October 11, 2017

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

Dear Director Collins:

We are writing today to urge the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to renew a recently-lapsed funding opportunity for firearm violence research.

**Gun Violence in the U.S. is “Underfunded and Understudied”**

Every year, over 30,000 Americans die in gun-related fatalities.1 In 2017 alone, over 11,900 people have died, and over 24,300 people have been injured, from gun violence. Our nation has experienced 278 mass shootings, including the horrific massacre in Las Vegas, and over 1,500 people have been injured by accidental shootings.2 Gun-related fatalities have surpassed motor vehicle deaths in 21 states3, and the American Medical Association has described gun violence in America as a “‘public health crisis’ requiring a comprehensive public health response and solution.”4

In spite of the toll of gun violence on Americans’ health and safety, a dearth of scientific research has hindered efforts to reduce gun-related fatalities and injuries. The Dickey Amendment, which has been largely interpreted as a congressional ban on federal funding for gun research at CDC, has played a large role in perpetuating the gun violence research gap.5

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2 Gun Violence Archive, “Gun Violence Archive 2017” (accessed October 10, 2017) (online at http://www.gunviolencearchive.org/). *Note:* The Gun Violence Archive compiles data on gun violence by using “automated queries, manual research through over 2,000 media sources, aggregates, police blotters, police media outlets and other sources daily.” The Gun Violence Archive data cited above may differ from CDC data, which relies on death certificates to track gun deaths. Furthermore, the Gun Violence Archive numbers cited above do not include data on suicides. For additional information, please see the “General Methodology” section at www.gunviolencearchive.org/methodology.
Dickey Amendment only prohibits research “to advocate or promote gun control”—not objective scientific inquiries into gun violence prevention—but it has had a chilling effect on gun-related studies. When compared to other leading causes of death, gun violence is “substantially underfunded and understudied...based on mortality rates for each cause.”

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, Gun Violence Research is in the “Sweet Spot” of NIH’s Efforts to “Save Lives”

Following the shooting of 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, President Obama directed the Department of Health and Human Services to “conduct or sponsor research into the causes of gun violence and the ways to prevent it.” In response, the NIH issued a new funding opportunity for “Research on the Health Determinants and Consequences of Violence and its Prevention, Particularly Firearm Violence.” The funding opportunity supported research at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), among other segments of NIH.

During a 2015 hearing on mental health challenges in the U.S., Dr. Thomas Insel, the then-Director of the NIMH, touted the funding opportunity as a critical piece of the NIH’s efforts to “understand how science can save lives.” Discussing projects to “assess risk for someone when they have made a suicide attempt” and to develop an understanding of “developmental pathways of violence,” Dr. Insel described the funding opportunity as “in the sweet spot” of the NIH’s mission to promote and improve health.

Renewal of the Funding Opportunity Is Critical to Our Nation’s Efforts to Combat Gun Violence

Researchers agreed that the funding opportunity was essential to combatting the public health ramifications of gun violence. According to one clinical psychologist, the funding opportunity was “mission critical to bringing me into a new area [of gun research].” Another argued that “[i]t would have been much harder...to get funding for [gun] research without that

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specific program announcement on firearm violence.” Ultimately, from 2014 to 2017, the NIH provided $18 million to 22 projects studying gun violence. The funding opportunity closed on January 8, 2017. Numerous public health experts have urged the NIH to renew the program.

Given Dr. Insel’s promotion of the gun violence funding opportunity as in the “sweet spot” of the NIH’s efforts to “save lives” – and the devastating impact of gun violence across the country – we were surprised by recent reports that the NIH may not renew the program. According to Science magazine, renewal of the funding opportunity is “under consideration.” The NIH is “evaluating the current program’s outcomes and has no timeline [set] for a decision on its renewal.”

Thanks in part to NIH-funded projects, the average American’s life expectancy increased by eight years between 1970 and 2013; heart disease deaths fell by 67.5% from 1969 to 2013; and cancer deaths decreased by 15% from 2003 to 2012. With 93 Americans dying per day from gun-related fatalities, it is critical that NIH dedicate a portion of its resources to the public health consequences of gun violence. We strongly urge you to renew the gun violence research program as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Christopher Murphy
United States Senator

Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

Patty Murray
United States Senator

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Christopher A. Coons  
United States Senator

Edward J. Markey  
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Chris Van Hollen  
United States Senator

Kamala D. Harris  
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senator

Cory A. Booker  
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Tammy Duckworth  
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Jack Reed  
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Maria Cantwell  
United States Senator