

**MINUTES OF THE
MARYLAND STEM CELL RESEARCH COMMISSION**
Monday, July 14, 2025
(Virtual Meeting)

Members:

Scott Bailey, Vice Chair
Rachel Brewster, Chair
Margaret Conn Himelfarb
Christopher Dreisbach
Mamta Gautam-Basak
Diane Hoffmann
David Moser
Barbara Nsiah
Linda Powers
Avram Reisner
Ira Schwartz
Curt Van Tassell

Staff:

Ben Antebi, MSCRF
Ruchika Nijhara, MSCRF
Sabrina Spinner, MSCRF

Guests:

Mindy Lehman, TEDCO
Cheryl Lohman, MD

The Commission meeting was called to order at 2:04 p.m.

The Commission welcomed and introduced new Commission Member, Dr. Christopher Dreisbach, Associate Director of Organizational Leadership Advanced Academic Programs, Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Dreisbach is also a faculty member of St. Mary's Seminary & University, Baltimore and an Episcopal priest. Dr. Dreisbach has been appointed by the Governor to fill the bioethics as it relates to religion seat on the Commission, and he expressed his willingness to serve.

I. Approval of Meeting Minutes

The Commission reviewed the meeting minutes from the May 5, 2025, Commission meeting. A motion was made and seconded to approve the meeting minutes as submitted. The motion passed (11 yes – 1 abstention).

II. Executive Director's Report

Dr. Ruchika Nijhara presented the Executive Director's Report, which focused on the following:

A. FY'25 Metrics Overview

An overview of MSCRF program metrics for calendar year 2025 was presented, covering application volumes, grant awards, and disease indications. The Commission awarded 63 grants totaling approx. \$22.6 million, distributed across all seven MSCRF grant programs in Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25). Funding supported a wide range of disease categories, with the nervous system receiving the highest level of support.

Since the launch of the Accelerating Cures initiative in 2017, MSCRF company awards have grown significantly, reaching 45 awards in total over the past eight years, with funding increasing from \$5 million for the period of 2007-2016 to \$21 million for the period of 2017-2025.

B. FY'26 R1 Cycle - Update

The application submission deadline was July 9, 2025, with a total of 58 applications successfully submitted (the largest number to date for the R1 cycle). Of the submitted applications, 22 are “shark tank” submissions (applications submitted under the Validation, Clinical, Manufacturing Assistance, and Commercialization grant programs), which involves live presentations by the applicants to the review panel, along with timed panel discussions. Peer reviewers are currently being recruited, and applications are being assigned. Due to the increased volume of applications, the review meeting will be extended from the usual two days to four days, and will be held from August 12–15, 2025.

C. Rescinded Award – Update

The R2 - 2025 Manufacturing Assistance (MA) award to Seraxis has been rescinded. The award was intended to support the establishment of a manufacturing facility to support a second product line. However, following the change in company leadership, Seraxis submitted a revised proposal shifting its priorities to focus resources on the clinical development of its first product. Since the revised plan no longer aligned with the original scope and the purpose of the MSCRF MA program, the award was rescinded.

D. MSCRF Events

a) The 2025 MSCRF Felicitation Ceremony was held on June 5, 2025, to recognize and highlight all awardees for FY25. The event featured brief presentations of each funded project. Guest speaker Shauna Whisenton, *a sickle cell patient cured through an innovative technique, Haploidentical bone marrow transplant, developed at JHU*, shared her story, highlighting the life-changing impact of MSCRF programs. The event was well attended and included two legislators –Edith Patterson (Charles County) and Michael Rogers (Anne Arundel County). Both recognized the tangible impact of the program on patients’ lives and appreciated the program’s support for high-risk research areas. For the first time, the event also included poster presentations, allowing awardees to share their work, foster collaboration, and leverage expertise across the community. Overall, the ceremony was a great success, reinforcing community engagement and the significance of ongoing research efforts.

b) Bio International Convention (2025): Dr. Nijhara attended the 2025 BIO International Convention in Boston, MA, from June 16–19, representing the Commission and MSCRF. This premier global life sciences event drew approximately 20,000 participants from across the globe. Dr. Nijhara engaged with Lt. Gov. Aruna Miller, Commerce Secretary Harry Coker, and other county leaders to highlight the significance and impact of MSCRF programs. She also met with numerous stem cell companies to discuss MSCRF funding opportunities, increasing the program’s visibility both nationally and internationally. As a result of these interactions, several companies expressed strong interest in applying for future funding, underscoring the growing recognition and reach of the program within and beyond Maryland.

III. 3% Cola Increase for MSCRF Staff

Dr. Nijhara indicated that both the TEDCO Board and MII Board approved a 3% cost of living adjustment (COLA) for FY'26 to their Staff, effective July 1, 2025. A motion was made and seconded to apply the same 3% COLA increase for all MSCRF Staff, effective July 1, 2025. The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Strategic Discussion - FY'26 Priorities

Dr. Nijhara opened the discussion by revisiting the outcome from the March 3, 2025, Commission meeting, where the Commission reflected on program performance, areas for improvement, and future priorities. Five breakout groups were formed during that meeting, and two common priorities remained consistent across all groups. The following two strategic topics were shortlisted for focused discussion along with several questions to guide the discussion.

- **Strategic Topic 1:** Strategic priorities for funding including *computational biology and stem cell medicine, non-animal stem cell-based models, bioimaging*
- **Strategic Topic 2:** Increase MSCRF visibility and showcase its impact

Topic 1: The Commission discussed how computational biology, AI, bioimaging, and non-animal stem cell-based models fit into MSCRF's strategic funding priorities. There was a consensus that these tools are becoming increasingly important in regenerative medicine and align with State priorities and FDA shifts away from animal research. While Commissioners support encouraging proposals in these areas, they also agreed no fixed funding should be allocated at this stage.

Topic 2: The Commission discussed ways to enhance MSCRF's visibility and to better highlight program impact. The Commission emphasized using patient stories to illustrate how MSCRF-funded projects contribute to medical breakthroughs. Additional suggestions included press releases, professional videos, and strengthening social media presence. Also discussed hiring someone with some experience posting on social media

V. Statement for Closing the Meeting

A motion was made and seconded that the Commission go into closed session. The motion stated the following:

STATUTORY AUTHORITY TO CLOSE SESSION

General Provisions Article §3-103(a)(1)(i):

This subtitle does not apply to ... a public body when it is carrying out ... an administrative function.

TOPICS TO BE DISCUSSED:

The discussion will concern a review of operational and related considerations impacting the administration of the MSCRF.

REASONS FOR CLOSING:

The Commission believes that the aforementioned administrative matters do not fall within the scope of coverage of the Open Meetings Act.

The Motion passed by unanimous vote of the Commissioners remaining present (see separate Closed Session minutes). The Commission went into closed session at 3:12 pm.

Meeting adjourned at 4:23 p.m.