September 27, 2021

Ursula von der Leyen
President
European Commission
Rue de la Loi / Wetstraat 200
1049 Brussels
Belgium

Dear President von der Leyen,

On behalf of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), a nongovernmental scientific organization representing approximately 25,000 research psychologists and students around the world, I commend you on the establishment of the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA). The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of a coordinated EU response to health emergencies, ensuring cross-border preparedness and access by all EU countries to vital medical countermeasures; HERA’s work will be essential to efforts to combat future health emergencies. These countermeasures, such as vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics, are most effective when complemented by a scientific understanding of human behavior. APS encourages HERA to integrate psychological science and the other behavioral sciences in HERA’s work and operations. Applying our understanding of human behavior to future public health emergencies will save lives.

Mitigating the effects of future epidemics and health emergencies requires the fullest possible understanding of human psychology and social behavior. Psychological scientists can help increase confidence in safe vaccines and increase vaccine uptake, promote health-protective behaviors such as social distancing, urge mask-wearing, and help EU citizens navigate misinformation surrounding future vaccines and other health protective behaviors. Psychological and other behavioral scientists are already making contributions to governmental efforts to combat and mitigate the effects of COVID-19. From Canada to the UK to Denmark, they have helped overcome vaccine hesitancy and adherence to protective measures against COVID. With more governmental and organizational support, expertise from our fields could make even more headway in combating COVID and preparing for future pandemics.

Earlier this year, APS launched a Global Collaboration on COVID-19. This initiative is bringing researchers from around the world together to consider what we have already learned from our collective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify the gaps in our knowledge that must be addressed through new research. As part of this effort, for example, leading cognitive scientists with expertise in memory are working with epidemiologists and other experts to identify weaknesses in our contact tracing systems. By better understanding the limitations of
human memory, we can strengthen how we track the spread of infectious conditions. Other efforts are underway to better understand how misinformation has contributed to behaviors that have exacerbated the effects of the pandemic.

I thank you for everything you and your colleagues are doing to fight COVID-19 as well as prepare for future health emergencies. I would be pleased to recommend psychological scientists that can assist in the work HERA will do or provide any other information that would be helpful to you.

Sincerely,

Robert Gropp, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Association for Psychological Science