

**Subject: Comments on Panel report on Children's EH Centers**

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**To:** "Thayer, Kristina (NIH/NIEHS) [E]" <thayer@niehs.nih.gov>

**Conversation:** Comments on Panel report on Children's EH Centers

Dr. Kristina Thayer

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**Re: Recommendations in the Report of the NIEHS Review Panel on the Children's Environmental Health Centers**

May 15, 2007

Dear Dr. Thayer:

I am writing to express my concerns about the Report of the NIEHS Review Panel on the Centers for Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Program.

The Panel has published final recommendations that call for a shift away from the current support for community-based participatory research (CBPR) and for community outreach and translation, but the recommendations are not well-supported by the text and conclusions of the report.

For example, the report states, "A critical feature and major strength of the Children's Centers program is its focus on addressing human health directly, for example, by the assembly of unique study populations ...and the formation of biorepositories. ... Not only is the information obtained currently on these populations critical for advancing understanding of exposure effects on childhood disease and outcome, the long term follow-up of these populations including into adulthood will also reveal critical information on the prenatal and childhood determinants of adult disease. In many cases, continued access to these populations by Children's Center researchers is due to the emphasis the program places on community outreach."

And yet, despite this strong endorsement of the value of community-based participatory research, as well as of community outreach, the recommendations of the panel are to do away with the emphasis on these aspects of the Children's Centers by either eliminating them or making them optional. (See Table 2).

After repeating this endorsement in the summary, the report goes on to state,

"However, the review panel believes the community-based research requirements reduced the

Center's ability to emphasize better translation of the basic research into the Children's Centers." Nowhere in the report does the panel fully explain how CBPR reduced the ability of the Center's to "emphasize better translation of the basic research into the Children's Centers".

It is likely that this very strength of the Center's, the ability to assemble robust cohorts and biorepositories based on the strong emphasis on CBPR, will ultimately pay off in far richer opportunities for discovery and translation of basic science than breaking up the centers and taking away the emphasis on building community relationships. This is true for several reasons. First, the development of trust with communities necessarily takes time. One would not expect the process of first developing the community relationships, then initiating research projects and collection of data, would necessarily reach maximal yield of scientific insights within a 4 to 8 year period, especially one that involves study of childhood development. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that a fragmented approach to community-based research primarily through competitive investigator-funded projects will result in the same degree of trust and participation that the current approach, which supports specialists in community outreach, can provide. Without this trust and participation, investigators will have far greater difficulty obtaining the clinical specimens needed to make basic science advances.

I am concerned and puzzled that a review panel for a program designed to perform translational research on children's health did not include a single pediatrician. All of the physicians on the panel, in fact, were basic science laboratory researchers instead of clinicians. It is therefore of greater concern, given the unbalanced composition of this panel, that its recommendations call for a greater emphasis on laboratory-based basic science research and a poorly-justified de-emphasis of community outreach and participatory research approaches.

I support continuation of the Children's Centers, and I believe that some broadening of the scope of topics is valuable, as is the desire to make the basic science research of the Centers more robust. I am deeply concerned, however, that this panel has overstepped in devaluing and de-emphasizing community-based participatory research as well as the community outreach and translation efforts, which will ultimately hinder reaching the panel's stated goals for the Centers.

Sincerely,

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