

February 19, 2021

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
437 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
304 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Chairman Leahy, & Ranking Member Shelby:

We write on behalf of the Friends of the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a coalition of professional societies and patient advocacy groups with a vested interest in promoting and sustaining the vital research activities of NICHD, to alert you to the urgent need for supplemental funding to support critical, timely COVID-19 research. We are grateful for the supplemental research funds appropriated to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and some of its institutes last year. However, NICHD has not received direct appropriations in these packages to date despite an overwhelming need to support pandemic-related research for children, pregnant women, mothers and babies, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and other critical populations. **We therefore urge you to provide a direct emergency supplemental appropriation of at least \$100 million to NICHD in COVID-19 relief legislation currently before Congress and also provide \$10 billion of research relief to NIH to support COVID-19-related expenses associated with both pandemic- and non-pandemic research and the research workforce pipeline.**

At the outset of the pandemic, little was known about the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, how it spread, the nature and severity of infection, or how to treat or prevent infection. While much remains to be learned, biomedical research, bolstered by congressional investments, has begun to reveal answers to these questions, improving public health mitigation measures and care for individuals with COVID-19. Federal investments have even led to the extraordinary development of multiple SARS-CoV-2 vaccines in record time, with two already authorized for emergency use and additional vaccines on the horizon.

However, nearly a year into the coronavirus pandemic, major research needs specific to children, pregnant women, mothers and babies, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and others under the unique purview of NICHD are acute. For instance, for children experiencing the impacts of the pandemic, it remains unclear what the long-term impact of isolation, school closures, and family stressors will be on their developmental and educational outcomes. NICHD research to better understand the dynamics of COVID-19 viral transmission in schools is essential. In addition, more research on the use of COVID-19 testing, and the most effective mitigation strategies in schools will help safely reopen schools nationwide. As pregnant individuals are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, it will be crucial to continue learning about the short-and-long term impact COVID-19 has on pregnant

individuals and their infants, including racial and ethnic inequities in outcomes. Furthermore, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have lost the support of trained caregivers and community service providers due to the pandemic, so the need for research into how these individuals are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 is high.

The gaps in research unfortunately impact some of the populations who will be last to benefit from COVID-19 vaccines or have been excluded from vaccine research. At present, SARS-CoV-2 vaccines have not been studied for use in children under 12 nor authorized for use in children under 16, leaving millions of children without access to a vaccine as vaccination efforts ramp up nationwide. Likewise, these vaccines have not been studied in pregnant and lactating women, leaving them and their health care professionals with limited information about the risks and benefits of this vaccine.

Answers to these questions will be critical to bringing the pandemic to an end and ensuring the health and well-being of every American. It is now essential to fully unleash the scientific expertise and ingenuity of the research enterprise onto issues impacting these populations. NICHD is uniquely positioned to conduct and fund this research with a network of researchers at the ready.

As you are aware, NICHD has made extraordinary achievements in meeting the objectives of its biomedical, social, and behavioral research mission, including research on pregnancy; reproductive biology; women's health throughout the life cycle; maternal, child, and family health; learning and language development; population health; and medical rehabilitation. Despite the lack of new funds, NICHD is an active participant in the COVID-19 response at NIH. NICHD has been an active participant in NIH institute and center-wide discussions on the topic, including working to ensure that NICHD's populations are included in COVID-19 related research (e.g. vaccine and therapeutic clinical trials).

Some prominent COVID-19 research studies that NICHD has conducted so far include the Gestational Research Assessments of COVID-19 (GRAVID) study, which is an analysis of medical records of 24,500 women to examine maternal and neonatal outcomes for pregnant women with and without coronavirus; and the PreVAIL Kids study where researchers will evaluate genes and other biomarkers in COVID-19 pediatric cases, as well as examine how the virus interacts with its host and how the immune system responds. NICHD is taking on these key efforts even as it maintains a robust and critical research portfolio, however, a lack of dedicated supplemental funding to expand research into these areas of scientific inquiry critical to addressing the pandemic threatens to divert core institute funding away from other promising science and delay the next generation of cures for NICHD's populations.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (P.L. 116-136) included \$945.4 million for the NIH to "prevent, prepare for, or respond to coronavirus, domestically or internationally." It also provided specific appropriations to support related work at NIH components, including the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHBLI), National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering (NIBIB), the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), and National Library of Medicine (NLM). Subsequent COVID-19 legislation has provided additional funding to the NIH.

As the public health pandemic has almost reached the year mark, the need for evidence-based research for understanding the short and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on maternal and infant health, child development, and in specific populations, including racial and ethnic inequities is crucial. NICHD will play a pivotal role in this work, but unfortunately has not received supplemental funding to fully research the

effects of COVID-19 on these populations. We call on Congress to act to ensure that NICHD receives dedicated support for its work in the next COVID relief package.

We write with urgency to respectfully request that the unparalleled research portfolio and programs of NICHD are addressed as we collectively work to anticipate and meet the challenges and learning opportunities presented by the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 research funds allocated to NICHD by the NIH Office of the Director have been insufficient to meet the need, as and we call on you to act to specifically support this vital institute at this critical time in the form of a direct emergency supplemental appropriation of at least \$100 million.

Thank you for your leadership during this extraordinary time and for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Deema Tarazi
Chair
Friends of NICHD

Matt Mariani
Vice Chair
Friends of NICHD