

January 26, 2022

Eric S. Lander, PhD  
Director  
Office of Science and Technology Policy  
The White House

Dawn O’Connell, JD  
Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response  
Department of Health and Human Services

Dear Director Lander and Assistant Secretary O’Connell:

On behalf of the 25,000 members of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), I would like to thank you for your leadership in establishing the Pandemic Innovation Task Force. This task force has the potential to significantly improve U.S. preparedness for future pandemics—and to put an end to the current one. In furtherance of that goal, we call on you to include behavioral science experts directly into the task force as it develops. An integrated scientific and engineering response—one that fully includes behavioral science—is required for an effective response to the current crisis and to improve responses to future crises.

Global efforts preceding the development of the new task force helped create effective and safe vaccines against COVID-19. Yet, as you know well, only approximately 64% of the U.S. population has been fully vaccinated. The pandemic has shown us that our technical and engineering investments and advances are most effective when coupled with a scientific understanding of human behavior, such as when and why individuals choose to get vaccinated. And while the U.S. has progressed on the first dimension, overall success has been limited because we have failed to integrate the behavioral science that underpins the second.

When then-President-elect Biden established the COVID-19 Advisory Board at the end of 2020, prior to the availability of safe vaccines to the public, APS wrote the leaders of that new body encouraging that experts in behavioral science be included. We think that the addition of such expertise to that board would have strengthened the U.S.’s ability to both roll out vaccines and combat the pandemic in other ways. The formation of the new Pandemic Innovation Task Force provides another chance to integrate behavioral science, including psychological science, into pandemic-related policymaking. APS recommends that the task force not only examine medium- and long-term opportunities in engineering, medical, and pharmaceutical domains but also address the immediate and long-term behavioral factors that have the capability to strengthen the human aspects of pandemic preparedness.

Our field indeed brings needed insights into vaccine hesitancy, trust, decision-making, social behavior, and mental health, plus other topics, all relevant to ongoing and future pandemics. This is partly illustrated by APS’s [Global Collaboration on COVID-19](#), an effort that is bringing together psychological scientists to make recommendations to policymakers and the public. One recent virtual event hosted by the collaboration—[which you can read about here](#)—explored how behavioral science provides an

understanding of the way that contexts such as social determinants of health influence pandemic-related mental illness and addiction. A similar event held by APS just this past Friday showed, among other things, the critical way that stress influences the likelihood of COVID-19 infection. If you would like to know more about the collaboration's activities and recommendations, we would be glad to share further information.

While we are disappointed that behavioral science expertise has not been integrated into prior COVID-19 policies and guidelines in the way our community believes it should have been, we are heartened by increasing recognition of the value that we can contribute to ongoing and future challenges. Retired NIH Director Francis Collins' recent comments to NPR, for instance, reflect a view that NIH underinvested in the science of human behavior. We recommend that you capitalize on society's growing awareness of the key role of behavioral science and do more to draw on these fields now, before it is too late.

We thank you both for all that OSTP and HHS are doing to improve public health and safety for the good of society. We are eager to share additional information about the important roles that psychological science and scientists can play in supporting your task force as it begins its work. Please feel free to contact me or Dr. Andy DeSoto, Director of Government Relations, at [adesoto@psychologicalscience.org](mailto:adesoto@psychologicalscience.org) for any potential follow-up.

Sincerely,



Robert Gropp, PhD  
Chief Executive Officer/Executive Director

cc: Alondra Nelson, PhD, Office of Science and Technology Policy  
Jennifer Richeson, PhD, President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology