

February 15, 2021

**Re:** Written testimony in support of the New York State Stem Cell Science (NYSTEM) program

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to express grave concerns about the proposed termination of the NYSTEM program in this year's executive budget proposal. I believe it to be a mistake that will disadvantage New York State in recruiting new scientific talent and severely limit the state effectiveness in finding new treatments and cures for diseases affecting its population.

I have been recruited from the University of California in San Francisco to take the direction in 2017 of the Columbia Stem Cell Initiative at Columbia University. Part of the attraction for me to come to New York was the NYSTEM program, which, despite being much smaller in funding than the California Institute for Regeneration Medicine (CIRM) program, has been instrumental in establishing New York State as a key player in stem cell research and biomedical applications through targeted investment in infrastructure, education and investigator-initiated research grant and clinical trials. However, much of those fundamental investments were made before I relocated to the state and there have been no additional funds awarded since I arrived to New York. There is a pending request for application (RFA) to which many of us responded, but it will not be funded if the Governor's proposal is enacted.

As we argued in front of the legislature when we advocated for the release of this new RFA, not supporting the NYSTEM program will undermine all the effort made since 2007 to develop New York State as a transformative hub for biomedical research with national and international visibility. This is particularly critical in the context of the recent renewal of CIRM in California with an even bigger budget, which will definitely drain talent, workforce, and industry away from the state if nothing is done.

In the Columbia Stem Cell Initiative, I am offering work to upward of 50 people in research, support and patient-facing clinical positions. In my laboratory, we are working on the mechanisms controlling blood production and regulating the function of the blood-forming stem cells in the context of disease development (leukemia) and aging. This is an essential research since leukemia is a life-threatening condition and the impairment of blood production in the elderly is what renders our senior citizens much more susceptible to infectious diseases like COVID-19. Over the years my laboratory has attracted over 15 million dollars in direct research support from governmental agencies and private foundations, and my goal was to leverage those investments with NYSTEM funding to find tomorrow's treatment for diseases that have been exacerbated by our current health crisis and have devastated entire communities in the state. If NYSTEM is terminated and the current RFA not funded, this will never happen.

I sincerely hope that you will reconsider terminating the NYSTEM program and instead re-invest into this flagship program that will raise the stature of the New York State as it pursues economic and public health recovery from the pandemic.

Sincerely yours, 

Emmanuelle Passegue, PhD  
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