American Society for Nutrition
Excellence in Nutrition Research and Practice

October 27, 2023

U.S. Senator Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Information from Stakeholders on NIH Reform

Dear Senator Cassidy,

On behalf of the American Society for Nutrition (ASN), we appreciate your review of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and its programs. ASN has more than 8,000 members around the world, working throughout government, clinical practice, academia, and industry, and conducting research to achieve the ASN vision of "A Healthier World Through Evidence Based Nutrition". As you work with the NIH and stakeholders to modernize the agency so it is more transparent, nimble, and forward-thinking, we encourage you to prioritize the role of the NIH Office of Nutrition Research (ONR) and do everything possible to elevate its work.

Nutrition is an important, highly promising, and cross-cutting interdisciplinary research area. As you know, approximately 100 million US adults have obesity, with diet-related diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes, accounting for half of the deaths in the US each year. Government spending, including Medicare and Medicaid, to treat cardiovascular disease, cancer, and diabetes accounted for 54% of the $383.6 billion in health care spending, a 30% increase from 2009 to 2018[1]. Slowing or preventing chronic diseases with nutrition and diet-related efforts will provide improved cost-effective outcomes for Americans, as nutrition research is translated into better human health. Nutrition is a modifiable risk factor for numerous chronic diseases, representing a highly viable approach to reduce adverse health outcomes and the NIH is responsible for conducting and supporting 90% of all federally funded basic and clinical nutrition research. Some of the most promising nutrition-related research discoveries have been made possible by NIH support.

A 2019 NIH analysis[2] compared the amount of NIH funding for prevention research on risk factors for death and disability, and concluded that large gaps exist between the top causes of poor health and the research funding allocated to address them – with the top cause being poor nutrition. Despite this pressing need for more investment, funding levels for nutrition research

[1]Government Accountability Office. 2021. Chronic Health Conditions: Federal Strategy Needed to Coordinate Diet Related Efforts. GAO Publication No. 21-593. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-21-593.pdf.

[2] Vargas AJ, Schully SD, Villani J, et al. 2019. Assessment of Prevention Research Measuring Leading Risk Factors and Causes of Mortality and Disability Supported by the US National Institutes of Health. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2(11): e1914718. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.14718

9211 Corporate Blvd., Suite 300 | Rockville, MD 20850
T: 240.428.3650 | F: 240.404.6797
info@nutrition.org | www.nutrition.org

and training (as a percentage of total NIH spending) have been flat at approximately 5% since Fiscal Year (FY) 2015[3]. Recently, due to inflation and other factors, support for nutrition research has actually declined — even as diet-related diseases have persistently increased in prevalence.

As such, ASN requests that you consider the following ways to elevate nutrition research and the NIH ONR to further support improved health and cost savings for the American public as you review ways to reform the NIH:

(1) Achieve broad interdisciplinary support for nutrition research and allow for increased collaboration and coordination,
(2) Elevate NIH nutrition research leadership, staffing, and resources, and,
(3) Encourage and support the next generation of nutrition researchers.

Achieve broad interdisciplinary support for nutrition research and allow for increased collaboration and coordination

Nutrition research creates a unifying theme across multiple NIH Institutes, Centers, and Offices, thereby promoting the need for coordinated teamwork, collaboration, translation, and technology-sharing. Given nutrition's inherently interdisciplinary nature, the ONR is essential to achieving broad interdisciplinary support for nutrition research within NIH and for collaboration and coordination with other federal agencies. A 2021 US Government Accountability Office report[1] noted that nutrition currently crosses 21 federal agencies and 200 disjointed efforts. As such, it is important for the NIH to engage all federal agencies that support nutrition research, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and inform them of NIH efforts and provide the opportunity for collaboration where possible. Effective nutrition research coordination is necessary for nutrition-related research discoveries to continue. It is vital that a trans-NIH focus on nutrition research be strengthened and that central coordination be in place to ensure the success of the many critically important nutrition research programs led and supported by various NIH Institutes and Centers, including the first ever 2020-2030 Strategic Plan for NIH Nutrition Research and the Nutrition for Precision Health, powered by the All of Us initiative.

Elevate nutrition research leadership, staffing, and resources supported by NIH

The ONR's staffing, resources, and capacities must be increased for greater cutting-edge nutrition research support across NIH. In looking at other offices within the NIH Office of the Director, including the Office of AIDS Research, Office of Research on Women's Health, Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, Office of Disease Prevention, and Office of Dietary Supplements, each of them leads and coordinates trans-NIH efforts, guided by an Office Director, and dedicated expert staff (ranging from 15 to 30 full-time employees). The same should hold true for ONR, which currently lists just 8 employees on its website. In

[3] https://dpcpsi.nih.gov/sites/default/files/NIH-Nutrition-Research-Report-Executive-Summary-508.pdf

addition to the importance of an adequate number of staff, ONR staff should also have technical expertise grounded in nutrition science. Investments are necessary to adequately support nutrition research and to provide the NIH staff dedicated to nutrition research with the tools and resources they need to fully support the exciting nutrition-related initiatives being conducted at the NIH. Dedicated support is necessary to continue to stimulate priority nutrition research across NIH and to encourage NIH Institutes, Centers, and other Offices to direct or pool their funds toward common priority areas in nutrition. ONR should also be able to stimulate new, flexible appropriations for the NIH Office of the Director to focus broadly on nutrition priority areas, including, but not solely, resources from the Common Fund.

The Administration's FY2024 Budget Request proposed dedicating $121 million to fund the ONR, which was relocated in January 2021 to the NIH Office of the Director to better coordinate and lead research functions across NIH Institutes and Centers. Funding at this level would enable the ONR to secure the leadership, organizational structure, and resources to effectively perform its important work. This investment would also accelerate discoveries across numerous critical areas and positively impact public health (namely, food and nutrition security), economic and national security, and equity, simultaneously bolstering the nation's resilience to current and future threats such as COVID–19.

Encourage and support the next generation of nutrition researchers

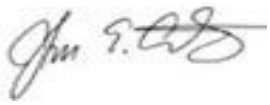
Finally, given the vital nutrition research supported by the NIH, efforts to continue to recruit cutting-edge nutrition scientists to the NIH and to train the next generation of nutrition researchers are of utmost importance. Allocation of funds to the ONR for an ONR Research Scholars Program not only will provide opportunities for students to grow in their chosen field but also provide visibility for the office and enable the staff to mentor young scientists while they contribute to the ONR mission. The strong support of a diverse and interdisciplinary nutrition research staff with relevant skills and experience in nutrition science is necessary for a robust and successful ONR. The future of nutrition science and improving the health of all Americans depends on support for the nutrition research enterprise.

As one effort to support and encourage the next generation of nutrition researchers, NIH postdoc salaries should be increased at all levels, particularly for starting postdocs. There also needs to be a regional cost-of-living adjustment. Some cities are disproportionately more expensive and more competitive than other cities or rural areas. A starting NIH postdoc annual salary is currently $56,484, but likely needs to be at least $10k more to remain competitive. As more students graduate with crippling student loan debt from both undergraduate and graduate studies, salaries need to facilitate payment of student loans while being able to meet a minimum standard of living. Student loan repayment is one of the primary concerns of current postdocs and needs to be addressed before they are able to secure mortgages, etc.

Thank you again for your efforts to modernize and reform the NIH. Please contact Sarah Ohlhorst, MS, RD, ASN Chief Science Policy Officer (sohlhorst@nutrition.org; 240-428-

3647) with questions or for additional information.

Sincerely,



John. E. Courtney, PhD
Chief Executive Officer