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NIH to invest \$29 million to address COVID-19 disparities

✖ April 29 2021 – To bolster research to help communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19, the National Institutes of Health is funding \$29 million in additional grants for the NIH Community Engagement Alliance (CEAL) Against COVID-19 Disparities. This funding was supported by the American Rescue Plan. The awards will provide \$15 million to 11 teams already conducting research and outreach to help strengthen COVID-19 vaccine confidence and access, as well as testing and treatment, in communities of color. An additional \$14 million will fund 10 new research teams to extend the reach of COVID-19 community-engaged research and outreach.

“The goal of this effort is to foster community-engagement research in communities which have been hit hardest by the pandemic,” said Gary H. Gibbons, M.D., director, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI). “The alliance is designed to meet people where they are with the help of trusted messengers, including family doctors, pastors, and community health workers, and to forge lasting partnerships to address health disparities.”

Eleven research teams received \$17 million in grants in 2020 to reach residents at risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes. Spread throughout the country, CEAL research groups have used different strategies to coordinate educational outreach, raise awareness about the importance of inclusive participation in COVID-19 testing, vaccine uptake, and clinical trials, and conduct research to understand barriers surrounding prevention and treatment. CEAL researchers also study the best ways to address these challenges and establish trust in the scientific process, while equitably distributing COVID-19 resources tailored to each community.

“It’s one thing to have strong national messages about the science behind vaccines,” said Eliseo J. Pérez-Stable, M.D., director, National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD). “It’s another to have those messages delivered by local, trusted sources, who can ensure questions from their communities are honestly and clearly addressed.”

For example, mobile units in the Mississippi Delta helped rural residents access COVID-19 vaccines, while pop-up vaccine clinics played similar roles in California, Michigan, and other states. Focus groups in multiple CEAL regions identified information-based needs and perceptions about vaccines and treatment, including concerns about medical mistrust, which guided future outreach.

“The most promising scientific discoveries benefit all populations and the way we ensure that is through inclusive research participation and community engagement,” Pérez-Stable added. “CEAL researchers are creating the community-engaged model to transform research practice.”

Throughout 2021, CEAL researchers will tap community leaders, trusted organizations, and experts familiar to their communities, including NIH Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx) testing centers, state health departments, and certified diabetes educators, and community health workers. These community assets will partner with each other to strengthen a national response to COVID-19 by focusing on local outreach. As teams within the CEAL Alliance personalize these outreach strategies, they will also share their findings with each other and the broader community of those working to move the country past the pandemic.

“The power of community-engaged partnerships extends beyond state borders,” said Catherine Stoney, Ph.D., the CEAL Alliance scientific program lead and deputy director of the Center for Translation Research and Implementation Science at NHLBI. “The CEAL Alliance provides a central research hub where findings from one region may inform or guide best practices in another.”

CEAL, guided by community-engaged researchers and supported by trusted community organizations and messengers, is an NIH-wide effort co-led by NHLBI and NIMHD.

The 10 new research teams joining the CEAL Alliance include:

Jose Arturo Bauermeister, Ph.D., M.P.H.
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Cheryl Himmelfarb, Ph.D., R.N.
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

Matthew Kreuter, Ph.D., M.P.H.
Washington University in St. Louis

Benjamin Linas, M.D.
Boston Medical Center

Vivian Colón-López, Ph.D., M.P.H.
University of Puerto Rico Medical Sciences, San Juan

Molly Martin, M.D.
University of Illinois at Chicago

Pearl McElfish, Ph.D.
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock

Donald Nease, M.D.
University of Colorado Denver

Chau Trinh-Shevrin, DrPH
New York University School of Medicine, New York City

Lisa Cacari Stone, Ph.D.
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

For more information about the CEAL Alliance, visit the NIH COVID-19 communities page.

About the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI): NHLBI is the global leader in conducting and supporting research in heart, lung, and blood diseases and sleep disorders that advances scientific knowledge, improves public health, and saves lives. For more information, visit www.nhlbi.nih.gov.

About the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD): NIMHD leads scientific research to improve minority health and eliminate health disparities by conducting and supporting research; planning, reviewing, coordinating, and evaluating all minority health and health disparities research at NIH; promoting and supporting the training of a diverse research workforce; translating and disseminating research information; and fostering collaborations and partnerships. For more information about NIMHD, visit <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov>.

About the National Institutes of Health (NIH): NIH, the nation's medical research agency, includes 27 Institutes and Centers and is a component of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIH is the primary federal agency

conducting and supporting basic, clinical, and translational medical research, and is investigating the causes, treatments, and cures for both common and rare diseases. For more information about NIH and its programs, visit www.nih.gov.

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