

House/Senate Hearings with DHHS Secretary Becerra, NIH Director Collins



House LHHs Appropriations Subcommittee:
Chairwoman Rosa De Lauro (D-CT), Ranking Member Tom Cole (R-OK)



Senate LHHs Appropriations Subcommittee:
Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA), Ranking Member Roy Blunt (R-MO)



Becerra Hearings



DHHS Secretary
Xavier Becerra, JD

On April 15 and June 9, respectively, DHHS Secretary Xavier Becerra, JD, testified before the LHHs Appropriations Subcommittees of the House and Senate regarding the President's budget request—the focus of which is health equity

that permeates all aspects of spending and which prioritizes mental health and maternal mortality and morbidity." He stated, "To build back America, we need a healthy America."

In her opening statement, full Appropriations Committee and LHHs Subcommittee Chairwoman DeLauro stated that this is "a time to be ambitious and to begin to repair the damage of the past four years," noting specifically that the proposed budget was a "step in the right direction" which addresses "part of the nation's public health system, which collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic." In his opening statement, Ranking Member Cole stated that, although he was disappointed in much of the proposed budget's spending, he praised that for the NIH and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—the latter at \$8.7 billion, or a \$1.6 billion increase. "Past Congressional investment in the NIH and CDC was wise, as we were better positioned to face the COVID-19 pandemic, and further investment in this 'biodefense' is just as critical as the nation's investment in military defense."

Since the House hearing occurred before the President's full budget request issued, Secretary Becerra described the ARPA proposal which prompted several members to question how it would dovetail with current activities of NIH's National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). Cong. Andy Harris (R-MD) expressed his concern that ARPA-H could move the NIH farther from basic research to which Secretary Becerra responded, "We're trying to move beyond just the basic research to be able to have a transformational result."

At the June 9 Senate hearing, Chairwoman Murray voiced support for the President's budget while Ranking Member Blunt voiced his support specifically for the ARPA-H proposal stating that, "this is the right time and the right initiative, as we know how to do it right as a result of our experience with COVID-19."

Collins Hearings

On May 25 and May 26, respectively, NIH Director Francis Collins, MD, PhD testified before the House and Senate LHHs Appropriations Subcommittees on the President's proposed FY2022 NIH budget.

In her opening statement, Chairwoman DeLauro commented that she was "intrigued" by the ARPA-H concept and stressed the need to strike the appropriate balance between supporting basic research and this new approach. She added that she wants to continue to invest in all areas of research, know how ARPA-H's research priorities will be set, and understand how ARPA-H will relate to the NIH's NCATS. In his testimony and in response to specific questions from Chairwoman DeLauro and Ranking Member Cole, Dr. Collins provided greater detail on ARPA-H, specifically that:

- The \$6.5 billion ARPA-H funding in the President's budget would be spent over three years.
- ARPA-H is intended to add a layer of translation to NIH's work, not detract from its existing work. He said there is enthusiasm to apply a DARPA-like (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) approach to support bold and risk-taking research that brings a number of partners, including those who would not traditionally apply for NIH grants, together to advance certain research topics. In that regard, he said that all I/Cs would be involved in the work of ARPA-H, offering up their best ideas for rapid translation of research that would benefit all Americans.
- ARPA-H is different than NCATS since the latter works on a modest scale and the former is more like the "NCATS model on steroids." Currently, there is no best clear option for the relationship between ARPA-H and NCATS, and that stakeholder input is needed.

In the Senate hearing, Chairwoman Murray supported the President's NIH budget proposal, but Ranking Member Blunt cautioned that ARPA-H "should not take away from NIH's basic research, because that has brought us to where we are." When asked about the impact of ARPA-H on I/C budgets, Dr. Collins responded that it would "augment, not subtract from, I/C budgets because it would address ideas presented from a variety of research areas for rapid translation."

Ranking Member Blunt also asked about disruptions in research due to COVID-19 lab closures and whether NIH was being flexible with grants, especially for trainees and early-stage investigators. Dr. Collins acknowledged that NIH's Intramural labs are currently at only 50 percent operation and that it has tried to have as much flexibility with extramural grantees and trainees—even extending the length of training grants. In closing, he estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a loss of \$16 billion to the biomedical research enterprise—about \$6 billion more than the \$10 billion he estimated at the Subcommittee's July 2, 2020, hearing.



NIH Director
Francis Collins, MD, PhD

NAEVR Comments on Cures 2.0 Proposal

On July 13, NAEVR submitted comments in response to a June 22 request from House Energy & Commerce Committee members Diana DeGette (D-CO) and Fred Upton (R-MI) for input on a discussion draft for potential *21st Century Cures Act 2.0* legislation. NAEVR:

- Supported the draft's inclusion of the bipartisan *RISE Act* for \$10 billion in NIH research recovery, noting that NIH Director Collins recently estimated the lingering financial impact from lost research productivity at \$16 billion.
- Recognized that, while ARPA-H potentially holds promise for new approaches that could accelerate biomedical innovation, its funding should supplement and not supplant that of the NIH base funding to support investigator-initiated research across the I/Cs. NAEVR also urged that the ARPA-H framework consider a wide variety of life-saving and quality-of-life enhancing research from across the I/Cs.