Dear Dr. Lander, Dr. Collins, Dr. Schwetz, and Dr. Tabak:

The undersigned organizations write to commend you for your work toward establishing an Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H), a U.S. agency aimed at accelerating biomedical and behavioral science breakthroughs consistent with NIH’s strategic plan to advance these sciences. Our organizations represent tens of thousands of behavioral and social scientists in the U.S. and internationally, many of whom conduct research with the significant potential to improve human health and well-being—through promoting healthy behaviors, encouraging compliance with treatments, improving acceptance of public health interventions such as vaccines, and more. As such, we know well that human health is shaped largely by behavioral and social influences. We encourage you to design and implement ARPA-H in a way that centrally engages and involves these scientific fields, and we urge ARPA-H to include in its structure a commitment to funding standalone behavioral and social science projects.

The importance of behavioral and social factors in health merits that they be integral components of ARPA-H, particularly because transformative breakthroughs in these areas offer opportunities for driving dramatic improvements in human health. As one example, a new research review observes that certain psychological treatments are effective in mitigating chronic pain—a finding with considerable implications for the opioid epidemic.* However, significant scientific knowledge gaps must be addressed to optimize the reach of these interventions. The funding flexibility and unique structure of ARPA-H may hold the key to breakthroughs in areas of mobile-health and movement-tracking technology, as well as in our understanding of which phenotypes predict responses to pain treatment, helping even more people who suffer from chronic pain.

If the structure of ARPA-H is one similar to DARPA or ARPA-E, we also encourage that each cadre of program officers that is brought into ARPA-H include behavioral and social scientists. Staffing and structure should also reflect the involvement of these disciplines. Additionally, behavioral and social science questions should be raised and considered across all ARPA-H funded projects, regardless of their scientific field of origin. We recommend that you establish a research environment that is truly interdisciplinary and integrative, bringing together all scientific fields—behavioral and social sciences

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included—that have the capability to collaborate on breakthroughs in human health and disease. Doing so would make ARPA-H unlike most other science agencies and imbue it with advantages complementary to those agencies.

We also note that fuller inclusion of the behavioral and social sciences may lead, in turn, to a more inclusive agency and funded projects. The National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates and report on Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering reveal that a greater percentage of women (relative to men) receive doctorates in psychology and social sciences than any other science or engineering field. Our fields also award more doctorates to Black and African American scholars. The behavioral and social science research conducted by our field addresses the root causes of inequality, bias, and prejudice. While all scientific fields—ours included—require further transformation in diversity, including behavioral and social science and scientists within ARPA-H may lead to broader perspectives at the agency and improved scientific knowledge about key issues linked to health.

Just as the U.S.’s first moon landing required an interplay among all scientific fields, behavioral and social sciences included, for success, the moonshot projects launched by ARPA-H will only achieve our shared goals with full participation of these fields. We encourage you to maximize ARPA-H’s ability to improve human health in remarkable ways by developing a plan to involve the behavioral and social sciences at the agency.

We appreciate your willingness to solicit and include broad scientific community input through listening sessions and other opportunities for comment, and it is in that spirit that we offer this request. Thank you for your attention, and please let us know if there is anything our organizations can do to help you achieve these objectives.

Sincerely,

Juliane Baron  
Executive Director  
Federation of Associations in Behavioral & Brain Sciences

Robert Gropp  
Executive Director  
Association for Psychological Science

Mitchell J. Prinstein  
Chief Science Officer  
American Psychological Association