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May 6, 2008

Edward J. Sondik, PhD
Director, National Center for Health Statistics
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Dear Ed:

On behalf of the Board of Scientific Counselors, it is a pleasure to forward to you a copy of the External Review of the SLAITS/NIS program. In our opinion, the report of the review panel is quite clear and well-written and on target regarding its recommendations, so we transmit it to you adding only a few points of emphasis from the Board.

SLAITS/NIS operates as a model of efficiency. There is a very small core staff and they function in a very entrepreneurial manner, deriving most of their support from outside sources. Being largely externally funded is in many ways an advantage to the program, especially in the tight budget times that NCHS has faced recently. By using the NIS sampling frame to conduct other surveys, particularly on the health of children, the federal investment in NIS pays even greater dividends. In addition to its efficiency, flexibility and uniqueness in being able to provide area specific data for all 50 states and some large metropolitan areas, it is important to underscore that the SLAITS is currently the source of most of the nation's detailed data on child health status.

It is clear that the SLAITS surveys are valued greatly, since other agencies are willing to pay to have them collected. SLAITS/NIS also serves as one of the few mechanisms within NCHS that can provide data at the state and local level, and they do so without competing for precious internal resources at NCHS. We believe that the SLAITS/NIS staff should be commended for the efficiency and effectiveness of their program, and for the strong collaborative relationships that they have built with outside agencies.

At the same time, it must be recognized that the dependency on external support creates some challenges for the program. To some extent, the agenda must be the agenda of the funding agencies, which creates both uncertainties for the stability of the program as well as for its identity and future directions. In addition, the program faces the more general challenges that confront telephone surveys today, with declining response rates, and decreased household landline phone coverage. The staff is well aware of these issues and their potential implications.



The Board supports the recommendations of the Review Panel, particularly those related to seeking a broader range of collaborators in an effort to create a more stable funding platform for the program. More strategic thinking about the future of the program, as suggested, also would be desirable. Given the challenges facing telephone surveys, we believe that a greater emphasis on methodological issues would be critically important to ensure the longer term success of SLAITS.

Finally, we are pleased to offer a few general observations about the review process itself. In our opinion, this review went remarkably smoothly compared with earlier reviews. We attribute the process improvement to several factors. The revised and simplified guidelines for the review helped to better prepare the review panel. The panel itself was very strong and was coordinated by an outstanding chair. In addition, the use of a report writer allowed the panel to assemble an excellent draft without an undue burden on the reviewers. We also wish to commend Virginia Cain for the hard work that she does in securing the reviewers, scheduling the sessions, and coordinating the preparation of a report.

We hope that you find this review to be helpful, and as always, if we can provide any additional information, please do not hesitate to let us know.

With best wishes,

/ Irma T. Elo /

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Chair, Board of Scientific Counselors