



Society for Research in Child Development

1825 K Street, NW, Suite 325 • Washington, DC 20006 USA
Tel: 202.800.0677 • Website: www.srcd.org

October 27th, 2023

Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member Co-Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building,
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Modernizing the National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Dear Senator Cassidy,

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) appreciates your efforts looking for ways that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) can improve and better serve the U.S. public.

SRCD is a nonpartisan, multidisciplinary professional membership association with nearly 5,000 child developmental scientists. Our members come from a broad set of backgrounds, including education, psychology, biology, sociology, anthropology, economics, public health and more. The child development discipline seeks to improve conditions for children and families. Our members ask questions about how individual differences and complex systems can impact human behavior, and we look to apply our science in homes, childcare settings, classrooms, pediatric settings, public policy and more. Our discipline studies a wide range of topics that are supported by the NIH, including pre-natal health, the impact of nutritional programs on children, childcare outcomes, youth mental health, and much more.

Many of our members' work relies on the opportunities that the NIH, among other U.S. federal agencies, provides to create evidence-based practices that improve the lives of our nation's children and families. For these reasons, SRCD engages with Congress and the Administration on policy related issues that would impact the NIH. We applaud the Ranking Member and his staff for reaching out to stakeholders to get feedback and thoughts for potential reforms to the agency.

As you have provided us with questions that range from all administrative capacities of the agency, our comments will focus mainly on the importance of continuous support and investments for the NIH to recruit and retain scholars and to strengthen the agency's administrative capacity to continue its leadership in research and innovation.

How NIH funding strengthens our communities

The NIH currently stands as the largest single public funder of biomedical and behavioral science in the world. The agency's support to our research community has created unique opportunities that have brought great contributions to both the U.S. population and the international community. Congress has

long understood this responsibility, and in bipartisan spirit, has enacted funding legislation to keep the NIH in good standing to meet the challenges of today's world. From children's health and development, prenatal care, to youth mental health and education at early stages, our senior and distinguished members' work has made great contributions to our communities.

For example, the NIH has supported initiatives that have confirmed the negative effects that environmental exposures, like pollution and chemical toxins, have on the development of children and adolescents. Other funded projects explore how to maximize the use of digital tools to increase media literacy, especially relevant in rural communities, and the best practices to combat online racism, among others. The NIH's promotion of science and innovation has consistently shown great impact, not only to our discipline but ultimately on the lives of children and their families.

Increasing the Rate of Scientific Discovery

A theme in the solicitation was how the NIH can increase the rate of scientific discovery. To ensure consistency in the ways that the NIH supports science and innovation, we recommend the Ranking Member consider existing recommendations that would increase support for social and behavioral science.

OBSSR

[The Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research \(OBSSR\)](#) was established in 1993 as an effort to recognize and support the role of behavioral and social science in the NIH. OBSSR, since its creation, has proven to be an important driver to the behavioral and social science research, and has made contributions that have significantly increased our understanding of the underlying mechanisms and treatments of mental health and physical illness. Our community's well-being has very much been intertwined with the work of the OBSSR. Pathways to strengthen NIH should closely follow the [recently proposed strategic recommendations of the OBSSR](#) that would enhance and support the scientific priorities of the agency.

NIH Council of Councils report

The NIH Council of Councils submitted a [report](#) in 2022 on how to better integrate behavioral science and social science research at the NIH. This report highlights how important behavioral and social science is for the NIH to achieve its mission to "seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability". The report is a response to an existing gap on how the agency integrates behavioral and social science research across the agency, and it included policy recommendations that are highly relevant for the purposes of strengthening the NIH. Behavioral and social science research (BSSR) is a valuable tool to inform policymakers on public health responses as it looks for ways to enhance lifestyle behaviors and preventive care. It is also essential when looking for ways to improve health equity and eliminate health disparities. Some of the recommendations of the report from the NIH Council of Councils included:

- That the NIH ensures and supports BSSR as part of the NIH's mission and priorities;
- To better evaluate and monitor the distribution of BSSR staff across the agency;
- For the NIH to closely monitor and evaluate the composition of scientific review panels to reduce systemic biases and better support high-quality investigators and junior researchers; and

- For the NIH to draw from BSSR findings to create evidence-based approaches to address workforce issues.

Trans-NIH research opportunities report

A 2021 [report](#) from the Council of Councils group identified some areas of research that are also not properly supported by the NIH. However, the report indicated promising and emerging areas of BSSR and how it can support its translational processes of behavioral and social science research to develop adequate policymaking. A few of the report's recommendations are the need for the NIH to increase the workforce diversity, particularly in the areas of research that is influenced by cultural contexts, to strengthen workforce training and capacity building to ensure staff match societal challenges and to ensure transdisciplinary integration to ensure that behavioral and social science research incorporates biomedical research to better address community ailments. Although the report mentions how the NIH has made great strides in its efforts to conduct excellent science for health benefits of our communities, the outlined recommendations of the report would play a significant role on ensuring a robust NIH that continues to lead in science and innovation.

Strengthening Peer Review

The request for information issued by your office asked a wide range of questions in peer review. We urge the Committee to reaffirm rather than significantly alter the peer review process, as part of potential NIH legislative reform process. The NIH's peer review process is considered the gold standard for allocating research funds and is a model example of how to identify and support innovative science.

Nonetheless, in the spirit of improved oversight and accountability, we acknowledge that continuous improvement is a noble goal. While we strongly endorse the current system, we also recognize that there are areas where small changes could see significant improvement. On the Simplified Framework for NIH Peer Review Criteria, the NIH proposed changes to the peer review process to address biases in the grantmaking process. These proposed changes would reframe the criteria so that reviewers would be focusing on the adequacy of investigators' expertise and institutional resources rather than the general scientific reputation. These changes would apply to most grants project grants (RPG) mechanisms for application due dates on or after January 2025.

In that spirit, our boldest and most innovative scientific discoveries are based on diverse minds, who can challenge our understanding and conception of our ideas. The NIH should continue to find ways to build a generation of scientists that leverages the training and expertise of a diverse pool of researchers to conduct excellent science. Studies have shown that scholars from under-awarded backgrounds are more likely to research human subjects with a focus on socioeconomic variables, like health care and lifestyle, which is vital to our understanding of human behavior.¹ In 2022, members of SRCDC proposed a series of recommendations to address initiatives within the NIH that could increase the ability for greater diversity of thought in the scientific process, including:

- Remove barriers so that scholars from under-awarded groups (e.g., non-R1 universities, scholars of color, etc.) can be part of peer review panels.

¹ Travis A. Hoppe et al., Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists. *Sci. Adv.* 5, eaaw7238(2019). DOI:10.1126/sciadv.aaw7238

- Scale up mentorship programs with demonstrated effectiveness. In one such program, 73% of scientists received federal grant funding, while 68% received recognition through honors and awards.
- Expand and support the [National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities \(NIMHD\)](#) Training and Career development programs. The NIMHD funds training and career development activities at universities and other institutions, to develop and support the next generation of researchers.

As we look for ways for the NIH to increase its transparency and accountability, increasing support to under-awarded but high-quality investigators will also encourage bold proposals to advance excellent science.

Improving Transparency and Oversight

The NIH is made up of 27 Institutes and Centers (IC), each focusing on specific areas of research. All of the 27 ICs have their own advisory council that is responsible for, among other things, conducting second level peer review for all grant applications that have been properly funded and approved. In efforts to strengthen the NIH, the advisory council should represent the diversity that exists within our communities. This would have a direct effect on the research priorities while also ensuring transparency in the peer review process, and the operational capacity of the IC to conduct excellent science in the communities that they serve.

This might involve following similar open-nomination processes, like the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine uses for its working groups and consensus committees. Or it could involve greater transparency in reporting grant awardees by their discipline and demographics.

Impact on the U.S. economy

The NIH's role and presence in our communities cannot be understated. Not only does NIH lead the world in science and innovation, but it also provides excellent support to the U.S. economy. In fiscal year 2022 (FY22), for every \$1 of NIH funding, the agency generated approximately \$2.64 in the economic activity for the U.S. economy.² This translates to a total of \$96.84 billion in the overall economic activity for the fiscal year 2022. For the State of Louisiana, NIH awarded \$227 million in grants and contracts for FY22, which directly supported nearly 5,000 jobs and \$631 million in economic activity in the state.³

The contributions that the NIH provides to the nation, and to the world, help millions of children and families. The agency's leadership on behavioral science is connected to bipartisan congressional support, and we hope that such support will continue, while taking into consideration the recommendations of this letter and the inputs of stakeholders across the nation.

We wanted to thank you for your time. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us. We work with Congressional offices regularly to help them create evidence-based policy to improve the lives of our nation's children and youth. We are always happy to help connect your office with experts who can give you nonpartisan advice on the science behind your work.

² *Annual Economic Report - United For Medical Research*. (2023, March 20). United for Medical Research. <https://www.unitedformedicalresearch.org/annual-economic-report/>

³ National Institutes of Health (NIH), NIH Awards by Location & Organization, U.S. FY2022

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Saima Hedrick', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Saima Hedrick
Executive Director
The Society for Research in Child Development
shedrick@srcd.org

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lindsay Turner Trammell', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Lindsay Turner Trammell
Director for Policy
The Society for Research in Child Development
policy@srcd.org