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April 10, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC, 20515

Dear Madam Speaker:

The American Society for Cell Biology, a professional society of more than 7,000 basic biomedical scientists in all 50 states and more than 60 other countries around the world, is grateful to Congress for recognizing the important role biomedical research will play in the battle against COVID-19. We are particularly appreciative of your leadership in directing important research funding in the recently passed CARES Act to the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) for research on this horrible virus.

I am writing regarding a critical issue facing the American biomedical research community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the travel restrictions and federal agency closures necessary to reduce transmission of the virus and flatten the infection curve are having severe consequences on the American biomedical research community and the dire situation will continue following the pandemic.

The ASCB asks that the next COVID-19-related support bill include visa extensions of one year for F-1, J-1, and H1-B visas for foreign scientists currently here in the United States and working in our biomedical research laboratories.

As you know, biomedical research laboratories in the United States depend heavily on the work of trainees and other scientists from nations all over the world. Without the energy and knowledge of these international investigators, the work of the U.S. research community in the battle against COVID-19 and other areas of biomedical research would all but stop. The research done in these labs is almost entirely funded by the NIH or the NSF.

In normal times, international trainees and scientists worry about the visa renewal process they must go through in order to continue their research here. In the current situation, with research institutions and science laboratories closed, these trainees are unable to even conduct their research. With govern-

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ment offices closed, even the opportunity to seek visa extensions is impossible. The only thing that will not change is the expiration date on their visas. It is possible that international scientists conducting research here in the U.S. will be forced to leave the country before their research is completed, or even before the national emergency is lifted.

Extending visa expiration dates will allow them to continue their research which, in some cases, will need to be completely restarted because of the lengthy closure of universities and scientific laboratories. These extensions are important to the individual scientist and the federally funded research labs that employ them. If research can't be completed, it will have harmful implications for the overall research goals of the lab.

We are also concerned about foreign graduate students who have already accepted offers from research institutions and medical schools around the United States with plans to begin their studies in the fall. This is the time of year they should be applying for visas to allow them to travel to the United States in the fall. With U.S. State Department offices in Washington, DC, and around the world closed, there is no opportunity for these future students to apply for and receive the visas that will allow them to travel to the U.S. this fall, just as the American research and medical communities struggle to get back on their feet and move forward.

As our nation struggles with the hundreds of thousands of cases of COVID-19 currently spreading throughout the nation, looks past the current pandemic to preventing a return of COVID-19, and continues other important biomedical research, it is essential that the research labs across the United States be fully staffed with the very best and brightest the world has to offer.

We look forward to working with you on this vitally important issue. Please do not hesitate to be in contact with Kevin Wilson, ASCB's Director of Public Policy and Media Relations at kwilson@ascb.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erika Shugart', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Erika Shugart, PhD
CEO
The American Society for Cell Biology