



February 4, 2022

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Chair, Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.  
648 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr  
Senate Committee on  
Health, Education, Labor and Pensions  
428 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Murray and Burr,

On behalf of the Association for Psychological Science (APS), I would like to thank you for your leadership in drafting the PREVENT Pandemics Act to authorize the study of how our government and nation has handled the COVID-19 pandemic and how to build a stronger public health and medical preparedness and response system for the future. In furtherance of those goals, this letter offers suggestions on how the Act could be strengthened even more by including insights from research in psychological and behavioral science on such diverse topics as vaccine hesitancy, public trust in leadership, evidence-based interventions to encourage greater participation in institutional programs, the effects of the pandemic on mental health, and many more.

APS's members are a global network of approximately 25,000 psychological scientists and students who seek to advance research psychology for the good of science and society. Psychological science is the study of mind, brain, biology, and behavior and how these domains connect and interact. Psychological scientists examine the entire spectrum of human behavior, from the neural circuitry involved in seeing and hearing to memory and risk perception to the ways societies and other collectives interrelate. Importantly, many psychological scientists conduct research that broadens our understanding of physical and mental health and disease.

Recognizing the urgent need to better integrate psychological science into our collective COVID-19 response, APS has launched the Global Collaboration on COVID-19. Through this initiative, we have been convening scientists as well as other professionals involved in combatting the pandemic to identify ways in which our responses would have been improved had behavioral scientists been engaged earlier or had we invested in research to strengthen our understanding of human psychology. Within the past few months, we have held online discussions where experts have explored how COVID is impacting the mental health of different socioeconomic and demographic groups, and discussed the urgent need to improve the integration of insights from psychological science into epidemiology. A forthcoming discussion will explore the importance of understanding how human memory works and how it influences contact tracing—whether through traditional models or through developing digital contact tracing. Without these insights from psychological science, we will continue to build and sustain systems that are ill-equipped to help us defeat the current and future public health crises.

Because psychological science has much to contribute to understanding and improving health, we applaud the inclusion of psychologists in Section 104 as experts to serve on the Public Health Information and Communications Advisory Committee and the inclusion of behavioral science in Section 301 as a scientific focus area for continued and new research on COVID-19. By including psychologists and behavioral research in these sections of the bill, you help to strengthen our country's capability to understand and influence the human aspects of pandemic response and preparedness.

We think the bill could be strengthened with further integration of behavioral science, including research psychology and psychologists, in the programs authorized by Sections 101, 103, and 201.

### **Section 101: Comprehensive Review of the COVID-19 Response**

Section 101 establishes a national task force to assess the nation's preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The legislation spells out the qualifications of potential task force members, including those with expertise in public health, medicine, and at-risk populations. ***We urge the Committee to add psychological scientists to this list of potential qualified task force members.*** The pandemic has shown us that our medical, technical, and engineering advances are most effective when coupled with a scientific understanding of human behavior, such as when and why individuals choose to get vaccinated. Psychological scientists can help provide this understanding.

### **Section 103: Public Health and Medical Preparedness and Response Coordination**

Included in this section is a discussion of the duties and responsibilities of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR). ***APS urges that the capabilities of the ASPR office be strengthened by adding psychological scientists and behavioral science expertise.*** When the COVID-19 Advisory Board was established at the end of 2020, APS encouraged the leaders of that new body to include experts in behavioral science, but they chose not to do so. We think that the addition of such expertise would have strengthened the U.S.'s ability to both roll out vaccines and combat the pandemic in other ways. Psychological science brings needed insights into vaccine hesitancy, trust, decision-making, social behavior, and mental health, plus other topics, all relevant to ongoing and future pandemics and future activities of the ASPR.

### **Section 201: Addressing Social Determinants of Health and Improving Health Outcomes**

APS applauds the expanded federal support authorized by Section 201 for evidence-based or evidence-informed projects to reduce health disparities and improve health outcomes; we strongly support continued investments in research on the social determinants of health (SDOH). ***We urge that this effort include basic behavioral research to help develop evidence-based interventions to ameliorate social determinants' potential negative effects.*** Behavioral science can help develop evidence-based interventions to assist individuals in best navigating all five of the major SDOH domains, including economic stability, educational access and quality, health care access and quality, and social and community environments and conditions. We therefore urge that psychological scientists be included and consulted in all programs and efforts designed to aid individuals and society in addressing SDOH.

Thank you for all you are doing to improve public health and safety. Please feel free to contact me or Andy DeSoto, PhD, Director of Government Relations, at [adesoto@psychologicalscience.org](mailto:adesoto@psychologicalscience.org) for any additional information.

Sincerely,



Robert Gropp, PhD  
Chief Executive Officer/Executive Director