

**AOTF Community Engaged Research Grant  
Request for Application (RFA)  
2025-2026**

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**Note: Letter of Intent will open August 14, 2025.**

Contact AOTF ([research@aotf.org](mailto:research@aotf.org)) if you have any questions.

## I. BACKGROUND

### **AOTF's Commitment to Community-Engaged Research**

The American Occupational Therapy Foundation (AOTF) is committed to advancing knowledge that supports effective, evidence-based occupational therapy in both clinical and community-based settings. Central to this vision is fostering innovative and rigorous science that supports full participation in meaningful life activities for all individuals.

To achieve this vision, AOTF actively promotes and supports a scholarship of practice grounded in the core principles of occupational therapy while embracing interdisciplinary collaboration. This includes intentional engagement with clinical practitioners, researchers, community-based organizations, and individuals with lived experiences from diverse communities—particularly those from historically marginalized or underrepresented communities (Hammel et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2024).

AOTF emphasizes the importance of equitable partnerships where power, decision-making, and responsibility are shared among researchers, practitioners, community-based organizations, people with lived experiences, and other relevant partners. By fostering these inclusive research practices, AOTF seeks to ensure that occupational therapy scholarship remains scientifically rigorous and responsive to the real-world needs of diverse communities.

### **Community-Engaged Research: A Collaborative Approach**

Community-engaged research is a collaborative approach that brings together the expertise and leadership of community partners with the methodological skills of trained researchers and, when appropriate, service providers. This approach centers on addressing community-identified priorities and generating outcomes that are mutually beneficial.

By fostering equitable partnerships, community-engaged research ensures that activities are culturally relevant, contextually appropriate, and aligned with the lived experiences of the populations involved. Meaningfully integrating community voices across all phases of the research process—from design through dissemination—is critical.

When successfully implemented, community-engaged research enhances the relevance, scalability, and sustainability of innovations, facilitating meaningful, long-term impacts in the communities it serves.

### **Defining Community**

Community comes in many forms, and all communities are made up of people with rich, diverse, and intersectional lived experiences. For the purpose of this Request for Applications (RFA), community is defined as individuals, groups, and organizations united by common characteristics, geographies, and/or social identities. These may include, but are not limited to, race and ethnicity, disability status, gender identity and sexual orientation, or other defining features (Consortium for Cancer Implementation Science Community Participation Capacity Building Task Group, 2021).

While the perspectives of occupational therapy practitioners from diverse backgrounds are valued, they are not considered the primary community partners for the purposes of this funding mechanism.

### **Funding Community-Engaged Research in Occupational Therapy**

It is imperative that occupational therapy research be grounded in the priorities and lived experiences of the communities it aims to serve. Many occupational therapy researchers—including previous grantees of AOTF—have successfully secured federal support for community-engaged research, demonstrating its relevance and impact.

This dedicated pilot funding mechanism builds on that momentum, advancing both the profession and the priorities of the communities engaged in the work. The initiative offers significant potential for return on investment, as funded projects will position investigators to pursue future extramural support—contributing to the long-term sustainability and expansion of community-engaged research in occupational therapy.

By supporting this approach, AOTF aims to strengthen the rigor, relevance, and equity of occupational therapy scholarship, ultimately enhancing the health, participation, and well-being of diverse communities.

### **Key Elements of Community-Engaged Research**

Effective community-engaged research is rooted in several key elements, including:

- **Commitment to Collaborative, 'Coequal' Partnerships:** Ensuring that researchers and communities engage as equal partners in the research process (Gibbons & Pérez-Stable, 2024; D'Agostino et al., 2024).
- **Focus on Community-Identified Priorities:** Addressing the specific priorities and outcomes that communities identify as essential.
- **Capacity-Building:** Strengthening the abilities of both research and community partners to engage in community-engaged research.
- **Cultural Humility and Ethical Practices:** Respecting the autonomy and self-direction of communities while ensuring culturally relevant practices.
- **Dissemination of Findings:** Ensuring that research results are shared with the community to ensure ongoing relevance and shared benefits (D'Agostino et al., 2024).
- **Objective of the Community Engaged Research Studies**

This grant program supports studies that apply rigorous qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies to address research priorities and service, or knowledge gaps identified in partnership with communities.

## II. AWARD INFORMATION

- Three, 2-year non-renewable grants for up to \$100,000 (including indirect costs) will be awarded.
  - Year 1: \$50,000 released at start of award period
  - Year 2: \$50,000 released after submission of the progress report
- Indirect expenses will be funded up to 10% of direct costs. The budget must include an equitable distribution of grant funds that align with the project activities and are clearly delineated in the budget justification.
- Community partners' compensation is not capped. *The PI's institutional setting may determine the payment method.*
- All applications must include a research mentor who meets the following criteria: Have an established record of extramural grant funding, peer-reviewed publications, and experience in research mentoring. Up to 10% of grant funds may be used towards research mentor compensation.
- Funds will be released in 2026 on a payment schedule identified by AOTF. The grant cycle will begin on July 1, 2026, pending IRB receipt by AOTF. The funding duration will last two calendar years from the start date. It is the applicant's responsibility to get IRB approval prior to the start date and submit all progress reports on time.
- Project Funds will be released in two installments, the first in July 2026 (assuming the IRB approval/exempt doc is received by AOTF) and the second in July 2027 (assuming the progress report is received by AOTF).

### **Requirement for AOTF funded Community-Engaged Research Grant Projects**

All proposed projects must:

- **Be led by a community-academic partnership**, jointly submitted by an academic researcher and at least one community-based individual, organization, or public agency.
- **Identify at least one community member as a Co-Investigator** or in an equivalent leadership role.

- **Demonstrate meaningful and equitable engagement of community partners** across all phases of the project—including study design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination.
- **Include a plan to compensate community partners** and dedicate appropriate resources to support their sustained involvement.
- **Address potential barriers to engagement** and outline strategies to foster effective, inclusive collaboration.
- **Clearly align with the scope of occupational therapy practice** or an emerging area relevant to occupational therapy.
- **Focus on original research.** Proposals limited to literature reviews (e.g., scoping reviews or meta-analyses) will not be considered unless they constitute a small component of a broader, community-engaged research project.

### Approaches: Pilot/Feasibility Study Descriptions

Approaches that lay the necessary groundwork for larger intervention studies include:

- ***Pilot studies***

“A Pilot Study is a version of the main study that is run in a miniature study to test whether the components of the main study can all work together. It is focused on the processes of the main study, for example to ensure recruitment, randomization, treatment, and follow-up assessments all run smoothly. It will therefore resemble the main study in many respects. In some cases, this will be the first phase of the substantive study and data from the pilot phase may contribute to the final analysis; this can be referred to as an internal pilot. Alternatively at the end of the pilot study the data may be analyzed and set aside, a so called external pilot.” (Arain, Campbell, Cooper, & Lancaster, 2010, p. 5)

Pilot studies are characterized by:

- “rigorous methodological components like sample size estimation, randomization and control group selection” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 5)
- an explicit purpose (e.g., “to test a new procedure in preparation for a clinical trial”) and “the criteria which lead to further studies being abandoned” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 6)
- reporting of results are “interpreted with caution” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 6)
- or as “inconclusive, with the intention of conducting a further, larger study” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 5)
- results that “provide information to enable a sample size calculation in a subsequent main study” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 6)

- ***Feasibility studies***

“Feasibility Studies are pieces of research done before a main study. They are used to estimate important parameters that are needed to design the main study. For instance:

- standard deviation of the outcome measure, which is needed in some cases to estimate sample size, willingness of participants to be randomized,
- willingness of clinicians to recruit participants,
- number of eligible patients,
- characteristics of the proposed outcome measure and in some cases feasibility studies might involve designing a suitable outcome measure,
- follow-up rates, response rates to questionnaires, adherence/compliance rates, ICCs in cluster trials, etc.

Feasibility studies for randomized controlled trials may not themselves be randomized. Crucially, feasibility studies do not evaluate the outcome of interest; that is left to the main study. If a feasibility study is a small randomized controlled trial, it need not have a primary outcome and the usual sort of power calculation is not normally undertaken. Instead, the sample size should be adequate to estimate the critical parameters (e.g., recruitment rate) to the necessary degree of precision” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 5).

In general, feasibility studies are “conducted with more flexible methodology compared to those labeled 'pilot'. For example, the term 'feasibility' has been used for large scale studies such as a screening program applied at a population level to determine the initial feasibility of the program” (Arain et al., 2010, p. 5).

### III. ELIGIBILITY INFORMATION

#### A. What are the eligibility criteria for the Principal Investigator (PI)?

##### General Personnel Criteria:

- The PI has a terminal research degree (PhD, ScD) or has an OTD or EdD with advanced research training (e.g., completion of a post degree research fellowship).
- The PI is a credentialed occupational therapist with a full-time faculty position appointment or an equivalent research position at the time of application OR a non-OT investigator with a primary academic appointment in an occupational therapy department.
- The PI is employed by a U.S. domestic, public or private, non-profit organization/institution that is eligible to receive Foundation research grants and will provide assurance of its accountability and support for the project.
- The PI is a U.S. citizen or non-citizen national of the U.S. admitted for permanent residence OR applied for permanent residence. (For non-citizens/visa holders, the applicant organization must have policies in place to determine whether residence status or visa status will allow completion of the research.)

##### Research and Proposed Project Related Requirements:

- The PI has a track record of achievements and career goals related to the proposed project that includes peer-reviewed publications.
- The PI is an Early Career Researcher\* who does not currently have any substantial extramural research awards (e.g. RO1, PCORI, Research Program Project Grant, Veterans Administration Merit Award, Field-Initiated Project).

*\*An early career researcher is a Principal Investigator (PI) in the early stages of their independent research career, typically within 10 years of completing their terminal research degree (e.g., PhD, DSc) or equivalent training (such as post degree research fellowship for non-research degrees e.g. OTD/EdD). A longer time frame may be appropriate for individuals who have spent significant time in non-research roles following their degree. These roles may include clinical practice, teaching-only academic positions, industry work (e.g., regulatory affairs or clinical operations), public health or policy practice, administrative or leadership positions, military or government service, entrepreneurial activities, or caregiving responsibilities. Eligible PIs are generally at the Lecturer, Instructor, Assistant Professor, or early Associate Professor level (or equivalent). Their funding history may include small research grants, mentored career development awards, or training-related mechanisms aligned with early stage or emerging investigators.*

- The PI has a commitment from a research mentor who has experience in community engaged research including established record of substantial extramural funding, peer-reviewed publications and supervision and research mentoring experience.
- The PI does not have any conflicts of interest. The PI is not:
  - An AOTF or AOTA board or staff member
  - An AOTF Scientific Advisory Council member
  - A board or staff member of a CERG sponsor

B. What are the eligibility criteria for the community partner/co-I?

- The community partner/co-I should have lived experience that is reflective of the identified community.
- The community partner/co-I should have a demonstrated commitment to the research process and/or topic.
- The Co-I does not have any conflicts of interest. The Co-I is not:
  - An AOTF or AOTA board or staff member
  - An AOTF Scientific Advisory Council member
  - A board or staff member of a CERG sponsor

IV. APPLICATIONS AND SUBMISSION INFORMATION

A. The Steps:

1. The principal investigator (and the community co-investigator) review the eligibility criteria and complete the Letter of Intent (LOI) application.
2. The submitted LOI is screened by AOTF (Scientific Review Group Chair included). If the LOI satisfies the following screening considerations, the LOI is accepted by AOTF and PI is invited to complete the Full Application.
  - PI and co-I eligibility criteria and merits,
  - Community partner merits and alignment with project,
  - Mentor merits and alignment with project,
  - LOI aligns with the grant opportunity, including evidence of community engagement in the research planning process and
  - LOI provides sufficient detail and clarity.
3. Principal investigators granted permission to submit a full application will be emailed the week of October 6, 2025.

Full Application deadline: **November 21, 2025 11:59 p.m. ET**

*Applicants are responsible for all deadlines. Deadline extensions will NOT be granted.*

Key Dates:

Dates	Application Stage
August 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• RFA and award guidelines are posted on AOTF website. Review the research priorities, objectives, approaches, and eligibility criteria found in the RFA.</li> <li>• Review award guidelines.</li> <li>• Develop the initial framework for a Letter of Intent and applications</li> </ul>
August 14, 2025	Online submission site for Letter of Intent opens

September 19, 2025	Letter of Intent deadline 11:59 p.m. ET.
October 6-10, 2025	Invitations to submit an application are extended to principal investigators who meet eligibility criteria and whose LOI is accepted by AOTF. Invitees can begin application.
November 21, 2025	Application deadline for grants full application at 11:59 pm EST
March 2026	Summary statements and award notifications are sent to applicants.

## V. CONTENT AND FORM OF APPLICATION SUBMISSION

It is critical that applicants follow the instructions for LOI and full application. Conformance to the requirements in the application guidelines is required. Applications out of compliance with these instructions may be delayed or not accepted for review. The following is a brief outline for requirements in the LOI and full application.

### A. Letter of Intent (LOI)

- Applicant/Principal investigator: Personal information and Biosketch
- Information about the applicant organization: Name, mailing address, Administrative Contact
- Information about the community partner/ co-I: Personal Information, Biosketch, Letter of Engagement
- Research mentor: Biosketch, Letter of Commitment, and research mentoring table and publications
- Description of the proposed research project
- Research team member/Community Engagement Plan: The description should include community/team members' roles and responsibilities with details regarding the contribution of each individual in the 1) development and execution of the proposed study and 2) Dissemination of study results. The plan should address 1) how the community partner/Co-I has demonstrated lived experience that is reflective of the identified community and 2) how the community partner/Co-I has demonstrated commitment to the research process and/or topic.

### B. Full Application

- Research Plan
  - Cover Letter
  - Project summary in lay language
  - Specific aims
  - Plan for Future Studies and Funding
  - Research plan strategy (with clear throughline of community involvement):
    - Significance
    - Innovation
    - Approach
    - Dissemination plan
    - Pathway to future research
- Resource Availability
  - Consortium, Contractual, Consulting Arrangements
  - References and Literature Cited
  - Letters of Support
- Research team member/Community Engagement Plan: The description should include community/team members' roles and responsibilities with details regarding the contribution of each

individual in the 1) development and execution of the proposed study and 2) Dissemination of study results. The plan should address 1) how the community partner/Co-I has demonstrated lived experience that is reflective of the identified community and 2) how the community partner/Co-I has demonstrated commitment to the research process and/or topic.

- Budget
  - Budget and Budget Justification- Community partners' compensation should be substantive and equitable. Details of the community partner compensation and budget should be clearly outlined, including how and when they will receive the payment. Mode of payment can be flexible and commensurate with the project activities including consultant fees, percent effort allocated for named contributor, honoraria for time limited activities, conference costs access to university courses, trainings and/or workshops etc., travel costs to present at professional conference (*Implementing the Expectation: Dedicated Funds for Engagement & Partner Compensation, 2025*).
  - *The PI's institutional setting may determine the payment method.*
- Assurance Form
- Protection Form
  - Protection of human subjects plan
  - Inclusion of Women, Minorities, Children
  - Vertebrate animal protections
  - Practice settings
- Appendices
  - Human Subjects Research Training Certificates
  - Consortium, Contractual, Consultant Letters
  - IRB approval letter/IACUC approval (required but may be submitted at a later date. Grant will not begin until AOTF receives IRB)
  - Blank Informed Consent/Assent Forms, Simple Lists of Interview Questions, Surveys, Questionnaires, Data Collection Instruments, and Clinical Protocols
- Optional Data Form
- Signature – Terms and Conditions

## VI. APPLICATION REVIEW INFORMATION

### A. Review Criteria

- Overall impact score- Grants will be scored utilizing the numeric scoring system based on the NIH grant scoring system. Overall impact scores will be determined by the following five criteria:
  - Significance: Does the project address an important problem or a critical barrier to progress in the field?
  - Investigator(s): Are the PIs, co-PIs, research mentors, collaborators, community partners, and others well suited to the project?
  - Innovation: Does the application challenge and seek to shift current research or clinical practice paradigms by utilizing novel theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions?
  - Approach: Are the overall strategy, methodology, and analyses well-reasoned and appropriate to accomplish the specific aims of the project?
  - Environment: Will the scientific environment in which the work will be done (scientific environment, subject populations, or collaborative arrangements) contribute to the probability of success?

B. Reviewers will also consider:

- Relevance to Award Objectives and alignment with the mission of AOTF.
- Community Impact & Community partner engagement: The strength and sustainability of community partnerships and the potential for research to benefit the community.
- Protections for human subjects
- Potential for subsequent funding lays the necessary groundwork for larger intervention studies and subsequent funding.
- Budget & Budget justification
- Mentor: Expertise & support provided to the PI

C. Knowledge Translation

In response to the AOTF 2023-2025 Strategic Plan, the Foundation is particularly interested in proposals that address the scope of research, i.e., wide or targeted, and outline strategies for future dissemination of findings.

D. Inclusion of Women and Minorities

All AOTF-funded studies must address plans for the inclusion of women and minorities within the application or proposal. Applications and proposals should describe the composition of the proposed study population in terms of sex/gender and racial/ethnic groups and provide a rationale for selection of such subjects. Any exclusions based on sex/gender or race/ethnicity must include a rationale and justification based on a scientific or ethical basis. Investigators should also plan for appropriate outreach programs and activities to recruit and retain the proposed study population consistent with the purposes of the research project

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