SP-CERN Pilot Project Grant Program

Spastic Paraplegia Centers of Excellence Research Network (SP-CERN-RDCRC) Pilot Project / Feasibility Core

Call for Applications – First Cycle (Start Date: September 1, 2026)

Program Overview: The Spastic Paraplegia Centers of Excellence Research Network (SP-CERN) - RDCRC, part of the NIH-funded Rare Diseases Clinical Research Network (RDCRN), invites applications for the SP-CERN Pilot Project Grant Program. This program is part of the SP-CERN Pilot Project / Feasibility Core, directed by Craig Blackstone, M.D., Ph.D. (Massachusetts General Hospital) and Marie Davis, M.D., Ph.D. (University of Washington), and aims to support innovative projects that advance the diagnosis, clinical trial readiness, management, and treatment of Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia (HSP) and related disorders.

Each pilot project will receive up to $50,000 in direct costs for a one-year period, with the possibility of a second year of support for projects that demonstrate significant progress and potential for continued impact.

Projects should align with SP-CERN's mission to accelerate translational research and clinical trial readiness for HSP and are expected to generate preliminary data supporting future extramural grant applications or larger collaborative studies.

Eligibility

- Junior investigators (at the level of instructor or assistant professor) affiliated with SP-CERN institutions seeking to establish a research program in HSP or related neurogenetic disorders.
- Established investigators affiliated with SP-CERN institutions wishing to expand their research into new directions relevant to HSP.
- Collaborations across SP-CERN sites, with international partners, or with other RDCRN consortia are strongly encouraged.
- U.S. and international applicants are eligible.
- Investigators from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds are strongly encouraged to apply.

Areas of Interest

The SP-CERN Pilot/Feasibility Core seeks projects that:

- Develop or validate biomarkers and clinical outcome measures for HSP subtypes;
- Advance diagnostic approaches, including genomic, transcriptomic, or functional tools;
- Explore gene-based or small-molecule therapies for HSP;
- Build or strengthen collaborations with patient advocacy groups (PAGs) and international consortia.

Projects are expected to address unmet scientific or clinical needs and to have clear translational potential.

Funding and Duration

Each award provides up to $50,000 (direct costs) for a 12-month period. One pilot award will be made in Year 1 (FY2026); two awards per year will be available from Year 2 onward. In exceptional cases, projects may receive a second year of support, based on progress and potential for impact. Awards are contingent on NIH/NINDS approval as required under the RDCRN cooperative agreement.

Application Requirements

Applications must include the following components:

- Specific Aims (1 page)
- Research Strategy (maximum 3 pages, Arial 11 pt, 0.5-inch margins), organized as follows:
    - Background and Preliminary Data
    - Scientific Approach
    - Interpretation of the Data
    - Future Directions
- NIH-format biosketch of the PI and key personnel
- Detailed budget and justification (1 page)
- Two letters of support (one letter from the applicant's SP-CERN site PI or from the applicant's division/department chair)

All applications should be submitted as a single PDF file.

Timeline

- Application deadline: February 1, 2026
- Decision notification: March 1, 2026
- Project start date: September 1, 2026
- Project duration: 12 months

Contact Information

Application submission: Please submit your application in a single PDF to: *spcern@childrens.harvard.edu* with Subject line: SP-CERN Pilot Project Grant Application – [Applicant Name]

About SP-CERN

The Spastic Paraplegia Centers of Excellence Research Network (SP-CERN) is a multi-institutional NIH RDCRN consortium dedicated to advancing translational research and therapy development for hereditary spastic paraplegia and related neurogenetic disorders. SP-CERN unites 11 academic centers across the U.S. and international collaborators to accelerate diagnosis, natural-history research, biomarker discovery, and clinical-trial readiness.