



February 15, 2019

Diana W. Bianchi, MD
Director
Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Re: NOT-HD-18-031

Dear Dr. Bianchi:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to inform the development of the NICHD Strategic Plan for 2020-2024. On behalf of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), I offer the enclosed comments for your consideration. First, we would like to thank the institute for the steps it has taken over the last several months to consult with the research community on its vision for the coming years. We are confident that employing such a consultative approach will yield a stronger vision to guide the institute and the child health and development research community into the next decade.

COSSA is a nonprofit organization representing the shared research and policy interests of the entire social and behavioral science research community. Across our broad and diverse membership—which includes, but is not limited to anthropology, communication, demography, economics, geography, history, law, linguistics, political science, psychology, sociology, and statistics—social and behavioral scientists engage in the rigorous study of why and how humans behave as they do as individuals, groups and within institutions, organizations, and society, including factors, environments, and experiences that shape child health and development. As one of the only NIH institutes to emphasize *at the time of its founding* the centrality of understanding behavioral and social science dimensions of child health and development, including the social determinants of health, it is crucial that future planning for NICHD continue to prioritize behavioral and social science questions that are unique to children and have critical implications later in life.

On behalf of the social and behavioral science community, I offer the following general comments about the draft Strategic Plan priorities:

- (1) **The Strategic Plan should focus on the “whole person,” to include research on development at the molecular, cellular, social, environmental, behavioral, biobehavioral, and other levels.** The emphasis in the plan on understanding human development at the cellular level is important; however, taking such a narrow approach to research misses the ways factors beyond the body influence health and development. The real frontier in developmental research is in understanding the cross-level (cellular, social, environmental, biobehavioral, etc.) interactions and feedbacks. Deemphasizing social, behavioral, environmental, and other factors comes with

significant risks, such as producing a partial and/or inaccurate picture of the factors involved in setting the course for healthy lives. NICHD has an opportunity through the strategic plan to embrace cutting-edge interdisciplinary research to better explore and understand the critical interplay at all levels.

- (2) **The Strategic Plan should not overlook the importance of research at all stages of child development, from prenatal/infancy *through* adolescence, and in normative and non-normative or at-risk environments.** The need to study “sensitive time periods” in development, including early development and adolescence is important; however, given that many factors shape child (and adult) health and well-being throughout the stages of development, NICHD must continue to prioritize research, including longitudinal research, at all ages.
- (3) **The Strategic Plan should strongly emphasize research on social determinants of health.** The draft themes reference lifestyle factors for health and well-being, but other social determinants of health are largely missing from the stated priorities. By under-emphasizing research on family dynamics and parenting, educational and economic success, residential segregation and migration, reproductive and sexual decision-making, the interplay between poverty and toxic environmental exposures, sexual violence, racism and discrimination, among others, you are potentially stunting the institute’s ability to fully tackle the totality of factors impacting health for children. Attention in this regard should be made to pre-pregnancy health as well as health during pregnancy and throughout childhood.

In closing, we urge NICHD to not take a narrow approach to the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan. The institute and constituent research community would benefit most from a roadmap that takes advantage of all the tools at its disposal, including within the social and behavioral sciences, to foster cutting-edge research that looks at the full context of health and development.

Thank you again for this opportunity. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Wendy A. Naus
Executive Director
Consortium of Social Science Associations