Michelle Timmerman: So welcome, everyone. This session is how NIH processes and assigns your application. To be sure you're in the correct place, what we're going to be discussing here is the basis for assigning an application to an institute or a center, the basis for assigning an application to a study section, and a little bit about the timing and the process for application assignments. I'm Dr. Michelle Timmerman. I'm an associate director at the Division of Receipt and Referral in CSR, and as I said, I'm the moderator today, and I'll be answering questions today. Our format today is a live presentation. This is not a recording. This is live, and that presentation will be given by Dr. Duane Price, who is the acting director of DRR. I'll answer a couple of questions in the middle, but most of our Q and A will be at the end. And I also have here with us my DRR colleagues, Charlie Lee and Dr. Sharon Gubanich. They are the ones who are going to be reading your questions in the Q and A and sending them on to me. So as you can see, we do have four live human beings who work at DRR and are on our presentation today. So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Price, and Dr. Price, can you confirm that you see my slides again?

Duane Price: I do, Michelle. Thank you very much. So good afternoon, everyone. My name's Duane Price. I am delighted to be representing the Division of Receipt and Referral and the Center for Scientific Review. Today I'm going to talk about how the NIH processes and assigns the applications that you submit to us. Next slide please, Dr. Timmerman. Thank you. Before I start I want to define a few key terms and acronyms. You've probably already heard these in the various talks this week, but a little repetition doesn't hurt. As you may now, the NIH is made up of 27 different institutes and centers. I will refer to these as ICs. Center for Scientific Review, or CSR, is one of the 27 ICs, and I'm representing a division within CSR, specifically the Division of Receipt and Referral, or just DRR. Grant applications submitted to the NIH are reviewed in scientific review groups, or SRGs. And just to confuse you a little bit, SRGs at CSR are also called study sections. Each SRG is managed by the scientific review officer, or SRO, and similar SRGs are housed in an integrated review group, or an IRG. These are directed by an IRG chief. After the review, portfolios of similar grants are managed by the ICs by NIH program officers, or POs. Next slide. Thank you. So this schematic depicts the life cycle of an NIH grant from the time the idea is initiated to the time of award. I'm really only going to focus on just a small part of the cycle, indicated over there on the right in purple. I'll talk a little bit about grant submission, and I'll talk a lot about how we assign the applications. I'll stop just before the applications actually get to the scientific review group. I want to take a moment to emphasize the important role of the authorized organizational representative, or AOR. The principle investigator in the AOR work hand in hand throughout this cycle. Next slide. So moving onto business, you can submit your application electronically in one of three ways. You can use a home built system, or a commercially available systems to system solution. You can use grants.gov's workspace, or you can use the NIH's ASSIST system, which is the one we recommend. Regardless of which system you use, once you submit your application, it takes the same path. It goes first to grants.gov, which does a few checks. Like whether the funding opportunity announcement is open or not, and then it's retrieved by the NIH. The NIH does nearly 800 electronic checks and validations. These checks may result in the rejection of your application, but once the application passes the system validations, it comes through to the NIH eRA commons, an online interface where grant applicants, grantees and federal staff at the NIH can access and share the same information. Next slide, please. So it's really important that your application be submitted on time, and on time means 5 p.m. local time. If you work in Hawaii, that means your application needs to come in at 5 p.m. Hawaii time. If, however, you're on vacation in Hawaii, which would be nice, but you actually in New York, it needs to come in at 5 p.m. New York time, and that's because it's the time of the applicant organization that really counts. We have a lot of standard due dates that repeat year after year after year, and sometimes they just happen to fall on a weekend or a holiday. Standard due dates automatically roll forward to the next business day. So if your standard due date is on a Saturday this year, you have until Monday to submit your application. Again, because it's due at 5 p.m., the application needs to be in the door at 5 p.m. Things that come in after 5 p.m. are considered to be late, and are subject to our late policy, and we may not be able to accept them. Next slide, please. So there is a 2-day viewing window after your application is submitted. This is a great opportunity to catch mistakes, but you need to be aware of two things. First, your application followed all the way through to the eRA commons. Many applicants just push the button and walk away. It's essential that you look at it. If you can't view it, it doesn't exist, and we can't review it. So make sure there's an image associated with your application. Second, it's also your opportunity to make sure that your application is in shape for reviewers to consider it. Sometimes you look at it, and you see you need to fix something. The system will hold your application for 2 business days after you submit to allow you to make changes. If you submit your application at least 2 days early, you'll have the full 2-day viewing window to take advantage of. However, if you submit 2 hours before the deadline, then you only have 2 hours to work on it. All changes and corrections and updates must be made before that 5 p.m. deadline, or your application is late. Next slide. However, we don't slam the door shut when a due date passes. We have to leave the 2-day viewing window open across that deadline because we do take some applications late. If your application is late, you must include a cover letter explaining the problems that you had. In all cases, these problems must apply to one of the principal investigators, or PIs. There are reasons that we would be able to take your application late. For example, if there are federal computer systems issues. If you have review service by the PI, or acute illness in the PI or a family member. The guide notice listed at the bottom of the slide details the full policy. Please note, we don't give approval in advance, and making a correction is not, is not, is not a valid reason for submitting late. Next slide, please. Once the application comes in the grants.gov pipeline and negotiates the 2-day viewing window, it ends up in the Division of Receipt and Referral. We process all incoming applications for the NIH, but we also process applications for other operating divisions of the Health and Human Services, such as the CDC and the FDA. Of the NIH applications, about 25 percent are destined for review in one of the IC review shops. The remaining 75 percent are reviewed in the CSR study section. Since that's the most likely destination of your application, I'll focus on CSR review for the rest of the talk. Next slide, please. So the doctoral level scientists at the Division of Receipt and Referral have broad scientific backgrounds. There are eight full time staff that do nothing but process applications, and there are 22 part-time referral officers. These are really full time SROs, but they're basically doing two jobs at once. Referral officers assign your application to an institute or center, and they direct your application toward the appropriate scientific review group. We're all expert in admission of the ICs, and we know which CSR study sections review what. And we're also very knowledgeable about NIH policies as they relate to the receipt and referral of applications. Next slide, please. We make decisions based on a number of factors. For assignments to institutes and centers, we consider the scope of the IC's mission and their referral guidelines. We verify that the IC that we would assign your application to participates in the funding opportunity announcement, or FOA. And for review assignments we look first for any agreements about the locus of review. Sometimes applications are reviewed at an institute or center, and so they would go there and not to CSR. And sometimes for special initiatives, we cluster applications during review at CSR. For applications destined for CSR study sections, we use the publicly available guidelines posted on the Internet. Next slide. So changing topics a little bit. Next slide. Let's talk about the IC assignment in more detail. The key thing here is that the IC that would take your application has got to be on the FOA in order for us to assign it. At the top of every FOA, there's a list called components of participating organizations, and it lists all the institutes and centers that are able to take applications through that FOA. Every single round, every round, we get a lot of applications that are submitted to FOAs where the IC that would be appropriate for that application doesn't participate. Sometimes we can find an alternative FOA with similar due dates, but usually we can't, and usually we have to withdraw the application. So please, please, please take a look at this before you decide to use a particular FOA to submit your application. The only exception to this rule is if an IC has issued a notice of special interest that points to a FOA that the IC does not participate on. This is allowed, but it's rare, and it's pretty onerous. In this case, it is essential that applicants include the notice number and the agency routing identifier field, or box 4B of the SF424 R&R form. Next slide, please. So what ... If you're not sure which IC is appropriate for your application, well, the NIH has developed an tool to help you. It's called Matchmaker, and it's in the online NIH reporter system. It uses a database of all funded grants. You just enter some text. Could be your abstract or specific aims and push the button. Next slide, please. Matchmaker output looks like this. The first column tells you which institute or center funded applications similar to yours, and that's really important. But it also lists applications and their abstracts. Next slide, please. The more important thing is that Matchmaker can also route you to a program officer. That's the person responsible for managing the programmatic, scientific, and/or technical aspects of grants. We always highly recommend that applicants, particularly when they're not sure which IC is appropriate, reach out to a program officer. Matchmaker provides a list of potential POs with their contact information. So I'm going to pause there for a moment, Dr. Timmerman, and we can take some questions if you like.

Michelle Timmerman: So out of respect for OER and their attention to making sure we stay on time, I am actually setting a timer to be sure we don't use a disproportionate amount at this. So here's a good question. If you speak with a PO prior to submitting to a new application, should you indicate that in a cover letter, and does that have any effect on the IC assignment? And bonus points to this person, they said for those FOAs that many ICs participate in, of course. Almost, not quite. So absolutely, if you speak to a program officer, you should note that you had this conversation with the program officer. The place to put that, however, is not in the cover letter. It is in the assignment request form. I will call it ARF, sorry for the abbreviation, and you should put that in the rationale. And that is where we look for all of the information about the assignments that you want to be requesting. So are applications reviewed on a first come, first serve basis? So I'm going to answer this question for application receipt and referral because application peer review is going to be different and talked about in many other cases. Application receipt and referral, so if you #SubmitEarly ... We created a hashtag for that, and let's say you submit a week early. We do not leave the applications sitting there until the due date. We actually process it according to our normal time frame. So if you submit it a week early, then there actually is the potential that you might be able to fix some issues, possibly. If you submit it 2 days early, then we get the application the day after that 2-day viewing window on the actual due date. So they are reviewed as they are received in terms of the application receipt and referral. Do we recommend that the PI makes suggestions for specific study sections? That's actually going to be in the next talk. Does CSR consider the matches from the assignment referral tool? So we consider that in two cases. One is if an applicant enters under their rationale I am requesting this particular study section because it was in the assignment referral tool, that is something we will consider. It's a valid consideration. We do not simply click a button and say, "Oh, the assignment referral tool said this is the top one, so we will assign it to there." And I'm answering this question not only for the assignment referral tool with study section assignments, but also the IC Matchmaker. Those are tools, and they are very valid things for you to make recommendations on. We will consider those recommendations, but it is all evaluated by multiple doctoral level scientists. In no case is it somebody clicking a button and simply confirming an algorithm. And with this, I'm going to actually turn it back to Dr. Price, to go ahead and continue on.

Duane Price: Excellent. Good questions, Dr. Timmerman. Thank you so much. So we are changing topics here a little bit. Next slide. So let's talk about the review panel assignment in more detail, and we had some questions about that, so good question. Again, 75 percent of the applications are reviewed at CSR. The rough path is that they come into the Division of Receipt and Referral, and our staff then pass them onto the chief of an integrated review group. That chief then makes the final decision about whether the application is appropriate for review in one of his or her study sections, and then makes the final assignment of the application. So you can see right there there's two people already. It's not just a computer. They use the same resources that you have access to. They use the guidelines that CSR has posted on the Internet, they use reporter, and as mentioned in one of the questions, they use an assistant referral tool called ART. And I'll touch on ART again in a moment. Next slide, please. So you can get information about CSR study sections a couple of ways. You can go straight to our website. There you can browse the various categories and look at specific study sections and see if they're of interest to you and appropriate for your science. Next slide, please. As you may have noticed previously, you can also use Matchmaker on the NIH reporter website, and I think we're ahead one, Michelle. Yeah, there we go. However, reporter only looks at funded applications, and it includes study sections that are now defunct or retired. Now next slide, so this is where we get to talk about ART. Yeah, so for our more complete and up to date approach, you can use the assisted referral tool. This works a lot like Matchmaker, but it's based on a universe of applications reviewed in study sections, not just the ones that were funded. And it only returns active study sections. As with Matchmaker, you just enter some text and push a button. Next slide, please. Thank you. So ART suggests study sections that might be appropriate for your science. They're categorized as either strong or possible, and note, the study sections are returned in alphabetical order. So the one at the top doesn't necessarily mean it's the strongest match. For this example, one of the strong matches as the neural basis of psychopathology, addictions and sleep disorder study section, or NPAS. If you follow the links to NPAS, you're going to get a lot more information. Next slide, please. For example, you're going to find out who the SRO is, along with his or her contact information. You can reach out to the SRO and get even more details, but the site actually provides the written guidelines for the review group. These are the same guidelines that we use in DRR for assigning the applications. Importantly, you can see who the reviewers are that served on that study section. You get a list of the appointed members and also the roster for the last three meetings. The roster lists the actual reviewers, including temporary reviewers that participated in each specific meeting. Next slide, please. So after all that leg work you might have some definite ideas about what you want. A particular IC looks better than another, and there's a couple of study sections that look pretty good too. So how do you convey this information with the Division or Receipt and Referral? Well, you can use, as Michelle said, ART. Sorry, ARF. The A-R-F, assignment request form. You can also use this form to let us know if there's someone out there who has a conflict that shouldn't be reviewing your application, or you can even just give us the general categories of science that need to be covered for the review of your research. We tried honoring your request, but it is of paramount importance that your application ends up in a study section with the appropriate expertise. Next slide, please. However, you don't have to make requests. The Division of Receipt and Referral knows how to wrap applications and add them together. Staff have nearly a century of experience doing referral, so you can just let us make the decision. We're pretty good at this. So now having talked about the SRG assignment, I'm going to pause and we'll take some more questions. Dr. Timmerman?

Michelle Timmerman: Okay. And following up on ART, if I get a strong match from ART, should I specify that in the ARF form, and will it be taken into account? So part one, should you specify that? Well, follow the links, read the study section description, and if you think it is appropriate for your application, then absolutely feel free to list it on ARF, and in the rationale explain this was a strong match on ART. Your request and your rationale will absolutely be taken into account. It's not necessarily simply going to be rubber stamped whatever you requested, those are suggestions, they are not pre-matches, or I don't quite know how to say what they're not. They are suggestions. They are requests. They are not something that the application must be assigned to, if in the opinion of DRR and the IRG chief ultimately there is a better study section. Is it possible to request a change of study section after the assignment? It is, based on your rationale, and you do need to act rather quickly because keep in mind, there is a review time frame here, and the very first thing is assignment to the study suction. So if you look in your commons account, you will see a list of the SRO and their e-mail address. The person you'll actually be talking to at the review, however, is their supervisor, the IRG chief. Now it's totally okay to send it to the SRO, that's the e-mail address that you have, and then you can just move forward communicating with the IRG chief. But briefly explain to them what expertise you think is lacking on that study section that is required to review your application, and that goes ahead and starts a dialogue there. And then I'll do one more question before finishing up. If I am doing a resubmission, is there anything I should do to make sure my application goes to the same study section? And I'm assuming that this is a case where the study section is still in existence and is still reviewing the same topics of applications. What you can do is on the assignment request form, list that study section, and then in the rationale list they reviewed the A0 and this was a good fit. The SOP, if an application does not request a change in either the IC or the study section assignment as a resubmission is to reassign them back to those original assignments if they are still appropriate. So that is our default action, but you are absolutely welcome to go ahead and put on the ARF, that yes, you do want this assigned back to the original study section. And, Dr. Price, at this point I'm going to turn it back to you.

Duane Price: Excellent, and again, Dr. Timmerman. We really appreciate the interactive nature of this format, so thank you. We are in the home stretch here, just a couple more slides and then we'll open it up for any more questions that you might have. So in addition to making the assignments, we also look at policy compliance in DRR. We're not able to screen every application from stem to stern, because it would take us literally months to get the applications out for review, but we start that process, and we look at the electronic system ... I think the electronic system itself looks at very binary things, like was appropriate attachments included. In DRR, we looked at the text in the attachments, things that the system can't check. We also looked for late applications, and we look at the font and format. We don't want someone squishing their application down to six point font just to get more text in there. We also look for what we call over stuffing, which is when people put excessive information into their application to maybe gain a competitive advantage. We often discover unallowable material in the craziest places. The appendix, the other attachment section, human subject section, you name it, so on. We also look for duplicate and overlapping applications. The NIH really wants to support great science, but we want to do it once, not twice or three times. And finally we look at unallowable resubmissions. Even though the NIH has had only a single resubmission for the past decade, there's some applicants out there that still go for that second resubmission. Applicants that are not compliant with NIH policy may be withdrawn by the DRR. Next slide, please. So I think we jumped ahead one too many. Sorry, back one. I think. Yep, there we go. Thank you. There, perfect. Yep, so at the end of the receipt referral process what you have. You have an IC assignment. You have a primary, and you may have one or more dual assignments if there's multiple ICs that might be interested in your science. Once the ICs have your application they will assign a program officer, that ball's going to be rolling. You'll have an application over as soon as the review chief clears his or her queue. You'll have the study section assignment, and as soon as you have that, you're going to know who your SRO is. All this information is available on the eRA commons status view page for your application. Most importantly you're going to have the name and contact information for both the SRO and the PO. As it's scheduled, you will be provided a review meeting date and time as well . Next slide, please. It bounces, doesn't it? Back one. There we go.

Michelle Timmerman: It is a very eager slide deck.

Duane Price: That's right. Yes, we want to finish up quickly here I guess. So sometimes during submission you really need to talk to somebody, so who do you talk to and when? If you're trying to submit your application and you're hitting errors, and you're not even getting the application in, please, please, please, the first group you're going to have to talk to is the eRA commons service desk. If they're not the right people to speak to they're going to direct you to the right people. More importantly though, if you're having a real federal system computer issue, they're going to be able to verify that for you and document it, and you'll need that because that's one reason we can accept an application late, but you need that verification. You can also reach out to the Division of Receipt of Referral if you have any questions. We have a telephone number where you can talk to a real, live human from 8 to 5 p.m. eastern time, and e-mail address that you can use 24/7. Mr. Charlie Lee, here with us today, usually clears out those e-mails within the day. If the application has already been processed and is under review, you have a couple of options. If you have an administrative question or process question, probably your scientific review officer is going to be the better contact. If you have a scientific question, you will probably want to reach out to the program officer. After the review, the SRO is done. Their job is finished, and you're going to want to talk to a PO. Next slide, please. There we go, just once that time. Again, feel free to reach out to the Division of Receipt and Referral at any point in this process. We're always, always happy to help. Final slide. Back one. Yep, there we go. Finally, consider subscribing to the NIH guide LISTSERV. This is very important. Every Friday you're going to get a summary of all the funding opportunity announcements, the notices and other things that have been published during that week. You might find a new FOA. You might find a policy change or a change in a requirement for a FOA that you're already planning to use. This is definitely worth your time, and it's really not too much of a burden. It's a page, usually, of information, and you can quickly scan it. Finally, finally I want to thank you for your time and attention today. And remember, we're here to help, so don't ever hesitate to reach out. We'll try to solve your problem and get you the information you need. So again, thank you for your attention.

Michelle Timmerman: We have a lot of great questions. If we're not able to get to your question, and if you have a question that's specific to you, rather than general ones for the whole group, I'm going to put our e-mail address back up there, which you can see is indeed staffed by a real, live person here. There are a couple of questions I'm going to answer about IC assignments. If you list a particular IC, and it seems to be 50, 50 percent between two ICs, and it's assigned to the second one, is there a possibility to transfer it, and how do we make that case? And a related question is if you work closely with a program officer at one IC, is it possible that an application might be assigned to another IC? And this is under that general topic of what do you do if your application is of interest to multiple ICs? You'll be hearing this guidance a lot at this seminar. Reach out to your program officers before you submit your application. And the reason for that is that your application must be assigned to, accepted by, considered for funding by one individual ICs. Generally two ICs do not come together and half fund parts of your application, so your application needs to be of particular interest to one single IC. So certainly, when you do that, submit on your ARF that you ... Explain that you worked with a particular program officer. And again, identify them by name. Follow your assignments through into commons. You should see them within about 2 weeks, and if you see your application is not assigned to that IC, then I would suggest you reach back out to the ICs. You certainly can contact DRR, and we will forward your requests along to our referral counterparts, but we find that applicants are the best advocates for their own research, so reach back out to the program officer that you had worked with and say "Hey, here's my application number. You can see it in the system. Looking at what I actually wrote, what I actually submitted. Can my application be assigned to your IC?" And They will know what to do, but I'll give you a term, it is referral liaison, that's the group that they will work with. Or just the term referral will get them to the correct group. Do PARs have special review panels compared to, say a PA or an RFA? And where would I see this in the FOA? So an RFA will always have a special emphasis panel. A PAR might, or it might not, or a PAR could go to a particular study section, but all of the applications to that PAR are clustered together. Every FOA lists a peer review contact at the end, and what you should do there is just reach out to the peer review contact and ask how it will be handled. Those decisions are always tentative because it depends upon what applications are actually submitted, but that gives you a good idea of what our plans are at least. There's a new e-mail address for CSR. That is a general mail box, but I can confirm that general mail box that's being listed is staffed by a real person. And a follow-up question is do I need to request an assignment to an IC or an assignment to a scientific review group? The answer for both of those is no, but with a but for the IC. You need to have done your research and known that your application can be assigned to one of the ICs that is one the FOA. So since you've done that homework, you might as well put it on. For a scientific review group, that is different. What happens if your application isn't quite right for any of the study sections? Well, your application absolutely will not be withdrawn, and the SRO that it is assigned to will make sure that your application receives a fair, timely and expert review. So many PIs certainly prefer to research this and make a suggestion, but if you chose wrong to use a phrase, or if your application just doesn't fit one particular study section well, it absolutely will be reviewed. It will not be withdrawn for that reason. Now if your application can't be assigned to an IC on the FOA, it will be withdrawn, and we will all be very, very sad. So I have your question here, if you are responding to a notice of special interest. Sorry, I have to call them a NOSI. We're the federal government, we need to use our abbreviations. If you are responding to a NOSI, what is the best way to show that? There is only one way to show that, and that is on the cover page form specifically in box 4B. Not 4A, not 4C, 4B. And that is listed in every NOSI exactly where it needs to be. You can list that information everywhere else you could possibly imagine, but unless it is in box 4B, it does not count. Now this isn't information that really is relevant to reviewers because this is only relevant to program and to receipt and referral staff. One of the good ways that I can tell we're getting a lot of good questions is we're getting a lot of very similar questions, and that is my alarm that we have 5 minutes left. Is it better to leave the assignments to DRR? For an IC, you have to have done your homework, so it's not much more effort to go ahead and to submit an ARF. For the scientific review group assignment, this is where your scientific mentors would talk about the importance of knowing your study section, but that is not going to impact whether or not your application is accepted for review, and so I really want to make that point because when it gets down to what if I can't do the platinum level cross every I, dot ... cross every T, dot every I, you have to be sure that your application can be assigned to one of the institutes or centers that is on that FOA. I love the courage of this question. Out of curiosity, how exactly does DRR make the assignment choice if there is no suggested SRG? Do you just use ART, or is it mostly from experience and knowledge of mission fit? The training for this job, frankly, it is similar to getting a master's. All of our staff were extremely experienced within NIH before we started here. There is a large amount of information about the institutes and centers' referral guidelines and the study section's referral guidelines, and we are required and expected, and we gladly do learn all of that information and use our doctoral level educations to read applications and make those assignments based on our scientific expertise. And that in the next step, for example, ICs are then responsible for reviewing their assignments. So the program officer will review the applications assigned to them and make their opinions about whether or not the application is appropriate, and sometimes that can start a dialogue with DRR. Similarly, the IRG chief and SRO might start a dialogue with DRR. So that's why, although you will see your assignments typically within 2 weeks, they might be changing throughout, quite a long time throughout the pre-review period, because we do try to be flexible about that. Two minutes late, so this is going to be the last question. It's high pressure here. Can you resubmit an application if the PAR expires before the next submission cycle? So whenever you submit an application, your application type, so new, resubmission, renewal, revision, it must be listed on the FOA, and there must be a due date for that application type. So it might be you submit under a PAR, but then the FOA expires and you would not be able to submit a resubmission the next cycle. There also are PARs and RFAs and even PAs that do not accept resubmission, so it's really important to read the FOA carefully to be sure that your scientific information is matching up with some more of the administrative requirements of the institute. Okay, and this next question is a great one. I've been hoping to get it, so I'll do this as the one last. Does a dual IC mean that either institute could fund the application? Theoretically yes. Will that happen? Probably not. A dual IC assignment primarily allows that dual IC to be aware of your application, to track your application, and golly, that's nice. It is not a second chance at funding, and do not expect that your application will be supported by the dual IC. When I say that technically it could, it is extremely rare, and we would typically see that in cases where there is some type of exigent public health crisis like, golly, I don't know, oh, the COVID pandemic, that means ICs are looking at supporting things quickly and so they are more open then to their dual IC assignments. But that's why having an IC listed as a dual IC does not really mean that they will consider you for funding. So I just wanted to thank everybody, and in particular, thank Dr. Price for the presentation today. This has been a very, very nice session here. If you have any questions, please visit the exhibit hall booths. If you have specific questions for yourself, please contact the DRR, and OER has also requested that you click on the session feedback button and complete the surveys. I will say, having participated in regionals at the time, back before it was virtual, that we absolutely take those survey feedbacks to heart. Thank you again, everybody, and have a great day.