



January 29, 2021

Prepared for the NIMH National Advisory Mental Health Council Members

Re: February 2, 2021 National Institute of Mental Health National Advisory Mental Health Council Meeting

The Treatment Advocacy Center appreciates the opportunity to provide public comments to the NIMH National Advisory Mental Health Council in advance of the February 2, 2021 meeting.

The Treatment Advocacy Center is a national nonprofit dedicated exclusively to eliminating barriers to the timely and effective treatment of serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Our organization promotes laws, policies and practices for the delivery of psychiatric care and supports the development of treatments for and research into factors of serious mental illness that have the potential for reducing suffering and improving lives of individuals living with these conditions.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is the main federal government agency for research into mental illness. The NIMH was authorized through the passage of the National Mental Health Act in 1946 to better help individuals with mental health disorders through better diagnosis and treatments. With a budget of almost \$2 billion in 2020, the NIMH conducts research and funds outside investigators to better understand mental illness and develop new treatments to reduce the burden these disorders have on individuals.

In December 2019, the NIMH released a draft of their five-year strategic plan for public comment. They reported receiving more than 6,000 responses over the winter holidays; some of these comments were from our organization and its supporters, identifying concrete examples of research initiatives the NIMH could be pursuing today to help people with serious mental illness recover and live better lives. Our recommendations included a need for the NIMH to examine the role of viral and parasitic infections in the development of severe mental illness and the relationship between immune system activation and the health and symptomology of individuals living with these conditions. Despite this robust response to the strategic plan, NIMH made no substantive changes to the research goals or objectives in the final version released to the public last year.

Since the draft five-year strategic plan was released for public comment, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world. Early on in the pandemic, there was an unprecedented rise in calls to mental health crisis hotlines. Measures to mitigate risk of spread of the virus has transformed mental health service access and delivery, especially for the most vulnerable Americans, including people with severe mental illness.

New cases of severe mental illness may increase due to COVID-19, similar to the impacts of the influenza pandemic of 1918. [Previous research](#) has shown that infection with other coronavirus strains may impact the development of psychosis. Given this evidence, the NIMH must acknowledge the role that infections play in

severe mental illness and prioritize studying the long-term effects of COVID-19 infections in individuals with psychiatric disorders on both their physical and mental health.

The purpose of the National Advisory Mental Health Council is to advise the NIMH Director “on all policies and activities relating to the conduct and support of mental health research.” Occasionally, over the years Council members have stepped forward and tried to alter NIMH priorities. Given the impact that COVID-19 may have on severe mental illness in the United States and failure of NIMH to prioritize research into those with the most debilitating psychiatric conditions, it would seem appropriate for the National Advisory Mental Health Council to step forward again regarding NIMH priorities. Those with the most severe forms of mental illness deserve to be prioritized.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Sinclair Hancq, MPH, Director of Research, Office of Research and Public Affairs, Treatment Advocacy Center

Lisa Dailey, JD, Acting Executive Director, Treatment Advocacy Center