

Open letter to members of the NIH community of peer reviewers

The purpose of this letter is to reinforce the procedures for proper handling of sensitive electronic grants information, and inform you of the security breach that has triggered this communication. I want to reassure you that NIH is committed to protecting the confidentiality of grant information while providing a highly secure, electronic peer review system.

The incident. A peer reviewer downloaded review materials in a way that allowed Google to capture, index them, and make them accessible via its search engine.

NIH addressed the problem. NIH addressed this security problem as soon as we became aware of it. The event highlighted the high dependency of the NIH's electronic system's security on both the NIH and its partners. Security is a matter that transcends NIH.

Lessons learned and prevention. The risks associated with any security breach are potentially very serious. In this case, NIH has no evidence that the released application information was used for illegal or malicious activities. But even an unintentional act can have major consequences that can compromise the privacy and confidentiality of information. NIH security procedures are intended to protect applicants, reviewers, the information in the applications, and NIH staff. NIH has added procedures to ensure that access to its electronic review modules is not compromised again, and we are currently reviewing guidelines to assure that privacy and security policies are clearly communicated and understood by all users.

Next steps. Now that NIH has addressed the immediate issue, we are exploring additional technical solutions for the protection of application and peer review information.

REMEMBER – Proper handling of electronic grants information. Grant applications contain private, confidential, and proprietary information that must be protected fully at all times, as stated in the non-disclosure statement (<http://grants2.nih.gov/grants/peer/Pre-Cert-Form.pdf>) that each reviewer signs. Critiques and scores are equally confidential. Reviewers and others with access MUST fully protect the information.

For information on the appropriate handling of application and peer review information please see the scientific review administrator (SRA) for the review in which you are participating or contact:

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