

FRIENDS OF ORWH

NIH Office of Research
on Women's Health

March XX, 2023

The Honorable Robert Aderholt
Chair
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
Chair
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairs Aderholt and Baldwin and Ranking Members DeLauro and Capito:

The undersigned members, as Friends of the Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH), request that you include at least **\$50.924 billion** in base funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and at least **\$71.4 million** for the NIH ORWH base budget in fiscal year (FY) 2024 appropriations legislation, which would allow for meaningful growth across both entities. The increase to NIH's base budget would allow the Institute to keep pace with the biomedical research and development price index (BRDPI) and receive a 5% increase, and the additional funding for ORWH would allow the office to build upon its research, programs, and initiatives to that could create consequential, positive change for women's health.

The Friends of ORWH greatly appreciates the increase provided to the Office in FY 2023 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies (Labor-HHS) omnibus spending package and urges Congress to build upon that growth this year.

As the NIH hub for coordinating women's health research, the ORWH ensures women are appropriately represented in the biomedical and behavioral research supported by the NIH. In its more than 30-year history, the ORWH has helped transform what we think of as "women's health," improved our understanding of the influences of sex and gender on health and disease, and developed resources to help scientists more efficiently and effectively recruit and retain women participants in clinical studies.

In addition to its work to improve the health of women broadly, the ORWH works to improve the health of all populations of women, by funding -critically important research that conducts

~~critical work to~~ addresses disparities within women's health ~~through analysis of~~ the intersection of sex and gender with ~~including considering how~~ race, ~~and~~ ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, geographic location, ~~gender identity~~, and disability status. ~~in order to better understand and address the health of all populations of women. As an example, ORWH co-leads with other NIH institutes the IMPROVE initiative which supports research that is anticipated to improve maternal health outcomes by reducing racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities. ORWH, in its~~ In the *Trans-NIH Strategic Plan for Research on the Health of Women, 2019-2023*, ORWH shared its dedication to expanding and refining methodologies to improve the recruitment and retention of women who are historically underrepresented in clinical research; advancing implementation science that could help eliminate disparities in care; and to conducting research on the factors that contribute to disparities in health status or health outcomes for different populations of women.

The ORWH also has an important role to play in addressing areas of growing public health concern. The Friends of ORWH greatly appreciate ~~se~~ the \$10 million, above ORWH's base funding, to establish an Office of Autoimmune Disease Research (OADR) within the ORWH. Autoimmune diseases affect up to 50 million Americans, and the prevalence of autoimmune biomarkers in the United States is rising. Yet, autoimmune diseases do not affect men and women equally. Women represent 80 percent of patients diagnosed with autoimmune diseases and conditions.

The new OADR—which was directed to (1) coordinate the development of a multi-IC strategic research plan with concrete, meaningful milestones to set priorities; (2) identify emerging areas of innovation and research opportunity as part of the internal and external outreach for the strategic plan, ~~identify emerging areas of innovation and research opportunity~~; (3) coordinate and foster collaborative research across ICs; (4) annually evaluate the autoimmune research portfolio to determine progress made across NIH; (5) provide resources to support planning, collaboration, and innovation; and (6) develop and oversee a publicly accessible central repository for autoimmune disease research—has a unique opportunity to meaningfully improve outcomes for women affected by autoimmune and immune-mediated diseases and conditions.

In addition to advocating for the Friends of ORWH's FY 2024 recommendation of \$71.4 for ORWH's base budget, many of the members of the Friends—in parallel—separately support bolstering robust investments in the newly established OADR in FY 2024. As OADR builds out its structure and programming, the Friends of ORWH believes that for OADR to reach its full potential, funding for the Office should supplement, rather than supplant, the foundational investment in the ORWH.

The ORWH should continue to receive sufficient, dedicated funding for its base budget. The nearly \$5 million increase proposed for the Office in FY 2024 would allow it to expand its research capacity and ~~to~~ build upon its existing programs—including the Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) program and the Specialized Centers of Research Excellence (SCORE) on Sex Differences program—all of which are essential

to realizing a vision where sex and gender are integrated into research and where women receive personalized, evidence-based prevention and treatment.

- The **BIRCWH program** is a mentored career-development program ~~that is~~ designed to connect junior faculty, known as BIRCWH Scholars, with senior faculty who have a shared interest in women's health and sex differences research. Since the program's inception, the ORWH has awarded 88 grants to 44 institutions, supporting more than 700 junior faculty. The BIRCWH program has been supported by several ICs, including the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), the National Cancer Institute (NCI), and the National Institute on Aging (NIA).
- The **SCORE on Sex Differences program**, a signature program of the ORWH, is a cooperative agreement program that supports research on sex differences. Each of the Centers, located across the country, serve as a national resource for translational research to identify the role of biological sex differences on the health of women and as hubs for research on sex and gender that provide pilot funding, training, and education.

The ORWH plays a critical role in our nation's research enterprise. Women's health research has historically been—and continues to be—underfunded. A July 2021 *Journal of Women's Health*¹ revealed that “in nearly three-quarters of the cases where a disease afflicts primarily one gender, the funding pattern favors males, in that either the disease affects more women and is underfunded (with respect to burden), or the disease affects more men and is overfunded.” This oversight means that a significant portion of the U.S. population is being overlooked, a disservice to research and the U.S. public health system. ORWH will be an essential partner in closing these gaps in knowledge and ensuring federal research serves everyone.

The Friends of ORWH urges Congress to prioritize women's health research in FY 2024 by making this funding request for ORWH a reality. This would expand ORWH's capacity to carry out its mission of strengthening research into conditions that differently, disproportionately, or solely affect women; advising on matters related to women's health research; and supporting the advancement of women in the biomedical research workforce.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please contact Lindsey Horan at lindsey@swhr.org with any questions regarding this request.

Sincerely,

Society for Women's Health Research
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¹ Mirin AA. Gender Disparity in the Funding of Diseases by the U.S. National Institutes of Health. *J Womens Health (Larchmt)*. 2021 Jul;30(7):956-963. doi: 10.1089/jwh.2020.8682. Epub 2020 Nov 27. PMID: 33232627; PMCID: PMC8290307.

