February 7, 2018

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services and Education
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray,

We are writing to you in our capacities as the Chair and Co-Chair of the Friends of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The Friends of NCHS is comprised of almost 100 scientific, patient advocacy, health professional, and public health organizations that support the NCHS, our nation’s principal health statistics agency. **We are writing to reiterate our coalition’s support for funding the agency in fiscal year (FY) 2018 and to urge you to provide NCHS with no less than $160 million, the amount recommended in S. 1771, the FY 2018 Senate Labor, Health and Human Services and Education appropriations bill, which is $5 million more than the level recommended in the House version, H.R. 3358.**

Given FY 2018 deliberations are still unresolved, we are writing to remind you about the challenges facing NCHS. Since FY 2011, the agency has been essentially flat funded. As a result, NCHS’s purchasing power is down considerably; current base funding remains below FY 2010 levels, adjusted for inflation, and the agency does not expect to ever recover the roughly $25 million in supplemental Prevention and Public Health Fund dollars it lost in 2013. NCHS also faces increasing costs on the horizon associated with state and vendor contracts and other infrastructure challenges related to survey redesign and systems improvements that will require additional resources far beyond current levels.

If the agency’s budget is reduced below the FY 2017 level, NCHS will need to consider reducing sample sizes in sizes of its two seminal surveys: the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)—the principal data source for studying demographic, socioeconomic, and behavioral differences in health and mortality outcomes since 1957—and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), which has assessed the health and nutritional status of adults and children in the United States since the early 1960s. Reducing the NHIS sample size could mean there would no longer be survey participants from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Further, reducing the sample size would adversely affect the agency’s ability to provide state-level estimates, especially for smaller, predominantly rural states, as well as its ability to monitor health disparities and provide timely estimates for smaller population subgroups, including American Indians and Asian Americans. If NHANES’s sample size is reduced, data across multiple years would need to be pooled, reducing the timeliness of estimates of key health indicators such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, among others.
These are challenges the Friends of NCHS raised in an organizational sign-on letter sent to you in May 2017. Since then, the cycle of ongoing continuing resolutions and uncertainty regarding the final FY 2018 funding outcome has exacerbated the agency’s struggles, alarming health care professionals, scientists, and educators alike who rely on NCHS data to inform health care delivery, research, and training activities. NCHS data have played an increasingly important role in informing the scope of the nation’s opioid crisis—another critical reason for investing in NCHS.

Thank you for considering our views and the needs of NCHS as you negotiate a final FY 2018 omnibus spending package that includes the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education bill.

Sincerely,

Mary Jo Hoeksema  
2018 Friends of NCHS Chair  
Population Association of America

John Thompson  
2018 Friends of NCHS Co-Chair  
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics