

Outside Witness Testimony
Prepared by the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

Prepared for the Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

Regarding FY 2019 Appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs

April 30, 2018

The Friends of Veterans Affairs Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) is a diverse coalition representing national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA was founded 30 years ago to ensure that America's veterans receive high-quality health care through support of a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)-based research program. FOVA organizations work in concert with the *Independent Budget* veterans service organizations to advocate for continued, necessary funding for the research and health programs that serve the nation's veterans.

FOVA is grateful to the Subcommittee for its historic strong support for the Medical and Prosthetic Research program at the VA. The increased research funding provided in the fiscal year (FY) 2018 spending bill resulted in above-inflation funding levels for the research program for the first time since FY 2010.

For FY 2019, FOVA recommends \$823 million for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research budget. This recommendation is supported by nearly 80 FOVA member societies and represents an intent to continue the incredible progress of basic, translational, and clinical research discoveries leading to better clinical care and health outcomes for veterans.

A VA-based research program is critical for improving health care for veterans. Strong investments in the Medical and Prosthetics Research program lead to these improved outcomes by:

- **Investigating a Veteran-Centric Comprehensive Research Portfolio** – Research at the VA focuses on veteran-unique conditions in four main areas: biomedical, clinical science, health services, and rehabilitation. All research proposals must affect veterans' health.
- **Collaborating with Partners to Leverage Taxpayers' Investment** – The VA has established nationwide partnerships with the NIH and other federal research agencies, for-profit medical industry companies, nonprofit organizations, and academic affiliates to maximize and augment its research capabilities.
- **Supporting the Next Generation of Veterans' Health Researchers** – By offering mentored research opportunities, the VA attracts, develops, and retains talented postdoctoral researchers in clinical, translational, and basic science disciplines.
- **Recruiting and Retaining Clinicians to Care for Veterans** – Because the VA awards grants only to VA employees, the VA uses a dedicated funding source to attract and retain high-quality physicians and clinical investigators to the VA health care system.

- **Fostering Excellence in Veterans’ Health Research** – VA researchers have received three Nobel Prizes in Physiology or Medicine, seven Albert Lasker Medical Research Awards (“America’s Nobels”), and numerous other distinctions that drive innovations in VA health care.
- **Helping Veterans: Bench to Bedside** – Seventy percent of VA researchers are clinicians who also provide direct care to veterans and, as a result, have developed a cultural competency for the unique needs of veteran patients.

FOVA recommends funding of \$823 million for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program in FY 2019. Funding for VA research must be predictable and sustained to meet ongoing commitments while allowing for innovative scientific growth to address critical emerging needs.

	<u>FOVA FY 2019 Recommendation</u>	<u>President’s FY 2019 Request</u>
<i>FY 2018 Baseline</i>	\$722	\$640
<i>BRDPI (2.7%)</i>	\$19	\$5
<i>MVP Biorepository</i>	\$8	\$8
<i>SECVA Priorities</i>	\$47	\$47
<i>VA/DOE Program</i>	\$27	\$27
Total	\$823	\$727
<i>(\$ in millions)</i>		

This recommendation mirrors the priority areas outlined in the President’s budget request for FY 2019, and include four major justifications.

Sustaining Investments in Veteran Research—The Toll of Biomedical Inflation

Despite numerous successes in research and innovation, appropriated funding for VA research and development has lagged behind biomedical research inflation since FY 2010, resulting in stagnant VA purchasing power. The Biomedical Research and Development Price Index (BRDPI), as projected by the Department of Commerce and the National Institutes of Health, estimates that the Medical and Prosthetic Research appropriation should be increased in FY 2019 by 2.7% over the FY 2018 baseline—about \$19 million—for VA research simply to maintain current research levels.

Addressing Growing Health Care Needs While Supporting Long-Term Investments

In line with the President’s FY 2019 budget request, FOVA believes that Congress should appropriate an additional \$47 million in FY 2019 for expanded research on both emerging and chronic conditions, as well as for groundbreaking research programs at the forefront of personalized medicine.

For example, additional funding will help the VA support its new research priority areas, including:

- Post-deployment mental health concerns, such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide
- New engineering and technological methods to improve the lives of veterans with prosthetic systems or to activate paralyzed nerves, muscles, and limbs
- Chronic pain abatement through alternatives to opioids such as new, safer medications and nonprescription strategies

In addition, FOVA believes that other critically underfunded areas should be maintained to expand research with the potential to affect the entire, diverse veteran's community, including:

- The gender-specific health care needs of the VA's growing population of women veterans
- Studies dedicated to understanding chronic multisymptom illnesses among Gulf War veterans and the long-term health effects of exposures to potentially hazardous substances
- Innovative health services strategies, such as telehealth and self-directed care, that lead to accessible, high-quality, cost-effective care for all veterans

The Million Veteran Program

The VA research program is uniquely positioned to advance genomic medicine through the Million Veteran Program (MVP), an effort that seeks to collect biological samples and general health information from 1 million veterans by 2021. To date, more than 650,000 veterans have enrolled in MVP. FOVA supports a continued commitment of at least \$65 million to further develop this transformative and innovative program, and an additional \$8 million to build a new biorepository to store the invaluable biological samples. Although MVP is currently the world's largest genomic database connected to one health care system, and when completed will offer tremendous potential to study and enhance the health of all veterans, funding for the program should not detract from other critical VA research priorities.

VA and Department of Energy Partnership

For FY 2019, FOVA supports the Administration's request for \$27 million to support the VA's collaboration with the Department of Energy (DOE) to enhance VA research with the DOE's computing capabilities and biomedical imaging expertise. This partnership would use both DOE's artificial intelligence for a computational approach to traumatic brain injury research and diagnoses, as well as its high-performance computing capabilities to more quickly analyze MVP data. This powerful collaboration would lead to more streamlined and efficient data analysis, translating into faster health care results for veteran patients.

Both FOVA and the *Independent Budget* veterans service organizations strongly believe that all decisions regarding the selection of individual research projects and their funding should be made through the VA peer-review process. Therefore, funding for any potential congressionally mandated VA research is not included in FOVA's recommendation. FOVA believes that any such directed research, if so desired by Congress, warrants a separate appropriation.

FOVA also recommends specific funding for VA research facilities improvements. State-of-the-art research requires an investment not only in state-of-the-art technology and equipment, but also in facilities. For decades, VA construction and maintenance appropriations have failed to provide the resources the VA needs to replace, maintain, or upgrade its aging research facilities.

The impact of this funding shortage was observed in a congressionally mandated report that found a clear need for research infrastructure improvements systemwide. Consequently, many VA facilities have run out of adequate research space, or existing space is unable to meet modern standards. FOVA believes that designating funds for specific VA research facilities is the only way to bring VA research up to standard.

For capital infrastructure, renovations, and maintenance in FY 2019, FOVA recommends at least \$50 million for up to five major construction projects in VA research facilities and \$175 million in nonrecurring maintenance and minor construction funding to address deficiencies identified in the congressionally requested report on the status of VA research facilities (H.R. Rep. No. 109-95, H.R. Rep. No. 111-559). FOVA encourages Congress to request information about the updated report from the VA to guide its funding decisions. A copy of the VA's 2012 report is available at aamc.org/varpt.

FOVA's members acknowledge the challenges facing appropriators in this time of increasing demands and fiscal challenges. We greatly appreciate the strong commitment the committee has shown to the VA research program in the recent past. Research at the VA has been an integral component of veteran patient care for over 90 years, and the VA must keep up with advancing technology to be able to provide the best care possible to veterans.

Therefore, FOVA recognizes the value of a continued strong commitment to VA Medical and Prosthetic Research and recommends \$823 million for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program for FY 2019.

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