

## Report on Research Compliance Volume 21, Number 5. April 25, 2024 ARPA-H Leverages Private-Sector Expertise To Tackle 'Imagine If' Questions, Director Says

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By Jane Anderson

The Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H), a two-year-old agency modeled after the iconic U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) unit that invented the internet and GPS, is reaching high in its initial projects to solve diverse problems, such as how to repair osteoarthritis in aging joints and how to prevent ransomware from being deployed against rural hospitals.

Renee Wegrzyn, ARPA-H director, said in a presentation at the Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research annual meeting that the agency's mission is to "accelerate better health outcomes for everyone," and that involves robust public-private partnerships, plus a nimble, fast-to-act mindset that moves away from traditional grant funding.<sup>[1]</sup>

"What's really important about this mission statement is acceleration [and] brand-new emergent science. Sometimes, it's putting together pieces that exist out there but have never been integrated. It's really trying to speed up the timelines to help the general public and improve health outcomes," Wegrzyn said.

ARPA-H, an independent entity under the NIH umbrella, was founded in March 2022. The agency supports cutting-edge research intended to drive biomedical and health breakthroughs, particularly in diseases such as Alzheimer's, diabetes, and cancer. According to the Biden administration, ARPA-H was inspired by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which "has driven breakthrough advances for the [DoD] for more than 60 years."<sup>[2]</sup>

Modeling ARPA-H on DARPA has given the agency "a way to function like a business—move very quickly and nimbly and decisively, which before ARPA-H had not been present in the health ecosystem in the federal government," Wegrzyn said.

### **No 'Top-Down Agenda'**

ARPA-H is a funding agency that's disease-agnostic and does not have its own internal research labs, she explained. "What that allows us to do is have a hot pursuit of the problems that we think ARPA-H investment can really asymmetrically advance the state of the art," Wegrzyn said. "I don't set a top-down research agenda."

The agency's \$2.5 billion annual budget is independent of NIH, and it generally funds outcomes-based contracts, not grants, she said, adding that it also has accelerated award timelines.

ARPA-H invests through its program managers, Wegrzyn said. "We look for the best and brightest out in the ecosystem who have a very specific problem in health that they want to solve, and they actually pitch that to the agency," she said. "So, when we hire a program manager, we're not hiring them just for their amazing CV. We're hiring them because they've defined a problem that we think ARPA-H can really help advance the state of the art in."

Program managers receive three-year appointments, designed to create time pressure, Wegrzyn said. "So, every

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two weeks that goes by, 1% of their time is up,” she said. “So, we really create this sense of urgency behind the work that they do. Because there is this three-year term limit, they launch about a program every year. We create this flywheel of different programs and invest in a portfolio across the ecosystem.”

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