

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 14, 2011

Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D.
Director, National Institutes of Health
Building 1 - Shannon Building, 126
1 Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Collins:

We write regarding the recent recommendation by the Scientific Management Review Board (SMRB) to create a National Center for Advancing Translational Science (NCATS) and reorganize certain other Institutes and Centers at the National Institutes of Health, including the National Center on Research Resources (NCRR). Our concerns include the timing of the reorganization process and the impact upon the second largest program in NCRR: the successful and important Institutional Development Awards (IDeA) program.

NIH established the IDeA program in 1993 to enhance the biomedical research activities in states with a historically low funding success rate. It currently supports competitive research in 23 states and Puerto Rico. The major initiatives at IDeA are Centers of Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) and IDeA Networks of Biomedical Research Excellence (INBRE). These successful programs develop the capacity and infrastructure for many research programs to compete successfully for more traditional NIH funding.

We understand that the SMRB recommended the formation of the new center at its December 7, 2010, meeting, the culmination of a study that had begun in May 2010. At the December meeting, the board endorsed NIH's commitment to undertake a more extensive and detailed analysis through a transparent process to evaluate the impact of a new center on relevant programs, including the NCRR. To accomplish this, you appointed an NCRR task force co-chaired by Principal Deputy Director Lawrence Tabak and Institute Director Alan E. Guttmacher.

We are concerned that the pace of decision-making on this reorganization has not allowed for a thorough analysis of how this reorganization will impact critical programs including IDeA. Following the December 7th meeting of the SMRB, Dr. Tabak began seeking comments via the feedback.nih.gov website on December 8, 2010. By January 16, 2011, he apparently had gathered enough input to post a straw model as a planning device to seek further input. Yet even before this straw model was posted on January 16, 2011, Secretary Sebelius had already on January 14, 2011 notified the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions, that "based on information provided to me by the NIH Director," "...I have further determined that the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR) is no longer required..."

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NCCR was formed at NIH as the result of a merger in 1990 and currently has a budget of over one billion dollars. The pace of this decision announcement is concerning.

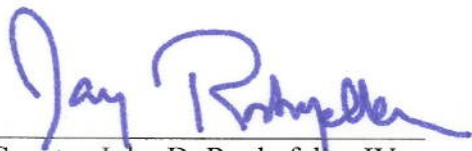
The straw model released on January 16th by the NCCR Task Force demonstrates the difficulty in finding new homes for all of the important programs within NCCR. Suggestions have been made for permanent homes for some programs in existing Centers, but the rest have been combined into an "interim infrastructure unit," which will temporarily place these programs within the Director's office. While the straw model is not detailed enough for careful analysis, it appears approximately half of the NCCR programs – including the IDeA program – are assigned to this interim unit, comprising approximately one-third of the current NCCR budget.

We are concerned that these changes, especially the shift from a permanent institute to an "interim unit" could have negative implications for many of the programs, especially the IDeA program. We are troubled by the Task Force's recommendation to move this important program temporarily, which could disrupt both the role that this program plays in accelerating the research of new investigators as well as the collaboration between IDeA and other programs currently housed in NCCR.

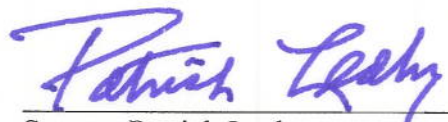
We understand that the task force continues to receive significant feedback through both its website and phone conferences hosted by Dr. Tabak. We applaud Dr. Tabak's efforts to gather input inside of the short time frame allowed him. Many of the over 1200 comments posted to date suggest how well many of the programs inside of NCCR have worked together and benefited each other. We ask that NIH proceed cautiously as you consider these organizational changes to ensure important programs such as IDeA are located in permanent institutes or centers where they can continue to succeed. We request a briefing before February 18 to update us on your planning. We hope that our comments and concerns are reflected in the final report scheduled to be completed by the end of the month.

CC: The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius

Sincerely,



Senator John D. Rockefeller IV



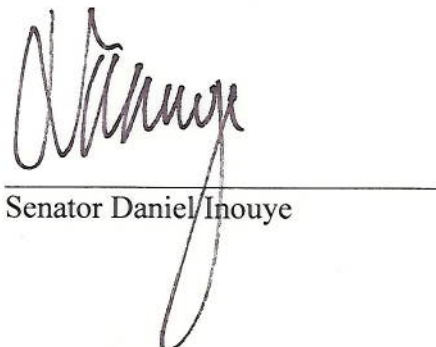
Senator Patrick Leahy



Senator Ben Nelson



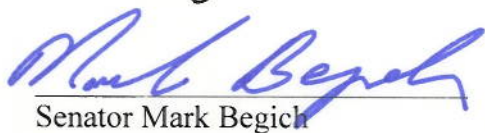
Senator Mike Johanns



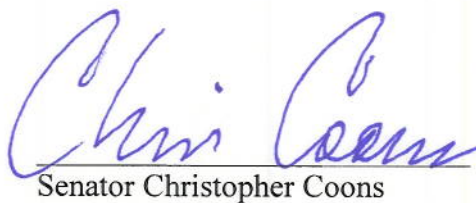
Senator Daniel Inouye



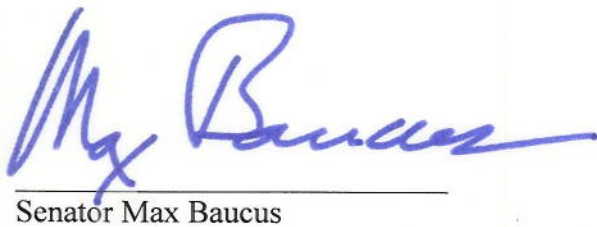
Senator Thad Cochran




Senator Mark Begich



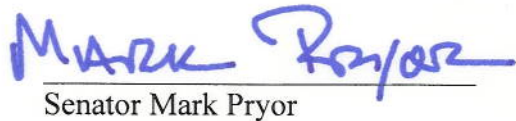
Senator Christopher Coons



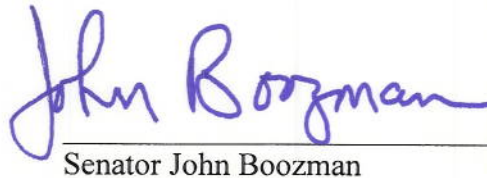
Senator Max Baucus



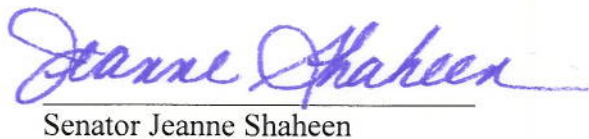
Senator Jon Tester



Senator Mark Pryor



Senator John Boozman



Senator Jeanne Shaheen

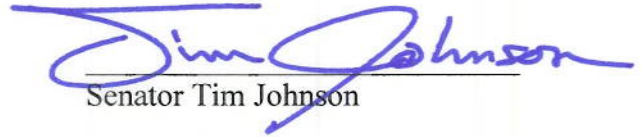


Senator Bernard Sanders

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kent Conrad". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'K'.

Senator Kent Conrad

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tim Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'T'.

Senator Tim Johnson