

# How SBIR and STTR Can Support Women in Biotech

## Funding for Innovation from NIH's Small Business Programs

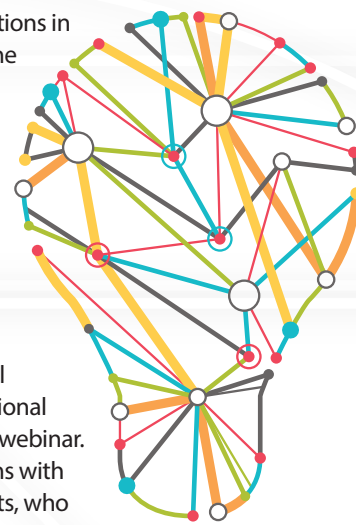


**Lili Portilla, M.P.A.**  
Director of Strategic Alliances  
National Center for Advancing  
Translational Sciences

**W**omen are vastly underrepresented in leadership positions in healthcare and biotech start-up companies, with some estimates showing that women represent only 6 percent of chief executive positions at these companies (Rock Health, 2015). To help improve this, a cadre of women who lead the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) and Small Business Technology Transfer (STTR) programs at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have made it a priority to engage with women scientists to help grow their representation as industry leaders, one start-up at a time.

AWIS joined the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke to produce a webinar. It focused on information about the SBIR and STTR programs with the goal of helping women and other prospective applicants, who might be working to develop breakthrough technologies, better understand the federal funding opportunities available.

Lili Portilla, M.P.A., director of strategic alliances at NCATS shares some of the most frequently asked questions about SBIR and STTR funding.



### What are SBIR and STTR programs?

**LP:** SBIR and STTR programs are one of the largest sources of capital for early stage businesses working towards the commercialization of technologies. These programs can be a vital source of seed funding to help women-led businesses bring much needed diagnostics, therapeutics, devices and research tools to market.

In 2016, more than \$870 million was earmarked for small businesses applying for NIH SBIR and STTR funding. The benefits go beyond traditional funding. The funding is stable, not a loan, and it is non-dilutive. Small businesses retain intellectual property rights and benefit from NIH's rigorous peer-review, which provides recognition, scientific validation and visibility to early-stage companies. Several companies also leverage this funding to raise matching funds.

Within the NIH, many of the Institutes and Centers (ICs), have SBIR and STTR programs. Each IC focuses on specific health and research priorities. The topics that NCATS is focused on include drug discovery and development, bioinformatics and information technology and clinical research.

### What are the differences between SBIR and STTR programs?

**LP:** Both programs support small businesses and provide non-dilutive funding. However, there are a few differences to keep in mind. The SBIR program permits and encourages research partnerships, but does not require it. The STTR program requires that the small business collaborate with a research institution. Under the SBIR program, the principal investigator (PI) must be primarily employed with the small business at the time of award and for the duration of the project period, unless a waiver is granted by the NIH. Under the STTR Program, primary employment is not stipulated so the PI may be primarily

employed by either the small business or the collaborating non-profit research institution at the time of award and for the duration of the project period.

*Learn more about SBIR and STTR differences.*

### How can I apply? How long does the application process take?

**LP:** Get started early and contact us! Review the eligibility criteria to ensure your small business qualifies and get your company registered on our various application submission systems. There are five required online registrations to apply. You should also review the funding announcement carefully and each institute's research areas of interest to see which one aligns with what you are proposing. Send us an email with an abstract or call us about what you're working on. Leverage our program officers' expertise to better understand if your project is a good fit and get tips for applying. We are here to help you.

Timing is also an important factor. Writing an application and compiling the necessary materials can take about three months. In addition to making contact with the IC to which you want to apply, we always recommend giving yourself as much time as possible. The time to the award after submission usually takes about nine months. Allocating time toward the preparation for a strong application can save you time in the long run.

### Why is it important for women to apply for SBIR and STTR funding?

**LP:** The lack of women in biotech and pharma leadership roles is a systemic problem. Applying for NIH SBIR and STTR funding to further innovative ideas in the biosciences is a tangible step to take toward parity. SBIR and STTR awards often serve as a launch pad for small companies, especially in healthcare and life sciences. With more women applying for these awards, there is a greater chance that more women will receive funding and their companies will grow and thrive.

### Should I self-certify as a Women-Owned Small Business or Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Business?

**LP:** Yes. Women-owned small businesses (WOSB) and socially and economically disadvantaged small businesses (SDB) are

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— *Lili Portilla,*  
**NCATS**

encouraged to self-certify. Certification is encouraged but not required. It is used for tracking purposes only to help us get a better understanding of applicant demographics during specific funding opportunity cycles.

### How can I learn more about the SBIR and STTR programs?

**LP:** To learn more, visit us online and don't forget to contact us. I really enjoy connecting with potential applicants and helping them to navigate the process. The end result could be a technology that saves lives, accelerates research translation, and helps more women rise to corporate board rooms. ✪

### Small Business Programs at the National Institutes of Health

- NCATS: <https://ncats.nih.gov/smallbusiness>
- NINDS: <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Funding>
- NIH SBIR: <https://sbir.nih.gov>

*Lili Portilla has worked in the area of strategic alliances and technology transfer at NIH since 1989, joining NCATS in December 2011. She oversees the Center's partnership, strategic alliance and technology transfer functions as well as NCATS' Small Business Innovation Research and Small Business Technology Transfer programs. Before coming to NCATS, Portilla served as senior advisor to the director of the National Center for Research Resources and as the director of the Office of Technology Transfer and Development at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. Portilla is an ex officio board member of the National Academy of Sciences' University-Industry Demonstration Partnership and a board member of the University of Kansas Institute for Advancing Medical Innovation.*

*Portilla received a master's degree in public administration in 1992 from American University and a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1986 from Stephen F. Austin State University, where she majored in finance and Spanish literature.*

### References

- Rock Health. (2015). *The State of Women in Healthcare 2015*. San Francisco: Rock Health. Retrieved from <https://rockhealth.com/reports/the-state-of-women-in-healthcare-2015/>