

RECOMMENDATIONS of the VMLRP Peer Review Panel

December 1 -2, 2015

STAKEHOLDERS

Recommendation #1 – Stakeholder Outreach

Expand outreach to stakeholders for the purpose of raising the visibility and awareness of the VMLRP, gathering feedback from and involving a diverse array of stakeholders, and elevating the quality of shortage nominations.

Conclusion: NIFA staff and others invested in extensive outreach to stakeholders when the program was initially established and getting set up. There is a perception that these efforts have declined in recent years resulting in low program visibility among some stakeholders. VMLRP, for example, is rarely a topic of discussion at executive board meetings of specialty veterinary associations (for example, the American Association of Veterinary Laboratory Diagnosticians, United States Animal Health Association, American Association of Bovine Practitioners, American Association of Swine Veterinarians, and the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges).

Panel Diversity. Stakeholders could assist NIFA in recruiting a greater diversity of panel managers and panelists to better reflect the distribution of veterinary-practitioners, academics, private industry, and state/federal officials. While the panel is not privy to the data on panel composition, it appears that practitioners are not adequately represented on the panels.

Quality of shortage nominations. Outreach to State Animal Health Officers (SAHOs) and other nominating officials could also contribute to higher quality shortage nominations, the development of shortage nominations to fill specific functions such as toxicology and poultry veterinary medicine. The 2015 outbreak of Avian Flu exposed the dearth of veterinary professionals in this field is an example. We did note, however, that several VMLRP Awardees were significantly involved in efforts to manage and contain the crisis.

Recommendation #2 – Expanded Flexibility to Increase Placement of Highly Qualified Applicants and Filling of Shortage Areas

Create greater flexibility to fill critical shortages when more than one high quality applicant has applied to a shortage area.

Conclusion: Under current VMLRP policies, veterinarians may apply to only one shortage area. If two or more persons apply to the same shortage area, it is possible that one or more highly qualified and highly motivated veterinarians are unable to pursue an economically viable career in food animal veterinary medicine, and might leave the underserved field

permanently. Based on rough estimates provided by NIFA staff, only a small percentage of applicants apply a second time and a much smaller fraction of those apply a third time.¹

The panel's concern behind this recommendation is that veterinarians who are motivated to build food animal practices but cannot do so without debt relief may opt to join a companion animal practice and not consider food animal practice again. It is important to "capture" and retain veterinarians who are passionate about food animal practice and are interested in providing greatly needed veterinary medical services. In Iowa, roughly 56 percent of the students in their third year of veterinary medical school are tracking exclusively food animal or mixed food animal. The graduates are not all finding jobs in their track largely because their debt levels prevent them from pursuing this path. We have observed that if these graduates do not enter food animal practices from the beginning, they will not go into the field later in their careers. It is, therefore, important to maximize their opportunities early on.

We encourage NIFA to consider two options:

- 1) Allow applicants to apply to two shortage areas. To reduce the administrative burden on NIFA and the selection panels, limit the second location to a nearby shortage and within the same state as their first choice.
- 2) Build a triage process by which panels are able to reduce the amount of time spent reviewing applicants with limited potential and who are unlikely to secure placement.

Recommendation #3 – Quality of Shortage Nominations

Provide additional guidance and information to help SAHO's identify economically viable shortage situations and provide quality nominations that will attract applicants.

Conclusion: The panel members share NIFA's concern with the development of chronic shortage areas and the inability to close these gaps in veterinary medical services. A majority of the panelists, however, oppose adjusting the selection criteria for the purpose of reducing the number of chronic shortages. Chronic shortages may exist for many reasons and do not justify weakening the integrity of the selection process by adjusting the criteria to favor chronic shortages.

We put forward two suggestions for NIFA's consideration, one of which we understand NIFA to have recently implemented: 1) Consider making the Awardee selection process more transparent to help SAHO's improve the quality of their shortage nominations by sharing information on chronic shortages such as the number of applications submitted to each area; 2) Collect and share best practices from SAHOs who submit high quality nominations.

Many states have smaller veterinary loan repayment programs. It might benefit both the states and NIFA to share best practices between federal and state/local administrators of these programs.

¹ In response to a question from the panel, NIFA/VMLRP staff estimated that, between 2010 and 2014, 128 persons submitted a second application to the program. During the same time period, 859 persons applied, 291 awards were offered, and 264 agreements were executed.

Recommendation #4 – Allocation of Shortage Nominations

We recommend that NIFA or another appropriate party constitute a neutral committee to review the shortage area formula and assess whether the current formula accurately describes and identifies shortage areas. The panel also suggests revisiting the allocation of shortages between public sector positions and the private sector. We question, especially in light of recent experiences with the avian flu outbreak in the Midwest, whether the current 10% allocation of shortages to public sector positions is adequate.

Conclusion: It seems appropriate at this stage of the program to revisit the fundamental calculation upon which much of the selection process rests, i.e. the allocation of potential shortage areas. An appropriate panel that is independent of NIFA selection panels, specific geographic areas, academic institutions, etc. would seem to be a logical group to do this.

APPLICANTS

Recommendation #5 – Validity of the Selection Process

Provide more detailed guidance to panelists on the goals of the VMLRP and how those goals should guide or influence the selection of Awardees to create greater consistency in selection criteria across panels.

Conclusion: Some members of the panel expressed concern with the apparent lack of consistency of criteria used by panelists when evaluating applications and whether NIFA could defend the decisions if scrutinized. We suggest that NIFA provide the goals and guidance prior to the onset of the review process with a reminder at the beginning of the panel sessions. Providing the panelists a brief opportunity to discuss how the goals of the program should influence the selection process to reduce subjectivity and increase consistency.

For this reason (and others), we also encourage NIFA to continue to hold in-person panels and resist moving to virtual panels. We understand the budgetary constraints that NIFA faces and the importance of funneling as much program money as possible to loan reimbursements. The significance of the selection process and the enhanced quality of face-to-face discussions should be taken into account as NIFA debates the financial benefits of virtual panels.

Recommendation #6 – Quality of Applications

Establish and communicate clearer expectations for applications from veterinarians for the purpose of improving the quality of applications.

Conclusion: We recognize that NIFA currently holds webinars during which VMLRP staff explain the application and selection processes and answer questions from participants. We also understand that attendance and participation are not at the level that NIFA desires. Unfortunately, veterinarians who do not understand the nature of the program and what it

takes to qualify are not likely to submit high quality applications. NIFA should emphasize that strong Applicants will –

- a. Develop a strong business plan to demonstrate the economic viability of a practice in the shortage area;
- b. Research the location thoroughly, including reaching out to the nominating official;
- c. Identify a mentor who can guide and answer questions during the early stages of a new practice.

NIFA should also consider targeting third-year students who, during their internships, are thinking about where they want to go after graduating. Graduating veterinarians are too busy and overwhelmed to digest the full volume of materials and information thrown at them during their fourth year. Enlisting multiple other stakeholders to advertise and promote the program, mentor potential applicants on how to develop a business plan, or educate graduating students on the implications of paying back their educational debt may help convey crucial information about the VMLRP to its target audience. NIFA could also be more aggressive in getting its place at the “table” when financial literacy programs are provided to students at many, if not all, veterinary schools.

Recommendation #7 – Alignment of Award Cycle with Academic Year

Revisit the timing of the veterinary application and selection process to coincide with the time of year when most veterinary graduates are searching for jobs and considering their options.

Conclusion: The current timing for reviewing applications and filling shortage situations is not optimal. By the time NIFA begins accepting applications, many food animal graduates have found jobs. To accommodate the academic cycle, review of applications from veterinarians should occur no later than March.

Recommendation #8 – Information Collection

We support NIFA’s initiative to collect feedback from Awardees and other information to be able to understand the impact of the program on a longer-term basis.

Conclusion: The profession is eager to have a clearer understanding of the impact of the VMLRP and be able to assess its achievements and limitations over the long term. In addition to the proposed surveys of Awardees and alumni, the Panel suggests that the following data could be collected to measure outcomes and impact. The panel agreed that new veterinarians are more likely to conduct surveillance and be more aggressive in collecting and submitting information. On that basis, we recommend the following metrics:

- a. Number of vaccinations purchased
- b. Number of tests for tuberculosis conducted
- c. Number of animals that move in and out of the state
- d. Number of Laboratory submissions by veterinarian and county
- e. Number of premise identifications and traceability
- f. Number of county health certificates

Recommendation #9: Monitoring and Accountability

We support NIFA's initiative to require that Awardees maintain a service log to improve NIFA's monitoring capacity and increase the accountability of Awardees. Awardees placed in private practice are more likely to fulfill the terms of their contracts; like NIFA, the panel is more concerned with Awardees in their own practices.

Conclusion: We encourage NIFA to explore web-based options for the location of its new service log, if only to ease the record-keeping burden on Awardees. We recommend that NIFA consider including drop-down lists for service types to attain consistency of data entries across the Awardees and make it easier to enter the information. Many practices use web-based service logs that are secure and would provide Awardees and their practices the privacy and protect their confidentiality. The Panel is aware of the burden that service logs can be but feel that requiring awardees to complete their service logs weekly is a reasonable expectation.

The Panel also suggests that NIFA develop more detailed guidance for Awardees as to which activities count toward service. A veterinarian could feasibly spend four hours on a farm but bill 20 hours because of the time needed to fill out paperwork. If an Awardees is committed to 30%, do they count only contact time with the farmer? Does driving time count toward that 30%? Additional guidance would be useful.