



## **NIH Request for Information: Inviting Comments and Suggestions to Advance and Strengthen Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Biomedical Research and Advance Health Disparities and Health Equity Research**

The American Society of Nephrology (ASN) supports the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in its efforts to “advance racial equity, diversity, and inclusion within all facets of the biomedical research workforce and expand research to eliminate or lessen health disparities and inequities.” ASN is pleased to see NIH address systemic challenges and barriers affecting the NIH workforce and NIH-supported biomedical community as these efforts will have a significant impact on improving the nation’s kidney health. As kidney disease disproportionately affects those that are disenfranchised, ASN advocates tirelessly for efforts to reduce health disparities and to develop a medical research and physician workforce that reflects the patient population it serves. Ensuring a diverse workforce that is representative of the 37,000,000 Americans living with kidney disease will generate world-class research and innovation leading to the development of better diagnosis, treatment, and preventative care.

ASN encourages NIH to determine its support (funding or otherwise) for initiatives by ensuring that each initiative adheres to the following basic principles and will:

- Advance the issues that people with kidney disease confront now
- Address the lack of innovation that has been, and still is present in kidney care
- Improve issues around disparities for children and adults with kidney disease
- Create new solutions for people with kidney disease that can be embraced by the community (e.g. easily translated into policy and practice)
- Achieve a diverse workforce representative of the kidney patient population

### *All Aspects of the Biomedical Workforce*

ASN applauds the commitment from NIH to support workforce diversity and encourages NIH to highlight the work of underrepresented minority faculty in basic science and translational research funded through the NIH in materials (e.g. print brochures, short videos, social media posts, etc.) that can be easily distributed to aspiring biomedical scientists and allied health professionals at undergraduate institutions (i.e. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, and other institutions) and post-baccalaureate programs. This effort should not just be focused on health disparities and equity-focused research.

ASN applauds the commitment that NIH has made to early-stage investigators, particularly those that are underrepresented minorities, to help start careers in research but believes more can be done. NIH must sustain existing and promote new mentorship programs for underrepresented minorities in research. Mentorship programs have been shown to be key factors in the success of early-stage investigators. Furthermore, ASN encourages NIH to expand loan forgiveness programs, promote those by other government agencies, and consider partnering with other agencies to increase the amount of loan forgiveness provided. These efforts to further support the workforce will maintain a robust and diverse pipeline of future investigators.

## *Policies and Partnerships*

ASN supports the concepts highlighted by NIH in the Request for Information, particularly access to application submission resources, changes to application submission instructions/guidance, interactions with and support from NIH staff during application process as these will help transcend the gap in resources of the parent institutions. While the COVID-19 public health emergency has negatively impacted the entire biomedical research workforce, it has particularly placed an undue burden on underrepresented and female investigators. ASN strongly encourages NIH to address this disproportionate impact by reevaluating and extending submission deadlines.

NIH must ensure a robust pipeline of the research workforce by developing new and expanding current initiatives that promote careers in biomedical research among undergraduate and high school programs, particularly targeting those from backgrounds with disproportionately high rates of kidney disease. The Division of Kidney, Urologic, and Hematologic Diseases within the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) hosts an annual Summer Undergraduate Research program to entice undergraduates to continue their medical or graduate careers in areas within the research mission of the Division. ASN applauds the success of this program in its efforts to expose undergraduates to professional and scientific opportunities, and provide the opportunity to conduct research, network with peers and distinguished faculty, and receive timely career advice. ASN wishes to highlight and applaud NIDDK's ongoing support of the Network of Minority Health Research Investigators (NMRI) and the NMRI Annual Workshop, which has helped to nurture the career of many minority investigators in our field, including those whose focus is the elimination of kidney health disparities.

ASN urges NIH to build off of these successful programs and establish partnerships with undergraduate and graduate organizations that encourage opportunities in biomedical research and allied health professions such as the National Panhellenic Counsel. This effort could directly address pipeline deficits. But it is not enough to target undergraduate and graduate students, ASN also recommends that NIH move further upstream and partner with innovative high school programs. NIH should consider developing radical and hands on biomedical science curricula focused particularly on disparity diseases. Students pursuing such a career path would need sustained support though college and this support should continue through reaching mid-level scientific positions. NIH must provide further educational, financial, and mentoring support for the current workforce to entice individuals to consider medical research as a viable career path.

Finally, ASN recommends that NIH encourage U2C/TL1 applicants to incorporate health equity and diversity and inclusion within their mission. At a given institution, faculty may not be engaged in health equity research therefore NIH efforts to facilitate partnerships with faculty across specialties is essential.

## *Research Areas*

ASN supports NIH efforts to develop, maintain and renew scientific research capacity by cultivating the biomedical research workforce. ASN recommends NIH prioritize funding community engagement research in order to identify priority issues for improving outcomes for patients, this is particularly significant for reducing existing disparities.

NIH must strategically target funding for underrepresented minority faculty in the basic science and translational research funding spaces to encourage greater involvement and scientific contribution from these historically disadvantaged groups. Because academic promotion relies heavily on the attainment of R01-level grant funding and because underrepresented minority faculty have been historically disadvantaged in receiving R01-level funding (and these problems still persist today), NIH should institute a policy prioritizing the work of underrepresented investigators in an intentional and strategic effort to facilitate scientific contributions from these investigators and bolster their representation as academic faculty. This type of programming could positively influence the perception of the NIH as a fair and anti-racist funding agency, enhance existing NIH efforts to provide equitable resource distribution and enhance scientific contributions from historically disadvantaged groups.

Lastly, ASN encourages NIH to provide full transparency on the current diversity of funded investigators as well as the portfolio dedicated to health equity and health disparity research. ASN believes that NIH can increase diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity to participate in research by recruiting underrepresented minority faculty to participate on study sections. Promoting diversity and inclusiveness within NIH and NIH Scientific Review Groups will enhance medical and scientific research and the lives of patients through improved health care, research, and education.