

## Pilot Intramural Keep-the-Thread Program for Postdoctoral IRTA/CRTA

For the past twenty years, the Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH), in collaboration with 23 NIH Institutes and Centers (ICs), has supported the Research Supplements to Promote Re-Entry into Biomedical and Behavioral Research Careers program. These supplements facilitate re-entry for women and men with doctoral degrees who have taken at least one year away from scientific research because of family or other personal responsibilities. At the inception of the program, there was an intramural component and three scientists re-entered through the NIH intramural program and FDA in the 1990s. Building on the success of the extramural re-entry program, the time is right to explore options for allowing re-entry and other accommodations that allow NIH intramural postdoctoral fellows to retain their careers through periods of increased family responsibility.

The Intramural Keep-the-Thread Pilot Program aims to offer current NIH intramural postdoctoral fellows with family responsibilities several options for increasing flexibility and temporarily reducing effort while remaining connected to their research and the NIH community. The hope is that having these options in place will encourage trainees to stay connected during times of intense care-giving needs, and should facilitate eventual full re-entry into the NIH community. The program would incorporate a variety of flexible arrangements, to be mutually agreed upon by the fellow and PI, with approval of the Scientific Director (SD). These arrangements could vary from increased use of telework and flexible scheduling to temporary reductions in effort, and would include necessary modifications of project timelines. The program would be open to female and male NIH postdoctoral IRTA/CRTA fellows who have been at the NIH for at least six months and have an established research project. Foreign nationals on J-1 visas are not eligible for part-time options or special volunteer status. These options are not intended to take the place of standard parental leave, which entitles IRTA fellows to eight weeks of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child. These policies may be implemented upon returning from parental leave or when faced with family situations not covered by the NIH parental leave policy.

The goal of this program is to retain NIH fellows through short periods in their careers when they require accommodations to successfully balance their research with family responsibilities. By increasing flexibility and enabling reduction to part-time status, fellows will be given options that facilitate "keeping the thread" of their research programs until they are ready to completely re-enter the scientific workforce. This program is designed to create a framework through which fellows and PIs can explore all mutually agreeable options that would allow the fellow to attend to family responsibilities while pursuing a productive research career, while at the same time recognizing the importance of minimal disruption to a PI's research program.

The Pilot Keep-the-Thread Program is intended to clarify intramural family friendly policies, publicize their availability, encourage PIs to participate, and reduce the stigma often associated with accepting accommodations. While Keep the Thread is largely composed of family-friendly policies already in existence at the NIH, in some cases these policies have been enhanced to remove barriers to implementation and facilitate reentry into full-time research when the fellow is ready.

The proposed Keep-the-Thread Pilot Program is a multi-faceted approach that maximizes flexibility. Individual fellows should work with their PIs to create a mutually agreeable plan appropriate for their situation. Examples of relevant policies include:

- **Flexible schedule options.**

- **Part-time work options**, available to IRTA fellows able to work at least 40% time (16 hours per week). The NIH manual chapter allows fellows to work part time at their supervisor's discretion. See <http://oma.od.nih.gov/manualchapters/person/2300-320-7/2300-320-7.pdf>. Fellows must work at least 40% time (16 hours per week), and will have their stipends adjusted accordingly. In order to retain full coverage of health benefits, fellows must work a minimum of 80% time (32 hours per week). Fellows working 40-80% time are still eligible for FAES health insurance but must contribute a percentage of health costs equivalent to their percent reduction of effort. After two years, fellows must return to at least 80% effort. Fellows working at least 40% time may stay on the waiting list for NIH child care centers. The 5-year fellowship clock may be prorated for these fellows, at the discretion of the Office of Intramural Research. Note that while exemptions may pause the clock to compensate for periods of reduced effort, the total duration of paid work as a postdoctoral fellow may not exceed five years of effort (which may stretch beyond than five calendar years).
- **Fee-for-service options**. Fellows intending to work part-time, but unable to commit to 16 hours per week, may be hired on professional services contracts for a maximum of 12 cumulative months. Note that this is a procurement action that may have other requirements (<http://olao.od.nih.gov/Acquisitions/TypeOfAcquisitions/Services/ServicesMakingThePurchase.htm>). Such fellows will not be eligible for health benefits nor will they have access to NIH child care centers.
- **Special volunteer (SV) status** for fellows who are unable to work at this time. Fellows converted to special volunteer status will not be paid, but will retain access to the NIH campus, library facilities, computers, and on-line resources. They will still be eligible for NIH health insurance, but must pay for it out of pocket, and are eligible for the NIH childcare facilities. Assuming special volunteer status will allow fellows to remain connected to the NIH and their research even if they are not able to commit substantial effort. For more information on special volunteer status, see <http://oma.od.nih.gov/manualchapters/person/2300-308-1/2300-308-1.pdf>. This is not intended as a mechanism for fellows to work without compensation, but rather as a way for fellows to maintain access to NIH resources while on leave. Since the five-year policy counts time spent on a non-FTE position in any capacity, including as SV, the DDIR will make exception to the five-year rule, if necessary, for Keep-the-Thread cases, which must be submitted in advance to OIR for approval of this exception.
- **Re-entry facilitation**. Facilitating reentry is a major goal of the Keep-the-Thread Program. Pls and SDs should consider creative solutions to meet the needs of the laboratory while preserving the fellow's ability to return to full time work when ready. When possible, a fellow's full-time position will be guaranteed for the equivalent of one year's stipend, up to two years maximum. For instance, fellows working 50% time will have their positions held for two years. After that point, fellows must return to 80-100% effort. Fellows converted to special volunteer status will have their positions held for one year. Consistent with standard termination policies, all fellows should be given at least twelve months notice prior to termination. (<http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-desig/early-term.htm>).

Taking advantage of any accommodation would require a written agreement between the supervisor and the fellow, signed by the SD. This document will confirm agreement on the details of the arrangement, such as the accommodations the fellow will use, the number of hours the fellow will work, the degree of flexibility, and the duration of the arrangement. Changes to the prearranged agreement would require approval by the SD or lab/branch chief as appropriate. ([Sample Checklist for Discussion Between Fellow, PI, and SD -- http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-desig/Keep\\_the\\_Thread\\_checklist\\_2012.docx](http://sourcebook.od.nih.gov/prof-desig/Keep_the_Thread_checklist_2012.docx))

At the end of three years, the Keep-the-Thread Pilot Program will be evaluated using qualitative and quantitative data, to determine whether the program meets the needs of NIH trainees, PIs, and SDs.

[June 8, 2012]

## **Pilot Intramural Keep the Thread Program for Postdoctoral IRTA/CRTAs Checklist for Discussion Between Fellow, PI, and SD**

The Intramural Keep the Thread Pilot Program offers options for postdoctoral IRTA/CRTA fellows who need to increase flexibility or temporarily reduce effort during periods of increased family responsibility. The goal of this program is to help fellows remain connected to their research and to the NIH community, in order to facilitate reentry into full-time research when ready. The program incorporates a variety of flexible arrangements, to be mutually agreed upon by the fellow and PI, with approval of the SD.

**All parties should discuss and reach agreement on the following possible options:**

- Flexible scheduling options.* Many research projects lend themselves to flexible hours. While full-time fellows are expected to work a minimum of 40 hours per week, they do not necessarily need to work during standard hours (i.e., Monday to Friday, 9 am -5 pm). In cases where the fellow is working independently, alternative work hours may be appropriate.

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- Telework options.* While NIH has no formal telework policy for fellows, working remotely may be an option for some postdocs, depending on the nature of their research projects and their stage of research progression. Note that telework is not permitted while caring for young children.

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- Temporary reduction of effort ( $\geq 40\%$ ).* The NIH manual chapter allows fellows to work part time at their supervisor's discretion. Fellows must work at least 40% time (16 hours per week), and will have their stipends adjusted accordingly. In order to retain full coverage of health benefits, fellows must work a minimum of 80% time (32 hours per week). Fellows working 40-80% time are still eligible for FAES health insurance but must contribute a percentage of health costs equivalent to their percent reduction of effort. After two years, fellows must return to at least 80% effort. Fellows working at least 40% time may stay on the waiting list for NIH child care centers. The 5-year fellowship clock may be prorated for these fellows, at the discretion of the Office of Intramural Research.

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- Fee-for-service options for less than 40% effort.* Fellows choosing to work less than 40% time can be hired, at the PI and SD's discretion, as a contractor on a professional services contract. This contract may not exceed 12 months, and may be subject to other requirements. Fellows converted to contractor status are not eligible for health benefits or for NIH day care centers. The 5-year fellowship clock may be prorated for these fellows, at the discretion of the Office of Intramural Research.

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- Special volunteer status.* For fellows unable to commit substantial effort at this time, special volunteer status should be considered. Fellows converted to special volunteer status will not be paid, but will retain access to the NIH campus, libraries, computers, and on-line resources. They will still be eligible for NIH health insurance, but must pay for it out of pocket, and are eligible for the NIH childcare facilities. Special volunteers with no outside funding may request pausing of the fellowship clock from the Office of Intramural Research. Time on special volunteer status may not exceed one year.

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- Other accommodations.* Consider whether other accommodations would be appropriate for this fellow, such as extension of project timelines. Also indicate whether there will be access to support personnel.

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- Specific expectations.* Clearly outline specific expectations for the fellow during the period of accommodation. It is generally expected that fellows will attend group meetings, keep up with the literature, and participate in mentoring activities and one-on-one meetings with the PI. Other possible expectations include working on manuscript or attending conferences relevant to the research project.

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- Agreement duration.* Determine the appropriate duration for this agreement. This initial duration may be reconsidered at a later date, upon approval of all parties.

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- Career counseling.* Taking an extended leave of absence or temporarily reducing effort could have unintended consequences for a fellow's career. Before signing this agreement, fellows should meet with a career counselor at OITE; a follow-up meeting should be scheduled 6 months later.

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- Reentry.* Facilitating reentry is a major goal of the Keep the Thread Program. PIs and SDs should consider creative solutions to meet the needs of the laboratory while preserving the fellow's ability to return to full time work when ready. When possible, the ability to return to a full-time position will be guaranteed for the equivalent of one year's stipend, up to two years maximum. For instance, fellows working 50% time will have their positions held for two years. After that point, fellows must return to 80-100% effort. Fellows converted to special volunteer status will have their positions held for one year. Consistent with standard termination policies, all fellows should be given at least twelve months notice prior to termination.

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Note that while the fellowship clock will be paused for fellows with no outside support converted to special volunteer status, and prorated for fellows working reduced hours, **the total duration of paid work as a postdoctoral fellow may not exceed 5 years of effort (which may extend beyond 5 calendar years).**

*Additional comments and special considerations:*

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**We have discussed each of these issues and reached an agreement.**

**Signatures:**

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**Fellow**                      **Date**                      **Principal Investigator**   **Date**                      **Scientific Director**      **Date**