

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 17, 2020

Dr. Francis S. Collins  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Collins:

We write regarding addiction and behavioral health research programs at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Over the summer, reports indicated that many of these programs were postponed as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.<sup>1</sup> We are concerned that this postponement will impact the results of this crucial research to the detriment of those struggling with opioid use disorder (OUD). In light of the growing number of opioid overdoses and deaths,<sup>2</sup> it is crucial this research be completed in a timely manner so that those struggling with OUD may receive the high-quality, evidence-based treatment they need.

In recent months, the United States has experienced a significant surge in the number of opioid overdoses and overdose deaths.<sup>3</sup> Since the beginning of the public health crisis in March, over forty states have seen increases in opioid-related mortality.<sup>4</sup> This follows an increase in opioid overdose deaths of over 70,000 in 2019, a 5 percent jump from 2018.<sup>5</sup> Shelter in place and social distancing measures have complicated patients' access to potentially life-saving medication assisted treatment (MAT) and counseling services that thousands rely on.<sup>6</sup> These growing numbers are particularly troubling as those who suffer from OUD and other substance use disorders are more likely to struggle with homelessness, economic insecurity, and other comorbidities that increase their chances of contracting COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Brown communities have borne the brunt of the opioid epidemic and its resurgence. While rates of overdose are decreasing overall, rates of overdose in

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<sup>1</sup> Politico, "Pandemic Unleashes A Spike in Overdose Deaths," Brianna Ehley, June 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/29/pandemic-unleashes-a-spike-in-overdose-deaths-345183>.

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, "COVID-19: Lockdowns Return and North Dakota Issues Mask Mandate as Records Fall," November 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2020/11/13/world/covid-19-coronavirus-updates>

<sup>3</sup> NBC, "Overdose deaths appear to rise amid coronavirus pandemic in U.S.," October 20, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/overdose-deaths-appear-rise-amid-coronavirus-pandemic-u-s-n1244024>

<sup>4</sup> American Medical Association, "Issue brief: Reports of increases in opioid- and other drug-related overdose and other concerns during COVID pandemic," October 6, 2020, <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2020-10/issue-brief-increases-in-opioid-related-overdose.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts," [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm?source=email#nature\\_sources\\_of\\_data](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm?source=email#nature_sources_of_data).

<sup>6</sup> The Wall Street Journal, "Coronavirus Pandemic Complicates Opioid Treatment," Jon Kamp, April 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronaviruspandemic-complicates-opioidtreatment-11586262903>.

<sup>7</sup> American Academy of Addiction Psychiatry, "Challenges to Opioid Use Disorder During COVID-19," Yankun Sun et al., April 13, 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7262307/>.

Black and Brown communities are actually increasing.<sup>8</sup> These accelerating trends paint a grim picture for those struggling with OUD and the country's work to recover from the opioid epidemic.

NIH, along with other federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Health and Human Services, have led the nation's efforts to combat the opioid epidemic. Together, the agencies conduct and support groundbreaking research to develop new treatments, affording individuals struggling with OUD increasingly sophisticated and effective treatment options.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the increasing need for OUD treatment, reports have indicated that several behavioral health and addiction treatment studies being performed at NIH have been put on hold.<sup>10</sup> The report states "The coronavirus threat put on hold a billion-dollar research program focused on new forms of addiction treatment, as part of a broader freeze on non-Covid-19 work at the National Institutes of Health."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, "Studies on disparities in behavioral health and efforts to deliver medication-assisted therapies to inmates struggling with addiction were also paused."<sup>12</sup> While this postponement is likely due to social distancing precautions and the resultant inability to conduct research in congregate settings, we have concerns over the impact these delays will have on the outcome of the study and the nation's work to combat the opioid epidemic. Given growing rates of opioid overdoses, it is imperative the federal government take all possible steps to help those suffering from OUD and other substance use disorders.

The work NIH does to combat public health crises such as the opioid epidemic is invaluable. It is imperative that NIH has the tools it needs to continue this life-saving research, especially as new data reveal the continually shifting trends of the epidemic from prescription opioids to synthetic fentanyl and stimulants<sup>13</sup>. To better understand how Congress may support NIH's work to combat the opioid crisis, we request answers to the following questions no later than December 1, 2020.

1. How many NIH-supported substance use, substance use disorder treatment, or behavioral health research studies have been delayed, cancelled, or otherwise adversely affected due to COVID-19? Please include:
  - a. A detailed summary of each program;
  - b. An explanation for how each program was affected;

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<sup>8</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, "Opioid Overdose Deaths by Race/Ethnicity," <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/opioid-overdose-deaths-by-raceethnicity/?dataView=1&activeTab=graph&currentTimeframe=0&startTimeframe=19&selectedDistributions=white-non-hispanic--black-non-hispanic--hispanic--total&selectedRows=%7B%22wrapups%22:%7B%22united-states%22:%7B%22D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>.

<sup>9</sup> National Institutes of Health, "NIH HEAL Initiative Research Plan," <https://heal.nih.gov/about/research-plan>; Department of Health and Human Services, "National Opioids Crisis," <https://www.hhs.gov/opioids/about-the-epidemic/hhs-response/better-research/index.html>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Opioid Overdose Prevention," [https://www.cdc.gov/injury/erpo/icrc/topic\\_opioidOverdose.html](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/erpo/icrc/topic_opioidOverdose.html).

<sup>10</sup> Politico, "Pandemic Unleashes A Spike in Overdose Deaths," Brianna Ehley, June 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/29/pandemic-unleashes-a-spike-in-overdose-deaths-345183>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

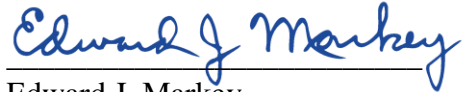
<sup>13</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Provisional Drug Overdose Death Counts," [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm?source=email#nature\\_sources\\_of\\_data](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/drug-overdose-data.htm?source=email#nature_sources_of_data).

- c. The date it was stopped if relevant;
  - d. Any anticipated resumption date.
2. What additional resources are needed by NIH to ensure that the agency is able to efficiently and safely complete this research?

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator