

Submitted by: The National Postdoctoral Association

Testimony for: Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, The United States Senate

In regard to: The National Institutes of Health

April 27, 2012

The Honorable Tom Harkin

Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in regard to the Fiscal Year 2013 funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). We are writing today in regard to support for postdoctoral researchers, specifically in support of FY2013 funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) at the 2012 level of \$ 30.86 billion and in support of the 2% increase in the Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award (NRSA) training stipends for postdoctoral researchers, as requested in the President's proposed FY2013 budget.

Background: Postdocs are the Backbone of U.S. Science and Technology

According to estimates by The National Science Foundation (NSF) Division of Science Resource Statistics, there are approximately 89,000 postdoctoral scholars in the United States¹. The NIH and the NSF define a "postdoc" as: *An individual who has received a doctoral degree (or equivalent) and is engaged in a temporary and defined period of mentored advanced training to enhance the professional skills and research independence needed to pursue his or her chosen career path.* The number of postdocs has been steadily increasing. The incidence of individuals taking postdoc positions during their careers has risen, from about 31% of those with a pre-1972 doctorate to 46% of those receiving their doctorate in 2002–05². According to the *2012 Science and Engineering Indicators*, an increase in those taking postdoc positions is evident across most disciplines:

*"In traditionally high-postdoc fields such as the life sciences (from 46% to 60%) and the physical sciences (from 41% to 61%), most doctorate recipients now have a postdoc position as part of their career path. Similar increases were found in mathematical and computer sciences (19% to 31%), social sciences (18% to 30%), and engineering (14% to 38%). Recent engineering doctorate recipients are now almost as likely to take a postdoc position as physical sciences doctorate holders were 35 years ago."*³

Postdocs are critical to the research enterprise in the United States and are responsible for the bulk of the cutting edge research performed in this country. Consider the following:

- According to the National Academy of Science (NAS), postdoctoral researchers "have become indispensable to the science and engineering enterprise, performing a substantial portion of the nation's research in every setting."⁴
- The retention of women and under-represented groups in biomedical research depends upon their successful and appropriate completion of the postdoctoral experience.

- Postdoctoral scholars carry the potential to solve many of the world’s most pressing scientific and health problems; they are the principal investigators of tomorrow.

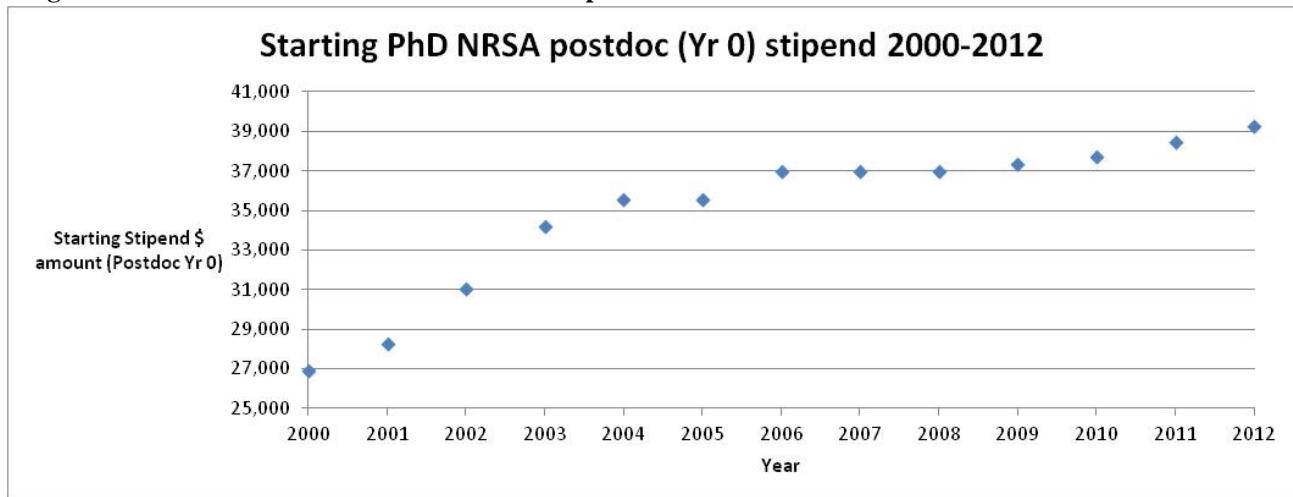
Unfortunately, postdocs are routinely exploited. They are paid a low wage relative to their years of training and receive varying benefits depending on the institution where they work. The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) advocates for policies that support and enhance postdoctoral training on the national level and also within the research institutions that host postdoctoral scholars. Low compensation remains one of the most serious issues faced by the postdoctoral community.

Problem: NRSA Stipends are Low and Don’t Meet Cost-of-Living Standards; For Better or Worse, Postdoc Compensation is Based on NRSA Stipends

The NIH leadership has been aware that the NRSA training stipends are too low since 2001, after the publication of the results of the NAS study, *Addressing the Nation's Changing Needs for Biomedical and Behavioral Scientists*. In response, the NIH pledged (1) to increase entry-level stipends to \$45,000 by raising the stipends at least 10% each year and (2) to provide automatic cost-of-living increases each year thereafter to keep pace with inflation. Most recently, the 2011 NAS study, *Research Training in the Biomedical, Behavioral, and Clinical Research Sciences*, called for, among other recommendations, increased funding to support more NRSA positions and to fulfill the NIH’s 2001 commitment to increase pre-doctoral and postdoctoral stipends.

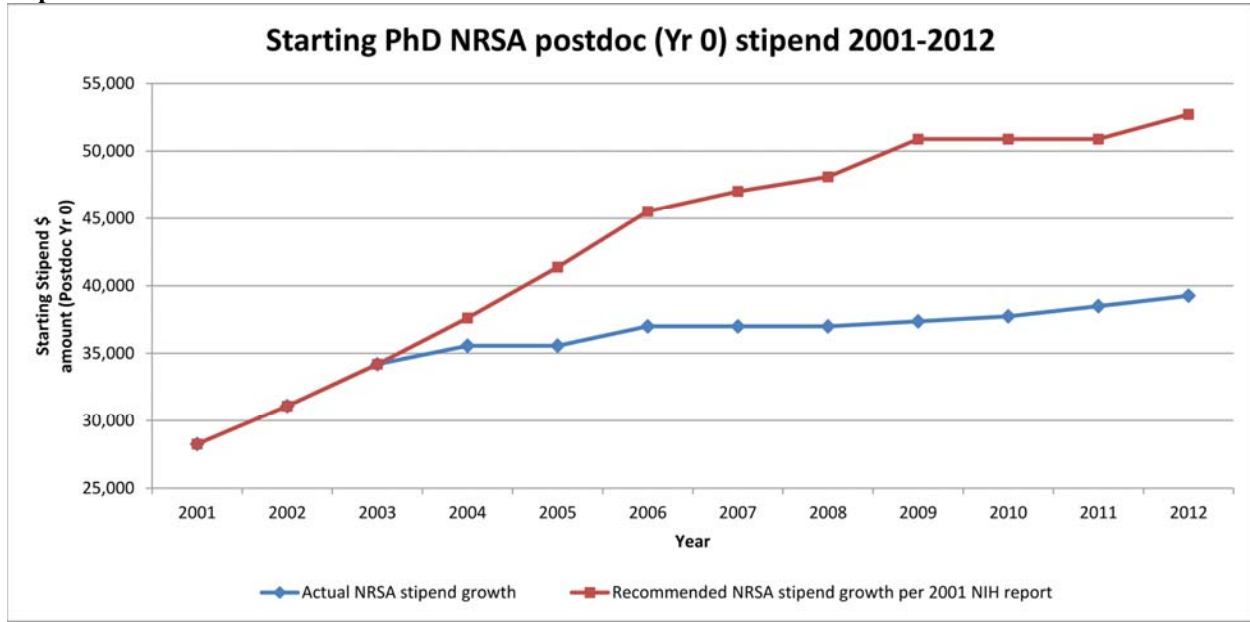
Without sufficient appropriations from Congress, the NIH has not been able to fulfill its pledge. In 2007, the stipends were frozen at 2006 levels and since then have not been significantly increased. The stipends were increased by 1% each year in 2009 and 2010 and by 2% in 2011 and 2012. The 2012 entry-level training stipend remains low, at \$39,264, the equivalent of a GS-8 position, step 2 in the federal government in 2012⁵, despite the postdocs’ advanced degrees and specialized technical skills and experience. Furthermore, this stipend remains far short of the promised \$45,000. Please see **Figure 1** for a summary of the stipend amounts since 2000 and **Figure 2** for a comparison of the actual stipend growth with the NIH recommended growth.

Figure 1. “Year 0” NRSA Postdoctoral Fellow Stipend Levels 2000-2012



Graph is based on data obtained from NIH Web site: <http://grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm>

Figure 2. Comparison of the Actual “Year 0” NRSA Postdoctoral Fellow Stipend Growth with the Promised Stipend Growth 2001-2012⁶



It is not only the NRSA fellows who remain undercompensated; the impact of the low stipends extends beyond the NRSA-supported postdocs. The NPA’s research has strongly suggested that the NIH training stipends are used as a benchmark by research institutions across the country for establishing compensation for postdoctoral scholars.⁷ Thus, an unintended consequence is that institutions undercompensate all of their postdocs, who must then struggle to make ends meet, which in turn affects their productivity and undermines their efforts to solve the world’s most critical problems. Additionally, the NPA is hearing from many postdocs, who say they are leaving their research careers behind because of the low compensation. In order to keep the “best and the brightest” scientists in the U.S. research enterprise, the NPA believes that it is crucial that Congress appropriate funding for the 2-percent increase in training stipends, as a moderate yet substantial step towards reaching the recommended entry-level stipend of \$45,000.

Solution: Keep the NIH’s Original Promise to Raise the Minimum Stipends

We respectfully request that the Subcommittee appropriate funding of \$30.86 billion for the FY2013 NIH budget, which would in turn allow the NIH to appropriate \$775 million to training grants and implement a 2% NRSA stipend increase, as per the President’s proposed FY2013 budget:

Support for the training mechanism would decline by 0.4 percent compared to FY 2012. This reflects a 1.8 percent reduction in the number of trainees supported. Stipend rates, however, would increase at the same pace as for FY 2012 at 2.0 percent, continuing a long-term strategy that NIH has used to try and keep stipend levels closer to salaries that could be

earned in related occupations, to ensure that outstanding individuals continue to pursue biomedical research careers.”⁸

The NPA believes it is just and necessary to increase the compensation provided to these new scientists, who make significant contributions to the bulk of the research discovering cures for disease and developing new technologies to improve the quality of life for millions of people in the United States. Please do not hesitate to contact us for more information.

Thank you for your consideration.

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¹ National Science Foundation Division of Science Resource Statistics. (January 2010, chapter 3, pp.44-46). Science and engineering indicators 2010. Arlington, VA: National Science Board.

² National Science Foundation National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES). (January 2012, chapter 3, p. 39). Science and engineering indicators 2012. Arlington, VA: National Science Board.

³ Ibid.

⁴ COSEPUP. (June 2001, p. 10). Enhancing the postdoctoral experience for scientists and engineers. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

⁵ U.S. Office of Personnel Management Salary Tables 2012. <http://www.opm.gov/oca/12tables/html/gs.asp>

⁶ Figure created by Lorraine Tracey, Ph.D., on behalf of the National Postdoctoral Association.

⁷ Johnson Phillips, C. (April 2012). *National Postdoctoral Association Institutional Survey on Postdoctoral Compensation, Benefits, and Professional Development Opportunities: Highlights*. Washington, DC: National Postdoctoral Association.

⁸ Department of Health and Human Services National Institutes of Health. (pp. ES25-ES26). *NIH Congressional Justification: Overview*. http://officeofbudget.od.nih.gov/pdfs/FY13/FY2013_Overview.pdf