

# NIH Centers of Excellence

## Introduction

NIH Centers of Excellence programs are diverse in focus, scope, and origin. In general, they facilitate and coordinate research efforts on a specific disease, a group of diseases, or an area of research. Some were created as NIH-wide initiatives, others by individual Institutes and Centers (ICs) and Offices within the NIH Office of the Director (NIH OD); some reflect mergers or redesignations of existing programs; and some were mandated by Congress. The NIH Centers of Excellence programs described in this report are a subset—those established by statutory mandate.

Some congressionally mandated Centers of Excellence programs focus on long-recognized, significant challenges to public health, such as Alzheimer's disease and other conditions that have a major impact on aging populations. Other such programs focus attention on areas of research that might otherwise be underfunded, such as rare diseases or health disparities. The mandated Centers of Excellence programs were established at different times and the number of research sites funded vary; thus, each of these programs differ in size, scope, accomplishments, and outcomes.

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The specific research goals and activities of the mandated Centers of Excellence programs vary according to their authorization. In general, however, these programs help establish critical research infrastructure; foster collaboration; train researchers, physician scientists, and other professional staff; and provide shared resources, often through core facilities. Shared resources include systems for data gathering and analysis, instrumentation and computing, and the development of large patient registries. Research at the centers funded by these congressionally mandated programs often is multidisciplinary and designed to encourage scientists and clinicians from diverse fields to come together to focus on a common set of objectives.

All of the congressionally mandated NIH Centers of Excellence seek to integrate basic and translational research and to move those findings efficiently toward clinical applications, some of which are evaluated in patient populations brought together at the centers. Results from these studies may have spinoffs that increase knowledge about other areas of research. Through outreach and communication efforts, the centers inform researchers and the public of scientific advances and improvements in medical care. Administrative and program staff at individual ICs and Offices within the NIH OD oversee and manage each congressionally mandated NIH Centers of Excellence program. Specific centers funded under these mandated programs receive awards for a defined period of years, after which they must re compete for support.

The creation of Centers of Excellence at the discretion of NIH only takes place after an assessment of whether an adequate base of knowledge and number of expert investigators exists; what research opportunities are adequately supported through existing or planned funding mechanisms and initiatives; and the appropriateness of alternative funding mechanisms. Recognizing that it should only create Centers of Excellence under certain circumstances, Congress provided the NIH Director with a new authority, through the NIH Reform Act of 2006, to review and approve the establishment of all Centers of Excellence recommended by the agency's ICs and Offices within the NIH OD.

This chapter provides overviews, progress reports for the FYs 2008 and 2009 biennial period (covering programmatic and research activities and outcomes), recommendations, evaluation plans, and future directions for the six congressionally mandated NIH Centers of Excellence programs, which are described in the order of their establishment:

- Alzheimer's Disease Centers (1984)
- Claude D. Pepper Older Americans Independence Centers of Excellence (1989)
- Senator Paul D. Wellstone Muscular Dystrophy Cooperative Research Centers (2001)
- National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities Centers of Excellence (2001)
- Rare Diseases Clinical Research Network (2003)
- New Autism Centers of Excellence (2006), which merged the previously existing Collaborative Programs of Excellence in Autism and Studies to Advance Autism Research and Treatment

Tables listing the centers funded under each mandated Centers of Excellence program appear at the end of the narrative on each program.