

American Federation of Government Employees

(AFGE) Local 3403

National Science Foundation
2415 Eisenhower Avenue
Alexandria, VA 22314



April 16, 2021

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Eddie Bernice Johnson
United States House of Representatives
2468 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Senator Schumer and Representative Johnson,

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of American science and technology. Under your leadership, the Senate and House of Representatives propose exciting and sweeping new directions for science and technology research at the National Science Foundation (NSF) under innovative visions in the “Endless Frontier Act” and the “National Science Foundation for the Future Act.” I commend you on this herculean legislative lift.

There is a significant Labor issue with both bills, however, regarding the treatment of federal civil servants who form the backbone of the NSF. **Both bills encourage the NSF Director to make hiring decisions “...without regard to civil service laws as the Director determines necessary...”** The House bill contains this explicit language while the Senate bill gives a quiet nod to the same hiring authority as found at the distinctively non-NSF Defense Advanced Research Projects (DARPA) research arm of the Department of Defense.

While a reinvigoration of basic science and technology is welcome, a rejection of civil service merit hiring principles is not. After years of assault on the civil service, the federal workforce was looking forward to a change in attitude; this is not that change.

I respectfully request that you remove the exceptional hiring provisions in both the Senate and House bills as they are unnecessary and wasteful for attracting competent people to join the NSF in its mission of public service.

This hiring authority is neither needed nor welcome to support new research and development activities at the NSF. The NSF already employs a complementary mix of federal employees,

contractors, and academic exchange personnel (under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act) to achieve its mission.

As both legislative efforts acknowledge, the NSF is a global leader in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and a highly successful cost-effective federal agency supporting basic research. We do this by empowering academia and business to do the actual research while the NSF's role is to lead the global "gold standard" for merit review. The staff at the NSF invests in STEM research for the American people, but the research is carried out by researchers in universities and businesses across the Nation. The unique posture of the NSF as the arbiter, but not the doer, of STEM research requires that the NSF staff be public service oriented and able to listen to the assessments of individual researchers whose reviews of projects contain their individual perspectives and biases. The NSF staff sorts through these opinions and biases to arrive at an objective recommendation in supporting projects to "promote the progress of science" as required by our organic legislation.

Why does the NSF, whose operations receive regular bi-partisan praise in both the Senate and House, need to jettison the practice of merit-based hiring under the civil service laws of this country when we expand our responsibilities into new but familiar areas of inquiry? The NSF Office of the Director currently has all the authority needed to hire good people and pay them a good salary to join the NSF enterprise.

In my twenty years at the NSF, I have seen episodic challenges to the necessary arms-length dealing with the communities we serve. We need to balance our connectivity to the wider STEM community against a certain degree of separation because we provide public funds for public research and we need to act objectively. The NSF Office of the Director and the National Science Board (NSB), over the years, have sought greater autonomy and discretion to hire individuals outside of the civil service and pay them beyond the government pay scale which, for the positions anticipated in the Senate and House bills, would be greater than \$200,000 per year. The NSF Office of the Director and the NSB have repeatedly joined in promoting the argument to Congress "we cannot get good people to come to the NSF unless we pay them above the government pay scale."

This argument is insulting to the men and woman who serve at the NSF and work on the government pay scale as part of their sense of public service and duty. No one need take a vow of poverty to work in government but, complaining that you simply cannot make ends meet on \$200,000 per year is ridiculous and elitist.

Allowing for differential hiring practices and pay between those individuals in fields of research favored by the NSF Director or the NSB at any given time would only serve to create conflict with those staff not seemingly favored in such a scheme who work alongside the favored ones in similar jobs. This may be the academic model, but it is not the government model and the NSF is not a university.

The hiring provisions in the Senate and House bills are a solution looking for a problem that does not exist. The NSF has no problem attracting talent to serve and, importantly, the opportunities provided in the Senate and House bills will only enhance our ability to attract talent due to the

exciting possibilities for the research community. Many researchers understand that their careers were made possible, in large part, by the financial support they received from the American people through the NSF.

Public service is an honor and not something to be auctioned off. I say this not only as a federal employee but also as a military veteran. The notion that money equals quality is not acceptable calculus at the NSF.

I respectfully request that you to remove these unnecessary, costly, and demoralizing hiring provisions in your otherwise forward-looking legislative effort.

I thank you again for your efforts on behalf of American STEM.

I am happy to discuss my concerns with you and your staff.

David J. Verardo, PhD

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David J. Verardo".

President of AFGE Local 3403 at the NSF
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