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Focus on 'Friction Points' to Facilitate Research Award Management Tasks

By Theresa Defino

Oversight and management of an HHS grant that funds care for individuals with substance use disorders, for example, differs from what's required for an award that supports a research lab investigating how normal cells become cancerous or probing for new treatments for epilepsy.

But exactly how service awards and research grants vary may be instructive to new compliance officials, as Scott Sheffler, a partner with Feldesman Tucker Leifer Fidell LLP, explained in a webinar,^{[1](#)} and can serve as a refresher to those with more experience.

Managing research awards versus service delivery awards "will be very different," said Sheffler, as oversight of service delivery awards "is very focused on issues of scope of project, beneficiary eligibility, the nature of the services furnished," as well as "potentially generating program income."

He called management of research awards "fairly straightforward" but not necessarily simpler.

There may be more "flexibility from a grant management standpoint, but then [the awards] will be more complicated from a managing personnel and personality standpoint," along with "really significant ancillary compliance requirements that can be layered on, depending on the nature of the research that you're doing," Sheffler said.

These ancillary requirements may necessitate specialized knowledge and expertise, Sheffler said.

However, "the good news" is that awardee universities and other institutions generally "have very well-developed systems around each of these ancillary areas. And so there's a support system in place," he said.

Oftentimes an official managing service awards is "really on your own."

Sheffler emphasized that, while he is a practicing attorney, the webinar is not legal advice and that institutions should consult their own counsel when necessary.

In Sheffler's experience, there are five areas of concern or "friction points" when it comes to the oversight of research awards. These are federal management parameters and potential research flexibilities; human subjects research; data rights and intellectual property; financial conflicts of interest; and collaborative research. This article will address the first two. A story in the December issue of RRC will discuss the other three, as well as issues related to contract management.

He referred to these topics as "the things that people are worried about" and are "trying to work through when managing a research award."

Sheffler's comments referred mostly to grants and cooperative agreements versus procurement contracts governed by the federal acquisition regulations (FAR). However, it is possible to have a mix of funding sources in

one project, Sheffler pointed out, adding that management principles will be “very similar.”

Comparing the three primary federal awarding agencies, Sheffler said the Department of Defense (DoD) has “very robust standard terms and conditions.” NIH “provides the fewest terms and conditions,” while the National Science Foundation (NSF) is “kind of in the middle,” he said.

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