

FOVA

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

A coalition of national organizations committed to quality care for America's veterans

Executive Committee

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September 19, 2008

The Honorable Robert C. Byrd
Chair
Senate Appropriations Committee
The Capitol, S-131
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Byrd:

On behalf of the 97 organizations from the national biomedical research, science, academic, and patient advocacy communities that constitute the *Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research* (FOVA), we write to urge conferees on the Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 Medical and Prosthetic Research program appropriation, within the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2009, to approve a funding level for the research program that is commensurate with the nation's priorities in caring for veterans wounded by war. We are concerned that that is not the case today.

As you well know, the chambers' designees are now conferencing in the hopes of settling differences between House and Senate levels in funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) appropriation. A key VA program reflecting these differences is one in which we have a vital interest: VA's biomedical research programs. Earlier this year, FOVA recommended that Congress provide VA with \$555 million for research programs, and \$45 million in additional funds to improve research infrastructure. The House included \$500 million for the program in its bill, while the Senate proposed \$526.8 million. Neither chamber included defined amounts for VA research infrastructure. The differences in the two measures must be resolved before the overarching bill can be enacted into law.

We believe funding for VA research must be steady, predictable, and sustainable to meet VA's ongoing commitments while permitting additional innovative scientific growth to address critical emerging needs. VA research will require approximately \$20 million simply to account for uncontrollable inflation. An additional \$55 million in FY 2009 is essential to support new research initiatives (some actually ordered by Congress) and for raising the existing funding limit on VA merit review awards. Thus, in consideration of these realities, FOVA recommended \$555 million for FY 2009 to both the administration and Congress, an increase of \$75 million over the FY 2008 appropriated level. We further defend that request as follows:

- **The nature of research and inflation:** VA research awards are typically three to five years in length. However, scientific advancement can entail many years of inquiry; thus, it requires steady, sustainable funding. To maintain the current level of VA research activity, research inflation is estimated at approximately \$20 million in each of the next three years (3.5 percent for FY 2009 through FY 2011). Unfunded inflation erodes VA's ability to award new proposals, and forces VA to reduce or eliminate existing awards.

Critical emerging needs: Additional funding also is needed to expand research on strategies for treating the devastating injuries being suffered by wounded and sick war veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Improvements in prosthetics and rehabilitation are urgently needed, as well as better treatments for women veterans' injuries (unprecedented in our military history), poly-trauma, amputation, traumatic brain injury (TBI), burns, and the myriad mental health challenges confronting this latest generation of war veterans, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). VA research paves the way to so many of those treatments.

- **Genomic Medicine:** VA is the largest integrated health-care system in the world with a renowned and unsurpassed electronic health record and an extensive, distributed enrolled veteran population. By taking advantage of these resources, VA is in a unique position to lead new research efforts in genomic medicine, and in turn, elevate the standard of care throughout the nation and provide potentially stunning new approaches to care, cure and prevention. VA combines these attributes and abilities with high ethical standards and standardization that could lead to remarkable innovations in safer, more accurate, and personalized treatment and prevention techniques. However, VA can only take advantage of these exciting developments if you provide the resources to do so.
- **VA Merit-Review Award Caps:** Since 2005, constrained funding in VA research growth has forced the VA research program to limit many VA merit-review awards to not more than \$125,000 annually. This imposed limitation has been a tradeoff that VA leadership made to continue funding the same number of awards VA historically supported. We believe funding should be sufficient to support a higher limit on merit review awards to maximize productivity, foster further recruitment, and speed translation of research from bench to bedside.

A state-of-the-art environment for research promotes excellence in teaching and patient care—two important and historic VA missions—as well as the conduct of sophisticated scientific work. The state of the physical infrastructure available to VA researchers also helps VA recruit and retain the best and brightest clinical scientists to care for veterans, teach in graduate medical education and other fields, and conduct research. However, over the past decade only \$50 million *en toto* was spent on VA research construction and renovation. These limited funds were spent at only 24 of VA's 97 major research sites. To ensure that funding meets both immediate and long-term needs, FOVA recommended to Congress an annual appropriation of \$45 million in the VA's minor construction account, dedicated solely to renovating research facilities.

Mr. Chairman, we hope you will consider our views in resolving VA's research funding compromise for next year. We believe that if you will provide them, these dollars will be well spent in search of answers to the multitude of perplexing questions related to human health, and in particular to the health of our nation's veterans. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

FOVA Executive Committee

Cc: Speaker of the House
Majority Leader of the Senate
House Minority Leader
Senate Minority Leader