

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 31, 2025

Dr. Dorothy Fink
Acting Secretary of Health and Human Services
United States Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Acting Secretary Fink:

We write with deep concern over a directive you issued that silences federal health officials and government scientists at a time when the United States is battling several emerging public health threats.¹ On January 21, 2025, you wrote to all Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) operating divisions, ordering them to “refrain from publicly issuing any document or communication until it has been reviewed and approved by a Presidential appointee.”² This includes regulations, guidance documents, notices, and grant announcements that bans public communications on social media, on official websites, or via press releases.³ The incredibly broad scope of this directive means the critical work of scientific advisory committees and government scientists who promulgate rules to protect public health and uphold scientific integrity could be suppressed. Right now, federal health officials are effectively banned from communicating with the public, an alarming and dangerous precedent.

Your directive immediately barred Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) scientists from publishing updated information on the spread of avian influenza, which has sickened 67 people and caused at least one death in the United States.⁴ Avian influenza is a rapidly evolving threat. It is deeply concerning that CDC scientists are unable to share real-time information with state and local partners and healthcare practitioners through the weekly

¹ *Trump Administration Temporarily Mutes Federal Health Officials*, New York Times (Jan. 22, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/health/trump-health-communications.html).

² *Federal Health Agencies Told to Halt All External Communications*, National Public Radio (Jan. 22, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/01/22/nx-s1-5270866/hhs-cdc-health-communications-trump).

³ *Id.*

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *H5 Bird Flu: Current Situation* (Jan. 24, 2025) (online at www.cdc.gov/bird-flu/situation-summary/index.html).

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, which CDC has published continuously since 1961.⁵ The Trump Administration should not be restricting the publication of this report and other health guidelines critical to public health and safety.

Confusion surrounding your directive has led to the immediate cancellation of advisory panel meetings on a wide array of health issues from vaccines to antibiotic resistance, and scientists can no longer meet to discuss National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant proposals or serve on outside panels, all of which has a chilling effect on scientific research and innovation.⁶ Not only is your directive a threat to public health, it suppresses the day-to-day work of thousands of government scientists and those responsible for allocating federal grants. It also demonstrates an alarming willingness on the part of the Trump Administration to politicize and infringe on the autonomy of our federal health agencies.

NIH has also cancelled “study section” meetings, which bring together scientists from academic institutions all over the country to discuss funding priorities for medical research.⁷ This could lead to critical delays, and according to one scientist, “even short delays will put the United States behind in research.”⁸ Your directive also means that NIH staff involved with clinical trials are unable to meet with patient groups or recruit patients into trials, and it is unclear whether NIH researchers will be able to publish their findings in peer-reviewed journals.⁹

All of this is particularly troubling with the knowledge that under the first Trump Administration, political appointees interfered with CDC reports on COVID-19. There is concern that in this second administration, political appointees will attempt to “exert a new kind of control on the federal health and research agencies.”¹⁰ It is essential that federal research does not bend to political will and upholds the highest standards of scientific integrity, which is paramount to effective, evidence-based policymaking.

In January 2023, the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC) released *A Framework for Federal Scientific Integrity Policy and Practice*, which defined scientific integrity as:

⁵ *Trump Administration Temporarily Mutes Federal Health Officials*, New York Times (Jan. 22, 2025) (online at www.nytimes.com/2025/01/22/health/trump-health-communications.html).

⁶ *Health Researchers Alarmed as Trump Administration Pauses Travel, Communications*, Washington Post (Jan. 23, 2025) (online at www.washingtonpost.com/health/2025/01/23/trump-administration-hhs-health-agencies-pause-travel-communications/).

⁷ *National Institutes of Health Cancel Scientific Meetings After Trump Directives*, National Public Radio (Jan. 23, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/01/23/nx-s1-5272398/nih-trump-hhs-cancer-research).

⁸ *Trump Hits NIH with ‘Devastating’ Freezes on Meetings, Travel, Communications, and Hiring*, Science (Jan. 22, 2025) (online at www.science.org/content/article/trump-hits-nih-devastating-freezes-meetings-travel-communications-and-hiring).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *National Institutes of Health Cancel Scientific Meetings After Trump Directives*, National Public Radio (Jan. 23, 2025) (online at www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2025/01/23/nx-s1-5272398/nih-trump-hhs-cancer-research).

the adherence to professional practices, ethical behavior, and the principles of honesty and objectivity when conducting, managing, using the results of, and communicating about science and scientific activities. Inclusivity, transparency, and protection from inappropriate influence are hallmarks of scientific integrity.¹¹

The implementation of consistent scientific integrity policies across the federal government will ensure public trust in the government's decisions and the science those decisions are based on, as well as provide opportunity for scientific innovation.¹² According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, scientific integrity policies "limit censorship, intimidation and other forms of political interference in research."¹³ It is essential that the federal government, including HHS and its operating divisions continue to uphold a commitment to scientific integrity as a foundation for fulfilling its mission to serve the American people.

To ensure that HHS and its operating divisions continue to protect public health and uphold scientific integrity, we request that you provide written responses to the following questions and related documents from January 20, 2025, to the present as noted to the Committee no later than February 14, 2025:

1. Does HHS intend to revise or rescind its scientific integrity policy that was adopted on October 16, 2024?
 - a. Please provide all communications and documents on or referring to plans to revise or rescind HHS's scientific integrity policy that was adopted on October 16, 2024.
2. How does HHS plan to support the autonomy of federal scientists and the integrity of federally funded grants in light of the January 21, 2025, directive that all documents and communications must be reviewed and approved by a Presidential appointee?
 - a. Please provide all communications and documents related to the January 21, 2025, directive.
3. How will HHS protect federal scientists and scientific research from political interference going forward?

¹¹ National Science and Technology Council, *A Framework for Federal Scientific Integrity Policy and Practice* (Jan. 2023) (online at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/01-2023-Framework-for-Federal-Scientific-Integrity-Policy-and-Practice.pdf>).

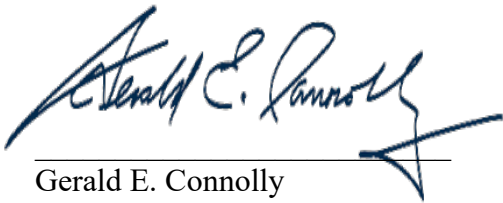
¹² *Id.*

¹³ *What is Scientific Integrity—and How Does It Keep All Of Us Safe?*, Union of Concerned Scientists (Dec. 9, 2024) (online at <https://blog.ucsusa.org/chris-williams/what-is-scientific-integrity-and-how-does-it-keep-all-of-us-safe/>).

- a. Please provide all communications and documents relating to or referring to the protection of federal scientists and scientific research from political interference.
4. How does HHS plan to communicate with the general public and the scientific community about public health threats in light of the January 21, 2025, directive?
 - a. Please provide all communications and documents related to HHS's plans to communicate with the general public and the scientific community about public health threats.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact Committee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform



Paul Tonko
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform