



Women First Research Coalition

WFRC First Quarter 2026 Activities Update

WFRC March Virtual Hill Day

The WFRC held a successful virtual hill day on Monday, March 9. Staff scheduled 19 meetings with Hill staff that were attended by 22 WFRC members from 7 states. WFRC's goals for the virtual hill day were to request that Congress support federal funding for women's health research, educate members of Congress about the importance of women's health research, and develop relationships with members of Congress and their staff. Specifically, we requested that Congress support at least \$51.303 billion for the NIH, and to include language that creates a women's health research fund at NIH, supports the research workforce through existing training programs, and supports efforts to advance women's health data science in the report accompanying the fiscal year (FY) 2027 Labor-HHS Appropriations bill.

Congressional Women's Health Research Working Group

On March 18, WFRC in partnership with the Society for Women's Health Research (SWHR) and American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), hosted a first quarter meeting for staff for members of Congress who lead on women's health issues. The purpose of this working group is to bring together staffers working for members of Congress with interest in women's health research and/or legislation on conditions that are under-resourced in women's health. The group met to discuss priorities for FY 2027 appropriations and collaborative opportunities in advocating for and advancing women's health research.

Legislative Activities

Fiscal Year 2026 Appropriations

On February 3rd, Congress passed and the President signed the final [FY 2026 Appropriations package](#) that includes Defense, Homeland, LHHS, and THUD bills. Below are the FY 2026 funding levels for NIH and NIH ICs of interest to WFRC members.

National Institutes of Health - \$48,716,000,000 (including \$1.5 billion for ARPA-H), an increase of \$415 million)

- Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH): \$106,480,000, an increase of \$30 million, including \$10 million for the Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) program
- Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD): \$1,769,078,000 (\$10 million increase)
 - This amount includes \$63,400,000 for the IMPROVE (Implementing a Maternal health and Pregnancy Outcomes Vision for Everyone) Initiative, an increase of \$10 million
- National Cancer Institute (NCI): \$7,352,159,000 (\$128 million increase)
- National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS): \$913,979,000 (flat-funded)
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI): \$3,990,345,000 (\$8 million increase)

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF OBSTETRICIANS AND GYNECOLOGISTS FOUNDATION • AMERICAN COLLEGE OF OBSTETRICIANS & GYNECOLOGISTS • AMERICAN GYNECOLOGICAL & OBSTETRICAL SOCIETY • AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR REPRODUCTIVE MEDICINE • AMERICAN UROGYNECOLOGIC SOCIETY • COUNCIL OF UNIVERSITY CHAIRS IN OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY • INFECTIOUS DISEASE SOCIETY FOR OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY • NURSE ASSOCIATION OF NURSE PRACTITIONERS IN WOMEN'S HEALTH • NORTH AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PEDIATRIC AND ADOLESCENT GYNECOLOGY • SOCIETY FOR ACADEMIC SPECIALISTS IN GENERAL OBSTETRICS AND GYNECOLOGY • SOCIETY OF FAMILY PLANNING • SOCIETY OF GYNECOLOGIC ONCOLOGY • SOCIETY FOR MATERNAL-FETAL MEDICINE • SOCIETY FOR REPRODUCTIVE INVESTIGATION • SOCIETY FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH

- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK): \$2,326,721,000 (\$16 million increase)
- National Institute on Aging (NIA): \$4,517,623,000 (\$10 million increase)

Notably, the final FY 2026 appropriations includes language that prohibits NIH from making any changes to their existing policy on indirect cost rates and limits NIH's ability to award the entire grant funding up front in the first year of the award rather than over multiple years. Also known as multi-year funding, this approach of funding grants resulted in significantly fewer grants in FY 2025. The final FY2026 appropriations language limits NIH's use of multi-year funding to the FY 2025 level, allowing no more than 39% of its funding for multi-year funding.

Support for NIH-focused Report Language Requests from WFRC Members

Thanks to input from WFRC members, we compiled NIH-focused report language that has been submitted by WFRC member organizations and sent a letter to the House and Senate appropriators to support inclusion of the language in the report accompanying the FY 2027 Labor-HHS appropriations bill.

Congressional Hearings

On February 3, the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee held a hearing titled, "[Modernizing the NIH: Faster discoveries, more cures.](#)" In his opening testimony, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, Director, NIH, outlined efforts to improve transparency, efficiency, and public trust, including centralized peer review, oversight of gain-of-function research, and investment in emerging technologies. During member questions, lawmakers raised concerns about disrupted research due to grant delays and cancellations, workforce impacts on early-career scientists, geographic funding disparities, and the implications of multiyear funding, while also debating issues such as vaccine safety and public trust, progress on Long COVID research, and fetal tissue research. Senators Susan Collins (R-ME) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) brought up concerns that cancellation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)-related grants may have disproportionately impacted important research that investigates women's health and other health disparities.

On March 17, the House Appropriations Labor-HHS Subcommittee's [hearing on oversight of the NIH](#) highlighted bipartisan support for increased NIH funding alongside concerns about recent NIH policy and operational changes. Chairman Robert Aderholt (R-AL) emphasized restoring public trust and ensuring research delivers measurable health outcomes, while Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) raised concerns about grant cancellations, delays in funding, and potential political influence over scientific decisions. Dr. Bhattacharya discussed NIH's efforts to modernize funding, improve reproducibility, and expand geographic distribution of research support. Members from both parties questioned disruptions in grant funding, low success rates for researchers, especially early-career scientists, and NIH leadership vacancies. Rep. Lois Frankel (D-FL) raised concerns about underinvestment in women's health research and the impact of anti-DEI policies.

Agency Activities

NIH Funding and NOFO Delays

NIH has fallen significantly behind its historical schedule for distributing research funds, largely due to delays by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in releasing FY 2026

appropriations after the budget was enacted in early February. This prompted scrutiny during a March 17 oversight hearing with NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya, where Ranking Member Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) noted that full funding was only approved for release the night before the hearing on March 16. In addition, a rollout of new Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) has been unusually slow, in part because of new review requirements that require political review at the Department of Health and Human Services, further delaying grant application timelines and creating uncertainty for researchers.

NIH Announces Streamlining the Landscape for NOFOs and the Application Process

NIH has recently made changes to how the agency announces funding opportunities and scientific areas of interest. On March 23, NIH [announced](#) that the agency intends to simplify the landscape for NOFOs by significantly reducing the overall number of NOFOs that target specific research areas and placing greater emphasis on investigator-initiated research. In another effort to simplify application processes, NIH is no longer publishing the Notice of Special Interests (NOSIs) and instead has developed a new [Highlighted Topics and Institute Profiles](#) website. This consolidated resource is meant to identify the top research priority areas of each Institute, Center, and Office (ICOs) at the NIH to help researchers better direct their research strategy.

NIH's Framework for Strategic Plan Fiscal Years 2027-2031

NIH is beginning to shape its long-term direction through development of its [Strategic Plan for fiscal years 2027-2031](#). The agency has launched a [public engagement process](#), including webinars and a [Request for Information \(RFI\)](#), to gather stakeholder input on its overarching priorities. The plan is to build upon the prior Strategic Plan and will articulate the highest priorities of the agency but will not address priorities of the individual ICOs since each ICO has their own strategic plan. The final plan should be publicly released later in 2026. WFRC will gather comments from members during the monthly meeting in May and submit them by May 26, 2026.

NIH Announces New Chief of Staff for NIH Director

On March 30, 2026, the NIH named Elisabeth Armstrong, DBe, as the new chief of staff in the Office of the Director, Jay Bhattacharya, MD, PhD. In the role, she will manage NIH operations and provide strategic counsel. She is replacing Seana Cranston, who resigned on March 9, 2026. Previously, Dr. Armstrong was director of the Office of the Executive Secretariat at the FDA, worked in healthcare policy equity research for Raymond James & Associates' Global Equities and Investment and held various biotech and bioethics related roles in asset management, technology and healthcare.

Agency Outreach

Meeting with ORWH Director

WFRC met with the NIH's Office of Research on Women's Health (ORWH) Director Dr. Janine Clayton to discuss priorities for women's health research on January 21. Dr. Clayton outlined the ORWH priorities, which focus on chronic diseases across the life course, midlife health and menopause, advancing sex as a biological variable (SABV), integrating women's health into emerging technologies like AI and multi-omics, and addressing persistent research gaps in women's health. WFRC highlighted workforce challenges, particularly the limited support for physician-scientists, especially in OB/GYN field, prompting discussions about expanding training programs like BIRCWH and WRHR, strengthening mentorship, and collaborating with

the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). Dr. Clayton suggested that WFRC hold a follow-up meeting with her in six months.

Meeting with NIEHS Director

WFRC met with National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) Director Dr. Kyle Walsh on February 27 to discuss NIEHS' and WFRC's research priorities and find opportunities to collaborate where those priorities overlap. Dr. Walsh highlighted efforts to increase pediatric and maternal-fetal research portfolio at NIEHS, with a strong emphasis on early-life exposures from preconception through gestation, as well as emerging areas such as micro- and nanoplastics and their effects on fertility, metabolomics and large-scale data approaches, and exposomics. Dr. Walsh also pointed to key cohort studies, including the Uterine Fibroid Study, the Sister Study, and ECHO, as valuable resources, with opportunities to expand into areas like dementia and pelvic floor disorders. NIEHS continues to support research on conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids, and bone health, while encouraging the use of OMICS approaches. Workforce development was another major topic of discussion, with WFRC emphasizing support for programs like BIRCWH and WRHR. Dr. Walsh offered to meet again in three months.

Highlighted Topics & Funding Opportunities from NIH

[Effects of Contraception as Treatment for Gynecologic Disorders](#) (Lead ICO: NICHD)

Expiration date: August 29, 2026

[Advancing Autoimmune Disease Research: Integrating Genetic, Environmental, and Immunological Factors to Improve Diagnosis and Treatment](#) (Lead ICO: ORWH)

Expiration date: February 27, 2027

Building Interdisciplinary Research Careers in Women's Health (BIRCWH) (K12 Clinical Trial Optional) ([RFA-OD-24-013](#))

Expiration date: May 29, 2026

Leveraging Network Infrastructure to Conduct Innovative Research for Women, Children, Pregnant and Lactating Women, and Persons with Disabilities ([UG3/UH3 - Clinical Trial Optional](#))

Expiration date: November 16, 2027

Mood and Psychosis Symptoms during the Menopause Transition ([R01 Clinical Trial Optional](#), [R21 Clinical Trial Optional](#))

Expiration date: May 8, 2026

Translational Research in Maternal and Pediatric Pharmacology and Therapeutics ([R01 Clinical Trial Optional](#), [R21 Clinical Trial Optional](#))

Expiration date: May 8, 2026

Notice of Special Interest (NOSI): Advancing Research on Early Pregnancy Loss ([NOT-HD-22-026](#))

Expiration date: January 1, 2028