

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)



# From Insight to Action: Health Equity Research That Meets This Moment



## THE FUNDING OPPORTUNITY<sup>1</sup>

To help applicants understand how we are using some terms in this call for proposals (CFP), see definitions of *italicized terms* in the [glossary document](#) in the Resource folder.

## BACKGROUND

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is committed to *transforming* health in our lifetime and paving<sup>2</sup> the way, together, to a future where health is no longer a privilege, but a right. To achieve that vision, RWJF supports *health equity research* that “*increases opportunities for everyone to live the healthiest life possible, no matter who we are, where we live, or how much money we make.*” Achieving *health equity* requires identifying solutions to the *historical and contemporary root causes of inequities*.

The goals of advancing health equity research and achieving health equity are being tested. Our society is currently facing ongoing policy shifts and administrative actions that undermine, delegitimize, and even erase its valuable achievements in naming the underlying causes of health and other inequities, and centering the voice of *communities* experiencing persistent health-harming injustices and *structural discrimination*. Those actions have spread confusing mis- and disinformation; made critical data and information inaccessible; criminalized a wide range of communities and populations; and weakened access to fundamental protections and public goods, like the right to vote, freedom of speech, and healthcare and public health services, to name a few.

In this context, ensuring that we continue to conduct health equity research, in all its forms, is especially important. All the progress our society has made in the above areas has been

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<sup>1</sup> All funding opportunities are contingent upon final funding confirmation from the Foundation. In addition, the Foundation may elect to modify or terminate this funding opportunity if an event or events beyond the Foundation's reasonable control (e.g., change in law; civil disturbance; epidemic, pandemic; or other medical emergency; labor dispute; natural disaster; quarantine; terrorism; war; or other unforeseen events, including, but not limited to, emergencies and nonemergencies) is threatened, occurs; or is continuing that, as determined by the Foundation in its sole discretion, makes the awards under this request for proposals illegal, impossible, impracticable, or otherwise inadvisable under the circumstances.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rwjf.org/en/our-vision.html>

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

documented, informed, and influenced by research that has strengthened our understanding of the legal, political, and economic *systems* that shape people's lives and their health and wellbeing. *Research* that is timely, credible, and grounded in real-world conditions can help communities and partners navigate uncertainty, assess the effects of *policy change* and institutional shifts, and make informed decisions to advance equitable health and wellbeing outcomes for all people in the United States.

While the current environment presents significant challenges, it also underscores the value of research *partnerships* that are “meeting this moment” to center/are rooted in *community* experience and aligned with real actionable decision points. Research that reflects lived realities and responds to immediate and long-term needs can help maintain access to evidence, support accountability, and inform efforts to build more equitable systems.

RWJF is launching this CFP as part of a new research funding *program*, Health Equity Research for Action (HERA), which will support community-rooted, action-oriented health equity research to inform and catalyze long-term social change across the Foundation's seven Prioritized Systems (see FAQs). HERA is being developed and will be administered by three national coordinating centers (NCCs) based at the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, Michigan State University College of Human Medicine, and the Morehouse School of Medicine.

HERA will evolve, but it will prioritize investing in research that is conducted in deep partnership with communities. Through this work, HERA aims to contribute to a more inclusive and responsive *Health Science Knowledge System*, one that is accessible, trusted, and better aligned with the pursuit of equity.

### PURPOSE

RWJF and the NCCs are interested in research that identifies the root causes of structural discrimination; challenges harmful narratives that undermine individual and community health and wellbeing; and *disrupts* growing mis- and disinformation. While HERA is still in its early stages, RWJF and the NCCs are launching this first CFP to sustain and advance health equity research during this critical time, while generating insights that can help shape HERA's future funding priorities and strategies. Such research can generate knowledge that shows how to advance health equity through *systems change*.

With this background in mind, proposals submitted under this first CFP must include the characteristics described below:

**Research through equitable community partnership.** Proposals must be part of established, ongoing, and equitable partnerships between communities and researchers affiliated with academic and/or comparable institutions. Proposals should include investigators who are from communities experiencing direct effects of the new and ongoing policies that seek to undermine and delegitimize health equity. Successful applications will:

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

- identify strategies to ensure that communities inform or drive the research questions and methods;
- demonstrate that communities are in full control of their own narratives; and
- demonstrate that academic or other research co-investigators serve as true thought partners throughout the research process and in the development of related action-oriented strategies.

**Research that focuses on at least one RWJF Prioritized System.** Proposals must be tied to at least one of the RWJF Prioritized Systems (see FAQs). RWJF prioritizes these seven interconnected systems that collectively shape its *Generational Goals* by supporting various approaches that lead to “the elimination of systemic and structural barriers to health and wellbeing, including those related to *structural racism*.”

**Research that informs systems change.** Projects must generate evidence, such as examining systems-level impact of existing interventions or programs; assessing how programs have been implemented across multiple systems and determining what works, for whom and under what conditions; or secondary data analysis of findings from previous program.

**Research that leads to actionable solutions.** Proposals must move away from descriptive research that primarily maps and defines a problem, such as documenting disparities. Instead, this CFP will fund *action-oriented research* designed to address and/or test a specific policy, institutional practice, or systems-level change. Competitive proposals will have the following characteristics:

- research that is designed to directly inform policy, institutional change, or real-world action—and that shares findings in ways decisionmakers, policymakers, grassroots movements, and communities can use; or
- testing and refining storytelling and other narrative strategies that can change dominant ways of framing issues that affect health equity and support collective *action*.

Some examples of research that might be funded under this CFP include (not exhaustive):

- Evaluating a state or local governmental public health *community-driven* collaboration that counters federal-level health misinformation.
- A *community-led* analysis involving the collection of survey or tracking data that examines how the Housing and Urban Development’s new rule that could force the eviction of non-U.S. citizens or “unqualified” immigrants may affect housing stability, displacement, or access to community infrastructure.
- Rapid community-led documentation of harms from a new policy or administrative practice, such as restricting immigrant, trans, or LGBTQIA+ communities’ access to healthcare, food, and housing security.

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

- Evaluation of a community-driven economic development model (e.g., community land trusts, cooperative ownership, or participatory budgeting) to assess how the model's *governance* structures redistributing power and resources may lead to more equitable outcomes for marginalized communities, with the goal of institutionalizing the model across jurisdictions.
- A regional/state study led by community and research organizations examining how the generation of state revenue policies and tax distribution toward childcare and public goods may affect the wellbeing of children and families.

We welcome the integration of different research approaches that work together to address urgent, solution-focused questions. HERA values a mix of both quantitative and qualitative research methods and approaches that are most suited to answer the research questions, including narrative, Indigenous, community-generated, and practice-based evidence, and recognizes that different questions may require different—or combined—methods. Rigor is based on how well the research creates useful knowledge that supports meaningful action, is accountable to communities most impacted by the issue, and applies to other real-world contexts beyond the research project.

### FUNDING DETAILS

- **Type of Award:** Awards will be structured as project grants and will be given to organizations, not to individuals.
- **Number of Awards:** We expect to award about 20 grants. The number of grants to be awarded will be determined based on the number, size, and scope of the studies proposed. We expect to award grants in a range of sizes.
- **Amount of Award:** This CFP will award a combined total of up to \$8 million, with awards of up to \$500,000 per project. Applicants are encouraged to request budgets that reflect the scope and needs of their work.
- **Award Duration:** Awards may be up to 36 months. However, we encourage projects to share interim findings with decisionmakers and community organizations early to be as timely as possible.
- **Use of Grant Funds:** Grant funds may be used to support all research-related aspects of a project, including project staff salaries; compensation for community or academic partners; consultant fees; travel stipends; support for participant involvement; data collection, analysis, and interpretation; *dissemination*; translation; meetings; supplies; and other direct project expenses. A limited amount of equipment essential to the project and dissemination is allowable.

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Grant funds may also be used to support *indirect costs*, such as administrative and operational expenses necessary to carry out the work.

Funding for programmatic activities is limited to 15% of the budget. See FAQs for more information. In keeping with RWJF policy, funds may *not* be used to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, **or** for lobbying or political activities. Additional budget guidelines are provided in the online application materials.

If necessary, the applicant organization may utilize the services of a fiscal sponsor to support the project's financial management and grants management and reporting activities.

- **Payment of Awards:** Award payments are generally disbursed based on expenditures aligned with approved budgets or the achievement of defined milestones rather than on submitted invoices.

### ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Applicants must demonstrate an existing, authentic, and accountable community partnership of at least two years (with more time preferred). One of the co-principal investigators must be a representative or leadership from community-based organizations.
- Applicant organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.
- Preference will be given to applicants that are 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 Type III supporting organizations. The Foundation may require additional documentation.
- Consistent with our Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Commitment, we particularly encourage applications that include project directors or team members from backgrounds historically underrepresented in research disciplines or with diverse lived experiences, including diversity of lived experiences related to race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, immigration, religion, and seniority.
- RWJF will not select, exclude, or prioritize applicants based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, or other protected characteristics.
- Applicants who have been or are currently RWJF grantees are eligible to apply.
- Only one organization may serve as the lead applicant.

### SELECTION CRITERIA

This CFP has a two-phase process. Phase 1 requires that applicants submit a letter of intent (LOI). LOIs will be screened for eligibility. Applicants invited to Phase 2 will be asked to submit a

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

full proposal. For both phases, reviewers will include RWJF staff, the HERA national coordinating centers, community members, individuals external to the program, and subject matter experts. Proposed studies should align with the objectives of this CFP, advance understanding of how to “meet this moment” (see Background section), and promote equity in the Health Science Knowledge System.

LOIs and full proposals will be evaluated on the following selection criteria, including a timeline, scope of work, and budget that are feasible:

- **Center community engagement and leadership.** Proposed studies should demonstrate authentic power-sharing, co-governance, and co-generative thought partnership with community members, including health equity movement leaders and community power-building and advocacy networks.
- **Focus on transformational systems change.** Proposed studies should aim to identify specific structural barriers to health equity and wellbeing and evaluate a project to reduce them for impacted communities. The noted barriers should relate to at least one of RWJF’s Prioritized Systems, including studies that examine how to protect, build, or leverage health equity research. RWJF and the NCCs are interested in research that identifies the root causes of structural discrimination, challenges harmful narratives that undermine individual and community health and wellbeing and disrupts growing mis- and disinformation.
- **Focus on action-oriented research.** Proposed studies should outline a model or framework that guides the research and includes an action plan that identifies solutions and results in the immediate or longer-term that can address key knowledge gaps; informs the work of grassroots movements; influences and informs policymakers’ and community members’ priorities and decisions; or facilitates collaboration among health equity movement leaders and community power networks across critical social, economic, governmental, healthcare, and public health systems.
- **Evidence of a clear communications and action plan.** Proposed studies should include plan(s) for identifying priority audiences and framing and communicating research outcomes, implications, and effects to policymakers and the broader community in creative, accessible, and attention-grabbing ways that disrupt current anti-equity narratives.
- **Quality of proposed design.** Applications should clearly state the research questions of interest and describe how they will be answered, including measures to be used; data sources; data collection methods and timeline; and analysis methods. The proposed methods should be well matched to the research questions and demonstrate how community members and priorities are centered in the design.
- **Evidence of fiscal and project management capacity.** Applicant organizations and members of the proposed research team should demonstrate the capacity to monitor project budgets and timelines, manage fiscal resources, and meet funders’ reporting requirements completely and on time.

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

- **Feasibility.** Applications should demonstrate that the proposed studies can be completed within the proposed timeframe and budget and should indicate reasonable timelines for collecting and/or analyzing data. Applications should demonstrate that data for analysis is accessible, particularly if secondary data analyses are proposed. The application should demonstrate that teams have identified potential challenges to completing the proposed study and considered how they will be addressed.

## GRANTEE EXPECTATIONS

We seek grantees who are deeply committed to conducting equitable research and ensuring that findings are actionable in the real world. In addition to research funding, we will also support grantees with networking and relationship building, dissemination strategies and tools, and other activities, including capacity-building, that can further apply or test, promote, or disseminate their work. Selected applicants will work closely with at least one HERA national coordinating center to provide guidance on the support they need to move their proposals forward, participate in technical assistance workshops and programming, and attend an annual gathering.

- Grantees funded through this CFP are expected to:
  - Participate in periodic progress connection sessions throughout the grant period with HERA staff; share research findings or learnings with RWJF and HERA, including an independent evaluation and learning partner; and submit financial reports annually.
  - Budget for and attend at least one RWJF-convened in-person meeting (dates and locations vary).
  - Participate in peer networking activities with other HERA and RWJF grantees.
  - Build appropriate funds and time into the project budget and timeline for engagement, conferences, meetings, and other forms of dissemination—especially to community groups, including after analyses are complete.
  - Collaborate with the HERA team to develop and implement an appropriate strategy to disseminate findings and engage relevant audiences. We respect that some information gathered and gained through these grants may be deemed proprietary. However, some aspects of the research or research process are expected to be shared publicly (e.g., via story work, videos, presentations, community-organizing activities, fact sheets, reports, white papers, journal articles).

## 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

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

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 in English via the RWJF online system. Visit [www.rwjf.org/cfp/HERA-MTM](http://www.rwjf.org/cfp/HERA-MTM) 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 proposal process.

### **Phase 1: Letter of Intent (LOI):**

Applicants must submit a LOI that describes the project and includes the requested funding amount. The proposal should be no longer than three pages, single-spaced, using 11-point Arial font. References will not count toward the page limit and may be uploaded to the application system as a separate document or appendix.

*The LOI narrative should include the following elements of the proposed project:*

- A brief description of the underlying context and challenge the proposed study is addressing and how the proposed study advances systems change.
- A description of the research aims and questions the project will address, their relevance to one of RWJF’s Prioritized Systems, community affected by the issue being addressed, and how project findings could be applied to advance health equity. Also, a brief summary of design of the proposed research project, including expected data sources; analysis methods; and how the design centers community.
- A description of the partnership between the community, its members, and the research organization. Applicants should briefly describe the co-governance structure and how the partnership ensures power-sharing.

*Supporting Documentation should include:*

- Letter of support from Co-PI partner
- CV/Resume of Co-PIs
- Proof of Partnership: Documentation of established partnership (up to 5 pages) may include Co-authored publications (citations only) and Co-presentations; Previous funding and budgets; Co-branding (e.g., websites, events, social media); Organizational structure: membership (lived experience integration); Partnership time: 2 years (with more time preferred)
- Bibliography/citation list (optional)

### **Phase 2: Full Proposals (requirements may change and will be shared to those invited):**

Selected Phase 1 applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal narrative of no more than 10 pages (not inclusive of appendices), alongside a detailed budget, budget narrative, additional supplemental documents (including PIs resumes or CV; data sovereignty and ownership agreements; data and participant protections documents; partner letter of support).

# 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

## *Proposal Narrative*

Overall, applicants should incorporate the following and should include responses to all the questions and prompts posed:

1. **Background and Significance: Frameworks, Experience, and Previous Work that underpins current proposal**
  - a. Describe the problem or issue and its significance.
  - b. What have you learned from your previous work (models/evidence) that serves to disrupt, counter, or resist structural racism?
  - c. What strategies, frameworks, or theory of change guide your proposed research, and how will they help connect your findings to concrete action, such as organizing, advocacy, or shifting public narratives?
  - d. How would this funding help elevate your work and/or connect this work to actionable change?
  - e. Which of RWJF's Prioritized Systems would be impacted by this work?
2. **Research Approach and Methodology: Project and Collaborative Research Description**
  - a. Include the research question(s) that the project aims to answer.
  - b. Describe the proposed research process, including proposal design, metrics, instrument and tool design, data collection, and data analysis.
  - c. How will community members affected by the issue be a part of each step of the research process, including the planning of the research project? What indicators will you use to ensure equity is built into the project and research with the affected communities?
  - d. How will the described research/project strengthen sustainable community action toward systems change?
3. **Dissemination: Beyond Knowledge Sharing**
  - a. Describe the activities that aim to translate your findings into actionable systems change.
  - b. What are two–three concrete deliverables that will share the knowledge gained from the project with community members?
  - c. How will community members and individuals with lived expertise help to create these strategies?

## *Supporting Documentation must include:*

1. **Co-Governance Plan:** Proposals must include a Community or Tribal *Governance* plan that identifies who holds decisionmaking authority over research questions, methods, budget and resource allocation, data use, interpretation, and dissemination. The partnership must be intentional in power-sharing and decisionmaking. If projects involve working with Indigenous Tribes, proposals must include a Tribal Governance Plan that has been approved by Tribal leadership. The Co-Governance Plan is not limited to and should include the following:

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

- a. Identify safeguards against performative partnerships with community: what will be done to prevent tokenizing people with lived experience?
  - b. Who currently holds decisionmaking power related to the issue?
  - c. How does the partnership address power differentials and/or imbalances?
  - d. How will the co-governance plan support the proposed research to shift, redistribute, or challenge power?
2. Letters of support from all partners and collaborators that describe their contributions to the project
  3. Project Timeline: Include a timeline of all activities
  4. Detailed Budget: See template in online application
    - a. Funding for programmatic activities is limited to 15% of the budget.
  5. Budget Justification and Narrative: See template in online application
  6. Expected project management and quality assurance procedures to ensure research rigor and quality, timeliness, and appropriate fiscal management
    - a. Describe the existing resources and infrastructure within your organization and collaboration that will support the proposed research.
    - b. Sustainability plan beyond the project period.
  7. As part of the Foundation's due diligence process, we conduct a financial review of all grantee organizations. We will require the following documents: Audited or internal financial statements for the past two years and organizational operating budgets for 2025 and 2026.

We recognize that preparing a proposal requires significant intellectual, relational, and administrative labor—much of it unpaid. We also acknowledge that recent, substantial cuts in funding for health equity research have led to unusually high demand for this opportunity and an unexpectedly large volume of applications. As a result, this CFP is highly competitive, and not all strong proposals will be funded. We encourage prospective applicants to review this call carefully before investing time in an application.

Please direct inquiries to: [hera@rwjf.org](mailto:hera@rwjf.org)

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission 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.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

### PROGRAM DIRECTION

**Responsible staff members at the National Coordinating Centers are:**

**Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science**

## **2026 Call for Proposals**

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Laura D'Anna, DrPH, MPA, co-director

Cynthia Gonzalez, PhD, MPH, co-director

### **Michigan State University—College of Human Medicine**

Nadia N. Abuelezam, ScD, co-director

Kent D. Key, PhD, MPH, co-director

### **Morehouse School of Medicine**

Megan Douglas, JD, co-director

Latrice Rollins, PhD, MSW, co-director

Samantha B. Weber, JD, co-director

### **Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:**

- Christine Fu, PhD, senior program officer
- Gina Hijjawi, PhD, senior program officer
- Leia Carey, program officer
- Alexandra Zisser, program officer
- Tejal Shah, senior program financial analyst
- Carole Salinger, senior grants management specialist

### **KEY DATES AND DEADLINES**

- **April 27, 2026**  
A pre-recorded applicant webinar will be made available.
- **May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)**  
Deadline for receipt of letters of intent.
- **June 29, 2026**  
Applicants are notified whether they are invited to submit full proposals.
- **July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)**  
Deadline for receipt of full proposals.

## 2026 Call for Proposals

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

- **August 21, 2026**  
Applicants are notified of review committee decisions.
- **Fall 2026**  
Grant start date.

### Applicant Deadline Policy

All proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit [www.rwjf.org/cfp/HERA-MTM](http://www.rwjf.org/cfp/HERA-MTM) 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 proposal 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 proposal deadline for all applicants. Such extensions generally will be granted only in the event of (1) a verified issue with the RWJF proposal system that prevented completion and submission of proposals; 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](http://www.rwjf.org). In addition, an email will be sent to all individuals that have started a proposal in the RWJF online system.

### EVALUATION

At RWJF, the purpose of evaluation is learning rather than accountability. An independent research group, selected through a process grounded in equitable evaluation principles, will conduct an evaluation of this program. RWJF intends for this work to contribute to national efforts to dismantle structural barriers to health equity; therefore, we will share findings from the evaluation. As a condition of receiving RWJF funding, grantees are expected to participate in the evaluation. Participation may include supporting data collection activities, such as surveys or interviews, as needed to meet the evaluation objectives.

### MONITORING

RWJF monitors the grantees’ progress and careful stewardship of grant funds. Grantees will be required to attend scheduled periodic check-ins with HERA program staff. Grantees are expected to communicate emerging challenges, propose adjustments when needed, and

## **2026 Call for Proposals**

Letter of Intent Deadline: May 14, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

Full Proposal Deadline: July 27, 2026 (3 p.m. ET)

maintain transparency regarding timelines, staffing, partnerships, and budget changes. Grantees will be required to submit periodic narrative and financial reports.

### **OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 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. 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 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](http://www.rwjf.org)

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

50 College Road East  
Princeton, NJ 08540-6614