

Scientists Pursuing Alzheimer's/Related Dementias Research in Kentucky (SPARK)

Program Overview and Objectives

The **SPARK program** will support early career investigators based in Kentucky who are working on important questions on Alzheimer's and all other dementias.

Research questions may address the full spectrum of scientific discovery that advances Alzheimer's and dementia research and must be strongly relevant to the needs of people living in Kentucky. This includes, but is not limited to:

- **Basic and translational science** could span a number of areas and questions. Kentucky houses several institutions with deep expertise in areas of molecular underpinnings of disease (AD/ADRD), neuropathology, biomarker discovery, drug discovery and development, and digital pathology platforms for AD/ADRD diagnostics.
- **Clinical and drug development research**, such as studies examining the real-world effects of disease-modifying therapies (e.g., anti-amyloid treatments) on disease progression in Kentucky populations.
- **Health disparities and rural health research** addressing the needs of Kentucky's Appalachian communities, where access to specialists and clinical trials is limited, such as medication optimization/deprescribing interventions for rural patients with cognitive impairment or dementia.
- **Implementation science** is research on how to effectively deliver and scale evidence-based dementia interventions in real-world Kentucky settings, including:
 - Academic–community partnership models for recruiting rural and medically underserved caregivers into ADRD clinical research (e.g., partnerships between academic centers and regional health systems or Area Health Education Centers);
 - Adapting or scaling caregiver support and non-pharmacological interventions (e.g., music therapy, dementia care navigation, or Center for Dementia Respite Innovation–style respite programs) for delivery through Kentucky's health systems, Area Agencies on Aging, or community organizations;
 - Studies evaluating uptake, sustainability, or adaptation of existing evidence-based programs within Kentucky primary care, geriatrics, or community-based settings; and
- **Population and public health research** studies using Kentucky-specific data (e.g., prevalence, caregiver burden, or health system utilization) to inform prevention, risk-reduction, or care-delivery strategies tailored to the Commonwealth.

Investigators who are not employed by a Kentucky organization, as defined under Eligible Organizations below, are ineligible to apply.

Funding

This funding opportunity originates from the Commonwealth of Kentucky's 2026-2028 HB 900 Appropriation Executive Branch Notification Research & Operations 27-230. As stewards of this appropriation, the Alzheimer's Association will offer up to five awards with a maximum of **\$160,000 in total direct and indirect costs over two years**. Indirect costs are capped at 15% of direct costs, including subcontract indirect costs.

Funds will be distributed through the applicant's institution. Allowable costs are detailed in the below section.

Key Dates:

LOI and application submissions must be received by 5 p.m. Eastern time (ET) by their respective deadlines. Late submissions will not be accepted - *no exceptions*.

Program Launch	October 8, 2026
Letter of Intent Deadline*	December 1, 2026
Letter of Intent Deadline* ISTAART Members	December 3, 2026
Application Deadline ISTAART Members	February 2, 2027
Application Deadline	February 4, 2027
Application Review	February – April
Award Notifications	By April 30, 2027

**Note: Due to the high number of submissions, specific feedback and reviewer comments are not provided at the letter of intent (LOI) stage.*

Eligibility

To avoid disqualification, investigators are encouraged to carefully consider these eligibility and ineligibility requirements before applying. The Alzheimer's Association reserves the right to find an investigator ineligible to submit for a particular program, based on the guidelines below. This section describes general inclusion and exclusion criteria. Specific requirements and additional exclusions to eligibility are noted in some detailed competition descriptions.

Eligible Applicants

- Applicants must hold a doctoral degree (Ph.D., M.D., D.O., or equivalent) and must be considered a full-time employee of an eligible Kentucky non-profit organization at the time of LOI submission and award.
- Applicants must have received their doctoral degree or completed post-residency training no more than **10 years** prior to the LOI deadline. Documented career interruptions (parental leave, military service, serious illness) may be considered for timeline adjustment; applicants should contact the program offices in advance.
- This grant is open to researchers based at an eligible Kentucky organization, as defined below.
- Investigators from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, women, and researchers with disabilities are strongly encouraged to apply, consistent with the commitments of both sponsoring organizations.
- The funders reserve the right to request further documentation to confirm eligibility of an applicant.

Eligible Organizations:

In general, public, private, research laboratories, medical centers, hospitals and universities that qualify as a Kentucky organization are eligible to apply. For purposes of this program, an applicant institution qualifies as a Kentucky organization if it (i) is incorporated or organized in Kentucky, or is authorized to transact business in Kentucky as a foreign entity under KRS Chapter 14A, and holds active status with the Kentucky Secretary of State as of the LOI deadline and through the award period; and (ii) will conduct the proposed research at a physical facility located in Kentucky. The research must be taking place in Kentucky and have a lens towards advancing research to benefit Kentuckians. State and federal government-appropriated laboratories in the U.S. and abroad, and for-profit organizations are prohibited from serving as the applicant institutions for this program. However, state and federal government scientists can participate as collaborating scientists with research teams from other eligible applicant institutions, provided they can accept the terms and conditions of this award mechanism.

Every application will require a Letter of Intent (LOI). For the LOI, you will be required to upload proof of your organization's not-for-profit status, provide your Kentucky Secretary of State organization number, and confirm the Kentucky address of the facility where the research will be conducted. An IRS Letter of Determination is no longer accepted and you must submit a W-9 that is signed and dated within the past five years by the signing official for US entities. The form must include the EIN, TIN or VAT number. Additional documentation may be required to confirm your organization has segregation of duties between transaction execution and transaction recording.

Ineligibility Considerations

- Applications that do not address one or more of the priority areas described in this RFA.
- Individuals currently enrolled as students in an undergraduate, Master, or Doctoral Program are not eligible, regardless of prior degree status.
- Temporary, part-time, or acting faculty are not eligible.
- Applicants who are not full-time employees of an eligible Kentucky organization are not eligible.

- Investigators who are delinquent in reporting to the Alzheimer's Association. The Alzheimer's Association will not accept new grant applications from investigators currently awarded an Association grant who are delinquent in submitting required reports and other deliverables on active grants.
- Investigators that have previous Alzheimer's Association awards closed as 'Incomplete' are not eligible to apply - this policy will be strictly adhered to with no exceptions.
- Overlapping funding of more than one Alzheimer's Association grant is not allowed.

Application Process

Applications are submitted through ProposalCentral. Late submissions will not be accepted under any circumstances.

Letters of Intent:

LOIs are a required component of the application process. No application will be considered without an approved LOI, including resubmitted applications. Additional details about the LOI components, review criteria and process are included below. To ensure a fair and unbiased review process, the Letter of Intent (LOI) will undergo blinded review. Applicants must not include any personally identifiable information (e.g., names, institutions, locations, or other identifiers) within the body of the LOI. Any submission containing such information may be disqualified or returned for revision. Please adhere strictly to this guideline to maintain the integrity of the review process.

LOI Components: Applicants must complete the required sections and upload any required documents. Some of these required fields are described below:

Applicant Information:

- Principal Investigator name, contact information, and current academic rank/position
 - Current academic rank/position
 - ORCID ID
- Lead Institution
 - Must qualify as an eligible Kentucky organization (see Eligible Organizations)
 - Applicants must be a full-time employee at time of submission
 - Institution/organization name must be in English
- Employer Identification Number (EIN) or TIN
 - This number must match the non-profit documentation
 - *Note: these documents should not contain the investigator's information.*
- Non-profit verification
 - W-9 (US entities) signed and dated within the past five years by an authorized institutional signing official and must include the EIN number
 - *Note: these documents should not contain the investigator's information.*

LOI Contents

- Proposal title
- Area of focus- Specific options will be available from a dropdown menu
- Brief project summary, including methodology (1000 characters, including spaces)
- Specific aims of the proposed project (1000 characters, including spaces)
- Innovation/novelty of the proposed project (1000 characters, including spaces)
- Impact on Alzheimer's and dementia in Kentucky (1000 characters, including spaces)
- Overall Impact on the field of Alzheimer's disease and related dementia (1000 characters, including spaces)
- Biosketch, Principal Investigator only. Applicants will be able to provide biosketches for other members of the project team at the full application stage
 - The Alzheimer's Association highly recommends using the latest NIH biosketch format (excluding Section D. Scholastic Performance), but any format will be accepted. Hyperlinks are allowed in biosketch only for individual research projects.

LOI Review Criteria and Process:

LOIs will be evaluated in a blinded review, where the reviewer has no information about the applicant and their environment for conducting the research. Each LOI is evaluated with attention to:

- Demonstrable innovation/novelty of the proposed project
- Impact of the research on Alzheimer's and all other dementia research, in Kentucky and broadly
- Evidence of methodological rigor that addresses the research question(s) being proposed

LOIs will be reviewed by 2 or 3 reviewers with expertise in the area of the application. Due to the number of LOIs received, individual feedback or comments from reviewers will not be shared.

A fraction of LOIs will be invited for full application.

Applications - Additional Details:

Following the LOI review, some of these projects are invited to submit full applications. The PI who submits the application must be the same PI who submitted the approved LOI. The application does not need to be completed in one session; a partially completed application can be saved and completed at any time before the deadline. It is imperative that you proofread your application before submission; you will not be allowed to make any changes to the application after the deadline or once applications are under review.

The application must be submitted by the receipt date/time deadline. Once submitted, you will receive a confirmation e-mail from proposalCENTRAL that your application was successfully submitted. If you do not receive a confirmation, click the Proposals tab and under the "Status" column make sure it says Submitted and not In Progress which indicates you have not yet submitted your application. It is the applicant's responsibility to make sure that the application is complete and accurate before submission. Only a single copy of an application will be accepted. Signatures are not required at the time of

submission by the Association, however, the signature page provided is for use should your institution/organization require signatures; the Association does not override any institutional policies and/or procedures. Please do not submit the signature page with your application.

Applicants may use LLMs and other generative AI tools in the preparation of their LOIs and full applications. Applicants are fully responsible for the content of their proposal, even those parts produced by an AI tool. Using one of these tools will not affect the review of your application.

Additional details for the application process are described below:

If you are invited to submit a full application, the required materials including the application format, templates, and instructions, will be available online at proposalCENTRAL after your LOI has been approved in the system. Full applications will not be accepted without an approved LOI from the current cycle

If you did not receive an email from an Alzheimer's Association staff member about your approval to submit a full application for the current cycle you should not apply even if one is available in your proposalCENTRAL Account.

Full Application Components

- **Scientific Abstract (300 words):** A summary of the scientific question, approach, and expected contribution/impact.
- **General Abstract:** A plain-language summary of the scientific question, approach, and expected contribution, suitable for a non-specialist audience.
- **Research Strategy (5 pages, including figures).** Organized as: Significance (alignment with priority areas and gap addressed); Innovation; Approach (experimental design, methods, anticipated results, pitfalls and alternatives).
- **Data Analysis (1 page):** A description of data and statistical analyses to support the interpretation of data produced by the research.
- **Relevance to Kentucky (1 page):** A description of how this research serves the people of Kentucky.
- **Biosketch (5 pages maximum):** A biosketch is needed for the PI and each individual listed as key personnel.
- **Letters of Support (no more than 3, each limited to 2 pages maximum).** Required from named collaborators and mentors. Institutional support letter from department chair is strongly recommended. No more than 3 letters of support will be accepted per application.
- **Budget Considerations:**
 - A budget justification for the proposed research project is required and must be submitted with the application and within the allowable two-page limit. However, if the application is to be awarded, a more detailed budget will be required and must be approved before the disbursement of funds.
 - **Direct Costs Allowed:** It is required that most of the funds awarded under this program be used for direct research support. No more than 10% of the total direct costs may be

included as indirect costs; this is inclusive of indirect costs for the implementing institution as well as any subcontracts. Allowable costs include:

- Purchase and care of laboratory animals
- Small pieces of laboratory equipment and laboratory supplies
- Purchases over \$10,000 require prior approval, even if included in the project proposal budget
- Computer software if used strictly for data collection (requires prior approval)
- Salary for the principal investigator, scientific (including postdoctoral fellows) and technical staff (including laboratory technicians and administrative support directly related to the funded grant); salary is capped at the current NIH cap of \$228,000.
- Membership to scientific association
- Professional development / communication training
- Support for travel to scientific and professional meetings and additional support for travel expenses necessary to carry out research planned – this may include site visits. A total of \$12,500 over the duration of the grant may be requested for travel purposes and is not to exceed \$7,000 in any given year.
- Training costs to visit and perform research related to the awarded project on another laboratory/facility (this is not to be included in the travel costs)
- Travel expenses for projects involving human volunteers are allowable expenses not included in the travel above. This can be captured under other expenses (itemized) in the budget.
- As part of Alzheimer's Association ongoing efforts to develop programs that support family-friendly research environments, Alzheimer's Association awardees can request up to \$2,500 per budget period for childcare costs provided by a licensed childcare provider.

○ **Direct Costs not allowed:**

- Computer hardware or standard software (e.g. Microsoft Office, mouse monitor, computer parts, AppleCare)
- Laboratory equipment such as freezers, ultracentrifuges, RT-PCR machines, microscopy/imaging equipment
- Service contract fees of equipment
- Construction or renovation costs
- Tuition
- Rent for laboratory/office space
- Visa costs and fees
- Expenses such as Data Network Recharges and Computing and communication device support services. However, data sharing and/or data storage for imaging, sequencing and other study data is allowed.
- General liability insurances, such as GAEL

- Wire and currency exchange fees; it is important to note that the Association does not adjust total funded amount in relation to fluctuations in exchange rates. All grants are paid in U.S. dollars.
- Institutional overheads associated with staff time
- The Alzheimer's Association Medical and Scientific Advisory Group (MSAG), the International Research Grant Program (IRGP) Council members and current employees of the Alzheimer's Association are allowed to be key personnel or collaborators on projects, however they are NOT ALLOWED to receive any salary or compensation. A complete list of MSAG and IRGP Council members can be found on our website alz.org/grants
- The Alzheimer's Association reserves the right to decline any charge that is an institutional fee and/or service charge.

Review Criteria

All applications are subject to a multiple stage peer-review process carried out with an online system. This multi-stage process is central to our award decisions and is designed to ensure both scientific rigor and fairness in the review of all submitted applications.

In the first stage, applications are reviewed and rated by peer scientists with expertise in the proposed area of research. Applicants may include recommended reviewers and also have the option to exclude specific reviewers from evaluating their application if a conflict of interest exists. Conflicts of interest include (but are not limited to):

- The Applicant trained with/ by the reviewer.
- The reviewer published with the Applicant in the last four (4) years. This excludes workshop or large consortia (i.e. ADNI, IGAP, etc.)
- The reviewer has been a co-investigator on a grant application or award with the Applicant in the last four (4) years.
- The reviewer has a conceptual difference of opinion with the Applicant that will prevent a fair review.
- The reviewer will receive financial benefit from the Applicant receiving an award.

In stage one of peer review, each application will be evaluated with the following criteria:

- **Scientific Merit and Innovation (35%).** Does the application address a clearly defined, high-priority gap? Is the approach novel and well-reasoned? Is the hypothesis testable with the proposed methods?
- **Feasibility and Rigor (35%).** How feasible and appropriate is the scope for the budget and timeline? Whether the applicant has necessary access to resources, cohorts, samples, or expertise? How well are credible alternative approaches described?
- **Pathway to Larger Impact (20%).** How will this work help fill impactful knowledge gaps at the? To what extent is the expected data likely to support meaningful impact to the people of

Kentucky? Whether there is a clear scientific path from this work to mechanistic or interventional studies at scale.

- **Investigator Qualifications (10%).** Does the PI's expertise, environment, and collaborative plan support successful completion?

The second stage includes further review and discussion of the scores and comments resulting from the initial review process to normalize across reviews and programs. The second review is carried out by the International Research Grant Program (IRGP) Council members and invited review committee members to ensure fairness and balance in the initial review procedures and to make funding recommendations to the Association.

Recommendations from the IRGP Council are shared with the Medical and Scientific Advisory Group (MSAG). The MSAG and IRGP evaluate and discuss the final recommendations to ensure alignment with the Alzheimer's Association's program and mission across the full scope of its objectives to best serve the broader goals and needs. Final recommendations are then shared with the Alzheimer's Association for funding. Members of the IRGP Council and MSAG are internationally recognized experts with distinguished careers in Alzheimer's and related dementia.

Financial Responsibility:

Funding is awarded to the institution and/or organization, not to the individual principal investigator. The principal investigator or a first-degree relative cannot be listed as the signing official or financial officer, or have checks sent to their attention if awarded.

Appeals of Scientific Peer Review:

To maintain a fair and rigorous review system, the Alzheimer's Association has a process for appeal of funding decisions. Appeals will not be considered for the letter of intent stage. Regarding applications, an appeal is intended to address extraordinary circumstances.

Appropriate reasons for initiating an appeal might include:

- Evidence that a reviewer has an undeclared conflict of interest.
- An egregious error or misunderstanding in the review process.
- Active malfeasance or demonstrable lack of due diligence.

The appeal process is not intended to provide a mechanism for routine protest of failure to receive a grant. It is anticipated that funding through the Alzheimer's Association grants programs will be extremely competitive and is limited by availability of funds.

If an applicant believes an extraordinary circumstance has contributed to failure to receive funding, the principal investigator may send a two-page, double-spaced formal letter of appeal (Word document) to grantsappeals@alz.org. Any supporting documents included must be submitted as a PDF. Appeals must be submitted within two weeks from the date your application outcome notification is sent. Notification of action on the appeal will be made via email, usually within 90 days of the appeal deadline.

Reporting Requirements, if Funded:

For funded awards through this program, there will be required scientific and financial reporting. Interim scientific and financial reports must be submitted at the end of each reporting period as long as the grant remains active.

Because this program is supported by a Commonwealth of Kentucky appropriation, the Alzheimer's Association is required to submit quarterly expenditure reports to the Kentucky Department for Local Government (DLG) from the time funds are disbursed until all appropriated funds are expended. To allow the Association to meet this obligation, awardees must submit quarterly expenditure documentation for all costs charged to the award, beginning with the first calendar quarter in which funds are disbursed and continuing until all award funds are expended. Acceptable documentation includes canceled checks, electronic payment confirmations or bank statements, vendor invoices, receipts, and payroll records. Final scientific and financial reports must be filed within 90 days of the grant's end date. All reports must be submitted electronically via proposalCENTRAL. The financial report must be approved and signed by someone with financial authority in the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or Grants and Contracts Office at the recipient's institution. Unobligated funds remaining at the end of the award must be returned to the Alzheimer's Association.

Awardees must retain all financial records supporting costs charged to the award and provide them to the Alzheimer's Association upon request, including in response to any inquiry, audit, or documentation request from the Commonwealth of Kentucky or DLG.

Note: The continuation of the grant over the awarded duration is contingent upon the timely receipt of all required reports, including quarterly expenditure documentation.

In addition, while animal welfare and human volunteer ethical assurances are not required at the time of application, investigators have until their chosen start date (within 6 months or less of award notification) to submit these approved documents. The Alzheimer's Association encourages investigators to initiate their certification applications on a schedule that recognizes that rDNA certification; IRB/IACUC approval at many institutions can take more than 90 days.

The Association accepts only certifications that apply specifically to the funded project and must include the name of the awardee.

Projects involving human volunteers must address the appropriate inclusion or exclusion of individuals in the proposed research project and describe recruitment efforts to represent the community in which the study is planned or being conducted. Prior to distribution of funding, the researcher must provide a description of their recruitment plan, including an outline describing how their recruitment efforts will ensure representative diversity in their volunteers.

Recruitment efforts should focus on diversity within key target groups, including a diverse representation of (but not limited to): sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. This will be tracked throughout the duration of the grant.

Electronic copies of publications, presentations and abstracts that report research supported by funds from the Alzheimer's Association must be submitted electronically at the time of publication. These copies will become part of the official file of the grant and will be provided to the Communications Division of the Alzheimer's Association to assist in the efforts to further inform the public about the International Research Grant Program of the Association. Any intellectual property disclosures resulting from the award must be submitted electronically at the time of publication. The Alzheimer's Association

may request any of the research outputs listed here from any awardee up to 7 years following the end of the award.

U.S. Sanctions:

Alzheimer's Association grants are generally open to scientists and researchers across the globe; however, as a U.S.-based charity, the Alzheimer's Association is subject to, and complies with, U.S. law. As a result, the Alzheimer's Association cannot award, and will not award, grants in violation of applicable U.S. statutes and regulations. This means, among other things, that the Alzheimer's Association cannot, and will not, fund any individual or entity (i) that is subject to U.S. comprehensive or targeted sanctions or if awarding funding would result in a violation of such sanctions, (ii) that is on the U.S. List of Specially Designated Nationals or entities owned or controlled by such persons, or (iii) when doing so is otherwise prohibited by U.S. laws related to combating terrorism.

Nondiscrimination and Harassment Statement:

The Alzheimer's Association is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and discrimination. The Alzheimer's Association strictly prohibits harassment and discrimination based on race; creed; color; religion; sex; sexual orientation; national origin; ancestry; age; Veteran status; citizenship status; marital status; physical or mental disabilities; pregnancy, gender identity or expression (including transgender status); genetic information; and any other characteristic protected by federal, state, or local law.

Program Administration and Contact

This program is jointly administered by the Alzheimer's Association International Research Grant Program. Investigators with eligibility or scope questions are strongly encouraged to contact the Alzheimer's Association prior to submitting an LOI.

Alzheimer's Association: grantsapp@alz.org | alz.org/research/for_researchers/grants