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Comments on the COTC Recommendations in the Report of the NIEHS Review Panel on the Children's Environmental Health Research and Disease Prevention Program ["Children's Centers"]

Dear Dr. Thayer:

This letter is written in response to a request for comments on the April 6, 2007 Review Panel Report referenced above.

We write to express our concerns about the recommendations of the Panel concerning the Community Outreach and Translation Cores (COTCs) of the Centers. The COTC is an outreach and translation effort designed to "develop, implement and evaluate strategies to translate and apply the scientific findings of the Center into information for the public, policy makers, and clinical professionals to use to protect the health of children." (*Quoted text is from the 2005 RFA*).

We believe that in its report, the Panel confuses the COTCs and the (separate and distinct) Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) projects – perhaps even inappropriately considering them as a single entity. To be clear:

- The COTC is an outreach and translation core.
- The CBPR effort is a community-based participatory research project.

The report also is inconsistent with regard to whether the COTCs should continue to receive support from NIEHS in the Center's Center programs.

- Page 12 of the report states that the COTCs have been a "major feature of the Centers ... and should continue."
- Table 2 of the report, without any explanation, shows the COTCs completely eliminated in the recommended Center program.

We urge the NIEHS and NIEHS National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council to pay particular attention to the many inconsistencies in the Panel Report dealing with the COTC and CBPR programs, which make it difficult

to understand the intentions of the Panel recommendations. A more detailed explanation follows.

First, we refer to Table I in the Review Panel Report, reprinted below, which identifies several strengths of the COTCs:

Table 1. Major strengths and weakness of the current Children’s Center

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Promotes visibility of children’s environmental health (COTC)	Narrow focus on local concerns
Transdisciplinary research	Limited number of health outcomes (asthma, autism)
<i>Facilitates access to vulnerable populations (COTC and CBPR)</i>	Less than optimal utilization of cohorts and other clinical resources (e.g., biorepositories) by the scientific community
Provides an infrastructure to respond to emerging risk issues (e.g., the World Trade Center)	Basic science component not strong in several key emerging areas (e.g., epigenetics, genome-wide analysis)
Successful community outreach (COTC)	Limited geographical representation
Intervention and prevention actions (Intervention research: CBPR. Policy changes: COTC)	
Training	<i>Note:</i> Key: Bold = Strength of COTC program Bold Italics = Strength of CBPR and COTC

As shown above, 4/7 of the major strengths of the Centers relate to activities of the COTCs. The Review Panel report also offers numerous examples of the value and successes of the Centers’ COTCs, accomplishments for which COTC directors are justifiably proud:

1. “*Other strengths include the use of community outreach to address research questions in difficult to access vulnerable populations.*” (page iv)
2. “*Through community outreach, the Children’s Centers also serve to build scientific capacity directly with the communities studied.*” (page 3)

3. *“Since their creation, the Children’s Centers have been translating and communicating their research findings to clinical personnel, public health professionals, communities and policy makers [resulting in] ... effective translation of science into policy advocacy, changes in prevention strategies ... community-linked outreach and changes in habits and customs (e.g., hand and clothes washing in migrant workers), policy changes (e.g., location of schools and playgrounds), and new laws (e.g., EPA directives on pesticides, changes to ... rules involving bus fleets and ports)...”* (page 8)
4. *“In many cases, continued access to these populations by Children’s Center researchers is due to the emphasis the program places on community outreach. The Children’s Centers allow researchers credibility and trust within the community and are thus an important resource for empowering communities by linking them with other professional groups through meetings, conferences, and continuing education programs.”* (page 9)

Inconsistent Recommendations of the Review Panel on Maintaining the COTCs:

The Review Panel report has the above quoted laudatory comments about the strengths of the COTCs. The Panel report also states:

“Efforts to communicate the latest sound science to community participants has been a major feature of the Children’s Centers from their inception and should continue.”
(Italics and underlining added) (Please see p. 12)

A completely contrary position, however, is found in Table 2 of the Executive Summary of the Report, which inexplicably (without any discussion or justification in the report text) eliminates the community outreach and translation programs from the recommended future program:

TABLE 2.	Current Program	Recommended Program
Cores	1. Administrative 2. Research support (optional) 3. Community Outreach & Translation	1. Administrative 2. Research support 3. Pilot projects

Confusion in the Report between CBPR and COTC efforts

The Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) projects remain in the recommended structure of the Children’s Centers as optional projects, with supplemental funding. In some sections of the report, it appears that the Panel members confused each Center’s CBPR research project with its COTC outreach effort. This confusion may be due to the fact that few of the review panel members have experience in either outreach or CBPR. The following sentence illustrates the confusion:

“The previous requirement for community-based participatory outreach and translation should be optional; however, supplementary core funding can be made available for community-based participatory research.” (page v of report) (Italics and underlining added)

The phrase “community-based participatory outreach and translation” has no meaning in the context of the Children’s Centers. Most Centers have one community-based participatory research project and a distinct outreach and translation core; no centers have a combination of the two, as the reviewers appear to believe.

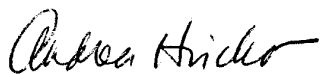
Suggestion to NIEHS and the NIEHS National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council

We urge careful scrutiny of the Review Panel report with regard to its conflicting recommendations, which are very confusing to Center directors, Center members, COTC directors, community partners – and the general public.

Perhaps convening a supplemental panel of review members, with appropriate expertise to evaluate the COTC program, is in order. It would certainly be unacceptable to eliminate an effective and successful Community Outreach and Translation Core program in the NIEHS/EPA Children’s Centers, based on the Review Panel’s faulty and inconsistent understanding of the program, with no written justification provided.

We urge you to maintain the Community Outreach and Translation Cores as an integral part of any future Children’s Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Center Program.

Respectfully submitted by:



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