

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA - CHAMPAIGN

Department of Veterinary Biosciences

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May 14, 2007

Dr. Kristina Thayer
NIEHS
P.O. Box 12233
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709

Comment on the Centers for Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Program Review Panel Report

Dear Dr. Thayer:

I write to express some very serious concerns about the recommendations put forth by the panel in their report. While I concur with many of the conclusions of the panel, including their call to strengthen the role of basic science in the Children's Centers, broaden the range of children's environmental health issues that are addressed, and achieve a better geographic representation of Centers throughout the US, I have strong reservations about the funding mechanism that is proposed to achieve these goals. The plan to have investigators with already funded R01 grants on related topics come together to submit center grant applications will be difficult if not impossible to implement within the context of the current NIH funding situation. My key concerns are outlined below.

- First, the key to an effective center is a highly integrated group of research projects that closely parallel each other. This level of integration takes planning on the front end. The likelihood that there are groups of investigators out there that will realize their already funded R01's beautifully complement each other and would make a great Center is very small. In reality these groups will have to form, plan their related research projects, submit the individual R01's and then pray that they all get funded in a reasonably similar time frame. If one or more proposals require a second or third submission to get funded this will quite likely put that component too far out of sequence with the other grants for a viable Center application.
- Second, given the long turnaround time to secure NIH funding, putting two steps in the process—first getting the R01 grants funded, and then applying for the Center—is unrealistic and will not promote cutting edge science. This unduly cumbersome two-step process will discourage investigators from using the Children's Centers mechanism to do the very cutting edge basic science research the committee is promoting.
- Third, while successful centers often do generate spin off R01 grants, making this a requirement for continued funding is unrealistic unless the amount of money available to support research cores increases as the number of R01's in the Center increases. If this does not happen either existing grants will have less access to core facilities after renewal or new grants will have limited ability to access these facilities and will be second class citizens within the Center.

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The goals the committee puts forth could be achieved within a more traditional funding mechanism such as a P01 or a P50 if the following changes were made:

- Provide a longer lead-time for grant preparation that allows for adequate planning, preliminary studies to be conducted if necessary, new collaborations to be pursued, etc. Previous Children's Centers RFA's have had turnaround times of approximately 3 months. This is an incredibly short time frame to prepare a highly competitive Center grant proposal.
- Minimize the number of prescribed elements in the RFA. This will allow some of the alternative approaches the committee champions to be used.
- Stress the importance of integrating cutting edge basic science research with well-designed clinical or epidemiological research.
- Increase the amount of direct costs/year. Grants in the program have been capped at \$1 million direct costs per year since the first call for proposals in 1998. Good basic science research using cutting edge methodology requires adequate funding, particularly if it is to be linked with equally strong clinical or epidemiological research.

In summary, I urge you to give the proposed funding mechanism close scrutiny and to seriously consider alternate funding mechanisms that might be more effective in achieving the goal to promote top-notch research on children's environmental health.

Sincerely,

Susan L. Schantz, PhD
Professor,
Director of the FRIENDS Children's Environmental
Health Research Center