

**Next Steps Program RFP:  
Priority Area Announcement  
Preclinical/Clinical Advancement of Cellular and Vaccine Therapies for  
Acral and Uveal Melanoma**

**Background:**

Over the past two decades, treatment options for advanced melanoma have expanded substantially, with 17 new therapies approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) bringing the total number of approved treatments to 19. Despite these treatment advances, nearly 50% of patients with advanced melanoma either do not respond to available therapies or eventually experience disease progression. This is especially pronounced in rare melanoma subtypes such as acral and uveal melanoma, which can differ biologically and clinically from cutaneous melanoma, and thus represents a need for new, more specialized therapeutic approaches. Emerging immunotherapeutic strategies, including cellular therapies and cancer vaccines, have shown promise across several cancer types, including melanoma. However, their potential in rare melanoma subtypes like acral and uveal melanoma, have yet to be explored at a pace that parallels cutaneous melanoma.

Through the 2026 Next Steps Program RFP, MRA welcomes proposals that **aim to accelerate the development of new approaches and technologies in cellular therapy and vaccine therapy specifically for acral and/or uveal melanoma**. Proposals on GNAQ/11 related melanomas are also allowed. This RFP will support preclinical, pre-IND development stage, and clinical-stage studies focused on advancing cellular or vaccine-based therapeutic approaches that have the potential to improved treatment strategies for patients with acral or uveal melanoma. Competitive proposals will demonstrate a clear path toward translating promising preclinical discoveries into near-term clinical development or clinical trials. It is anticipated that achieving the aims of the proposal may require the expertise from different departments at a given institution or collaborations across multiple institutions and core facilities.

**Deadlines:**

- **Letter of Intent (LOI)** must be submitted through **Proposal Central** by **April 10, 2026 at 5:00PM ET**.
- **Estimated LOI decisions** made by **May 6, 2026**.
- **Invited proposals** must be submitted through **Proposal Central** by **June 16, 2026 at 11:59PM ET**.

**Award Term:** Up to 3 Years (projects are milestone-based)

**Funding Level:**

- \$100,000 to \$500,000 total for proposals involving preclinical/pre-IND development studies
- Up to \$1,000,000 total for proposals involving clinical trials

**Payment Schedule:**

Payments will be released after **achieving specific milestone accomplishments clearly outlined in a milestone/timeline plan** to be included as part of the application. Payments will be approved

after MRA's review of progress and determination that milestones and timelines have been met, at MRA's sole discretion. An initial payment will be released upon full execution of the grant contract.

**Timeline:**

**March 18, 2026:** Request for Proposals (RFP) released

**April 10, 2026:** Deadline for LOI

**May 6, 2026:** LOI Decision Notification

**June 16, 2026:** Full Applications Due

**September 1, 2026:** Awardees Notified (Please note that MRA may adjust notification date without notice to applicants)

**October 1, 2026:** Anticipated Project Start Date

**Funding Priorities and Pertinent Accompanying Information:**

Proposals for clinical trials, pre-IND development studies, or preclinical studies testing well-defined and clearly articulated hypotheses are welcome and should be accompanied by a timeline with milestones and anticipated budget per milestone. Applications should provide evidence that the proposed targets or antigens/neoantigens for the therapeutic approach have been validated in acral and/or uveal melanoma (or GNAQ/GNA11 mutated melanomas). For clinical studies, a brief protocol synopsis will be required as a supplemental document to the full application; IRB and IND approval is not required at the time of application but is required before initial payments are made to an awarded proposal for a clinical trial.

**Cellular and vaccine therapies include, but are not limited to:**

- CAR T-Cell Therapy
- Tumor-Infiltrating Lymphocyte (TIL) Therapy
- T Cell Receptor Therapy
- Dual Target Cellular Therapy
- Nucleic Acid or Peptide Personalized Neoantigen or Shared Antigen Vaccines
- Cell-based Vaccines
- Oncolytic Virus Vaccines
- Novel Vaccine Delivery Approaches
- Combination Approach (e.g., cell therapy and immune or targeted therapy, vaccine therapy and immune or targeted therapy, cell and vaccine combination therapy)

**The RFP supports:**

- Cellular or vaccine therapies ready for study in a clinical setting (e.g., clinical trial) focused on patients with acral and/or uveal melanoma
- IND enabling studies (i.e., toxicity, feasibility of manufacturing, etc.)
- Development and testing of cellular or vaccine therapies in acral and/or uveal melanoma cell-based/animal or other relevant models

**The RFP DOES NOT Support:**

- Identification of new targets/neoantigens for cellular or vaccine therapies (e.g., discovery or high-throughput screening approaches)
- Mechanism-based studies of response/resistance to cellular or vaccine therapies

- Proposals focused on cutaneous, mucosal, or pediatric melanoma

## **Application Process:**

### **Step 1: Letter of Intent**

A letter of intent (LOI) must be submitted through [Proposal Central](#) by **April 10, 2026 at 5:00PM ET**. The LOI is a maximum of one page that includes (1) a description of the scientific aims; and (2) the members of the study team and the specific role of each participant. MRA will review LOIs and an invitation to submit a full application will be made to applicants by May 6, 2026. A select number of LOIs will be invited to submit a full application.

### **Step 2: Full Application Submission**

Full applications must be submitted through [Proposal Central](#) and are due on **June 16, 2026 at 11:59PM ET**. Late applications **will not** be accepted under any circumstances.

### **Eligibility:**

Researchers and clinicians within or outside the U.S. working in academic medical centers, universities, or other non-profit research institutions are eligible to apply. Applications will **not** be accepted from for-profit companies.

### **General eligibility requirements:**

- **Principal Investigators (PIs) must hold a full-time faculty appointment at the level of Assistant Professor (or equivalent) or above.** Early-stage career investigators are encouraged to consider this funding opportunity as a way to leverage applying for additional funding through other sources and aid in their career development.
- Proposals must include one principal investigator and at least one co-investigator at the same or different institution (within or outside of US)
- Fellows/post-docs or those in other training or research support positions are **not** eligible to apply as a PI, but can be included as key personnel.
- Multiple applications will be accepted from a single institution, provided that each application has a different PI and represents a distinct project.
- **MRA encourages applications from a diverse pool of investigators with respect to race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, and disability.** MRA recognizes that diversity in the biomedical research workforce is critical for ensuring that the most creative minds have the opportunity to contribute to realizing our research goals and to ensuring more equitable health outcomes for all.

If there are any questions about eligibility, please contact [science@curemelanoma.org](mailto:science@curemelanoma.org) before applying. Applications from PIs who do not meet the eligibility criteria will not be reviewed.

### **Evaluation Criteria:**

All proposals will be evaluated on:

- Capacity of the proposed study to advance cellular or vaccine therapies in the preclinical/clinical setting for patients with acral and/or uveal melanoma.
- Strength of scientific rationale supporting the proposed preclinical/clinical study of the stated therapeutic approach

- Strength of the scientific approach, research design, and/or clinical trial design
- Qualifications of the research team and adequacy of resources and environment
- Appropriateness of budget tied to a reasonable milestone/timeline plan (evaluated by MRA staff)

## **Application Format:**

### **Step 1: Letter of Intent Submission**

A one-page letter of intent (LOI) must be submitted through [Proposal Central](#) **no later than April 10, 2026 at 5:00PM ET**. LOIs will be reviewed and used for inviting full applications. It is a requirement that MRA receives an LOI submitted through Proposal Central for an invitation to submit a full application. An invitation to submit a full application will be made to applicants via email by May 6, 2026.

#### **The one-page LOI must include the following information:**

- Title of proposal
- Brief description of the (1) goal of the project and (2) specific aims
- Nature and rationale for any proposed collaboration and the specific role of each participant
- Names and affiliations of all key personnel

Institutional approval is not required for LOI submission. **The maximum length of LOI is one page, to be submitted through [Proposal Central](#) by April 10, 2026 at 5:00PM ET.**

#### **Please carefully follow the instructions in Proposal Central:**

1. **Title Page:** Enter the project title.
2. **Download Templates and Instructions:** Download RFP and templates.
3. **Enable Other Users to Access this Proposal:** Allow others (e.g., institutional administrators or collaborators) to view, edit, or submit your proposal.
4. **Applicant/PI:** Applications must identify one PI for administrative purposes (the Administrative PI for the proposal). This is the Applicant.
5. **Organization/Institution:** This is the Administrative PI's institution. If your institution has a [ROR](#) (Research Organization Registry ID), please include.
6. **Key Personnel:** Include the Principal Investigator and all other key personnel. An ORCID ID is required only for the Principle Investigator. *Please see Key Personnel requirements and descriptions of roles under step #6 of the Application Instructions section of the RFP.*
7. **Upload Attachments:** Upload the **Letter of Intent (LOI)**, which is not to exceed **one page maximum** and includes (1) the title of the proposal, (2) a brief description of the goal of the

project **and** specific aims, (3) the nature and rationale for any proposed collaboration and the specific role of each participant, and (4) the names and affiliations of all key personnel.

8. **PI Data Sheet:** Please enter your ORCID ID and other requested demographic information. If you do not have an ORCID ID, you can register for one here: <https://orcid.org/register>. *Please note that requested demographic information will NOT be used by MRA in any way during the selection process. Having such information will help MRA better understand its applicant and awardee pool and detect and address any inequities that exist in the selection process.*
9. **Validate:** Check for any missing required information.
10. **Submit:** Please note that no LOIs will be able to be submitted past their deadline. Technical support for the on-line application system is not available after 11:59 PM ET or on weekends.

An invitation to submit a full application will be made to applicants via email by **May 6, 2026**.

## **Step 2: Full Application Submission**

**Applications must be submitted by 11:59PM ET on June 16, 2026.** Submissions will **not** be accepted after the deadline. Applicants must use [Proposal Central](#) and should carefully follow the application instructions.

### **Full application submission includes the following steps and components:**

1. **Title Page:** Enter the project title. The grant title (along with the PI's name and institution) will become public if the award is selected for funding, so it should not contain any proprietary information.
2. **Templates and Instructions:** Download RFP and templates.
3. **Enable Other Users to Access this Proposal:** Allow others (e.g., institutional administrators or collaborators) to view, edit, or submit your proposal. Electronic signatures are required to submit the application. ***The Signing Official from the applicant's institution must be provided at least 'Edit' access on this screen to be able to sign.*** Please review the Signature Page to confirm the signature roles required and add as appropriate on this page.  
**\*Please make sure to grant access to your institution's signing official ahead of time to avoid any last-minute issues with signing and submitting your application.\***
4. **Applicant/PI:** Key information about the applicant PI.
5. **Organization/Institution:** Key information about the PI's institution, including name and email address of the signing official who, in addition to the PI, will be contacted if the award is selected for funding. If your institution has a [ROR](#) (Research Organization Registry ID), please include.
6. **Key Personnel:** List and provide contact information for key persons. Include everyone **except the applicant** who will contribute to the scientific development or execution of the project in a

substantive, measurable way whether they receive salaries or compensation under the grant. ORCID ID is required only for the PI.

**Descriptions of Key Personnel roles:**

**Principal Investigator (PI):** This is the applicant for this award who will also serve as project leader and primary point of contact for MRA Staff if multiple investigators and collaborators are involved. The PI will ensure that the team complies with the terms of the award, including all reporting, contractual, and financial obligations. Co-PIs are **not** allowed.

**Co-Investigator:** Co-Investigators are vital scientific contributors who bring needed expertise to the research team. They commit some level of measurable effort to the project and are, therefore, always designated as Key Personnel whether being compensated or otherwise. Co-Investigators can be at the same or a different institution as the PI.

**Collaborator:** Play a lesser role in the thinking and logistics of the project than a Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator. Depending on the role and effort, a collaborator may be designated as Key Personnel (although not required) and may be compensated.

**Consultant:** Provides guidance on specific aspects of the research project, as their expertise applies. A consultant may be designated as Key Personnel (although not required) and may be compensated.

**Others:** Key Personnel includes individuals who will contribute to the scientific development or execution of the project in a substantive, measurable way. Examples include project managers, technicians, postdoctoral associates, fellows, research assistants, or graduate students.

REQUIRED SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS FOR KEY PERSONNEL (KP)					
Personnel	Include in KP Section	Biosketch	Current/Pending Support	Letter of Support	ORCID ID required
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	Yes (All)	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes
<b>Co-Investigator</b>	If applicable	Yes	No	Optional	No
<b>Collaborator</b>	If applicable	Yes, if included as KP	No	Optional	No
<b>Project Manager</b>	Optional	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No
<b>Technician</b>	Optional	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No
<b>Consultant</b>	If applicable	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No

<b>Postdoctoral/Fellow</b>	Optional	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No
<b>Graduate Student</b>	Optional	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No
<b>Other (e.g., Research Assistant)</b>	Optional	Yes, if included as KP	No	No	No

7. **Data and Renewable Reagent Sharing Plan:** In order to promote rapid research advancement, transparency, reproducibility, and collaboration, MRA encourages the open sharing of data and resources generated from its funded awards. Provide information for the types of data and renewable reagents that will be generated as part of the award and how they will be shared.

MRA will incur costs associated with policy compliance, provided these fees (e.g., article processing charges, data storage), are included in the original grant application budget.

8. **Abstracts and Keywords:** Provide a general audience abstract (non-technical) and a technical abstract (2,000 characters, *including spaces*, maximum each) and keywords. Please note: the general audience abstract will become public if the award is selected for funding, so it should not contain any proprietary information.
9. **Budget Period Detail:** Enter budget details for each award period requested. Awards will not support indirect costs, overhead costs, or other similar institutional charges. Fringe benefits for personnel salaries are allowable. Please also include any costs associated with compliance with MRA's data sharing policy. **Furthermore, the budget should align with the milestone/timeline plan proposed in the project description.** For example, for a 3-year award, the budget does not have to be split evenly over the three years.

Please note that budgets for preclinical and pre-IND studies are not to exceed \$500,000, and budgets for studies involving clinical trials are not to exceed \$1,000,000. **Preclinical or pre-IND studies with budgets exceeding \$500,000 will not be accepted.**

MRA recognizes that research studies will need a certain amount of upfront funding support to initiate the project. Therefore, an initial payment upon full execution of the grant award can be included as the first milestone with an associated budget. **Applications that do not have a milestone/timeline plan included in the project description will not be reviewed.**

10. **Budget Summary and Justification:** A summary of the budget details will be shown in this step. In addition, provide sufficient detail for the evaluation of the major portions of the budget that are being requested. If more space is required than is provided in the Proposal Central forms (2,000 characters), applicants may upload the budget justification in document form in step 13.
11. **Current and Pending Research Support:** Please list all current and pending support for the Applicant.

Any overlap of current or pending support with the MRA Next Steps proposal must be described and explained. Current and pending support can be added to your (and other Key Personnel's) Professional Profile on Proposal Central by clicking on the 'Professional Profile' tab and going to Step #6: Other Support.

To add your entries, please click on the "+" link and all entries previously saved in your Professional Profile will show. Please select the applicable support and save.

12. **Organizational Assurances:** IRB and IACUC approvals, if applicable.

13. **Upload Attachments: Upload the following:**

1. **Biosketch for PI and Key Personnel:** Please upload an NIH format biosketch for yourself and all Key Personnel listed in step #6. Biosketches for research support staff, students, postdocs, and other training positions are **not** required. Applicants who do not have an NIH biosketch may use the template provided by the [NIH](#). Besides publications, MRA welcomes the inclusion of research outputs such as datasets, code, patents, and papers posted to preprint servers.
2. **Current and pending research support:** Please enter PI current and pending support directly into Proposal Central in the "Current and Pending Support" section (step #11). Any overlap of current or pending support with the Next Step proposal must be described and explained.
3. **Project description:** Must be formatted in Arial 11-point or Times New Roman 12-point font with no less than ½ inch margins. The project description should be **5 pages maximum**, including figures. The project description should include:
  1. **Project Background:** Evidence for preclinical/clinical study of proposed cellular or vaccine therapy in acral and/or uveal melanoma
  2. **Specific Aims:** For all proposals, clearly indicate the scientific rationale and clear capacity to address each specific aim.
  3. **Pertinent Preliminary Data**
  4. **Experimental Design:** To include resources available and collaborative efforts.
  5. **Detailed Milestone Plan with Timeline:** (Note that the maximum award length is 3 years). Payment schedule in budget should be associated with milestone plan and timeline. This section must be included in the project description for application to be reviewed.
  6. **Rationale/Fit:** The goal of this proposal is to deliver clinical impact for patients with acral, uveal melanoma, and/or GNAQ/11-mutated melanoma
  7. **Literature references:** A list of up to 30 references supporting the project description is allowed, in addition to the 5-page project description.

14. **Brief Clinical Trial Protocol Synopsis** (For Clinical Trial Proposals Only): Include a brief protocol synopsis including but not limited to IRB and regulatory approval (if applicable), patient accrual timeline, primary endpoints, secondary and exploratory endpoints (if relevant), inclusion and exclusion criteria, and projected timeline for completion of analyses.
15. **PI Data Sheet:** Please enter your ORCID ID and other requested demographic information. If you do not have an ORCID ID, you can register for one at <https://orcid.org/register>. Please note that requested demographic information will NOT be used by MRA in any way during the selection process. Having such information will help MRA better understand its applicant and awardee pool and detect and address any inequities identified.
16. **Validate:** Check for any missing required information.
17. **Signature Page(s):** *Before submitting the application*, an electronic signature is required from both the Applicant/PI and a Signing Official from the applicant's institution. Type your name in the text box and click the green 'Sign' button. A date and time stamp will appear next to the button indicating that the electronic signature was successful. To give the Signing Official access to sign this application, enter their information in Step #3: "Enable other users to access this proposal" and grant them at least "Edit" access.
18. **Submit:** Please note that no proposals will be able to be submitted past their deadline. Technical support for the on-line application system is not available after 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time or on weekends.

**PLEASE MAKE SURE TO ALLOW ENOUGH ACCESS AHEAD OF TIME TO YOUR INSTITUTION'S SIGNING OFFICIAL TO AVOID ANY LAST-MINUTE ISSUES WITH SIGNING AND SUBMITTING YOUR FULL APPLICATION BY JUNE 16, 2026!**

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