



The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor, and Pensions
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr,

The Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences (FABBS) is grateful for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Prepare for and Respond to Existing Viruses, Emerging New Threats, and Pandemics (PREVENT Pandemics) Act. FABBS represents twenty-seven scientific societies and nearly sixty university departments whose members and faculty share a commitment to advancing knowledge of the mind, brain, and behavior and connecting this knowledge to policy and practice to improve life outcomes and promote well-being. We applaud the attention to health disparities, access to mental health treatment, and the social determinants of health. These are key considerations for an effective and equitable response to COVID-19 and future infectious diseases.

Below we identify two sections, offering feedback and potential resources:

Sec. 104. Strengthening Public Health Communication

We are especially grateful that the PREVENT Pandemics Act includes an Advisory Commission for public health communication, and that it specifically calls for the inclusion of a psychologist on the council. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed an urgent need to foster better public health and science communication. Thankfully, the field of risk communication science offers strong evidence to improve future pandemic responses. The presence of a behavioral scientist at the table during these discussions will be an important step toward more effective public health communication.

Baruch Fischhoff, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, recently [wrote on this issue in Foreign Affairs](#). Dr. Fischhoff explains “That research shows policymakers need to provide the scientific evidence supporting their recommendations. Moreover, they need to test their messages to ensure people understand what is being asked of them.”¹

Additionally, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, with support from the National Science Foundation, conducted a series of expert consultations to develop actionable tools for policymakers responding to the pandemic. [The Societal Experts Action Network \(SEAN\)](#) drew on research from behavioral, social, and economic sciences to produce publications identifying effective strategies on subjects such as [Communication Strategies for Building Confidence in COVID-19 Vaccines: Addressing Variants and Childhood Vaccinations](#).

¹ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-04/covid-communication-breakdown>

Title III – Accelerating Research and Countermeasure Discovery

Given the importance of behavioral considerations in all aspects of pandemic response, FABBS recommends increasing the investment to research in these fields. We appreciate that Section 301 of the PREVENT Pandemics Act calls for behavioral research on the long-term health effects of COVID-19 infection. The bill would be further strengthened by including explicit reference to these sciences in forward-looking research directives as well.

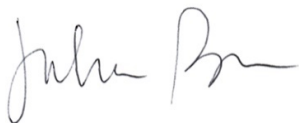
The draft supports improved coordination of research into medical products and countermeasures for potential future pandemics. FABBS encourages you to expand this language to include medical *and behavioral* countermeasures. Prior to the development and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines, our country relied almost exclusively on behavioral and social mitigation efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, such as physical distancing and mask wearing. Efforts to prepare better for the next pandemic should include research on the effectiveness of behavioral strategies, best practices to motivate and maintain desired behaviors, and communication strategies to encourage their uptake across the U.S. population.

Behavioral considerations also provide important insights to maximize the value of other medical interventions. Fear of needles provides a clear example of a barrier that behavioral science has the potential to address. About half of individuals suffering from fear of needles inherited a vasovagal reflex, a physical reaction that lowers blood pressure and may lead to fainting, which undoubtedly deters people from getting vaccines. However, two effective treatments exist: desensitization (progressive exposure to blood and needles) and applied tension (the process of raising blood pressure before exposure to reduce the consequences of a drop of blood pressure). This underscores the value of emphasizing behavioral science research as an avenue for addressing hard to tackle problems. While biomedical research may focus on developing new preventatives, treatments, and cures, behavioral research can ensure that these innovations are used to the greatest effect possible.

In addition, judgement and decision making under the different social conditions caused by the pandemic is an area ripe for further research. How does a context of heightened stress and uncertainty cause decision making to differ from standard decision making around questions that are typically studied, such as decisions to eat a better diet or save for retirement?

Once again, FABBS thanks you for your openness to feedback and your work to craft legislation to protect us from the next pandemic. Please call on us as a resource as you and your staff continue your lead this critical legislation.

Sincerely,



Juliane Baron
Executive Director
Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences