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 2020 Appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs
May 1, 2019

The Friends of Veterans Affairs Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) is a diverse coalition representing nearly 90 national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA was founded more than 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 years' (FY) 2018 and 2019 spending bills resulted in above-inflation funding levels for the research program for the first time since FY 2010.

For FY 2020, FOVA recommends $840 million for VA's Medical and Prosthetic Research program. This recommendation is supported by nearly 90 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 Prosthetic Research program lead to these improved outcomes by:

- 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 high-quality physicians and clinical investigators to the VA health care system and retain them.
- 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.
- 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
    - Most 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.

Funding for VA research must be predictable and sustained to meet ongoing commitments while allowing for innovative scientific growth to address critical emerging needs in the veteran community.

Addressing Growing Health Care Needs While Supporting Long-Term Investments

In line with past budget requests and report language, FOVA believes that Congress should appropriate additional funding in FY 2020 for expanded research on both emerging and chronic conditions, as well as for groundbreaking research programs at the forefront of personalized medicine.

For example, the VA is uniquely positioned to advance genomic medicine through the Million Veteran Program (MVP):

- It 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.
- This effort seeks to collect biological samples and general health information from one million veterans by 2021. To date, more than 750,000 veterans have enrolled in MVP.
- Although MVP has tremendous translational and clinical potential, funding for the program should not detract from other critical VA research priorities.

Additional funding will help the VA expand research priority areas, including:

- Postdeployment 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.

FOVA believes that other critically underfunded areas should be maintained to expand research in areas affecting 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.

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 2020 by 2.8% over the FY 2019 baseline - about $22 million - for VA research simply to maintain current research levels. FOVA recommends meaningful growth above inflation for FY 2020 in order to build on momentum of recent years and to allow VA to support promising research proposals in all disciplines to better the health of all veterans.

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 the *Independent Budget* or FOVA recommendations. FOVA believes that any such directed research, if so desired by Congress, warrants a separate appropriation.

Improving Research by Supporting Laboratory Infrastructure

In addition to research funding, FOVA 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. For capital infrastructure, renovations, and maintenance, 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.

The impact of this funding shortage was observed in a congressionally mandated report (H.R. Rep. No. 109-95, H.R. Rep. No. 111-559) published in 2012 that found a clear need for research infrastructure improvements systemwide. VA recently completed Phase II of the assessment, and preliminary findings show that not all projects identified in the 2012 report have received funding, few facilities have seen significant improvement, and that renovations can lead to significant benefits, including increased collaborations and potential to increase research funding.

The preliminary Phase II report indicates that the process for applying and receiving funding for construction projects has focused more on clinical spaces, and is transitioning to reside under the purview of the Veterans Health Administration through individual VISNs. FOVA believes that designating funds for specific VA research facilities is the only way to bring VA research up to standard. FOVA encourages Congress to request information about the Phase II report from the VA to guide its funding decisions. A copy of the VA's 2012 report is available at aamc.org/varpt.

While the physical infrastructure is key to supporting high-quality research, modern research is data intensive, requiring extensive computing power and quickly producing vast amounts of data. FOVA recognizes that the information technology (IT) infrastructure within the VA research program is not sufficient to support the needs of its researchers and encourages VA's Office of IT to prioritize funding for IT infrastructure improvements for research.

FOVA's members acknowledge the challenges facing appropriators in this time of increasing demands and fiscal challenges. We greatly appreciate the strong commitment the subcommittee 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 $840 million for the VA research program for FY 2020.

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