

## 2018 Call for Proposals

Proposal Deadline: October 10, 2018 (3 p.m. ET)



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

## Systems for Action

*Systems and Services Research for a Culture of Health*

**Note: Please be sure to review the “Topics of Special Interest” starting on page 4.**

### BACKGROUND

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Culture of Health vision calls for better health and well-being for all Americans. The Culture of Health Action Framework identifies four Action Areas for achieving improved health and health equity: (1) Making Health a Shared Value; (2) Fostering Cross-Sector Collaboration to Improve Well-Being; (3) Creating Healthier, More Equitable Communities; and (4) Strengthening Integration of Health Services and Systems.<sup>1,2</sup> Activating this Framework requires new knowledge about how to mobilize collective actions across the diverse sectors and systems that shape health in American communities.<sup>3</sup>

A large body of evidence demonstrates that social, economic, and environmental conditions strongly influence health and health equity for individuals, families and communities.<sup>4-5</sup> As defined by RWJF, health equity means that “everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthier,” and it requires “removing obstacles to health—such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the services and supports designed to improve these conditions—such as housing; transportation; education; income and employment assistance; child and family supports; and legal and criminal justice services—are often disconnected from the medical services and public health programs tasked with improving health. As a result, people seeking to maintain or improve health through the medical and public health systems often find that underlying social, economic, and environmental conditions go unaddressed, making it difficult to achieve desired levels of health and well-being.

Delivery and financing systems for medical, social, and public health services operate largely in isolation from each other, despite pursuing many common goals and serving overlapping populations. These systems interact in complex and often poorly understood ways through fragmented funding vehicles; information systems; governance and decision-making structures; implementation rules and strategies; and professional practices. Research can help untangle these interactions and expose novel ways of coordinating systems to improve health and health equity.<sup>7</sup>

Very few research-tested models currently exist that describe how to align and coordinate the delivery and financing systems for medical, social, and public health services. Scientific research often focuses narrowly on a single type of service, professional area of practice, or group of service providers—usually those within the medical care and public health sectors. While such studies allow researchers to isolate the implementation and impact of specific interventions, the research often falls short in revealing how multiple systems converge and interact—or fail to do so—in supporting population health. To address these evidence gaps, the [Systems for Action](#) program supports new research on novel ways of aligning delivery and financing systems across the medical, social, and public health sectors.<sup>8</sup>

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## THE PROGRAM

Systems for Action (S4A) is a signature research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that builds a Culture of Health by rigorously testing new ways of connecting the nation's fragmented medical, social, and public health systems. Health is shaped by a complex web of social, economic, and environmental conditions that extend far beyond the reach of the medical care system. Medical, social, and public health services are often implemented in isolation through separate delivery and financing systems that offer few opportunities for coordination and synergy. Studies conducted through the S4A program test innovative mechanisms for aligning the delivery and financing systems for medical, social, and public health services, with a focus on estimating their impact on health and health equity. S4A uses a wide research lens that includes and extends beyond medical care and public health to incorporate social service systems—such as housing; transportation; education; employment; food and nutrition assistance; child and family support; criminal and juvenile justice; and economic and community development. Research studies supported through S4A must: (1) focus on solutions to high-priority system alignment problems that involve medical, social, and public health services; (2) test the effectiveness of these solutions using rigorous scientific methods; and (3) engage stakeholders from medical, social, and public health systems in the design and conduct of the research, so that findings can be readily used in practice.

Studies funded through the Systems for Action program will produce new scientific knowledge about the **implementation and impact** of novel strategies to align multiple delivery and financing systems supporting a Culture of Health. Studies must address one or more of the priority topics described in the [S4A research agenda](#), including testing a specific **mechanism for systems alignment** such as those listed in Figure 1.<sup>8</sup> Studies should focus on system alignment mechanisms that engage all three of the broad sectors referenced in the S4A research agenda, including: (1) medical care; (2) public health; and (3) social and community services and supports. We use the term “system alignment mechanism” broadly to include any action that an organization, network, or community may undertake to reduce fragmentation and improve coordination in the delivery of medical, social, and public health services. Each individual study supported through S4A will contribute to a larger knowledge base that elucidates how delivery and financing systems align and interact across sectors in shaping population health and health equity.

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Figure 1: Key Ingredients of Systems for Action Research Projects



Studies should focus on mechanisms for system alignment that relate to the Culture of Health Action Framework's defined Action Areas, with an explicit focus on the drivers of these Action Areas as specified in RWJF's most recent Culture of Health report, [Moving Forward Together: An Update on Building and Measuring a Culture of Health](#), and the 2015 report, [From Vision to Action: A Framework and Measures to Mobilize a Culture of Health](#).<sup>1,2</sup> Studies should include an explicit focus on health equity by examining the ability of system alignment mechanisms to assure everyone the opportunity to achieve his or her full health potential, and to ensure that no one is disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or circumstance.<sup>9</sup>

The specific research topics to be pursued by S4A studies should reflect a combination of: **(1) delivery and financing systems** of interest; **(2) novel mechanisms for system alignment** to be studied and tested; **(3) community settings and population groups** to be engaged that will frame the equity dimensions of the research; and **(4) multidisciplinary methodological approaches** that will be used (Figure 1).

Studies supported through the S4A program must produce evidence that informs and advances one or more of RWJF's thematic [focus areas](#). All S4A studies should contribute to the focus area of **Transforming Health and Health Care Systems (THHCS)**. THHCS' goal is for health care, public health, and social services to be more closely aligned to improve health equity and to meet the needs of the people and communities they serve.

Additionally, S4A studies may also produce evidence that advances one or more of RWJF's other focus areas, including: **Healthy Children, Healthy Weight**, which aims to ensure that all children and their families have an equitable opportunity to attain optimal physical, social, and emotional development and well-being; or **Healthy**

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**Communities**, which aims to foster the conditions that allow communities and their residents to reach their best possible well-being.

## *Topics of Special Interest*

The S4A program has identified several specific research topics that are of special interest in the 2018 call for proposals (CFP). These topics include:

- **System alignment mechanisms that are developed and led by stakeholders outside the public health and medical sectors.** People working in education, criminal justice, housing, transportation, community development, and other social service sectors often have new ideas about how to align their work with that of medical and public health professionals. We are eager to see innovative proposals that study ideas initiated, developed and/or implemented in nonhealth sectors. Preference will be given to applications in which the lead organization is based in the social service sector.
- **System alignment mechanisms designed to change system behavior, not just individual behavior.** Some programs are designed to help individuals navigate complex health and social service systems in order to receive the services they need, but without changing the systems themselves to make them more connected, responsive and effective. We are eager to see proposals that study innovations designed to achieve system-level change.
- **Innovative financing and payment mechanisms that align medical, social, and public health services, including mechanisms for incentivizing and financing cross-sector collaboration.** We are eager to see proposals that evaluate innovative financing mechanisms that span the health and social sectors, such as pay-for-success, shared-savings models, risk-sharing arrangements, and global budgeting.
- **Systems science methodologies.** Delivery and financing systems operate as complex and adaptive networks of organizations, policies, and people, which are challenging to study rigorously. We are eager to see proposals that use innovative methods from systems science to study how medical, social, and public health systems interact and respond to system alignment mechanisms. Systems science methodologies of interest include network analysis, agent-based modeling, system dynamics modeling, and microsimulation.<sup>10</sup>

To avoid duplication and maximize the potential for innovation, applicants are encouraged to review descriptions of studies already funded by the S4A program and by RWJF's other signature research programs: [Policies for Action](#) and [Evidence for Action](#). Policies for Action supports research on how law and policy impact health and well-being, and Evidence for Action supports research on how specific programs, policies, and partnerships impact health—particularly programs that operate outside the domain of health care services or public health practice. [Systems for Action](#) complements these other signature research programs by conducting research on the delivery and financing systems that impact health, and particularly on mechanisms for aligning and integrating these systems. Narrow studies of policies, programs, or interventions are unlikely to be supported through S4A but may be a better fit for one of the other research programs.

## **Program Activities**

Applicants responding to the 2018 CFP may apply for awards of up to 24 months in duration and up to \$250,000 each in total costs to support studies that evaluate the implementation and impact of novel system alignment mechanisms. In evaluating impact, studies should focus on health and/or economic outcomes of interest, with a priority focus on equity in impact. A 24-month research time frame places emphasis on studies that can be implemented expeditiously using novel applications of quasi-experimental research designs; natural experiment designs; rapid pragmatic trials; system dynamics and simulation studies; mixed-method approaches; and/or analysis of existing, linked health and social service data systems. Of particular interest are studies that exploit novel existing data sources—such as electronic health and social service records, other public records, restricted-access government survey data, social media data, commercial transaction data, environmental monitoring and sensor data, and satellite or other imaging data.

Studies should include a multidisciplinary approach demonstrating strong theoretical, methodological, and operational expertise that is directly relevant to the S4A research agenda. Funded studies should draw upon expertise in all three

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broad sectors implicated in the S4A research agenda: (1) medical care; (2) public health; and (3) social and community services and supports. Research teams should include people who work in each of these three types of sectors. Preference will be given to applications in which the lead organization is based in the social service sector.

S4A is a “for Action” research program, so studies must be designed with a clear focus on the stakeholders who will use the scientific knowledge the research produces. Strong stakeholder relationships should be maintained throughout the research process using structures—such as practice-based research networks; community-based participatory research collaboratives; translational research institutes; and/or other engagement mechanisms. Similarly, research teams should engage individuals who are members of the target population to be served by the system alignment mechanisms under study, reflecting principles of community-engaged research.

Applicants must demonstrate a supportive environment for S4A research and may be based within community organizations, government agencies, professional associations, academic institutions, and independent research organizations that have the requisite skills, resources, and relationships to carry out the proposed work. We strongly encourage partnerships between research organizations and community organizations.

Each study funded under the S4A program will undertake the following activities:

- Design and implement the proposed study that tests a novel system alignment mechanism and evaluates its implementation and impact;
- Engage local, state, or national stakeholders in the design, implementation, and translation of the research project;
- Work collaboratively with the S4A national coordinating center and other S4A research investigators to identify and leverage potential synergies across research projects and to disseminate results broadly;
- Participate actively both in research dissemination and translation mechanisms organized by the national coordinating center and RWJF, including research-in-progress webinars, blogs, podcasts, research meetings, and policy briefings;
- Identify and pursue opportunities for research expansion and follow-on studies from RWJF and other research funding agencies; and
- Attend RWJF’s annual Sharing Knowledge to Build a Culture of Health conference during each year the grant is active.

In order to ensure research is made accessible to a wide and diverse audience, grantees who publish S4A findings in peer-reviewed publications must do so in open access journals or must include funds in their budgets to cover the cost of making the resulting publications open access (typically \$3,000–\$5,000 per manuscript).

## TOTAL AWARDS

This call will support studies that can be completed over a 24-month period with up to \$250,000 each in total funding from RWJF. Up to six awards will be selected for funding under this solicitation.

Each study will be expected to distribute its resources for stakeholder engagement, research implementation, and research dissemination in the most productive and equitable ways. Funded investigators are encouraged to leverage resources from other sources to support research, engagement, and dissemination activities.

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## *Foundation funded:*

The grant opportunity outlined in this CFP is contingent upon final funding confirmation from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for such grants.

## ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Applicants must be either public entities or nonprofit organizations that are tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and are not private foundations or nonfunctionally integrated Type III supporting organizations. The Foundation may require additional documentation from applicant organizations.
- Applicant organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.
- Awards will be made to organizations, not to individuals. Multi-organizational consortia are encouraged to apply as long as a single eligible organization is designated as the primary applicant responsible for maintaining consortium agreements with other participating organizations. The primary applicant organization must have a demonstrated history of successfully managing funds awarded by foundation or government sources.

We welcome applications from people of all personal and professional backgrounds. We especially encourage applications from organizations that include:

- Individuals having backgrounds and life experiences that are under-represented on research teams.
- Individuals and institutions who are new to RWJF and have not received funding previously.
- Individuals from disciplines outside of the health professions and medical sciences, including but not limited to: architecture, business, communications, computer science, criminal justice, design, economics, education, engineering, finance, geography, law, political science, psychology, public administration, public policy, social work, sociology, transportation, and urban and regional planning.
- Individuals from non-academic settings, including government agencies, professional associations, and community-based organizations.
- Interdisciplinary and cross-sector research teams that include individuals with both scientific expertise and operational experience.

Because S4A is a research program, all applicants must make sure that their team includes individuals with relevant expertise in scientific research design and analysis methodologies. Applicants from non-academic settings that do not have an embedded research unit are strongly encouraged to partner with a research institution to provide this expertise.

## OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to building a Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. 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 ability, 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.

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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 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.

## SELECTION CRITERIA

Criteria to be used in evaluating applications will include the following:

1. **Significance:** A clear logic model and theory of change describes how the system alignment mechanisms under study, if successful, will activate key drivers within the Culture of Health Action Framework, thereby exerting a powerful and sustained impact on health and health equity. Applications must clearly identify how each of the three sectors of interest to this program—medical care, public health, and social services—will be engaged and aligned through the system alignment mechanisms under study.
2. **Innovation:** The system alignment mechanisms are novel and previously untested, or represent promising adaptations to new settings and systems.
3. **Multidisciplinary expertise:** The proposed research team has expertise in areas relevant to the S4A research agenda, including investigators from diverse health and social science fields who have expertise in all three broad types of delivery and financing systems implicated in the S4A research agenda: (1) medical care; (2) public health; and (3) social and community services and supports. The team includes both scientific expertise and operational experience with the delivery and/or financing systems to be studied.
4. **Strength of the environment:** The project team has access to the necessary resources, collaborative relationships, and infrastructure required for successful execution of the project. The team has access to relevant data resources, computing facilities, supporting staff expertise, communication and dissemination mechanisms, and institutional relationships with relevant scientific, policy, professional, and community organizations.
5. **Scientific merit and feasibility of the research approach:** The project includes a rigorous research design, data sources, sampling, measurement, and analytic methodology that can support sound conclusions about implementation and impact; and uses sound research translation and dissemination methods.
6. **Capacity for supporting meaningful system alignment and system change strategies:** The application describes a feasible and well-reasoned approach for helping relevant stakeholders use findings from the research to achieve systems alignment and systems change. The project team demonstrates an ability to support strong stakeholder engagement, research dissemination, and research translation strategies. Preference will be given to applications in which the lead organization is based in the social service sector, and to applications that engage individuals who are members of the target population to be served by the system alignment mechanisms under study.

## MONITORING

RWJF monitors the grantees' efforts and careful stewardship of grant funds to assure accountability. Grantees will be required to submit periodic narrative and financial reports.

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## APPLICANT SURVEY PROCESS

The principal investigator (PI) of the proposal may be contacted after the submission deadline by SSRS, an independent research firm. The principal investigator will be asked to complete a brief, online survey about the proposal process and applicant characteristics. This voluntary questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Responses provided to SSRS will not impact the funding decision for your proposal in any way.

SSRS will protect the confidentiality of your responses. RWJF will not receive any data that links your name with your survey responses.

## USE OF GRANT FUNDS

Grant funds may be used for project staff salaries, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, dataset procurement, meetings, supplies, project-related travel and other direct expenses, including a limited amount of equipment deemed essential to the project. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used to subsidize individuals for the costs of their health care, to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for lobbying, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities. RWJF budget preparation guidelines are available [here](#).

## HOW TO APPLY

Proposals must be submitted via the RWJF online system, which opens for this solicitation on July 18, 2018. Visit [www.rwjf.org/cfp/s4a3](http://www.rwjf.org/cfp/s4a3) and use the Apply Online link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at [my.rwjf.org](http://my.rwjf.org) before you begin the application process. Guidelines and information, including a list of frequently asked questions, are available in the online system through the links shown on the left side of all screens. A webinar for applicants will be held on August 7, 2018 from 1–2 p.m. ET. Registration is required, [here](#).

Applicants are encouraged to submit a one-page letter of intent (LOI) providing a preliminary title, a brief description of the proposed research, and a listing of the participating investigators and institutions. This LOI is not binding and not required, but it ensures that the program office is able to recruit reviewers with appropriate subject matter expertise to review your application thoroughly. The LOI should be submitted via email to [systemsforaction@uky.edu](mailto:systemsforaction@uky.edu) by 3 p.m. ET on September 12, 2018, which is four weeks before the application deadline.

Full proposal submissions will be accepted via the RWJF online system until 3 p.m. ET on October 10, 2018. Applicants should not begin drafting their proposals until they've familiarized themselves with the detailed instructions and formatting requirements displayed on the online application system. Applicants are expected to submit a detailed proposal of no more than 10 pages, accompanied by a budget, budget narrative, and curriculum vitae for PI and/or co-PIs. The proposal narrative should include a discussion of each of the areas described above under selection criteria, including: (1) a statement of study aims, their significance, and their responsiveness to the objectives of this solicitation; (2) a description of key personnel and their qualifications and experience relevant to the objectives of this solicitation; (3) a description of the research approach to be used in the project, focusing on evaluating the implementation and impact of the system alignment mechanism under study; (4) a timeline and management plan; and (5) a discussion of how practice, agency, and/or community partners will be engaged in the research and how findings will be disseminated, translated, and applied to ensure their accessibility for relevant stakeholders. It is incumbent upon applicants to make the case to the reviewers that they can provide appropriate expertise and capabilities, as well as good value for the funding requested.

Applications will be screened for responsiveness to this call for proposals; all responsive applications will be reviewed by members of the national advisory committee for the S4A program and selected external reviewers with applicable subject matter expertise. The national advisory committee will make recommendations about grants to Foundation staff based on these reviews and on S4A program priorities. RWJF will make all final grant decisions.

RWJF does not provide critiques of proposals submitted.



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## **Late Submissions**

RWJF will accept only those proposals that are completed/submitted at the time of the deadline. Because one of our Guiding Principles is to treat everyone with fairness and respect, RWJF's deadline policy applies to all applicants. Applicants are expected to notify the program administrator immediately after experiencing difficulty with the online proposal system that may interfere with a timely submission. To do so, click on the "Contact Us" link found in the "Resources" area on the left side of most screens within the online proposal site. We encourage you to submit your proposal in advance of the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties, e.g., technical problems, may be addressed well before the deadline.

## PROGRAM DIRECTION

Direction and technical assistance for Systems for Action are provided by the S4A national coordinating center at the University of Kentucky, located at:

### **Systems for Action National Coordinating Center**

University of Kentucky College of Public Health

Lexington, KY 40536

Phone: (859) 218-0113

Fax: (859) 257-3748

Email: [systemsforaction@uky.edu](mailto:systemsforaction@uky.edu)

Website: [www.systemsforaction.org](http://www.systemsforaction.org)

Responsible staff members at the national coordinating center are:

- Glen Mays, PhD, *program director*
- Anna Hoover, PhD, *program co-director*
- Lizeth Fowler, MPA, *deputy director*

Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- Carolyn Miller, MSHP, MA, *senior program officer*
- Oktawia Wojcik, PhD, *program officer*
- Sofia Kounelias, *senior program financial analyst*

Members of the national advisory committee are:

- Susan Dreyfus, Alliance for Strong Families
- Tracy Wareing Evans, JD, American Public Human Services Association
- Darrell Gaskin, PhD, MS, Johns Hopkins University
- Glenn Harris, Center for Social Inclusion
- Phillip Huang, MD, MPH, Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department
- Jim Scanlon, MPP, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (ret.)
- Elizabeth Sobel-Blum, MBA, MA, Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas
- Amy Ellen Schwartz, PhD, Syracuse University
- Steven Teutsch, MD, MPH, Los Angeles Department of Health (ret.)

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## KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

### August 7, 2018 (1–2 p.m. ET)

Informational webinar for applicants. Registration required, [here](#).

### September 12, 2018 (3 p.m. ET)

Deadline for receipt of one-page letter of intent (LOI) via email to [systemsforaction@uky.edu](mailto:systemsforaction@uky.edu).

### October 10, 2018 (3 p.m. ET)

Deadline for receipt of full proposals via RWJF online system.\*

### January 2019

Applicant finalists notified of funding recommendations.

### March 1, 2019

Grants initiated.

\*All proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online proposal 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.

## REFERENCES

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2. Plough A, Miller C, Tait M, et al. *Moving Forward Together: An Update on Building and Measuring a Culture of Health*. Princeton: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; 2018, [www.rwjf.org/content/dam/COH/PDFs/MovingForwardTogetherFullReportFinal.pdf](http://www.rwjf.org/content/dam/COH/PDFs/MovingForwardTogetherFullReportFinal.pdf) (accessed June 2018).
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5. Woolf SH, Braveman P. Where health disparities begin: the role of social and economic determinants—and why current policies may make matters worse. *Health Affairs* 2011; 30(10):1852–1859.
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9. National Academy of Medicine. *Communities in Action: Pathways to Health Equity*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2017, [www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2017/communities-in-action-pathways-to-health-equity.aspx](http://www.nationalacademies.org/hmd/Reports/2017/communities-in-action-pathways-to-health-equity.aspx) (accessed June 2018).
10. Luke DA, Stamatakis KA. Systems science methods in public health: dynamics, networks, and agents. *Annual Review of Public Health*. 2012;33:357-376.

## ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

For more than 45 years the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working alongside others to build a national Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. For more information, visit [rwjf.org](http://rwjf.org). Follow the Foundation on Twitter at [www.rwjf.org/twitter](http://www.rwjf.org/twitter) or on Facebook at [www.rwjf.org/facebook](http://www.rwjf.org/facebook).

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at [www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html](http://www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html).

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