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# NIH staff break ranks in open letter to Director Jay Bhattacharya

Bethesda Declaration urges reversal of recent policies, including funding cuts

by **Laurel Oldach**

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Staff at NIH sent their letter to new director Jay Bhattacharya.

**S**ixty-six current and 23 recently-terminated staff at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), along with 253 anonymous colleagues, **sent an open letter** to Director Jay Bhattacharya today, calling on him to reverse controversial policies cutting support for research. The group also sent copies to US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and to members of Congress. 40 prominent scientists signed a second letter in support of the NIH staff.

The letter from NIH staff is titled the Bethesda Declaration, after the location of the NIH's main campus and as a reference to the **Great Barrington Declaration**, an October 2020 Bhattacharya-led critique of US COVID-19 control measures. Jenna Norton, a program director at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), who signed the letter, says that choice was deliberate. "I think our hope was that Jay would see himself in us."

Carolyn Bertozzi, a chemist at Stanford and Nobel laureate in chemistry who cosigned the second, supporting letter, says she is optimistic about Bhattacharya's response to the Bethesda Declaration, which she sees as a call from a beleaguered workforce to a new leader who has previously expressed his commitment to open, data-driven dialogue. "People get fired for saying the wrong thing in this administration," she says, but "Dr. Bhattacharya, I imagine, would push back against this [retaliation] because this is exactly the kind of behavior that he has criticized."

The letter calls for Bhattacharya to reverse five recent NIH policy moves:

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1. The agency's termination of thousands of **grants and contracts** totaling over \$12 billion for research on **COVID 19**, health disparities, **climate change**, **gender**, and **broadening the scientific workforce**.
2. The agency's decision to cut off subawards to international institutions—money for **research collaborations** led by US based scientists with collaborators abroad.
3. Making funding decisions at odds with the peer review process for determining what research to support, such as spending **\$500 million on a vaccine project** without any apparent competition or review by experts, and removing grant applications from consideration after they were reviewed.
4. The imposition of a cap on **indirect costs**—the additional funds that the NIH sends to organizations to support research infrastructure—at **15% of the amount of the grant**. Until this year, **the national average was closer to 30%**. In April, a federal judge issued a **permanent injunction** on this policy; the government is **appealing that decision**.
5. The firing of thousands of NIH staff via **layoffs of probationary workers** and an **HHS-wide reduction in force** (RIF), which the letter writers say “has hamstrung the NIH,” put patients at risk, and damaged the institution's transparency and efficiency.

### Why a letter, and why now?

C&EN spoke to five NIH employees who signed the letter. While all signed with their names, three gave interviews only on the condition of anonymity because they fear losing their jobs or being doxed. But they said they felt a moral imperative to object to the NIH's recent policy changes because of the stakes for health research. “Say it's 1955 and we're funding Jonas Salk. We might have just canceled his grant,” says a program director at a small institute at NIH who spoke on condition of anonymity. “That's hard to sleep with.”

An open letter from staff to their own agency's director is atypical—but, National Institute of General Medical Sciences research fellow Ian Morgan says, staffers have tried fruitlessly to reach Bhattacharya through more conventional routes. An NIH labor union sent Bhattacharya a letter outlining policy concerns early in his tenure and has followed up repeatedly, Morgan says, but has received no response. Norton, the program director at the NIDDK, says that when she contacted leaders with questions about whether certain grant cancellations were illegal, she received no clear answer but “was told that people didn't want to see me on the next RIF list and that I should be careful what I email and who I email.”

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— a program director, a research institute within the National Institutes of Health

Several of the employees who spoke with C&EN anonymously say the NIH is pervaded by a fear of firing and a sense of constantly shifting rules. Some say that grants they have tried to process have been blocked without explanation by unidentified decision-makers, making it hard to discern what would be acceptable to fund. One person described seeing numerous grants terminated and colleagues who review and award grants dedicating time to reassessing already-awarded grants instead of working to make new awards.

“What I see is a total attack on the biomedical infrastructure,” says the program director who spoke anonymously, citing both the policy changes listed in the staff letter and others that the NIH and HHS have proposed but not yet executed. “What's coming is really a tsunami of epic proportions. It's an extinction-level event.”

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“The investigators at the academic institutions are desperate,” writes one anonymous NIH staffer in a text message. The staffer thinks Congress and the public are unaware of the situation and calls the Bethesda Declaration a “last hope to get everybody’s attention.”

### ‘The future of our research enterprise . . . is at stake’

In a letter of support, 40 prominent scientists write that they “stand with these committed professionals in support of reversing the harmful actions of this administration,” and they ask NIH and HHS leaders to work with the agency letter signers. The support letter, drafted by Jeremy Berg, a former National Institute of General Medical Sciences director, adds that though some of the NIH’s reforms could benefit the organization, the way the agency’s leaders are making changes harms scientific progress and public health.

## “Generally, I don’t like to sign things, but . . . the future of our research enterprise . . . is at stake here.”

— Mounji Bawendi, 2023 Nobel laureate in chemistry, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Cosigner Mounji Bawendi, a chemist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who **shared the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2023**, says, “Generally, I don’t like to sign things, but . . . the future of our research enterprise . . . is at stake here.”

Some signers of the Bethesda Declaration hope it will move Bhattacharya to lift the freeze on awarded research money and to include more consultation and deliberation in future policy changes. “It is not meant to be a political letter,” Morgan says. “We want to work with people to make a better NIH.”



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But others doubt the declaration will change much. “My expectations are really low,” the program director who spoke anonymously says, though they wonder whether raising awareness of the problems they have observed could win more external support for NIH research. “Maybe we’ll move someone in the House or the Senate, and that would be a win.”

“I don’t know what kind of effects these declarations have,” Bawendi says. “But we can’t stand still.”

In an emailed response to C&EN's request for comment, an HHS spokesperson rebutted the Bethesda Declaration's five policy points. "The Bethesda Declaration has some fundamental misconceptions about the policy directions the NIH has taken in recent months, including the continuing support of the NIH for international collaboration," the spokesperson quoted Jay Bhattacharya as saying. "Nevertheless, respectful dissent in science is productive. We all want the NIH to succeed."

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