March 24, 2020

The Honorable Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD
Director
U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH)
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Collins:

The members and leadership of the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) would like to thank you and the leadership of the U.S. National Institutes of Health for your announcement of flexibilities in the administration of grant applications and the management of existing awards during the COVID-19 public health emergency. This flexibility will help provide a sense of ease to the NIH extramural research community at a very tense time for them and for the world. I am writing to clarify these guidance notices with respect to other laboratory employees.

With many universities and research institutions ordering the closure of research labs for as long as two months, many ASCB members are concerned about the future of their research projects and the wellbeing of the members of their labs. I am sure fellows and trainees are relieved to know that the NIH will allow PIs to continue to provide stipend payments to them.

We have, however, heard from a number of our members who are concerned about the status of the employees of their labs whose wages are not directly paid for through research grants but are important to the success of the research. As I am sure you know, these skilled employees, often categorized as lab assistants, are vital parts of the operation of a lab.

The ASCB hopes that the NIH can clarify any existing avenues that allow support for these important lab employees during the duration of COVID-19-related closures. If that authority already exists, as part of the existing NIH Policy and Compliance Guidance or through recent Office of Management and Budget Memoranda (M-20-11 or M-20-17)
we would hope that specific information could be highlighted along with the other important COVID-19-related information on the NIH COVID-19 webpage. If provisions do not currently exist, we urge the NIH to consider providing grantees with some support for these important employees.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this important question.

Sincerely,

Erika Shugart, PhD
CEO
The American Society for Cell Biology