Explore a vital link to health services research
www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj

Have you ever stopped to ponder what you should do about a research solicitation addressing a topic in which you are interested? Does the solicitation encourage the use of a data set with which you are unfamiliar or suggest collaboration with policymakers or practitioners who might use the information your research generates? Does either the solicitation or your tenure requirement place a priority on work that would make a unique contribution to the field? If so, how can you be reasonably confident that after two years of hard work, no one will have done similar work and scooped your findings? Perhaps, you have recently completed a set of analyses and the findings do not tell a story that fits with your original hypotheses. Are there problems with the data or methods, or are you unaware of key factors affecting the phenomenon or intervention you are studying? Where can you turn to locate similar work underway or find people familiar with this research topic that can shed additional light from various perspectives? In these scenarios and many like them, HSRProj (Health Services Research Projects in Progress) could hold the answer.

Background
HSRProj, a free database coordinated by the National Information Center on Health Services Research and Health Care Technology (NICHSR) for the National Library of Medicine, is a database of information about grants and contracts in health services research that have been funded and are still in progress. The database is a joint effort of AcademyHealth and the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and is funded by the National Library of Medicine. Records include grants and contracts awarded by major public and private funding agencies and foundations. Individuals can retrieve:

- Names of the organizations conducting and sponsoring the research;
- Principal investigator contact information;
- Beginning and ending dates of the project; and
- Information about the study design and methodology, including demographic characteristics of the study group, number of subjects in the study population, population base of the study sample, and the source of the project data.

HSRProj records are indexed with the NLM Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). Project abstracts are included whenever possible.

How Can HSRProj Help You?
HSRProj provides access to ongoing research projects before the results are published. Findings from recently completed, but not yet published, health services research projects can be valuable to researchers, policymakers, funders, and conference organizers. This listing of ongoing and recently completed research projects provides researchers and policymakers with a vital link to information not readily available from other sources.

HSRProj also can be used to:
- Identify cutting-edge topics and research gaps not already being addressed;
- Build networks of colleagues interested in collaborating professionally to discuss the state of the field, data and methodological approaches, or policy implications of a given area of research; and
- Identify public and private sources of funding for health services research, as well as funders’ interest in particular topics.
1. Putting Together a Research Team and Responding to a Funders’ Solicitation

This morning you received a call for proposals from a national philanthropy that supports health services research. They have just authorized $1 million to fund several projects exploring how best to address the problem of those without health insurance in the United States. The projects must make a unique contribution to a debate that has been raging in policy circles for nearly two decades. In addition, the projects must be completed in 18 months or less, so that the findings are timely and of the most use to state and federal policymakers.

The Administration is promoting health savings accounts (HSAs) as a means of expanding coverage to those who are uninsured, as well as an alternative for those with more traditional health insurance benefits. Some argue that HSAs simply shift costs to individuals who currently have employer-paid health insurance, decreasing the employers’ financial burden, and do nothing to expand access to the uninsured. You would be very interested in developing evidence about the impact of HSAs on insurance coverage. It seems clear that if you could gather compelling evidence and secure the assistance of colleagues to work with you, such a project would fall within the scope of the solicitation you just received.

Recently, under a small consulting agreement, you have been meeting with an informally organized group of local employers to help them assess and address the financial burden that increasing health care costs is placing on their businesses. The group feels it would be irresponsible not to consider various health insurance options and their impact on costs and coverage, as well as their ability to maintain a stable workforce. You have developed a simple model to estimate how many employees will choose various options, as well as how much they are willing or able to pay out of pocket before choosing to drop their insurance coverage or seek other employment. The employers have been very forthcoming with salary data, as well as data on their current premium costs and take up rates. They have indicated to you that if it would be helpful, they would encourage their employees to respond to a survey, assuring them that individual responses would be anonymous, confidential, and aggregated across all participating employers.

If you could secure a grant, perhaps you could further develop your model and collect data from employers spanning a larger geographic area. Certainly, you could help policymakers and employers begin to see the real impact that HSAs have on them or on their employees. But, you wonder, is it worth spending the time to develop this proposal? Everyone seems to be asking the same question lately, but you do have a model, even if it’s in early development, as well as a core group of cooperating employers who have helped you to figure out what data you need for analysis, as well as what they have on-hand. There must be some useful evidence that you can contribute to the debate.

You turn to HSRProj to explore what other researchers are doing and to help refine your research questions to ensure that your work will make a unique contribution to the policy debate. After accessing the HSRProj website, www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj, a search on “health savings accounts” yields seven records. A quick skim of the abstracts indicates that three researchers seem to be addressing similar questions to those you are asking, but none is using a predictive model, and they seem to be evaluating data only from large employers.

You communicate with each of the three researchers by email and then by phone. They are quite excited about the model you are developing, as well as the relationships you have built with employers in your area. They have each developed relationships with the employers in their geographic areas as well. With four established core groups of employers already...
willing to supply data, the timeline of the project can probably be reduced from two years to one. In addition, this ensures that data will be from different regions of the country, increasing the generalizability of the project’s findings. Each researcher also has relationships with a variety of health plans and policymakers, whose advice can be brought to bear as the model is more fully developed and the data analyzed. Ultimately, after several more discussions, the four of you decide to collaborate to develop a proposal and, if funded, to conduct the work.

2. Problems Working with a Widely-used Database

You thought the hard work was done. After over a year of proposal development and revision, you were awarded a three year grant to study the impact of a set of state regulations on patients in long-term care facilities. The research questions are exciting and likely to inform policy, and you actually enjoyed the challenge of defending your proposed work and improving it based on reviewers’ comments and discussions with the funder’s program officer. Working with staff at CMS to obtain the data was also challenging, but you learned a lot about the data and working with a government agency in the process. Now, finally, it is time to do what you do best – crunch the data and conduct the analyses.

The project requires that you merge data from CMS’ OSCAR (Online Survey, Certification and Reporting) database with data from MDS (The Minimum Data Set), also maintained by CMS. OSCAR is a comprehensive source of facility level information on the operations, patient census and regulatory compliance of nursing facilities, including nursing home operational characteristics and aggregate patient characteristics for each facility. MDS contains elements extracted from the Resident Assessment Instrument, a standardized tool for assessing the functional capacity of residents of long term care facilities. You now have all the data in-hand, but your programmer has just told you that when he tried to merge the data sets, the linkages failed. You and he have now spent hours trying to figure out what the problem is. You know that others have linked these datasets successfully in the past. You need to find someone who knows how to work with these data, and it would really be helpful if they also were familiar with your research topic and the particular data elements in which you are interested.

Turning to HSRProj, www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj, you search on “OSCAR and MDS and nursing homes,” and ten records are identified. Scanning quickly down the list, you recall meeting two of these researchers at the long-term care colloquium you attended last year. Their projects began within the last year, so they must have worked through the same problems you are having relatively recently. You immediately send an email to each of them describing your project and the problem you are encountering with the dataset. After several email exchanges and a conference call with both researchers and their programmers the next day, your programmer is ready to attempt the linkage again. Within a week, you are able to begin analyzing the data.

3. The Analyses are Complete but the Results Are Not What You Expected

You and your colleagues have spent the last two years examining the impact of changes in Medicare reimbursement to physicians on hospitalizations for ambulatory sensitive conditions (ASCs). You expected to find that as physician reimbursement increased, hospital admissions for those conditions would decrease. However, that trend is not demonstrated by the results of your regressions. Over the last few weeks, you and your co-principal investigator at another university have each had your data analysts re-run the regressions independently. Both sets of results confirm the original findings.

You and your colleagues spent three hours on a conference call yesterday trying to “tell a story” that would explain your findings. You are reluctant to begin drafting journal articles for publication consideration until you can make sense of the findings. The remaining alternatives seem to be that there is an inherent problem with the data or that the regression equations have not sufficiently controlled for simultaneous events. You and your colleagues have talked through those possibilities, but maybe it is time to speak with others who have used these data. It would also be helpful to speak with someone from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and a physician’s office or hospital administrator who can shed light on possible confounding effects which the regressions have not taken into account.
It will be important to find someone using the data for the same time period, which is quite current, so looking at projects in HSRProj, www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj, that have been funded within the last five years makes sense. A search on “ambulatory-sensitive conditions and Medicare” yields six records. One is funded by CMS, and the principal investigator is someone you knew years ago in graduate school. You were always impressed by her ability to think creatively, even when the rest of you were just racing to get something down on paper to meet a deadline. Two additional projects are supported by the Department of Veterans Affairs and both principal investigators are housed at facilities providing direct patient care.

After phone conversations with your graduate school colleague and the principal investigators of the other two projects, one of whom turns out to be a physician, you are much more comfortable. They have each agreed to review your regressions and see if there is an endogenous event for which you have not controlled. In addition, they have put you in touch with an acquaintance of theirs who works in a non-profit hospital financial office and is very familiar with reimbursement rules, and changes in them, for all payers. Finally, once you are comfortable with your findings, these new acquaintances have also agreed to review and comment on draft papers before you submit them for publication consideration.

**HSRProj Can Help. How Do You Search?**

- Go to www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj
- Enter search terms in the query box. Use double quotes (“”) around the terms to search for a multi-word phrase, Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT), and field tags enclosed in square brackets to search within a field (e.g., [ir] to search for investigator).
- Select the type of search (e.g., investigator/researcher or supporting/funding agency).
- To conduct a more-tailored search, (e.g., if you are seeking projects recently added to HSRProj, projects funded in a particular year or in a certain state, or completed projects), click on the limits option above the query box and enter the appropriate parameters.
- Click the search button. A results screen is displayed.

**HSRProj records are displayed in a brief format, displaying the project title, full name of investigator, sponsoring agency, unique identifier number, and project status. Note that HSRProj displays records in reverse chronological order of the project’s status. (For example, a project that has an end date of 2009 will appear before a project that has an end date of 2005.)**

- View the full record by clicking on the hyperlink of the project title, (this opens a new browser window).
- Use the print function of your browser to print all the information displayed on the Web page.
How Can You Be Sure Your Project Is in HSRProj?

Researchers are invited to submit a description of their current health services research projects. Send an email to hsrproj@academyhealth.org or complete an online submission form at www.academyhealth.org/hsrproj/input.cfm.

Questions?
Call AcademyHealth HSRProj staff at 202-292-6700, email hsrproj@academyhealth.org, or visit www.academyhealth.org/hsrproj. For technical assistance, click on Contact Us on the top of the screen at www.nlm.nih.gov/hsrproj.