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March 15, 2020

Dr. Francis Collins  
Director, National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Collins,

I write to urge you to mobilize the U.S. research community to address the COVID-19 pandemic. As the global leader in biomedical research, the United States has a large and talented pool of experts, as well as available laboratory equipment. We need to harness this capacity and provide flexibility to researchers supported by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to enable them to participate in the national response to this public health emergency.

First and foremost, in order to adequately respond to the spread of COVID-19, we need the capacity to test millions of people over the coming months. The United States has conducted only roughly 13,000 tests since the virus first arrived here.<sup>1</sup> This pales in comparison to countries like South Korea that are conducting nearly that number of tests *each day*.<sup>2</sup> Our nation must be able to conduct tens or hundreds of thousands of tests daily, ultimately testing millions of people over the course of the response.

Although NIH has taken important steps to facilitate rapid research efforts on the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, there are serious bottlenecks to translating this research into action or unleashing the potential of our strong research community. The biological research community comprises thousands of expert researchers, graduate students, and academics that have experience with laboratory techniques that are very similar to the diagnostic testing for COVID-19. NIH funds 300,000 researchers, and can enable many of them to contribute to the COVID-19 response.

On March 12, NIH released a notice advising of “administrative flexibilities” that will apply to NIH applicants and recipients of NIH grants as they seek to conduct lab work that the COVID-19

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Brown, *Coronavirus “unknowns” put U.S. in unprecedented situation, top infectious disease expert says*, CBS News (Mar. 13, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-us-testing-closures-unprecedented-anthony-fauci-nih/>.

<sup>2</sup> Min Joo Kim and Simon Denyer, *South Korea is doing 10,000 coronavirus tests a day. The U.S. is struggling for even a small fraction of that.*, Wash. Post (Mar. 13, 2020), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/coronavirus-test-kits-south-korea-us/2020/03/13/007f14fc-64a1-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/coronavirus-test-kits-south-korea-us/2020/03/13/007f14fc-64a1-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html).

outbreak has hindered.<sup>3</sup> Many of these flexibilities are of the accounting variety. But NIH needs to go a step further and allow grantees greater freedom to respond to this public health emergency.

I call on the NIH to immediately provide additional flexibility to research grantees to repurpose equipment and resources toward COVID-19 diagnostic testing. With such flexibility, researchers can come together to funnel equipment to hospitals, share expertise, and set up testing in their own labs (with appropriate biosafety procedures). We need an immediate and large-scale response in this country, and our talented biomedical community can contribute to this response. This is an all-hands-on-deck moment, and every moment counts.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator

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<sup>3</sup> Office of the Director, *National Institutes of Health, NOT-OD-20-086, Flexibilities Available to Applicants and Recipients of Federal Financial Assistance Affected by COVID-19* (Mar. 12, 2020), <https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-086.html>.