

key stakeholders to interact with grantees and provide feedback on center activities. As part of this evaluation system, NIDRR conducts both formative (early in the five-year funding cycle) and summative (toward the end of the fourth year) reviews. The overall goal of the formative review is to support grantees in achieving their planned results and becoming centers of excellence across the four major areas of activity. The overall goal of the summative review is to evaluate the quality, relevance, and productivity of each center's results and accomplishments. For more information about NIDRR's program review process, applicants are invited to visit the following Web site: <http://www.cessi.net/pr>.

In accordance with the provisions of 34 CFR 75.253(a), continued funding depends at all times on satisfactory performance and accomplishment.

These priorities reflect issues discussed in the New Freedom Initiative (NFI) and NIDRR's Long-Range Plan (the Plan). The NFI can be accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/freedominitiative/freedominitiative.html>.

The Plan can be accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/NIDRR/Products>.

We published a notice of proposed priorities for the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers (RERC) Program in the **Federal Register** on January 10, 2003 (67 FR 51744).

Except for minor revisions there are no significant differences between the notice of proposed priorities and this notice of final priorities.

Generally, we do not address technical and other minor changes and suggested changes the law does not authorize us to make under the applicable statutory authority.

In response to our invitation in the notice of proposed priorities 13 parties submitted comments. We fully explain changes made as a result of these comments in the Analysis of Comments and Changes published as an appendix to this notice.

Note: This notice does not solicit applications. In any year in which we choose to use this priority, we invite applications through a notice in the **Federal Register**. A notice inviting applications for FY 2003 awards is published elsewhere in this issue of the **Federal Register**. When inviting applications we designate the priority as absolute, competitive preference, or invitational. The effect of each type of priority follows:

Absolute priority: Under an absolute priority, we consider only applications

that meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(3)).

Competitive preference priority: Under a competitive preference priority, we give competitive preference to an application by either (1) awarding additional points, depending on how well or the extent to which the application meets the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(i)); or (2) selecting an application that meets the priority over an application of comparable merit that does not meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(ii)).

Invitational priority: Under an invitational priority, we are particularly interested in applications that meet the invitational priority. However, we do not give an application that meets the priority a competitive or absolute preference over other applications (34 CFR 75.105(c)(1)).

Background

The Background statement for the following priorities was published in the notice of proposed priorities on January 10, 2003 (67 FR 1446).

Priorities

NIDRR intends to fund up to nine new RERCs in FY 2003. Applicants must select one of the following priority topic areas: (a) Hearing enhancement; (b) prosthetics and orthotics; (c) communication enhancement; (d) measurement and monitoring of functional performance; (e) technology access for land mine survivors; (f) universal interface and information technologies; (g) telerehabilitation; (h) accessible public transportation; (i) wheeled mobility; (j) cognitive technologies; and (k) technology transfer. Applicants are allowed to submit more than one proposal as long as each proposal addresses only one RERC topic area.

Letters of Intent

Due to the open nature of this competition, NIDRR is requiring all potential applicants to submit a Letter of Intent (LOI). Each LOI must be limited to a maximum of four pages and must include the following information:

(1) The title of the proposed RERC, the name of the host institution, the name of the Principal Investigator (PI), and the names of partner institutions and entities; (2) a brief statement of the vision, goals, and objectives of the proposed RERC and a description of its research and development activities at a sufficient level of detail to allow potential peer reviewers to be selected; (3) a list of proposed RERC staff including the center Director and key personnel; and (4) a list of individuals

whose selection as a peer reviewer might constitute a conflict of interest due to involvement in proposal development, selection as an advisory board member, co-PI relationships, etc.

Submission of an LOI is a prerequisite for eligibility to submit an application. The signed, original LOI, or with prior approval an e-mail or facsimile copy, must be received by NIDRR no later than May 22, 2003. Applicants that submit e-mail or facsimile copies must follow up by sending to NIDRR the signed original copy as soon as possible. All communications pertaining to the LOI must be sent to: William Peterson, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue, SW., room 3425, Switzer Building, Washington, DC 20202-2645. For further information regarding the LOI requirement, contact William Peterson at (202) 205-9192 or by e-mail at: william.peterson@ed.gov.

Priorities

The Assistant Secretary intends to fund up to nine RERCs that will focus on innovative technological solutions, new knowledge, and concepts to promote the health, safety, independence, employment, active engagement in daily activities, and quality of life of persons with disabilities. Each RERC must:

(1) Contribute substantially to the technical and scientific knowledge-base relevant to its respective subject area;

(2) Research, develop, and evaluate innovative technologies, products, environments, performance guidelines, and monitoring and assessment tools as applicable to its respective subject area;

(3) Identify, implement, and evaluate, in collaboration with the relevant industry, professional associations, and institutions of higher education, innovative approaches to expand research capacity in its respective field of study;

(4) Monitor trends and evolving product concepts that represent and signify future directions for technologies in its respective area of research; and

(5) Provide technical assistance to public and private organizations responsible for developing policies, guidelines, and standards that affect its respective area of research.

(6) Each RERC must focus on one of the following priority topic areas:

(a) **Hearing Enhancement:** This center must research and develop methods, systems, and technologies that will assist hearing professionals with the process of matching hearing technology to individuals with hearing loss and associated conditions such as tinnitus. This includes improving the compatibility of hearing enhancement