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Order to Reclassify Civil Service Posts Will Compromise Responses to Public Health Threats

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The executive order signed last week that strips protections from our nation’s civil service workforce comes at a time when the critical role of career staff in guiding federal responses to public health needs could not be more clear.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to confront our nation and the world with challenges that must be met with evidence, experience, best practices and collaborative multi-sectoral interventions that are free of political pressures. Federal agencies that include the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration would be gravely weakened if the long-serving, experienced, nonpartisan professionals in those organizations are replaced by political appointees.

A threat to the political autonomy of our scientific and public health workforce would be deeply concerning in any circumstance. Coming at this time, the dangers posed by the directive are particularly alarming. We rely on the judgement of civil service experts to lead responses against the pandemic, inform the public, drive research, update guidance and review data supporting the use and distribution of vaccines and treatments to address the impacts of COVID-19. Replacing our scientists and public health experts with politically motivated staff will reduce our ability to respond, and reduce public confidence in our response, to COVID-19 and other public health crises.

Members of the Infectious Diseases Society of America, its HIV Medicine Association, the Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America, the Pediatric Infectious Diseases Society and the Society of Infectious Diseases Pharmacists witness the need for objective evaluation of our responses to this pandemic and to other public health challenges on a daily basis.

We urge the White House to rescind this misguided directive. If the directive is not rescinded, we encourage Congress to use its authorities to maintain the integrity of the civil service workforce.

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