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Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

December 20, 2019

Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D.  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
MSC 0148  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Director Collins,

We write to you with regard to the recent journal article “Topic choice contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists”, by Hoppe, et al., published on October 9, 2019 in *Science Advances*<sup>1</sup>. The fact that African-American scientists are ten percentage points less likely than their white counterparts to receive National Institutes of Health (NIH) investigator-initiated research funding, even after controlling for variables such as educational background, training, and scientific achievements<sup>2</sup>, is a matter of serious concern. We applaud NIH – the largest public funder of biomedical research in the world – for seeking to understand the reasons for this discrepancy.

However, we are deeply alarmed by Hoppe and colleagues’ conclusion that the topic choice of African-American researchers’ proposals accounts for a fifth of the known funding gap. Specifically, the finding that certain topic areas favored by African-American investigators had relatively lower rates of funding is troubling. Per the paper, these topic areas focus on health disparities and patient-focused interventions, using characterizing words such as “socioeconomic”, “lifestyle”, “health care”, “disparity”, and “risk”.

This information is extremely worrying. We know that African Americans, as well as other minority communities, experience a disproportionate burden of preventable disease, death, or disability compared to non-minority communities.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we are increasingly acknowledging the importance of the central role of the patient’s voice in his or her medical care and the role of social determinants in overall health and well-being for all people. If research proposals focused on disparities, social factors, and patient-focused interventions are less likely

<sup>1</sup> Hoppe, T. A., Litovitz, A., Willis, K. A., Meseroll, R. A., Perkins, M. J., & Hutchins, B. I. (2019). Topic Choice Contributes to the lower rate of NIH awards to African-American/black scientists. *Science Advances*.

<sup>2</sup> Ginther, D. K., Schaffer, W. T., Schnell, J., Masimore, B., Liu, F., Haak, L. L., & Kington, R. (2011). Race, Ethnicity, and NIH Research Awards. *Science*, 1015-1019.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/index.html>

to be awarded NIH funding, then a disservice is being done not only to the African-American researchers whose proposals in these subject areas are rejected, but to the American public as a whole. In your own words, these topics are “vitally important”.<sup>4</sup> Again, we appreciate that NIH has recognized the funding gap that exists and the steps it has taken to investigate the underlying factors. We understand that NIH already has several workforce diversity efforts underway to try to mitigate the disparity in grant awards.

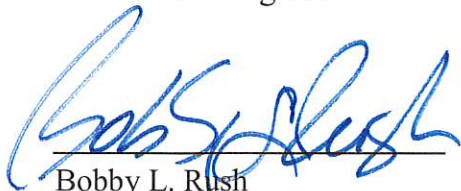
We recognize that this research has only recently been released, its conclusions are new, and that change takes time. Still, the longer we choose not to address the underlying problem, the greater the damage we may do to African-American scientists, their careers, and the health of the entire American population. Consequently, we request information about any plans by NIH to follow up on this study or any policy interventions discussed as possibilities to address topic selection as a significant contributor to certain disparities in research funding awards. We also request any information about policy changes NIH has identified to address this problem that require Congressional action to assist with or allow for implementation. Please provide this information by May 1, 2020. We stand ready to help you resolve this inequity, and work with NIH toward creating a stronger, healthier America.

Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



Lisa Blunt Rochester  
Member of Congress



Bobby L. Rush  
Member of Congress



James E. Clyburn  
Member of Congress



Karen Bass  
Member of Congress



Maxine Waters  
Member of Congress

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/research-topic-contributes-persistent-gap-nih-research-grants-black-scientists>





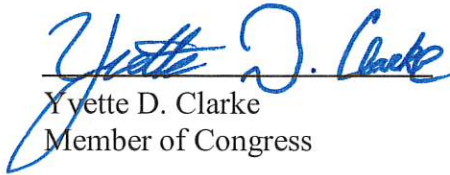
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Cedric L. Richmond  
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Robert C. "Bobby" Scott  
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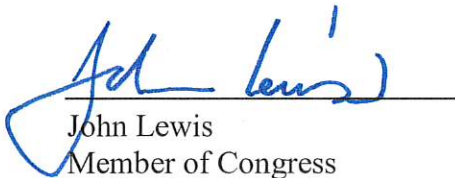
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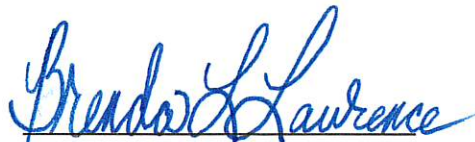
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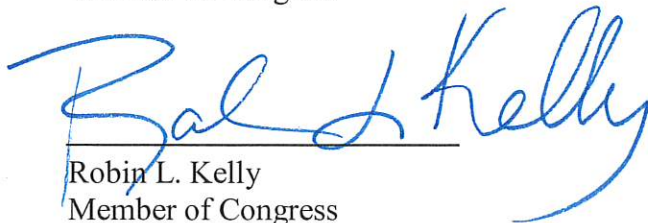
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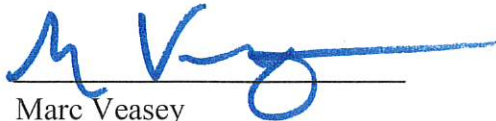
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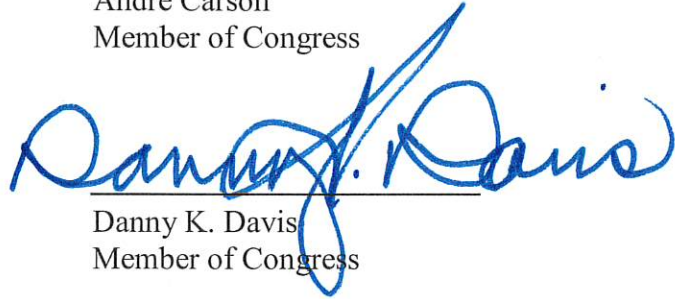
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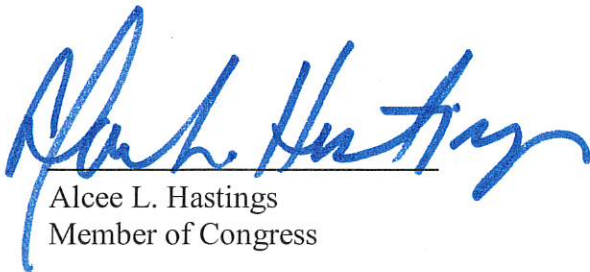
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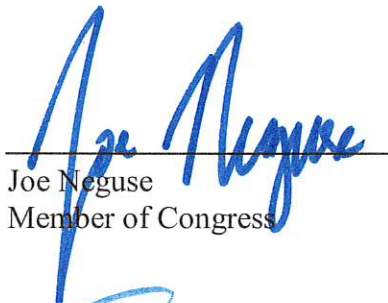
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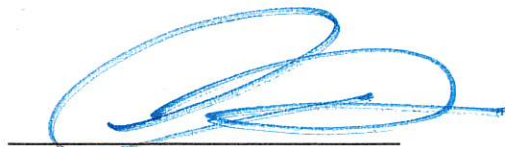
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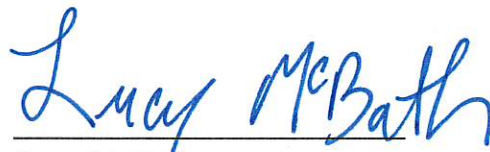
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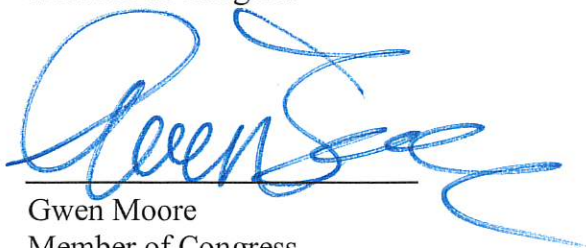
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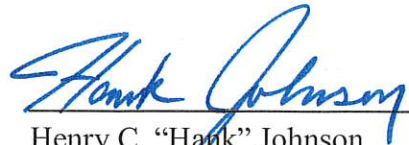
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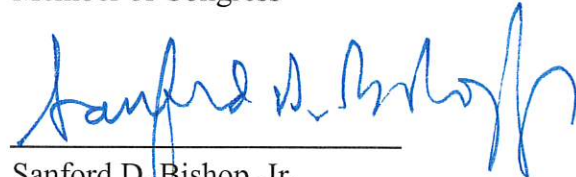
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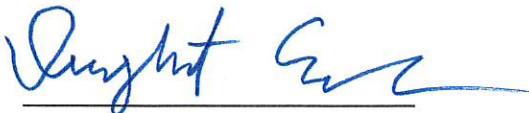
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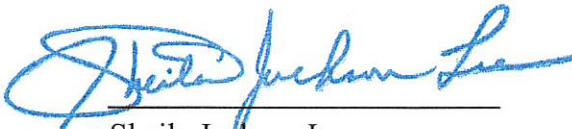
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Dwight Evans  
Member of Congress



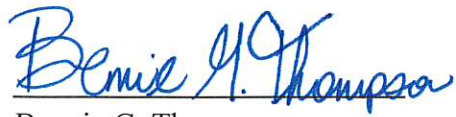
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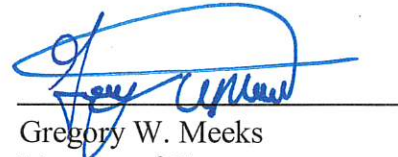
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