

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 2, 2021

The Honorable Jane Nishida
Acting Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20460

The Honorable Francis Collins
Director
National Institutes of Health
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Acting Administrator Nishida and Director Collins:

We write concerning the current status of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) portfolios of environmental justice grants and environmental health disparities research grants. As the nation continues to confront the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, your agencies must address the environmental injustices that are disproportionately placed on the nation's frontline communities and that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

The office of Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey recently found that, “[i]n communities of color across the United States, the painful legacy of environmental injustice and unequal access to healthcare are lethally compounding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹ These findings echo ongoing studies that have stated that “racial disparities in exposure to environmental pollutants are greater factors that remain even after controlling for income” and that middle-class Black Americans “are exposed to much higher levels of industrial chemicals, air pollution and poisonous heavy metals, as well as pathogens, than are profoundly poor white people” across urban and rural areas.² As the nation faces both a public health crisis and an economic crisis,³ it is also notable that “Black workers are more likely to be in front-line jobs that are categorized as ‘essential’—forcing them to risk their own and their families’ health to earn a living” and that Black Americans “have disproportionately high COVID-19 death rates

¹ Office of Attorney General Healey, “COVID-19’s Unequal Effects in Massachusetts: Remedying the Legacy of Environmental Injustice & Building Climate Resilience” report, May 12, 2020, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/covid-19s-unequal-effects-in-massachusetts/download>.

² Nature, “How environmental racism is fueling the coronavirus pandemic,” Harriet Washington, May 19, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01453-y>.

³ New York Times, “Anemic Jobs Report Reaffirms Pandemic’s Grip on Economy,” Sydney Ember and Ben Casselman, February 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/business/economy/january-2021-jobs-report.html>.

and are more likely to live in areas experiencing outbreaks.”⁴ It is clear that now, more than ever, the federal government should be putting resources into programs that would research and identify ways to mitigate these environmental injustices and disparities.

We are concerned about the status of the Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities (EHD) Research program, a program jointly administered through the EPA and the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) at the NIH. The EHD Research program “encourages basic, biological, clinical, epidemiological, behavioral and/or social scientific investigations of disease conditions that are known to be a significant burden in low socioeconomic and health disparate populations,” and the centers “support research efforts, mentoring, capacity building, research translation and information dissemination, and are designed to address program-specific research priorities.”⁵ As the nation faces a dire public health crisis with disproportionate impacts on low-income communities and communities of color, the research conducted by the EHD centers is more important than ever.

We were troubled by the NIMHD and NIEHS decision to reduce the number of EHD centers from five centers to three,⁶ following the Trump-era EPA’s decision to withdraw its support for the program. The 2019 grant for EHD through NIH stated that “NIMHD and NIEHS each intend to commit \$2 million in FY2020 for a total of \$4 million to fund up to 3 awards and NICHD intends to commit \$300,000 in FY2020 for a total of \$4.3 million to fund up to 3 awards.”⁷ This grant opportunity, however, contrasts with the 2014 grant opportunity, which stated that “NIH and EPA intend to fund approximately 5 awards, corresponding to \$5.1 million per year, for 5 years beginning in fiscal year 2015. Future year amounts will depend on annual appropriations.”⁸

The currently funded projects, located in Arizona, California, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Mexico,⁹ are researching cumulative effects of contaminant exposure and how they combine with social stressors, how different socioeconomic groups are differentially exposed to

⁴ Economic Policy Institute, “Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality,” Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, June 1, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>.

⁵ Environmental Protection Agency, “Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research,” July 16, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/research-grants/centers-excellence-environmental-health-disparities-research>.

⁶ National Institutes of Health and Environmental Protection Agency, “Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research (P50),” October 30, 2014, <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-ES-14-010.html>; National Institutes of Health, “Limited Competition: Specialized Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research [P50 Clinical Trial Optional],” September 20, 2019, <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-MD-20-001.html>.

⁷ National Institutes of Health, “Limited Competition: Specialized Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research [P50 Clinical Trial Optional],” September 20, 2019, <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-MD-20-001.html>.

⁸ National Institutes of Health and Environmental Protection Agency, “Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research (P50),” October 30, 2014, <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-ES-14-010.html>.

⁹ Environmental Protection Agency, “Currently Funded Grantees: Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research,” April 14, 2017, <https://www.epa.gov/research-grants/currently-funded-grantees-centers-excellence-environmental-health-disparities>.

environmental hazards, and how land use contributes to environmental health disparities.¹⁰ They are also studying how proximity to transportation infrastructure and poverty affects pollution exposure, how improvements in environmental health literacy enable sustainable lifestyles, and how researchers can convey findings to stakeholders and community members in culturally sensitive ways.¹¹ This research is critical, particularly given the NIH’s acknowledgement that “climate variables may be useful to predict periods of lower or higher intensity of COVID-19 spread in local communities, which has significant policy, communication, and resource implications[,]” and that “the COVID-19 pandemic illuminates the special challenges to health systems of concurrent events and cumulative health hazards and stressors.”¹²

Specifically, the Center for Research on Environmental and Social Stressors in Housing across the Life Course (CRESSH), located in Massachusetts and jointly administered by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Boston University School of Public Health, conducts “innovative interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary studies spanning epidemiology, exposure science, risk assessment, and quantitative disparities analysis, with strong community engagement” and examines “multiple health outcomes across the life course, operating within [the] Center’s targeted low-income communities (Chelsea and Dorchester) as well as across Massachusetts.”¹³ The Trump-era action to reduce the available funding for EHD centers, along with the fact that the EPA appears to have ceased its participation in the next round of EHD center grant funding,¹⁴ challenges the EPA’s mission of “working to improve the environment and public health conditions of low-income and minority communities.”¹⁵

Given reports that “Black and Latino people have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus in a widespread manner that spans the country, throughout hundreds of counties in urban, suburban and rural areas, and across all age groups,”¹⁶ the federal government should be taking every step to address environmental injustices and health disparities, which includes providing robust funding for programs that research these health disparities. It is disturbing that this funding would be reduced now, especially considering that “[p]oor air can also cause lung

¹⁰ Environmental Protection Agency, “Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research,” July 16, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/research-grants/centers-excellence-environmental-health-disparities-research>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² National Institutes of Health, “Global Environmental Health Newsletter: The COVID-19 Pandemic from a Global Environmental Health Perspective,” June 22, 2020, https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/programs/geh/geh_newsletter/2020/6/articles/the_covid19_pandemic_from_a_global_environmental_health_perspective.cfm.

¹³ Environmental Protection Agency, “2019 Progress Report: Center for Research on Environmental and Social Stressors in Housing across the Life Course,” November 25, 2019, <https://cfpub.epa.gov/ncer/abstracts/index.cfm/fuseaction/display.abstractDetail/abstract/10630/report/2019>.

¹⁴ National Institutes of Health, “Limited Competition: Specialized Centers of Excellence on Environmental Health Disparities Research [P50 Clinical Trial Optional],” September 20, 2019, <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-MD-20-001.html>.

¹⁵ Environmental Protection Agency, “EPA Provides Grant Funding to Support Environmental Justice Communities Impacted by COVID-19,” April 30, 2020, <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-provides-grant-funding-support-environmental-justice-communities-impacted-covid-19>.

¹⁶ New York Times, “The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequity of Coronavirus,” Richard Oppell, Robert Gebeloff, K.K. Rebecca Lai, Will Wright, and Mitch Smith, July 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html>.

inflammation that could worsen the symptoms of covid-19.”¹⁷ Given the identification and development of the COVID-19 pandemic since the NIH released its solicitation, we urge your agencies to reverse the decision to limit EHD center funding, relative to previous levels, and to explain how your agencies will ensure that the important research being conducted by the program continues without unnecessary impediments or delays.

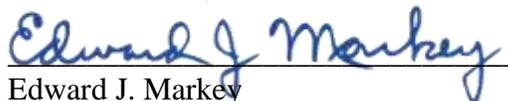
In order for us to understand your agencies’ environmental justice programs, please provide the following information by Tuesday, March 16, 2021:

1. Please provide a summary of activities and grant programs under your agencies’ environmental justice programs, including new funding opportunities or programs that would address environmental health disparities since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Please provide information on any plans to restore the joint EPA and NIH program supporting the EHD centers, including the timing for EPA to rejoin the program.

Thank you for your consideration of these important matters, and we look forward to your responses.



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

¹⁷ Washington Post, “The coronavirus is deadly enough. But some experts suspect bad air makes it worse.” Chris Mooney, March 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/03/15/smoking-air-pollution-coronavirus/>.