Request for Applications: 2027 Doctoral and Postdoctoral Research Fellowships

Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation
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Contracting Officer:	Tanya Stevenson, Chief Executive Officer, MDF
Location:	United States, Canada, and eligible international sites
Date Issued:	April 6, 2026
Proposals Due:	September 4, 2026
Selection Notification:	by December 18, 2026
Period of Award:	January 1, 2027 – December 31, 2028
Anticipated Award:	Doctoral: $55,000 (includes funding for required travel) Postdoctoral: $105,000 (includes funding for required travel)
Number of Awards:	To be determined based on applicant mix and available funds

Synopsis

Through this Request for Applications (RFA), the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation (MDF) seeks to strengthen the pipeline of researchers working in the field of myotonic dystrophy (DM) by supporting doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows who are interested in pursuing research related to the disease. The MDF recognizes the importance of engaging researchers early in their careers and providing opportunities for training and mentorship that will encourage sustained involvement in DM research.

This fellowship program supports research projects focused on basic, translational, and clinical aspects of myotonic dystrophy, as well as projects that aim to improve the care and quality of life of people living with DM. Fellowships are for projects conducted under the supervision of qualified sponsors in academic institutions or research institutes. By supporting trainees at a critical stage in their development, the program aims to build a strong and diverse community of researchers who are prepared to contribute to advances in understanding the disease and developing new therapeutic strategies.

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Goal

The goal of this program is to support doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows who demonstrate strong potential to contribute to research in myotonic dystrophy (DM). Through these fellowships, the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation (MDF) provides trainees with resources, mentorship, and research experience that support their development as investigators in the field. By supporting researchers during critical training stages, the MDF aims to strengthen the long-term research workforce focused on myotonic dystrophy and encourage promising scientists and clinicians to pursue careers in DM research.

Background

The development of effective therapies and improved care for myotonic dystrophy depends on a strong and growing community of researchers dedicated to understanding the disease. Rare disease fields often face challenges in attracting and retaining early-career scientists, particularly during doctoral and postdoctoral training when researchers are establishing their long-term research focus.

Training opportunities that provide dedicated funding, mentorship, and engagement with the DM research community are critical to building this pipeline. The MDF Research Fellowship Program, launched in 2009, supports doctoral and postdoctoral trainees

during these formative stages and encourages new investigators to develop the expertise needed to advance research and therapeutic development in myotonic dystrophy.

Grant Focus Areas

Myotonic dystrophy is a chronic and multi-systemic disease that affects the lives of individuals with DM and their families every day. There are two major types of myotonic dystrophy: type 1 (DM1) and type 2 (DM2). Both are inherited autosomal dominant disorders affecting multiple organ systems. In DM1, progressive muscle wasting and weakness primarily affect the lower legs, hips, hands, shoulders, neck, and face. In DM2, progressive muscle wasting and weakness primarily affect the proximal legs, hips, shoulders, and neck.

Symptoms may include myotonia, cataracts, cardiac conduction defects, infertility, and central nervous system involvement, which can cause fatigue, excessive daytime sleepiness, and executive function difficulties. Congenital DM, a severe infantile form of DM1, can cause hypotonia, breathing and swallowing difficulties, delayed development, and intellectual disability. Research indicates that as many as 1 in 2,100 individuals in the United States are affected by myotonic dystrophy or at risk of passing the disease to the next generation.[i]

Opportunity for DM Research

Recognizing that the symptoms and the severity of DM vary widely among affected people and often severely impact activities of daily living, mobility, and independence, the MDF is soliciting scientific proposals for **Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowship** supporting research related to myotonic dystrophy. Projects may focus on basic science, translational research, clinical research, or studies aimed at improving care and quality of life for individuals living with DM.

Duration of the Award

Fellowships are awarded for a two-year period. Funding for the second year is contingent upon satisfactory progress during the first year. Applicants may apply once per calendar year. Individuals who receive an MDF award are not eligible to apply for another MDF fellowship for three calendar years following the award. Applicants may apply for only one MDF grant type at a time and may not hold more than one MDF grant simultaneously. The Small Grants Program is an exception to this rule (please see the RFA for more information).

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Payment

Awards are made to the applicant's organization on behalf of the recipient. Award amounts are as follows:

- **Doctoral Award.** Total award: $55,000 over two years for salary, benefits, travel, and research support. This includes $5,000 designated for travel to the MDF International Conference and the biennial International Myotonic Dystrophy Consortium (IDMC) meeting.
- **Postdoctoral Award.** Total award: $105,000 over two years for salary, benefits, travel, and research support. This includes $5,000 designated for travel to the MDF International Conference and the biennial IDMC meeting.

Travel funds not used for these required meetings must be returned to MDF at the end of the funding period. MDF funds may not be used for institutional overhead, indirect costs, or capital cost recovery.

Second-year funding is contingent upon satisfactory progress as documented in the required progress report submitted four weeks after the end of the first award year. MDF reserves the right to terminate funding if program requirements are not met.

Applications

Eligibility Requirements

Applications are limited to those submitted by individuals at academic institutions or non-profit research organizations. For-profit organizations are not eligible. Applications from non-U.S. academic institutions or non-profit organizations are permitted, as long as they are accredited academic medical centers or research institutes.

Applicant Requirements

Degree Requirements. Applicants must meet the following degree and training requirements based on their training stage.

- Doctoral applicants must be enrolled and in good standing in a PhD program at an accredited academic, medical center, or research institute. By the time the award begins, the applicant must have completed at least two years of doctoral training, including required coursework and any qualifying examinations, and must have selected a sponsor whose laboratory focuses a substantial portion of its research activities on myotonic dystrophy.

- Postdoctoral applicants must hold a PhD, MD, DO, or other doctoral-level professional degree from an accredited domestic or international institution before the fellowship can begin. The doctoral degree must have been awarded no more than three years prior to the start of the fellowship period. Documentation confirming successful completion of the doctoral degree must be submitted before the award can be activated. Postdoctoral applicants must also have a sponsor whose laboratory focuses a substantial portion of its research activities on myotonic dystrophy.

Commitment to Myotonic Dystrophy Research. The MDF Research Fellowship Program supports doctoral students and postdoctoral scholars who show strong potential to contribute to research in myotonic dystrophy. Previous experience in DM research is encouraged but not required.

Applicants should describe how their prior training, research experiences, and scientific interests prepare them to undertake the proposed project and address important questions related to myotonic dystrophy. The application should also describe how the fellowship will support the applicant's development and growing expertise in DM research.

Sponsor. Applicants must identify a qualified sponsor who will oversee the proposed research and provide mentorship throughout the fellowship period. The sponsor should have expertise in myotonic dystrophy or a closely related scientific area relevant to the proposed project.

The sponsor must confirm that appropriate laboratory space, facilities, and research resources are available to support the project and provide a strong training environment. For applicants remaining at an institution where they have already trained for more than one year, the sponsor should explain how the fellowship will expand the applicant's research experience or training opportunities.

Co-sponsors are encouraged for multidisciplinary projects, particularly those involving collaborations between academic institutions and biotechnology or pharmaceutical partners.

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Study Requirements

Applicants must demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to complete the proposed research project. Proposals must focus on research directly related to myotonic dystrophy and may include basic, clinical, or applied research.

Eligible research areas include, but are not limited to:

- Pathogenesis of DM
- Molecular mechanisms underlying phenotype differences in DM1, DM2, and congenital DM
- Development of diagnostics or biomarkers
- Studies of disease progression or natural history
- Identification and validation of endpoints for drug development
- Standards of care and care integration, including nursing, social work, and psychology
- Epidemiology, health economics, and patient support services
- Therapeutic development, particularly early-stage projects that could potentially leverage additional funding

Proposals focused on DM2 research are given priority for these awards.

Submission Process and Requirements

Proposals must be submitted in 12-point font. Proposals must be submitted via the Proposal Central application system **by September 4, 2026, at 5 PM Pacific Time**. The proposal must include the following sections:

Applicant

- Professional Profile
- ORCID Number
- NIH-style applicant bio sketches (not to exceed four pages each)

Applicant Institution Information

- Applicant Institution Profile
- IRS EIN or TIN Number
- Signing Official Email
- Financial Official Email

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Sponsor and Key Personnel

- Professional Profile
- ORCID Number
- Percent effort
- NIH-style bio sketches of all participating team members (not to exceed 4 pages each)

Abstract

- *Technical Abstract of Research Plan (one-half page).* The technical abstract should provide a concise scientific summary of the proposed research. It should briefly describe the central hypothesis, specific aims, overall approach, and anticipated significance of the project. The abstract should be written for reviewers with scientific expertise and clearly demonstrate the rigor and feasibility of the proposed work. The technical abstract will remain part of the application and is used exclusively for the evaluation of scientific merit. Applicants should ensure that it is precise, well-organized, and fully integrated with the research plan.
- *Lay Summary (one-half page).* The lay summary should be written in clear, non-technical language suitable for a general audience. Applicants should describe the purpose, goals, and potential impact of the proposed research on the DM field without using scientific jargon. The summary should explain why the research is important, how it may benefit people living with myotonic dystrophy, and how it contributes to the broader field. If the project is funded, the lay summary may be published and shared publicly by the MDF in newsletters, on the website, annual reports, and in other communications. Applicants should ensure that the summary is clear, accurate, and appropriate for a general audience while avoiding the disclosure of confidential or proprietary information.

Budget

- *Detailed Budget.* Applicants must submit a detailed budget outlining all proposed expenses for the grant. Authorized expenses include salary and fringe benefits for the applicant or research personnel, equipment and supplies directly related to the project, and travel expenses, which are limited to a maximum of $2,500 per year. Expenses not covered by the grant include institutional overhead or indirect costs, educational fees, payments to members of governing bodies, illegal or inappropriate expenditures, and any costs not directly related to the research project.
- *Budget Description and Justification (one paragraph).* Applicants should explain the rationale for each proposed expense and describe how any uncovered salary,

fringe benefits, or research costs will be addressed. Applicants should clearly indicate any funding gaps and how these will be covered, whether through other grants, departmental support, or personal resources.

- *Other Sources of Funding (one paragraph).* Applicants must describe other sources of funding that support the project or the applicant's research program. This should include current and pending awards, institutional support, or collaborations that contribute to the feasibility and success of the proposed research.

Publications

Applicants should provide a list of their current publications relevant to project and the DM field.

Attachments

- *Applicant Statement (one page).* The applicant statement must include the applicant's name and contact information, a list of current research funding, and a description of any pending applications for research funding that would overlap with the proposed funding period. The statement should describe the applicant's previous research experience and current research interests and explain how these align with the proposed project to address important questions related to myotonic dystrophy. Applicants should clearly describe their interest and potential in DM research and provide a brief discussion of their planned career trajectory in the field. This section should outline how the applicant intends to develop skills, gain experience, develop a career in DM research, and contribute to DM research in the future.
- *Description of Environment (one-half page).* Provide a description of the research environment in which the project will be conducted and the support available to the applicant. Include available facilities and equipment, institutional resources that will support the project, and any leveraged or complementary funding that will contribute to the work. Describe how the sponsor and other key personnel will provide training support to the applicant.
- *Research Plan (total should not exceed six pages).* This must include the following information:
  1. Background and Hypothesis (one page): Describe the scientific background relevant to the proposed project. This section should summarize the current state of knowledge, highlight key gaps in understanding related to myotonic dystrophy, and explain the rationale for the proposed work. Clearly state the

central hypothesis that will be tested and explain how the hypothesis is supported by existing literature or prior findings.

2. Specific Aims of the Project (one page): Clearly state the primary objectives of the project. Each aim should describe a defined research question or objective that can be realistically completed within the proposed funding period. Applicants should briefly describe the approach that will be used to achieve each aim and explain how the aims collectively address the central hypothesis. Applicants should also very briefly describe alternative strategies.
3. Translational Significance (one-half page): Explain the potential relevance of the proposed work to myotonic dystrophy. Applicants should describe how the findings may contribute to improved understanding of disease mechanisms, development of therapeutic strategies, identification of biomarkers, or other outcomes that may advance research or clinical care for individuals with DM.
4. Preliminary Data (one page): Provide any preliminary data that support the feasibility of the proposed work or the validity of the central hypothesis. Preliminary data may include pilot data generated by the applicant or relevant findings from the literature. If preliminary data are limited, applicants should describe other evidence that supports the feasibility of the proposed research.
5. Methods and Data Analysis Plan (two pages): Describe the study design and methods that will be used to accomplish the proposed aims. This section should include details regarding experimental approaches, data collection procedures, and analytical methods. Applicants should describe how data will be analyzed and interpreted, including the statistical methods that will be used when applicable. Expected results and their significance should be discussed. When relevant, applicants should include estimates of statistical power and justification for sample sizes. This section should also address potential challenges that may arise during the project and describe alternative strategies that could be used if initial approaches are not successful.
6. Anticipated Collaborative Agreements, if applicable (one-half page): If the project involves collaboration with other investigators, institutions, or organizations, describe the nature of these collaborations and how they will contribute to the success of the project. Include a brief description of the roles and responsibilities of collaborators and any relevant agreements or arrangements that support the work.

References

Provide references cited in the research plan.

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Sponsor Support Letter

Applicants must include one letter from the Sponsor who will supervise the proposed research project. This letter should confirm the sponsor's commitment to mentoring the applicant and overseeing the research during the fellowship period. The sponsor must describe the training plan for the applicant and explain how the fellowship will support the applicant's development as a researcher in the DM field.

The training plan should outline how the applicant will gain the scientific knowledge, technical skills, and research experience necessary to advance in myotonic dystrophy research. The sponsor should describe the mentorship structure, including how the applicant will be guided in designing and conducting research, analyzing data, and communicating findings. The letter should also describe opportunities for professional development, such as participation in collaborations, presentations at scientific meetings, manuscript preparation, and exposure to new methodologies or areas of expertise. If the applicant has already been working in the sponsor's laboratory, the sponsor should describe how the fellowship will expand the applicant's training and provide new research experiences.

Letter of Reference

Applicants must also include a separate letter of reference from an individual who is familiar with the applicant's academic background, research experience, and potential for success. This letter should provide an independent assessment of the applicant's abilities, motivation, and promise as a developing researcher.

The referee should comment on the applicant's preparation for the proposed research, their intellectual curiosity and work ethic, and their potential to contribute to research in myotonic dystrophy or related fields. The letter should help reviewers understand the applicant's strengths and their potential to grow into an investigator or research leader in the future.

Review and Selection

All applications must be received by **5:00 PM Pacific Time on Friday, September 4, 2026**. The MDF Scientific Advisory Committee will score and prioritize candidates based on the following criteria:

- **Impact on People Living with DM (approximately 25% of total score).** Reviewers will assess the potential of the proposed research to improve the quality of life for individuals with myotonic dystrophy. This includes considering how the project addresses urgent research gaps, clinical needs, or care delivery challenges.

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Applicants should clearly articulate the real-world relevance of their work in the "Lay Summary" and "Technical Summary" sections, including how the research might directly or indirectly improve patient outcomes, inform clinical practice, or advance understanding of disease mechanisms. Proposals that make a strong, well-supported case for meaningful impact will score higher in this category.

- **Commitment and Career Trajectory of the Research Fellow (approximately 50% of total score).** Reviewers will evaluate the applicant's potential to develop as a researcher in myotonic dystrophy. Because this fellowship supports doctoral students and postdoctoral scholars, emphasis will be placed on the applicant's demonstrated interest in DM research, the clarity of their proposed career trajectory, and the quality of the mentorship and training environment. The applicant statement and letters of support will help reviewers assess the applicant's motivation, potential for growth, and likelihood of continuing to engage in DM research.
- **Feasibility and Scientific Quality (approximately 25% of total score).** Reviewers will assess the scientific rigor, clarity, and feasibility of the proposed research. This includes evaluation of the study design, methods, analytical approach, expected outcomes, and the applicant's ability to complete the project within the proposed timeframe. Applicants may suggest external experts in their field for consideration in the review process. These suggestions may inform the selection of reviewers but will not guarantee assignment. Proposals deemed infeasible or of low overall scientific quality will receive a low-priority funding score regardless of the proposal's scores on the other dimensions.

Applicants are welcome to consult with the MDF Chief Scientific Officer, Dr. Andy Rohrwasser at Andy.Rohrwasser@myotonic.org for refinement of their proposals before submission. Technical issues should be directed to the MDF Director of Evaluation and Research Programs, Dr. Nadine Ann Skinner, at nadine.skinner@myotonic.org.

After initial screening by MDF staff members, the Scientific Advisory Committee and selected experts will review applications and recommend final candidates to the MDF Board of Directors. The MDF Board of Directors will consider the Scientific Advisory Committee recommendations and determine final grant awards. Awards are made at the sole discretion of the MDF Board of Directors and are contingent upon the availability of funds. Availability of funds does not signify a commitment to award any grants. If no applicant is deemed of sufficient scientific merit, expertise, and/or skill, MDF may choose not to award a grant during this funding cycle.

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Reporting and Publications

Progress Reports

All grant recipients are required to submit narrative progress reports to the MDF on a regular schedule throughout the two-year grant period. Narrative reports must include updates on research progress, accomplishments, and any challenges encountered.

Recipients must submit a mid-year narrative progress report six months after the start of the grant. At the end of the first year, a year-one narrative progress report must be submitted along with the year-one expense report. A second mid-year progress report is due six months into the second year. Upon completion of the project at the end of the second year, a final narrative report must be submitted no later than one month after the conclusion of the grant. The final report must include an abstract written in lay language for general audiences.

Expense Reports

Each grant recipient must submit expense reports to the MDF during the course of the two-year grant:

- An interim expense report (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the first year.
- A final expense report (including the original proposed budget and final expenses on the grant) submitted to the MDF no later than one month after completion of research at the end of the second year and should be submitted along with a check for any unexpended funds on the grant.

The grant recipient may reallocate up to 10% of the total grant award budget between line items without prior approval.

A request for a “no-cost extension”, if required, must be submitted in writing at least two weeks before the end of the grant year for which the extension is requested and may be granted for no more than six months.

Publications and Conferences

Research Fellow award recipients are encouraged to submit at least one scientific manuscript for peer-reviewed publication within six months of the conclusion of the research, reporting the research findings. All publications, exhibits, and press releases directly resulting from MDF funding shall carry a credit line to the MDF.

Grant recipients must notify MDF if a press release is being prepared or if they are contacted by a journalist regarding the project. Recipients should encourage university press offices or outside journalists to contact MDF to coordinate publicity. Press releases related to MDF-funded research should be emailed to grants@myotonic.org.

MDF encourages an open-access policy that enables the unrestricted access and reuse of all peer-reviewed published research funded, in whole or in part, by the MDF. MDF shall pay reasonable fees required by a publisher or repository to effect immediate, open access to the accepted article. This includes article processing charges and other publisher fees. While not needed to fulfill the open-access policy requirements, grantees are encouraged to deposit funded research consisting of their submitted manuscript, and its subsequent versions, on a preprint server.

Doctoral and Postdoctoral Fellowship recipients must attend virtually or in-person at the MDF International Conference and biennial IDMC conference and present at the MDF International Conference (travel funds are included).

The title of each study funded by MDF, together with the lay language abstract of the research, the names of the grant recipient, and the institution, will be published on the MDF website, in MDF newsletters, in annual reports and wherever else MDF deems appropriate. The grant recipient will always be clearly acknowledged. The lay summary description should not contain information the grant recipient does not wish to disclose to the general public.

Timeline

Date Issued:	April 6, 2026
Proposals Due:	September 4, 2026
Selection Notification:	by December 18, 2026
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[i] Johnson NE, Butterfield RJ, Mayne K, et al. Population Based Prevalence of Myotonic Dystrophy Type 1 Using Genetic Analysis of State-wide Blood Screening Program. *Neurology*. Published online January 20, 2021:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425. doi:10.1212/WNL.0000000000011425