: [HERA@rwjf.org](mailto:HERA@rwjf.org) A staff member will respond to your inquiry within one business day. The corresponding Frequently Asked Questions document will be updated weekly, if necessary, to include recent inquiries or clarification.

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

## Application Review

Applications will be reviewed by a committee representing a broad cross-section of people with systems change and research expertise (including RWJF staff, health equity researchers, anti-racist scholars, grantees, and other partners). RWJF will make all final funding decisions.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of applications submitted.

## KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

- **March 7, 2025 (1 p.m. to 2 p.m. ET)**  
Optional applicant webinar – will be recorded. Registration is required [through this link](#).
- **March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)**  
Deadline for receipt of RFA application and letter of intent.
- **April 30, 2025**  
Select applicants (up to 20) notified if invited to submit a full proposal.
- **June 4, 2025**  
Full proposals due.
- **July 7, 2025**  
Award notification.
- **September 1, 2025**  
Anticipated award start date.

## Applicant Deadline Policy

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

All applications for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. You will receive an email invitation from [my.rwjf.org](https://my.rwjf.org) with instructions and a link to the RWJF online application system. To begin your application, select the link in the email and follow the instructions.

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online application requirements well before the final submission deadline. Please note that, in the 24-hour period leading up to the application deadline, staff may not be able to assist all applicants with any system-related issues. Therefore, we encourage you to submit your application well before the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties or technical problems may be addressed in advance.

**Late submissions will not be accepted for any reason.** While late submissions will not be accepted, RWJF may choose, at its sole discretion, to extend the application deadline for all applicants. Such extensions generally will be granted only in the event of: (1) a verified issue with the RWJF application system that prevented completion and submission of applications; or (2) a disaster, emergency, or significant internet outage that affects one or more regions. For purposes of this policy, a region is generally considered to be one or more states. RWJF strives to give all applicants any support needed to successfully submit their application prior to the deadline. Submission is defined as all sections completed, marked finished, the application “submit” button used, and the application status shows “Submitted.” If the deadline is extended for any reason, an email will be sent to all individuals that have started an application in the RWJF online system.

## MONITORING

RWJF monitors the awardees’ efforts and careful stewardship of funds to assure accountability. Awardees will be required to submit periodic narrative and financial reports.

## OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is working to take bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime and pave the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right. Achieving this goal requires focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. To that end, we are committed to fostering diverse perspectives. We recognize that individuals’ perspectives are shaped by a host of factors, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental abilities, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, familial status, education, religion, legal status, military service, political affiliation, geography, and other personal and professional experiences.

We know that the presence of diverse perspectives alone is not sufficient. Therefore, we also are committed to creating inclusive environments where all individuals are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences. We believe that only through valuing our differences and similarities, and remaining vigilant in advancing equity, will we be able to maintain an equitable

## 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

workplace and actively pursue equity in all aspects of our work. We commit to being continuous learners and working alongside others to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion.

### ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

RWJF is a leading national philanthropy dedicated to taking bold leaps to transform health in our lifetime. To get there, we must work to dismantle structural racism and other barriers to health. Through funding, convening, advocacy, and evidence-building, we work side-by-side with communities, practitioners, and institutions to achieve health equity faster and pave the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right. For more information, visit [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at <https://www.rwjf.org/content/rwjf-web/us/en/email-subscriptions.html>

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# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

This document will not be part of the RFP, however, should be approved by Legal prior to posting on the A&R Site

*Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

*Frequently Asked Questions*

*Identifying (HERA) Coordinating Centers*

*Acronyms Used in the Request for Applications*

Acronym	Meaning
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions – this document
HERA	Health Equity Research for Action – new research program
RFA	Request for Applications – phase one, the current opportunity
RWJF	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – the funder of this work

## APPLICATION DETAILS AND TIMELINE

- What is the due date to submit responses to the Request for Applications (RFA)?**
  - All responses must be received in RWJF's online system by 3 p.m. March 26, 2025.
- What is the timeline for Phase One?**
  - All RFA responses are due March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET).
  - Applicants will be notified by April 30, 2025 if they are invited to submit a full proposal (full proposals will be due June 23, 2025).
- Where can I send questions?**

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

- Please send written inquiries to ([HERA@rwjf.org](mailto:HERA@rwjf.org)).
- This FAQ document will be updated weekly, to reflect any new/updated information that may be relevant to all applicants.

## 4. Is there an information session for applicants?

- Yes, there is an (optional) webinar for applicants Friday March 7, 2025 (1-2pm ET); it will be recorded.
- Please register for the (optional) webinar [HERE](#).

## 5. May I share this RFA with other potential applicants?

- You are welcome to nominate a potential applicant directly to RWJF. Please email your nomination to [HERA@rwjf.org](mailto:HERA@rwjf.org).
- Please provide first/last name, org name (if applicable), email, and a brief rationale.
- RWJF will make a decision whether to invite the nominee or not.

## 6. May I share this RFA with partners we intend to include in our application materials?

- Yes, please feel free to share this opportunity with those you intend to include in your application materials.

## 7. Will RWJF provide feedback on applications that are not invited for the full proposal/RFP?

- RWJF does not provide individual critiques of applications submitted.

### **ELIGIBILITY AND GRANTEE SELECTION**

## 8. What types of organizations/applicants are eligible to apply?

- Applicants/organizations must be based in the United States or U.S. territories and focus on work taking place in the U.S. and its territories.
- Organizations/applicants should already have a strong understanding and support for systems-led health equity research.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

- Demonstrate diverse methodological expertise with proven background in research aimed at achieving equity goals, racial equity values, and principles.

- Please see RFA for more information.

## 9. Can a current or former RWJF grantee apply?

- Yes.

## 10. Can individuals apply?

- No. The proposed work is beyond the capacity of a single individual.
- Applicants must demonstrate relevant expertise, managerial and programmatic capacity, and have current experience or history of leading efforts that are similar in scale or scope.
- It is important for the review committee to understand how you will staff this effort and that you have the expertise, credibility, and managerial experience necessary to lead a large body of work.

## 11. Are applicant organizations from U.S. territories eligible to apply?

- Yes.

## 12. Can the same person be part of multiple proposals as a coordinating center lead or co-lead?

- Yes, we welcome individuals or organizations to be part of the support lead for multiple proposals. However, we will only allow a team or person to be the lead on one proposal.

## 13. How were organizations selected for this RFA opportunity?

- Organizations were recommended by RWJF staff, grantees, and other partners.

## 14. How will RFA responses be reviewed?

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

- RFA responses will be assessed by a review committee – consisting of individuals representing a broad cross-section of people with systems change and research expertise (including RWJF program staff, health equity researchers, anti-racist scholars, grantees, and other partners).
- See RFA for more details.

**15. After reviewing RFA responses and letters of intent, how many organizations/applicants in phase one will be selected to submit a full proposal?**

- Up to (12) applicants from phase one will be invited to submit a more detailed application.

**16. Will any grants be awarded in Phase One?**

- No grants will be awarded during the Request for Applications portion of phase one.
- Upon completion of reviewing full proposals in phase one, RWJF will select three grantees to lead the three HERA coordinating centers.

**17. What is the anticipated amount for the grant awards?**

- Upto three selected grantees will initially receive a planning grant for \$600,000-800,000 each for a period of 6-9 months.
- All t grant awards will be for the same duration.
- After the planning period, RWJF has budgeted approximately \$3,500,000 annually for the coordinating center budget for all 3 of the centers and related functions.
- So, we anticipate that each of the coordinating centers would receive approximately \$1,000,000 to \$1,200,000 yearly for a grant period of four years, depending on the agreed functions during the planning period. If functions of the coordinating centers are centralized (e.g., shared website or shared administrative



# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

functions), we anticipate that the budget would be adjusted to fund and resource those functions accordingly.

**18. Will the selected grantees (coordinating centers) need to reapply after the planning period and design phase ends?**

- We anticipate that the selected grantees selected in phase one will successfully complete phase two of designing HERA and be invited to continue to serve as coordinating centers once the full HERA model

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

launches in phase three and thereafter for a grant period of four years with possibility of renewal or recompetes. A proposal will be required for subsequent phases of the work.

- We anticipate all three selected grantees will demonstrate continued commitment, capacity, and desire to work collaboratively and not in a siloed fashion.

## TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### 19. How does RWJF define systems change research?

- A research approach that views the problem(s) being studied as part of a complex system, considering all interconnected elements and their interactions, rather than focusing on isolated components.
- Systems research aims to understand and address issues by analyzing how different parts within a system influence each other, how leverage points and levers affect systems leading to more holistic solutions.
- Key resources include but are not limited to [Academy for Systems Change](#) and the [Water of Systems Change](#) by FSG.

### 20. How does RWJF define health equity?

- Every person has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible.
- Regardless of where a person lives, works, or worships – everyone has an equal chance to achieve optimal health.

### 21. How does RWJF define anti-racism?

- The practice of actively opposing racism and working to promote racial equity. This involves identifying and disrupting racism in all its forms, both implicit and explicit. The goal of anti-racism is to change policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.
- To truly disrupt structural racism, research must go beyond documenting racial disparities to investigate why these disparities exist and how the mechanisms of structural racism operate to continually benefit some groups and disadvantage others.

## ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE FOR APPLICANTS

### 22. Where can I find more information about the three prioritized systems mentioned in the RFA (community development, economic supports for families, healthcare)?

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

- Please see RWJF's strategic framework (below) and visit [our website](#).



23. **How many organizations/applicants were invited to respond to this RFA and submit a letter of intent?**

- Approximately 90
- Up to 20 of the approximately 90 (invited) RFA applicants will be invited to submit a more detailed proposal, which focuses more on the approach to the work.

24. **With whom will the three selected HERA coordinating centers work with to “co-design” this work?**

- The selected HERA coordinating centers will be expected to work together, and in collaboration with RWJF staff and relevant partners (e.g., communications, review committees, etc).
- It is important for the selected coordinating centers to work collaboratively and in a networked fashion, while avoiding siloes and duplicated efforts.

# 2025 Request for Applications

Application Deadline: March 26, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

**25. Once the HERA coordinating centers are selected, will funding be renewed in subsequent rounds?**

- Supporting health and health equity research has been a priority for RWJF for decades. We anticipate that RWJF will commit to HERA or a similar research program for the long term.
- However, as field priorities change, we may re-compete the coordinating centers in 2029 to ensure the coordinating centers remain aligned with the needs of our prioritized systems.

**26. Is there a central location where I can view information about this grant or initiative?**

- No. (Invited) applicants to this RFA may find relevant resources in RWJF's online application system once you create a profile (or log in to your existing profile).
- Once the three HERA coordinating centers are selected and the design period is in motion, there may be a public website once the HERA model is further developed.

**27. What happens if RWJF doesn't receive competitive applications for phase one?**

- RWJF will re-visit the application materials, timeline, and overall process to determine next steps.