

Report on Research Compliance Volume 17, Number 3. February 20, 2020

FY 2021 Budget Seeks 10% Hike for ORI, Lays Out New Initiatives, Past Activities

By Theresa Defino

For the second time in as many years, HHS is seeking a 10% increase in funding for the Office of Research Integrity (ORI) for the upcoming fiscal year,^[1] a request Congress did not grant for the current FY, which began Oct. 1. ORI is responsible for making findings of research misconduct, defined as fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, when found in studies supported by the Public Health Service (PHS).

ORI's budget has been flat at \$8.558 million since 2013, when it was decreased from \$9.027 million. If granted, ORI would see an increase of \$856,000 for a total of \$9.414 million for FY 2021.

While Congress may focus on bottom-line expenditure requests, proposed budgets—such as ORI's—are often revealing, with a year-end summary of activities and a projection of things to come. Among ORI's wish list is a refreshed website and more technology to help it perform better.

Despite a stable budget, ORI's staffing has been in turmoil for many years. The budget does not call for an increase above the current 28 full-time equivalent employees.

Interim Director Still in Charge

Since August, Elisabeth Handley has been ORI's interim director,^[2] on loan from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Handley stepped in to replace Wanda Jones, who was named interim director in December 2017 after Kathryn Partin was removed from the top post after two tumultuous years at the helm.

After a year-long detail outside HHS, Partin was named NIH's director of research integrity and agency intramural research integrity officer in late 2018. Jones was named deputy ORI director in June of last year, and Alex Runko became director of ORI's Division of Investigative Oversight in August.

In addition to lacking a permanent director, ORI has not had a director of the Division of Education and Integrity (DEI) since December of 2016, despite the job being advertised at least three times. However, RRC has learned that a new DEI director is expected to be announced later this month.

As it stated in last year's budget justification provided to Congress, ORI would like the additional funds to help "accelerate its database modernization project with a module to implement enhanced reporting capabilities and case tracking."

The agency would "enhance internal case handling processes through investment in 21st Century technology," and hopes to improve the capabilities of its website, which it says receives "2.2 million page views per year from users around the world."

Ongoing efforts will continue toward the development of government-funded forensic tools to aid in the detection of image manipulation.

Last year ORI “convened other federal agencies with research misconduct policies...to assess interest in jointly completing development of image analysis technology that would use artificial intelligence to analyze the multiple (sometimes hundreds) of images involved in a research misconduct investigation,” the agency explained. “Since image manipulation comprises about 80% of allegations of falsification or fabrication of research results, automating the initial identification of suspect images will greatly increase efficiency.”

Improvements are also planned to ORI’s case-tracking system, with new “features to improve file access, and enabling a secure document transfer capability without compromising confidentiality. This latter improvement alone will enable institutions to send electronic files directly, versus the current methods which rely on external media (CD or flash drive), reducing burden and improving security for both ORI and the sending institutions,” the budget says.

ORI “anticipates a full transition into a paperless, initiation-to-close case management system, with continuation of that work through 2021.”

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