



September 24, 2020

Mr. Peter Thomas  
Mr. Joe Nahra  
Mr. Bobby Silverstein  
Disability and Rehabilitation Research Coalition  
1501 M Street, NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Messrs. Thomas, Nahra, and Silverstein:

Thank you for writing to Dr. Francis Collins at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) on behalf of the Coalition to urge that COVID-19-related research supported by the NIH should include the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities and chronic conditions. I was asked to respond to your letter on behalf of Dr. Collins and the NIH. We appreciate the thought and effort that went into making your recommendations on potential research topics to address this rapidly evolving situation.

While COVID-19 is affecting people across all demographic groups, some populations are disproportionately affected, including people with disabilities and chronic conditions. NIH is making concerted efforts to support research on underserved and/or vulnerable populations through targeted supplemental funding and Notices of Special Interest (NOSIs) that provide supplemental funding, both of which signal NIH's interest on specific topics to the research community. NIH plans to expand these efforts further in the near future.

To date, NIH has received very few investigator-initiated applications addressing COVID-19 infection in people with disabilities, the impact of COVID-19 on rehabilitation, or the need for rehabilitation following COVID-19 infection. NIH has provided \$1.9 million in supplemental funding for FY 2020 to eight ongoing rehabilitation projects to add COVID-19 related work. Additional awards totaling over \$2 million have been made to researchers through the INvestigating Co-occurring conditions across the Lifespan to Understand Down syndromE (INCLUDE) project.

Looking ahead, as part of its new Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx) – Underserved Populations (UP) program, NIH is developing community-engaged projects across the United States to assess and expand COVID-19 testing for underserved populations (<https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/about/overview/>) and/or vulnerable populations, which include *individuals with intellectual, developmental, sensory, or physical disabilities*, cognitive impairment or dementia, or communication disorders (see FOAs referenced below). This program will support multiple clinical research sites across the country to evaluate, in real-time,

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a variety of testing methods in specific populations, areas, and settings. Collaboration between the program sites and the community is strongly encouraged to identify and address their unique needs.

RADx-UP comprises four initiatives that include a coordination and data collection center ([RFA-OD-20-013](#)), supplements to individual research project grants or large-scale networks/consortia and centers or to include community collaborations or partnerships to support COVID-19 testing to reach underserved and/or COVID-19 vulnerable populations ([NOT-OD-20-120](#) and [NOT-OD-20-121](#), respectively), and supplements to understand the Social, Ethical and Behavioral Implications of COVID-19 testing in these populations ([NOT-OD-20-119](#)).

Another recent Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA) encourages grant applications to implement and evaluate community interventions testing on the impact of mitigation strategies to prevent COVID-19 transmission in NIH-designated health disparity populations and other vulnerable groups (including persons who are deaf or with disabilities including visual, hearing, communication, or mobility impairment); and already implemented, new, or adapted interventions to address the adverse psychosocial, behavioral, and socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic on the health of these groups <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PAR-20-237.html>.

In addition, NIH expects to publish a new NOSI in the near future, aimed at encouraging grant applications in three areas specifically related to the intersection of COVID-19, associated mitigation activities, and rehabilitation. NIH hopes to receive research applications addressing these topics. Applications will be directed to the National Center for Medical Rehabilitation Research (NCMRR) at the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

NIH staff, including Dr. Theresa Cruz and the members of the NIH Medical Rehabilitation Coordinating Committee, Director of NCMRR, have been actively alerting the research community to these funding opportunities, reaching out to rehabilitation research hospitals across the country, and speaking to NICHD's national advisory bodies. If you have additional means of alerting the field to these opportunities, Dr. Cruz would welcome those suggestions.

Thank you again for writing, and for your help in ensuring that NIH is able to fund excellent research applications to address the impact of COVID-19 on people with disabilities.

Sincerely,



Diana W. Bianchi, M.D.  
Director, NICHD