

## NIH Workers Demand Changes In New 'Bethesda Declaration'

The public letter to NIH Director Jay Bhattacharya was signed by hundreds of agency personnel.



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*This piece has been updated from its original email version . The updates are noted at the bottom.*

On Monday, hundreds of workers from the National Institutes of Health sent a public letter to Director Jay Bhattacharya decrying the state of the agency under his leadership and demanding changes.

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"The Bethesda Declaration: A Call for NIH and HHS Leadership to Deliver on Promises of Academic Freedom and Scientific Excellence" was signed by over 300 current and fired NIH employees representing every one of the agency's various institutes and centers. Signatures were collected through an Action Network intake form and all identities were later verified by a core group of organizers and signers via Signal and vouching by individuals whose identities had already been confirmed. *Important Context* did not individually verify the identity of every signer. We did review the final signed declaration prior to publication.

Delivered to Bhattacharya and members of Congress early Monday morning, the three-page document charges that the current NIH leadership "prioritizes political momentum over human safety and faithful stewardship of public resources," laying out a list of grievances and demands for their new director.

Dissatisfaction with Bhattacharya has been growing inside NIH since he took over on April 1. Considered the crown jewel of American public health, the agency has seen a wave of firings, drastic cuts to research, and new, politically charged rules policing language—along with other changes. At his first town hall event in May, the new director faced a [walkout](#) and heckling from the audience.

The Bethesda Declaration is the latest effort by dissatisfied insiders to make their frustrations with the new regime heard. The signers who spoke with *Important Context* said Bhattacharya has shown little appetite to engage with employee concerns. Ian Morgan, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow at the National Institute of General Medical Sciences who signed the declaration, said that his fellows union, which organized a walkout at the town hall, had been trying without success to meet with the director for two months.

"I feel like the next step has to be, if he's not going to talk with us, we have to go further," Morgan said, explaining that "this is an extinction level event for biomedical research and for the health and well being of the American people and global public health more generally."

"I feel like we have to do something now," he said.

Sarah Kobrin, PhD, MPH, a branch chief in the National Cancer Institute who signed the declaration, also told *Important Context* that she did so to send a message to Bhattacharya.

"Dr Bhattacharya knows NIH," she said. "We're asking him to learn about our science before he dismisses it. To be our leader and say no when he's asked to do something that's bad for science and bad for NIH."

The declaration calls out Bhattacharya for his unresponsiveness, explaining that "Many have raised these concerns to NIH leadership, yet we remain pressured to implement harmful measures."

"Today, we come directly to you," it says. "We include HHS leadership and members of Congress who oversee NIH."

## "I feel like we have to do something now."

Morgan and Kobrin are just two of 342 signers, and one of 92 to use their names and positions. Joining them were 250 anonymous signers "who share [their] concerns but who—due to a culture of fear and suppression created by this Administration—chose not to sign their names for fear of retaliation."

Beyond the administration, which has been slagging federal positions for months, Bhattacharya has a devoted social media following, which he has not shied away from directing at his critics.

The named signers *Important Context* spoke with said they too were concerned about retribution for speaking up. Nevertheless, they said they felt they needed to stand up for the institution and science. An intake form for declaration signers acknowledged the risks, declaring that "Courage is contagious, so we aim to model courage for our colleagues and the country."

One of the lead organizers of the declaration, Jenna Norton, PhD, MPH, a program officer with the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases who agreed to speak on the condition that it be emphasized she was doing so in her personal capacity, told *Important Context* that signing scared her "tremendously." Nevertheless, she said, although she worried about being fired or doxxed, she wanted to model bravery for her children—and she felt the stakes were too high to stay silent.

"If I don't speak up, I am complicit in the extremely harmful policies being enacted at NIH—policies that risk the health and safety of research participants who generously donate their time and bodies to help us find cures for others," she said. "They put the public at risk by impeding the development of lifesaving research advances."

Norton said that she was alarmed by the direction the country appeared to be moving, explaining that "the attacks we are seeing on science, on the media, and on academic institutions are a classic part of the fascism playbook."

"And if our country continues to follow this path, it will only become harder to speak up," she added. "The risks will only grow larger. And I want my kids to grow up in a country where they can speak freely without fear of retaliation from their government."

Sylvia Chou, PhD, MPH, a program officer in the National Cancer Institute, told *Important Context* she felt similarly compelled to make her voice heard, explaining, "I signed my name because the last four months have been THAT bad and the ship continues to sink. I feel that I have no choice but finding the courage to speak up."

Asked about the possibility of retribution, Chou explained that she'd made her peace with the situation, telling *Important Context*, "If they retaliate, then this is not a place I want to work in, and if they don't retaliate and even better, engage with us meaningfully, then I have just spoken up for an institution that I believe in and will continue to serve proudly."

Morgan similarly told *Important Context* that he accepted the risks involved. The 32-year-old scientist had no illusions about how his decision might impact his future.

"I have my PhD, I'm doing the research to establish my career within the next few years," he said. "I'm going to try to set up my own lab."

Morgan also noted that his own work studying antimicrobial resistance was "unobjectionable" to the administration. Still, he said he signed the declaration out of a sense of personal responsibility. Morgan explained that doing so was "definitely scary" and "definitely something where...I don't know what they're going to do," but added "it would be worse not to say something."

"I was in a seminar the other day, and someone was saying something along the lines of 'to whom much is given, they're required to give much of themselves,'" he said. "And I feel the same way. My values align with speaking up when I see injustices being done, and when I see this level of destruction being done to health and well-being the American public and global public health more widely, it means something to me."

Anna Culbertson, a fired probationary employee who worked as a scientific program specialist with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said she worried about doxxing. However, her concerns were lessened, she said, by the fact that "I can't be fired again."

"I signed to speak for those who cannot who support the mission or who support anonymously," she said. "I also think doing anything we can to show our concern about the lives that will be lost is extremely important. I know putting a face to a name and a name to a statement is extremely helpful so I'm happy to do it if it helps people resonate with the letter and story."

Culbertson added that if her signing "encourages others to speak up, it's worth it."

**"I want my kids to grow up in a country where they can speak freely without fear of retaliation from their government."**

The declaration authors crafted their letter to appeal to Bhattacharya's better nature, choosing the name "Bethesda Declaration" deliberately to invoke the [Great Barrington Declaration](#) he co-authored in October 2020. That document, which called on governments to reject economically disruptive COVID-19 mitigation measures in favor

of pursuing herd immunity through widespread infection and “focused protection” for the vulnerable, was widely rebuked by the scientific community. The mainstream rejection stung Bhattacharya, who subsequently declared himself as a victim of censorship—and cast himself a champion of free speech. The Bethesda Declaration, which quotes their new director several times, tests these purported commitments.

“We hope you will welcome this dissent, which we modeled after your Great Barrington Declaration,” it reads.

Although the language appeals to Bhattacharya’s better nature, the Bethesda Declaration blames him for the unpopular changes occurring at the agency. It notes that the Trump administration had “forced NIH, under your watch” to take the unpopular actions it highlights.

Many of the complaints enumerated in the Bethesda Declaration were previously raised by NIH staffers that *Important Context* spoke with for the [investigation](#) we published last week. Atop the authors’ and signers’ list of concerns, for example, is the politicization of research “by halting high quality, peer reviewed grants and contracts.”

The document alleges that Bhattacharya has selectively applied academic freedom “based on political ideology.” It further states that “To achieve political aims, NIH has targeted multiple universities with indiscriminate grant terminations, payment freezes for ongoing research, and blanket holds on awards regardless of the quality, progress, or impact of the science.” It notes that the cuts were made “based on political preferences and without input from NIH scientific staff or Congress” and accuses the administration and Bhattacharya of censoring research and programs related to specific topics—health disparities, COVID-19, gender identity, and more.

“Since January 20, 2025, NIH has terminated 2,100 research grants totaling around \$9.5 billion and \$2.6 billion in contracts,” the declaration reads. “This undercuts long-standing NIH policies designed to maximize return on investment by working with grantees to address concerns and complete studies. Many terminations contradict federal regulations that mandate protections for research participants and require grant awards to specify potential termination reasons.”

The declaration argues that the research cuts “throw away years of hard work and millions of dollars,” “shirk commitments to participants,” “risk participant health,” and “damage hard-earned public trust.”

“We urge you as NIH Director to restore grants delayed or terminated for political reasons so that life-saving science can continue,” it reads.

Another major grievance highlighted in the Bethesda Declaration is interruption of global collaboration. It notes that “dissolving foreign collaborations while we await new procedures harms research participants and slows scientific discovery, cutting American scientists off from the global scientific community, preventing access to technologies only available abroad, and eliminating critical research that crosses

political borders." The authors and signers urge the new director to "allow rigorously peer-reviewed research with vetted foreign collaborators to continue without disruption."

The declaration also takes aim at the \$500 million universal flu vaccine research project led by former acting NIH Director Matthew Memoli, which made headlines recently for [bypassing the normal review process](#). The authors and signers accuse the current NIH leadership of undermining peer review—ignoring it "to cater to political whims, pulling applications prior to review and removing high-scoring grants from funding consideration."

"Without independent peer review, we risk losing scientific integrity and public trust," it reads, citing the Memoli project. "We urge you as NIH Director to restore peer review and hold political appointees to the same standards as other scientists."

Other grievances included were the imposition of a 15 percent cap on indirect costs, which the declaration calls "arbitrary" and harmful to research and universities, and the firings of essential staff.

"The cuts to talented, hardworking professionals and critical departments without thought to their purpose or need has slowed the pace of science, held up extramural grant funding, made NIH less transparent and efficient, and put Clinical Center patients at risk," it reads. "We urge you as NIH Director to reinstate the people who make NIH work."

## **"We hope you will welcome this dissent, which we modeled after your Great Barrington Declaration."**

The organizers of The Bethesda Declaration deliberately timed the document to have the greatest possible impact. Its publication comes one day in advance of a Senate Appropriations Committee [hearing](#) at which Bhattacharya is slated to testify. The focus of that hearing is the Trump administration's proposed 2026 fiscal year budget, which includes deep cuts to the NIH. In our [report](#) last week on frustrations inside the agency, *Important Context* noted that some insiders were concerned that the staffing reductions were threatening the NIH's ability to spend down its congressionally appropriated budget, and they suspected that the administration planned to use that possible failure to justify the proposed cuts.

These concerns are reflected in the declaration, which states that the actions of the agency's leadership highlighted therein "have resulted in an unprecedented reduction in NIH spending that **does not** reflect efficiency but rather a dramatic reduction in life-saving research." (The emphasis on "does not" is in the original document.) It notes that "Some may use the false impression that NIH funding is not needed to justify the draconian cuts proposed in the President's Budget."



"This spending slowdown reflects a failure of your legal duty to use congressionally-appropriated funds for critical NIH research," it adds. "Each day that NIH continues to disrupt research, your ability to deliver on this duty narrows."

The Bethesda Declaration organizers also coordinated a showing of outside support for their pressure campaign with the nonprofit Stand Up for Science. The organization sent out a press release Monday morning announcing that it was hosting the declaration online along with an [open letter](#) backing it that anyone could sign onto.

"We commend the NIH staff who have come forward with the 'Bethesda Declaration' to share concerns in the spirit of academic freedom, for the good of all," the letter reads. "We stand with these committed professionals in support of reversing the harmful actions of this administration."

The press release noted that current supporters of the declaration signers "include Nobel Laureates, prominent scientists, politicians, activists, patients, and more." It called on members of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee to seek a "commitment of support for NIH staff members signing the Bethesda Declaration" from Bhattacharya.

## **"Some may use the false impression that NIH funding is not needed to justify the draconian cuts proposed in the President's Budget."**

Despite all of the preparation and planning, The Bethesda Declaration signers who spoke with *Important Context* had varying expectations for how Bhattacharya might respond to their demands.

Norton was trying to be optimistic, explaining that if the new director held true to his stated principles "then I have to believe he will listen to us."

"One of my philosophies is to try to give everyone the most [generous] interpretation of their actions," she said. "And I try to extend that to Jay Bhattacharya, as well. I can't say it has been easy to do that, watching the harmful and cruel policies he is allowing at NIH under his watch. But I hope he will listen and work with us to fix NIH."

Culbertson simply said, "It would be great if he did," when asked if she thought Bhattacharya would respond. Chou, however, was less hopeful.

"I imagine Jay won't respond well," she said.

*Important Context* sent a press inquiry to Director Bhattacharya and will update this piece if he responds.

**Read the full declaration [here](#).**

UPDATE 6/9/25: In the wake of The Bethesda Declaration's publication and widespread media coverage, House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee Ranking Member Diana DeGette (D-Colo.), Energy and Commerce Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) and all Democratic Health subcommittee members [called for](#) "an urgent hearing" with Bhattacharya "amid growing concerns over sweeping disruptions to the agency since the beginning of the second Trump Administration."

"It is critical the Energy and Commerce Committee convene a hearing with Director Bhattacharya to examine these actions and assess whether the NIH remains equipped to serve the American people and maintain its leadership in global biomedical research," read a letter sent by the members to Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Brett Guthrie (R-Ky). "We are deeply concerned the disruption at NIH and our biomedical research enterprise will have untold costs in terms of lost innovation and treatments and cures for the American people."

UPDATE #2 6/9/25: Bhattacharya [responded](#) to the declaration in a thread on X, saying he appreciates dissent but denying its key assertions. The embattled director claimed that he was "working to remove ideological influence" and that no "legitimate" research had been terminated. He also denied that peer review was being undermined.

">300 of your staff are telling you this is not what is happening on the ground at NIH," Norton responded, quoting the first post in Bhattacharya's thread. "I encourage you to speak to your staff—stop repeatedly postponing meetings—and learn what your staff are seeing. We await your response to our email."

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By Walker Bragman

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