

The Honorable Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Chair, House Committee on Energy and Commerce
2188 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

August 9, 2024

Dear Chair McMorris Rodgers

The Friends of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) appreciate the opportunity to submit the following comments on reforming the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Our coalition of organizations represents a variety of interests, including medical and scientific professional societies, environment and public health focused organizations, children's health advocates, women's health advocates, and many others. Collectively, our community supports and calls attention to the unique and vital work being done by the NIEHS. The NIH is the world's preeminent biomedical research institution, and we welcome a thoughtful discussion about how NIH reform and reauthorization could accelerate biomedical research and advance human health. However, we are extremely concerned that the discussion framework may have unintended consequences for environmental health research through the proposed consolidation of Institutes and Centers (ICs); we urge the Committee to pursue a transparent and open authorization process that involves input from the biomedical research community, including environmental health scientists.

The NIEHS plays an important role within the NIH that is complementary to the other ICs; it is the principal institute conducting research to prevent human illness and disability by understanding how the environment influences the development and progression of human diseases and illnesses such as cancer, autism, asthma, Parkinson's disease, autoimmune diseases, chemical intolerance or toxicant-induced loss of tolerance, and chemical sensitivities. Expert research funded by NIEHS as well as the Worker Training Program also enables first responders, governments, and the public to respond to disasters (both natural and man-made) and other public health emergencies¹². Importantly, NIEHS-funded researchers identify environmental contributors to health disparities and help us understand how children and other individuals may be uniquely susceptible to environmental exposures. In this context, we note that NIEHS plays an important role in the President's Task Force on Risks to Children's Health and Risks to Children's safety, which led the development of the Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes program³. Given the unique role NIEHS plays within NIH, and the important approaches to biomedical research conducted by NIEHS-funded investigators, we do not understand the rationale for combining NIEHS with ICs having disparate missions and research priorities under a new National Institute on Health Sciences Research.

We note that NIEHS is an established leader in pursuing scientific objectives consistent with some of the recommendations in the proposal. NIEHS-funded investigators appreciate a lifecourse approach to health and disease; for example, scientists funded by NIEHS help us understand how early life exposures contribute to disease incidence and progression later in life⁴. NIEHS also supports innovative

¹ <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/programs/disaster>

² https://www.niehs.nih.gov/careers/hazmat/disaster_response

³ <https://ptfcehs.niehs.nih.gov/>

⁴ <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/supported/health/developmental>

partnerships including Community Engagement Cores that foster collaboration between researchers, universities, and the communities they serve⁵. The institute appreciates the need to collaborate across ICs and break down silos, for example through the Specialized Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research program, which is supported by NIEHS in partnership with the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), and the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)⁶.

Recognizing that the proposal is now included in the House Labor, Health and Human Services and Related Agencies appropriations bill, we maintain that NIEHS and NIH as a whole would be well-served through predictable, sustainable increases in funding. Consistent growth in the NIEHS budget above inflationary increases would allow the institute to make strategic investments in discovery-oriented research as well as respond to disasters and other health threats as they arise. We encourage the authorizing and appropriating committees to work together to create a sustainable growth trajectory for NIH that allows NIEHS to support research with a competitive payline and encourage young environmental health scientists to remain in the profession.

In conclusion, NIEHS is a vital institute with a unique focus on the prevention of health problems and diseases with special emphasis on the intimate interactions between our bodies and the environments where we live, work, and play over our lifetimes. Environmental health research must be recognized and given thoughtful consideration in any proposed reform of NIH. In the context of the proposed framework, a reorganization of this magnitude, impacting the most productive and successful biomedical research enterprise in the world, should be carefully considered through an open, transparent authorization process that includes input from environmental health scientists, public health advocates and other stakeholders alongside a thorough review of NIH operations and portfolios.

Thank you for considering our comments. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to connect with us via e-mail to jlaakso@endocrine.org and vadelson@thoracic.org.

Sincerely

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⁵ <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/supported/centers/core/coe>

⁶ <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/supported/centers/ehd>