

REPORT FROM THE 1ST MEETING OF THE NATIONAL CANCER ADVISORY BOARD WORKING GROUP ON EXTRAMURAL RESEARCH CONCEPTS AND PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

The inaugural meeting of the National Cancer Advisory Board Working Group on Extramural Research Concepts and Programs (NCAB WG) was held on February 6, 2026, at NCI Shady Grove in Rockville, MD. The meeting was chaired by Dr. Neli Ulrich, NCAB WG Chair, and attended by 32 NCAB WG members. Meeting materials including the agenda, full participant list, and NCAB WG roster can be found in Appendices 1-3. This report focuses on NCI-initiated concepts reviewed by the NCAB WG to make recommendations for voting at the subsequent NCAB meeting. A complete record of the NCAB WG meeting can be found in the meeting minutes, which will be publicly posted to the NCAB WG website.

At the start of the meeting NCI Director, Dr. Tony Letai, joined by video to officially charge the NCAB WG.

The Working Group will make recommendations on research priorities conducted or supported by the Institute. This includes the evaluation of new and reissue NCI concepts, i.e., request for applications (RFAs), cooperative agreements (Coop. Agrs.), request for proposals (RFPs), i.e., contract concepts, and program announcements with special receipt, referral, and/or review (PARs). In evaluating the concepts, the Working Group will consider whether the proposed initiative will advance/enhance the Institute's current research efforts and advise the Institute regarding future research directions. The advisory role of the Working Group is scientific and does not include deliberation on matters of public policy. In addition, the Working Group will evaluate and review the selected program's concepts or initiatives for effectiveness as well as discuss and prioritize program ideas.

Following the charge, Dr. Doug Lowy, Principal Deputy Director, provided an update from NCI Leadership and Dr. Dinah Singer, Deputy Director for Science Strategy and Acting Director of the Division of Extramural Affairs, welcomed the NCAB WG and spoke to the importance of external review of research concepts and advising the NCI on research priorities. She stressed that the thoughtful and critical guidance in its evaluation and advice to NCAB is especially important in light of the reductions in funding announcements.

CONCEPT REVIEW

New PAR: Early-Onset Cancers: Investigating Etiology, Mechanisms, and Early Detection Strategies (RP1)

This trans-NCI initiative will support R01 and R21 research projects investigating the etiology, biological mechanisms, and early detection strategies for non-hereditary early-onset cancers (ages 18-49). Many of the current research efforts are focused on colorectal cancer, and this program would prioritize understudied cancers such as uterine, kidney, and pancreatic while remaining open to other cancer types. This PAR encourages transdisciplinary approaches examining modifiable exposures, host responses, and methods to identify high-risk individuals. Applications are encouraged to leverage existing resources and cohorts, address diverse cancer populations, and focus on sporadic cancers rather than hereditary syndromes, with survivorship research reserved for a future companion initiative.

Working Group Feedback

Strong enthusiasm was expressed for this concept, recognizing early onset cancers as a critical public health priority that fills important gaps in the current portfolio, though members emphasized the need to broaden the research focus beyond microbiome to include comprehensive genome sequencing, epigenetic mechanisms, and lifespan exposures from in utero through adolescence. Key recommendations included strengthening language around health disparities and implementing robust data sharing requirements for secondary use. NCAB WG members also stressed the importance of multi-PI collaborations across disciplines, community engagement components, and building on existing cohorts rather than creating new ones, while maintaining the etiology focus that distinguishes this initiative from existing adolescent and young adult (AYA) research programs.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

RFA Reissuance: Man's Best Friend: Canine Cancer Immunotherapy Network (K9CIN) (U01)

This RFA reissuance will continue to leverage canine cancer immunotherapy clinical trials as predictive models for effective cancer treatments in humans. Pet dogs naturally develop cancer at higher rates than humans, with tumors that have coevolving tumor microenvironments, undergo immunoediting, exhibit high heterogeneity, and develop in immunocompetent hosts—advantages not replicated in mouse models or in vitro systems like organoids. The proposed network structure includes one U01 coordinating center (with a small research project) and four U01 research project awards conducting clinical trials and correlative studies, with total costs of \$3M per year for five years, focusing on five cancer types with strong genetic similarities between canines and humans: osteosarcoma, lymphoma, glioma, melanoma, and urothelial carcinoma.

Working Group Feedback

The NCAB WG expressed strong enthusiasm for the concept, citing the network's demonstrated impact through two treatments that have advanced to early-stage human clinical trials (pediatric osteosarcoma and adult glioblastoma, robust publication record, and contributions to the publicly accessible Integrated Canine Data Commons (ICDC). Reviewers emphasized that canine clinical trials provide unique value that cannot be replicated by other available methods, as confirmed by external evaluators who noted that long-term success requires sustained recurring funding. The NCAB WG members recognized several strengths including: the ethical approach of offering cutting-edge treatment to pet dogs who might otherwise go untreated due to financial constraints; the bidirectional translation between veterinary and human medicine; the superior modeling of immunotherapy responses compared to humanized mice due to intact immune systems; and the exceptional value proposition of producing multiple clinical trials equivalent to 3-4 R01 grants. Discussion also addressed suggestions for enhancement, including consideration of antibody-drug conjugates and theranostics, co-clinical trial opportunities running simultaneously through the Comparative Oncology Program (COP) and Experimental Therapeutics Clinical Trials Network, and concerns about whether the proposed budget (\$625K total costs per U01) is sufficient for comprehensive correlative science.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

PAR Reissuance: Research Specialist Award for Laboratory and Core Scientists and the Clinician Research Award (R50)

These two PAR reissuances would continue providing five-year renewable salary support (up to 10 years maximum) for exceptional researchers who make critical contributions to NCI-funded cancer research but do not seek independent investigator status, addressing the workforce gap between training positions and independent research grants. The lab and core-based specialists program supports research specialists with advanced degrees who provide stability, expertise, and technical excellence to NCI-funded research programs in individual laboratories and institutional core facilities. Eligible specialists must be in full-time non-tenure track positions, have contributed to their unit director's NCI-funded research for at least two years, spend at least six person-months on NCI-funded research, and have not applied for independent research grants in the past five years. The clinician scientists program supports mid to senior-career physicians and other clinicians engaged in NCI-funded clinical trials activities, including accrual, protocol development, network leadership, and institutional infrastructure service. Eligible clinician scientists must have clinical degrees with active licensure, be more than six years from initial faculty appointment, have been at their institution for at least two years, have a demonstrated record of NCI clinical trial involvement, and cannot currently hold major NIH grants like R01 or P01.

Working Group Feedback

The NCAB WG recognized both R50 programs fill critical workforce gaps not addressed by other NIH mechanisms. Key recommendations included expanding clinician scientist eligibility beyond network trials to include those working on Cancer Center Support Grants (P30) or other multi-year NCI grants and research coordinators in Cancer Centers' Offices of Clinical Research; and combining both PARs under a single announcement.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

PAR Reissuance: Pathway to Independence Award for Early-Stage Postdoctoral Researchers (K99/R00)

This PAR reissuance provides dual-phase transition awards for early-stage postdoctoral scholars (up to 2 years of postdoctoral experience) who don't require extended mentored training before advancing to research independence, particularly those in cancer control, population sciences, molecular precision cancer prevention, and data science. The program supports up to 2 years of mentored K99 training followed by up to 3 years of independent R00 research, with 80% of awardees successfully transitioning to tenure-track positions and 76% applying for subsequent research project grants.

Working Group Feedback

Strong support was expressed for this K99/R00 program, recognizing its importance in launching population science faculty careers and noting that while early outcomes show 17% of awardees have received subsequent RPG awards, this percentage is expected to increase over time as the program matures.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

PAR Reissuance: The NCI Wortz McCaskill-Stevens Career Development Award for Community Oncology and Prevention Research (K12)

This institutional career development award will support institutional programs to train clinical scholars committed to independent research careers in community oncology, prevention, or treatment research, with special emphasis on improving care and outcomes for populations experiencing cancer health disparities. The program requires at least two oncology or cancer prevention specialties represented among faculty and scholars, individualized career development plans with dual mentorship, and 75% effort (50% for surgeon-scientists) dedicated to the award.

Working Group Feedback

Strong support was expressed for this K12 program. The board appreciated the early reissuance request to allow sufficient time for the NOFO publication process and noted the program's alignment with NCI's NCORP mission to strengthen community oncology research.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

PAR Reissuance: Small Cell Lung Cancer Consortium Resource Center (U24)

This concept is for the reissuance of the NCI Small Cell Lung Cancer (SCLC) Consortium Coordinating Center through a limited competition. To date the SCLC Consortium Coordinating Center has generated over 1,100 publications, 61,000 citations, and seminal discoveries leading to the first precision-guided SCLC therapies entering practice in 2024. The U24CC provides critical infrastructure to the SCLC community, including coordination of meetings, maintenance of comprehensive databases (700+ patient profiles and 300+ PDX models through cBioPortal), distribution of preclinical models, and support for international collaborations. As the original U01 grants conclude, the U24CC will continue serving a growing portfolio of investigators that are funded through different grant mechanisms.

Working Group Feedback

NCAB WG members sought clarification on why the this Coordinating Center was needed given the growth in investigator-initiated grants since the start of the SCLC Consortium, with the presenter explaining that the U24CC has continuously served as a hub for the entire research community—not just the initial SCLC Consortium (U01) members—providing open access to databases, models, and resources that enabled many researchers to become competitive for R01 funding. The NCAB WG recognized this as a potentially successful model for other disease areas.

Recommendation to NCAB: Approve

SUMMARY

The NCAB WG reviewed a total of seven NCI concepts and made recommendations to approve, disapprove, or defer for NCAB consideration. Two additional concepts from other NIH Institutes with NCI participation, as well as two project updates were presented for informational purposes. Presentations by program officials were followed by robust conversation. Table 1 summarizes the recommendations from the NCAB WG to NCAB on each of the presented concepts.

Table 1: Summary of the Concept Recommendations

Concept Type	New/Reissue	Title	Recommendation
PAR	New	Early-Onset Cancers: Investigating Etiology, Mechanisms, and Early Detection Strategies (RP1)	Approve
RFA	Reissue	Man's Best Friend: Canine Cancer Immunotherapy Network (K9CIN) (U01)	Approve
PAR	Reissue	Research Specialist Award for Laboratory and Core Scientists (R50)	Approve
PAR	Reissue	Clinician Research Award (R50)	Approve
PAR	Reissue	Pathway to Independence Award for Early-Stage Postdoctoral Researchers (K99/R00)	Approve
PAR	Reissue	The NCI Worta McCaskill-Stevens Career Development Award for Community Oncology and Prevention Research (K12)	Approve
PAR	Reissue	Small Cell Lung Cancer Consortium Resource Center (U24)	Approve

APPENDIX 1 - AGENDA

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
National Cancer Institute
National Cancer Advisory Board (NCAB)
Bethesda, Maryland

TENTATIVE AGENDA

1st In-Person Meeting of the

NCAB *Ad hoc* Working Group (WG) on Extramural Research Concepts and Programs

National Cancer Institute, Shady Grove Campus, Terrace Level, Conference Room TE 406

Friday, February 6, 2026 – Open

9:00 a.m. – 9:15 a.m.

Call to Order, Opening Remarks and Introduction of WG Members

Dr. Ulrich

- **Conflict of Interest**
- **Future Meeting Dates:**

To be Confirmed:

April 8, 2026 - Virtual	Wednesday
October 28, 2026 – Virtual	Wednesday
January 7, 2027 – Virtual	Thursday
April 29, 2027 - In-person	Thursday
October 28, 2027 - Virtual	Thursday
January 6, 2028 - Virtual	Thursday
April 27, 2028 - In-person	Thursday
October 26, 2028 - Virtual	Thursday

9:15 a.m. – 9:20 a.m.

NCI Director's Charge to the Working Group (recording)

Dr. Letai

9:20 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.

NCI Principal Deputy Director Update

Dr. Lowy

10:00 a.m. – 10:05 a.m.

Division of Extramural Activities Acting Director's Remarks

Dr. Singer

10:05 a.m. – 10:15 a.m.

Working Group Members Orientation

Dr. Finstad

10:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Coffee Break

10:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

RFA*/Coop. Agr. **/Single Source*** Concepts – New/Re-issue

Early Onset Cancers: Investigating Etiology, Mechanisms, and Early Detection Strategies (R01/R21)

Dr. Yassin

11:00 a.m. – 11:20 a.m.

RFA*/Coop. Agr. **/Single Source*** Concepts – New/Re-issue

Palliative Care Research Across the Lifespan: Leveraging the Palliative Care Consortium (R01)

Dr. Mitchell

11:20 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

NCI Project Update

Cancer Systems Biomedicine

Dr. Joe Gray

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Lunch

1:00 p.m. – 1:20 p.m.

RFA*/Coop. Agr. **/Single Source*** Concepts – New/Re-issue

HEAL Initiative: Pain Management Effectiveness Research Network: Clinical Trial Planning Cooperative Agreement (UG3/UH3)

Dr. Streck

1:20 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

NCI's Approach to Evaluating Multi-Cancer Detection Assays for Cancer Screening: The Vanguard Study

Dr. Minasian

2:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

RFA*/Coop. Agr. **/Single Source*** Concepts – New/Re-issue

Man's Best Friend: Canine Cancer Immunotherapy Network (K9CIN) (U01)

Dr. Sommers

2:30 p.m. – 2:45 p.m.

Coffee Break

2:45 p.m. – 3:10 p.m.

PAR Reissuance

Research Specialist Award for Laboratory and Core Scientists (R50)

Dr. Crotty

Clinician Research Scientist Award (R50)

Dr. Lindwasser

3:10 p.m. – 3:35 p.m.

PAR Reissuance

Pathway to independence Award for Early-Stage Postdoctoral Researchers (K99/R00) Dr. Zahir

The NCI Wortis McCaskill-Stevens Career Development Award for Community
Oncology and Prevention Research (K12)

3:35 p.m. – 3:55 p.m.

PAR Reissuance

Small Cell Lung Cancer Consortium Resource Center (U24) Dr. Ujhazy

3:55 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Closing Remarks Dr. Ulrich

4:00 p.m.

Adjournment

**** Request for Application (RFA); ** Cooperative Agreement (Coop. Agr.); ***Single Source; Program Announcement
with special receipt, referral and/or review (PAR)***

APPENDIX 2 – ROSTER

NATIONAL CANCER ADVISORY BOARD AD HOC WORKING GROUP ON EXTRAMURAL RESEARCH CONCEPTS AND PROGRAMS ROSTER

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