

2025 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: November 6, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: March 12, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)



Health Equity Scholars for Action

BACKGROUND

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is taking 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. To this end, RWJF is committed to dismantling barriers to health equity by deepening its focus on prioritizing community knowledge and relationships that build community power, evidence, and systems of change.

RWJF has a longstanding record of funding research and sees it as an integral part of reimagining systems that created obstacles for many qualified individuals pursuing an academic career path. We believe that research and evidence is strongest when driven by a diverse academic workforce—one that reflects different perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of knowing—to challenge biases and conventions; promote innovation; and train future generations of scholars.

Launched in 2021, the Health Equity Scholars for Action (HES4A) program aims to support early-career researchers who are underrepresented in health sciences and related fields. HES4A was designed to enhance the supports, resources, and community necessary for participants to thrive personally and professionally. In turn, scholars are better positioned to promote and expand health equity-related research and evidence aimed at dismantling systemic barriers to health and wellbeing, thus enhancing the lives of all Americans.

THE PROGRAM

The goal of HES4A is to support the career development and academic progress of faculty conducting health equity research. Grants will be awarded to address the challenges that historically marginalized faculty typically experience and help them overcome obstacles to earning tenure. Grants will support three aspects of career development: (1) Research, (2) Mentorship, and (3) Connection with a community of support.

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Research

These grants will fund a new cohort of HES4A scholars, whose research centers community needs, assets, experiences, and expertise and explores systemic solutions to health inequities. RWJF supports research to uncover root causes of health disparities and potential solutions to improve health equity and wellbeing. HES4A projects should focus on transformative, action-oriented strategies that address structural barriers, and are aligned with RWJF's [strategic framework to achieve equity](#). We welcome applications that apply an intersectional approach, with the aim of improving social, political, and economic conditions that support health and health equity.

Studies funded through this call for proposals will need to be completed within a two-year time frame. Research approaches, study designs, and evaluation methods that are acceptable include, but are not limited to, natural experiments; implementation research; developmental studies; impact studies; linkages and analyses of existing data sources; mixed-methods analyses; and qualitative research. New sources of data can also be proposed and analyzed. Research that involves gathering information from diverse methods and ways of knowing is also welcome. Studies may be conducted as standalone projects or as part of larger existing studies or trials underway. Projects should be community-centered/engaged and can also be co-developed with communities that are impacted by the research. Given the focus on addressing structural and root causes of health inequities, we will not consider studies that only describe problems, document inequities, or investigate solutions targeting individual behavior changes, without broader environmental or systemic potential for change. Please note that RWJF views evaluation as a tool to advance equity, and all research that includes evaluation should apply principles of the [Equitable Evaluation Framework](#).

Mentorship

Each scholar selected for the program will be matched with a technical mentor and a career coach to help them develop and strengthen technical skills, explore career opportunities, and foster networks of support and accountability within their fields, tailored to their needs. In some cases, both the technical mentor and career coach roles may be filled by the same individual, if appropriate.

The technical mentor will usually serve as the primary mentor, and will spend more time with the scholar, playing the key role of research advisor.

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- The career coach is intended to complement the role of the technical mentor. As a leader in the scholar's field, this person will provide opportunities for professional guidance, exposure, and career advancement.

The matching of scholars with mentors/coaches will be provided by a team at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, who will also manage those relationships to ensure they adequately meet the scholars' needs. Compensation for technical mentors and career coaches will be provided in addition to the grants awarded to the scholars themselves.

Applicants are strongly encouraged to also involve a home institution advisor, if they have one, to play an additional role of supporting the scholar in navigating dynamics and conditions specific to the scholars' institution. This relationship should reduce any conflicting expectations between scholars' home institutions and their involvement in HES4A. The advisor will be asked to write a letter of support describing their commitment to supporting the applicant's professional advancement within their institutions. **Applicants will not be penalized for not having a home institution advisor, nor will they be given an advantage in the selection process if they have one.**

Community of Support

Scholars will have access to activities and events organized by RWJF and the [Partners for Advancing Health Equity: A Research Learning Collaborative](#) (P4HE). P4HE is a research learning collaborative that facilitates the sharing of ideas to harmonize the goals of people and organizations and advance solutions to achieve health equity. P4HE will offer monthly program meetings, semi-annual "Master Classes," and annual "Writer's Retreats." Scholars will attend optional virtual programming offered throughout the year. Scholars will also have opportunities to expand their networks of support and career development through P4HE webinars, training workshops, and member events with all members of the HES4A community.

FUNDING DETAILS

- **Type of Award:** Awards funded under this opportunity will be structured as grants made to the scholar's home institution.
- **Number of Awards:** Up to 15 awards will be funded.
- **Amount of Award:** Each award will be up to \$260,000.
- **Use of Funds and Duration:** Award funds can cover up to 70 percent of the scholar's salary for two years (capped at \$75,000 per year), with the remainder of the award to be

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used for research and other related expenses. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used 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. See frequently asked questions for details.

- **Payment of Awards:** Grants made to participating institutions will be in accordance with RWJF's funding guidelines. The grant funds provided to the institutions under the program cover the scholars' annual stipends and health insurance, as well as expenses associated with their research and travel. Payment of the award generally will be based upon spending against approved budgets or milestones (not invoices).

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

To be eligible for HES4A, the individual applicant must:

- Demonstrate challenges and/or barriers to full inclusion they have faced in their research disciplines because of their personal characteristics and/or experiences. To assess this factor, RWJF will evaluate each applicant's experiences holistically to determine whether the applicant has demonstrated that they have faced challenges and/or barriers to full inclusion in the health equity field because of their personal characteristics and/or experiences, rather than the quality of their work. RWJF recognizes that individuals who have any of the following experiences are statistically more likely to have faced barriers in the academic field:
 - First-generation college graduates;
 - People for whom English is not a native language;
 - People from low-income communities;
 - Individuals with disabilities;
 - Older or second career professionals; and
 - People from geographically isolated locations.

However, these examples are intended to be illustrative only. As part of the application process, candidates will be asked to describe in what way they believe they are systemically marginalized and how they hope participation in the program will help them to overcome those barriers. Every applicant will have an opportunity to describe their own individual circumstances. RWJF will consider all forms of marginalization equally, including those that are self-described. RWJF will not select, exclude, or prioritize applicants based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or other protected characteristics.

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- Have completed a terminal degree within the last five years. The degree can be in any field and is not limited to public health or health sciences.
- Be a junior faculty member in an accredited school in the U.S. or its territories (“home institution”), with a full-time academic position that could lead to tenure, or a postdoctoral fellow poised to be in such a position by the start of the grant.
- Have a home institution that agrees to administer and receive the grant. The home institution must be an accredited academic institution. Applicants from any universities classified among the R2-M3 by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education are encouraged to apply.
- Individuals who have received grants to support predoctoral training or have a predoctoral fellowship grant are eligible to apply.
- Individuals who have been principal or co-principal investigators on a grant greater than \$10,000, since receiving their doctoral degree, regardless of the source (e.g., federal grants, foundation grants, corporate grants, institutional grant) or allocation of funds, are not eligible for HES4A. See frequently asked questions for further clarification.
- Individuals who have received support from other post-graduate research fellowships/traineeships (e.g., research career development award or equivalent) are not eligible for HES4A. Investigators are not discouraged or prevented from applying to other fellowships/traineeships while participating in the program.
- Be a U.S. citizen, permanent resident, or granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the time of application. As federal policy or laws change, we may need to consider adjustments in eligibility and grant terms.
- Not be related by blood or marriage to any Officer or Trustee of RWJF, or be a descendant of its founder, Robert Wood Johnson.¹

¹ The Officers are the Chair of the Board of Trustees; President and CEO; Executive Vice President; General Counsel; Secretary; Assistant Secretary; Treasurer; Chief Investment Officer; and Chief Operating Officer.

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- Federal, state, tribal, and local government employees are eligible to apply unless they are considered government officials under Section 4946 of the Internal Revenue Code.²

SELECTION CRITERIA

Proposals will be reviewed by a committee composed of RWJF staff, alumni from the former RWJF New Connections program, staff at P4HE, and other expert reviewers. Final funding decisions are made by RWJF. RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

Letters of intent (LOIs) will be evaluated based on:

- Eligibility in accordance with the above criteria.
- Potential for this program to influence the trajectory of the scholar's academic career.
- Relevance of the proposed research topic to advancing one or more RWJF Generational Goals (Economic Inclusion for Family Wellbeing; Equitable and Accountable Public Health and Healthcare Systems; and Healthy and Equitable Community Conditions).
- Relevance of research question to dismantling barriers to health equity, improving population health, and/or building equity.
- Feasibility of the proposed research (e.g., timing, relationships, research settings, acceptability, equitable compensation).

Additionally, full proposals will be evaluated based on:

² For these purposes, a government official is defined as any person who holds one of the following:

- An elective public office in the executive or legislative branch of the Government of the United States.
- An office in the executive or judicial branch of the Government of the United States, appointment to which was made by the President.
- A position in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of the Government of the United States—(A) which is listed in schedule C of rule VI of the Civil Service Rules; or (B) the compensation for which is equal to or greater than the lowest rate of basic pay for the Senior Executive Service under section 5382 of title 5, United States Code.
- A position under the House of Representatives or the Senate of the United States held by an individual receiving gross compensation at an annual rate of \$15,000 or more.
- An elective or appointive public office in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of the government of a State, tribe, possession of the United States, or political subdivision or other area of any of the foregoing, or of the District of Columbia, held by an individual receiving gross compensation at an annual rate of \$20,000 or more, and a significant part of whose activities include "the independent performance of policymaking functions."
- A position as personal or executive assistant or secretary to any of the foregoing; or
- A member of the Internal Revenue Service Oversight Board.

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- Applicant's ability to clearly describe and justify the research design and methodology. If the applicant lacks experience with the proposed design or methodology, the applicant should specify a plan for developing the necessary skills and expertise to carry out the research.
- For evaluation studies, applicants should demonstrate that they intend to implement approaches that reflect the principles of Equitable Evaluation whenever possible, including approaches to defining research questions and conducting research.
- Significance and relevance of the applicant's previous training, research experience, and interests to the proposed project. If the applicant is proposing a project that reflects a shift from the applicant's prior research agenda, the applicant should explain how that shift will advance his, her, or their career.
- Demonstrated progress toward scholarly engagement and responsible dissemination (e.g., publications, presentations, or other forms of accessible communication).
- Applicant's description of how mentorship and other opportunities offered through this program would support career growth and professional development.

As we select the scholars, we will carefully consider the composition of the overall cohort selected in terms of geographic location; disciplines; and educational background to ensure that the selected scholars have an opportunity for a rich training experience within their cohort. Consideration will also be given to the number of individuals from one home institution within a selected cohort. RWJF will make all final funding decisions.

SCHOLAR EXPECTATIONS

The following are expectations for all HES4A scholars:

- Collaboration with RWJF program officers, program staff, and other HES4A scholars to identify and leverage potential synergies across scholar projects and to disseminate results broadly.
- Regular meetings with technical mentor and career coach.
- Active participation in research collaboration and translation activities offered through P4HE.
- Participation in other activities organized by RWJF including, but not limited to, webinars, blogs, podcasts, research meetings and presentations, and policy briefings.

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- Participation in periodic progress check-ins throughout the grant period with RWJF staff managing the program.
- Attendance at monthly program meetings and annual scholar gatherings. If held in person, travel and hotel costs to attend will be covered by RWJF.

OPEN ACCESS

In order to ensure RWJF-supported research is made accessible to a wide and diverse audience, grantees 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.

HOW TO APPLY

Proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/HES4A25 and use the Apply Online link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process.

There are two phases in the competitive proposal process:

Phase 1: Letter of Intent:

Applicants must answer eligibility questions and submit a letter of intent consisting of a narrative and supporting materials that describe their eligibility and their proposed research project. The letter of intent should include:

1. Information on applicant's eligibility
2. Statement of impact
3. A brief (2-page) plan for the two funded years, outlining a clear rationale for the research, the research approach and activities, description of how it relates to dismantling structural barriers to health, plans for dissemination, and a preliminary budget.
4. Curriculum vitae for the applicant

Phase 2: Full Proposals:

Selected Phase 1 applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal, which should include:

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1. Proposal narrative (6–8 pages) research rationale, description of research approach and activities, capacity and potential to grow, and timeline
2. Curriculum vitae and letter of support from home institution advisor, if available
3. Detailed budget and budget narrative
4. Project timeline
5. Summary of scholarly engagement and dissemination history
6. Optional supporting documents

A group of semifinalists will be invited to participate in web-based interviews that will occur in April 2026. Finalists for the program will be selected after all interviews are complete.

Please direct inquiries to:

Sheldon Oliver Watts, PhD, MPH, senior program officer

Phone: (609) 627-5846

Email: HES4A@rwjf.org

Mieka Smart, DrPH, MHS, program director

Phone: (504) 988-1404

Email: HES4A@tulane.edu

PROGRAM DIRECTION

P4HE, housed at the Tulane University Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, provides program direction and overall assistance for the program.

Partners for Advancing Health Equity: A Research Learning Collaborative

Tulane University—Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine

1440 Canal Street

New Orleans, LA 70112

Phone: 504-988-5388

Email: HES4A@tulane.edu

Website: <https://www.partners4healthequity.org/>

Responsible staff members at the program office are:

- Mieka Smart, DrPH, MHS, program director

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Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- Sheldon Oliver Watts, PhD, MPH, senior program officer
- Mateusz Szalda, CPA, MAcc, senior program financial analyst

KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

- **October 10, 2025 (1–2 p.m. ET)**
Optional applicant webinar. Registration is required through this [link](#).
- **October 15, 2025 (1:00 p.m. ET)**
2025 HES4A Office Hours – Access obtained through this [link](#).
- **October 21, 2025 (2:00 p.m. ET)**
2025 HES4A Office Hours – Access obtained through this [link](#).
- **November 6, 2025 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of letters of intent.
- **January 16, 2026**
Invitation to select applicants to submit full proposals.
- **March 12, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)**
Deadline for receipt of full proposals.
- **April 2026**
Semifinalist interviews via web conference.
- **May 2026**
Notification of finalists.
- **July 15, 2026**
Grant start; program begins.

APPLICANT DEADLINE POLICY

All proposals/applications for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/HES4A25 and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the application process.

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

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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 proposal prior to the deadline. Submission is defined as all sections completed, marked finished, the proposal “submit” button used, and the proposal status shows “Submitted.” If the deadline is extended for any reason, the extension will be posted on the funding opportunity page at www.rwjf.org. In addition, an email will be sent to all individuals that have started a proposal in the RWJF online system.

EVALUATION

The purpose of evaluation at RWJF is learning rather than accountability. An independent research group selected and funded by RWJF will conduct an evaluation of the program. RWJF intends for this project to contribute to national efforts to dismantle structural barriers to health equity. Therefore, the program will publicly release results from this evaluation. As a condition of accepting RWJF funds, grantees must participate in the evaluation. Grantee participation includes assisting with necessary data collection efforts (i.e., surveys and interviews) to accomplish the evaluation objectives.

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.

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 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.

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

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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. Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html

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