July 24, 2009

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the Consortium of Social Science Associations, I write to urge you to vote “NO” on the amendment being offered by Representative Darrell Issa to the House FY 2010 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill that would eliminate funding for three currently funded, peer reviewed research grants supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Supported by more than 100 professional associations, scientific societies, universities, and research institutions, COSSA stands alone in representing the full range of social and behavioral sciences.

The NIH mission is to uncover new knowledge that will lead to better health for everyone. It is widely recognized by the scientific community that social and behavioral science research is critical in America’s quest to promote health, prevent disease, and provide quality treatment. Behavioral factors “are a main driver” of disease burden. Six of the ten leading causes of death in the United States are behaviorally-based, including HIV/AIDS, smoking, violence, accidents, diet, and substance abuse. This research provides knowledge about the social, cultural, and economic environments that influence human health and behavior and the means by which these environments exert their influence.

Given that HIV/AIDS is a global epidemic that has already killed more than 25 million men, women, and children and 33 million are currently living with HIV, it is clear that prevention of HIV infection should be a priority area of research funding. The research is easy to ridicule if it is taken out of its public health context. The fact is scientists need to explore a range of research avenues in vulnerable populations around the world to learn the best ways to control the transmission of HIV.

In response to previous congressional concerns about whether sexual health research should be funded by the agency, NIH reviewed the entire NIH sexuality portfolio in 2004. That investigation found that all of the NIH grants in areas of sexual health met the rigorous standards of scientific and ethical quality, that they were not funded out of proportion to the public health burden of these diseases, and that the merit review system had been followed.

NIH supports hundreds of thousands of scientists across the country engaged in basic and clinical research, from cellular biology and genetics to studies of health disparities across populations. Each study that eventually receives support from NIH has undergone a rigorous review of both its scientific merit and its relevance to the public’s health and NIH mission. Efforts to override the peer review process would undermine one of the core principles of the research enterprise.
This research provides: knowledge, methodology, and measures that are essential for prediction, prevention, understanding individual variation, and controlling illness; for minimizing the collateral impact of disease; and for promoting health. As you consider this amendment which seeks to stop NIH from funding its current peer-reviewed research projects, we hope that you will consider the importance of preserving the integrity and rigor of the peer review process.

COSSA urges you to reject the practice of subjecting individual research projects to scrutiny based on political and ideological criteria. Doing so threatens the interest of science and the public’s health. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact Angela Sharpe, Deputy Director for Health Policy at 202.842.3525 or alsharpe@cossa.org.

Sincerely,

Howard J. Silver, Ph.D.
Executive Director
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American Association for Public Opinion Research
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Society for Research in Child Development

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American Association for Agricultural Education
American Psychosomatic Society
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International Communication Association
Justice Research and Statistics Association
Midwest Sociological Society
National Association of Social Workers
National Council on Family Relations

North American Regional Science Council
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Population Association of America
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Society for Behavioral Medicine
Society for Research on Adolescence
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