Statement for the Record Submitted by

The Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

to the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on “Foundation of Care: Examining Research at the Department of Veterans Affairs”

November 1, 2023

The Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) respectfully submit this statement in support of continued strong funding for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program at the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). 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 over 30 years to ensure that America’s veterans receive high-quality health care through support of a 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 urges Congress to continue reliable and robust growth in the VA research program and take XYZ under consideration. For FY24, FOVA recommended:

* $980 million for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program;
* At least $100 million for Major and Minor Construction in VA research facilities; and
* At least $22 million for VA research in the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) budget.

This recommendation will deeply impact the incredible progress of basic, translational, and clinical research discoveries leading to better care and health outcomes for veterans.

FOVA’s FY 2024 appropriation recommendation of $980 million for VA research would enhance the investment in veteran-centric research on a trajectory of meaningful growth across established and emerging areas of medical research. Some examples include:

* The Precision Oncology Program and Million Veterans Program, integral components of the Cancer Moonshot initiatives, are at the forefront of advancing precision medicine. Their primary objectives include the customization of therapeutic approaches for veterans and the expansion of the world's most extensive genetic database.
* Leveraging state-of-the-art artificial intelligence techniques, the VA National Artificial Intelligence Institute and VINCI Data Management, housing a vast repository of more than 900 million records, have harnessed the power of AI to enhance the analysis of veterans' health records.
* The Post Deployment Cardiopulmonary Evaluation Network (PDCEN), a clinical research initiative funded by Congress, aimed at studying respiratory issues in Veterans with deployment-related concerns across the nation. The research conducted at these sites seeks to understand the connection between toxic exposures and respiratory diseases, provide guidance to healthcare providers, and offer valuable insights to enhance the well-being of Veterans. Recent analysis of surveys completed by Veterans who underwent PDCEN

evaluations has shown a positive impact, leading to improved ratings of VA healthcare on various health-related measures.

However, we must also express concern regarding the expansion of veterans' community choice programs without supporting data that ensures veterans research is not hindered. Current efforts in Congress are accelerating the outsourcing of veterans’ healthcare to the private sector. For example, S.1315 proposes a pilot access program that could undermine the core integrated healthcare model on which VHA is based. The bill's provisions can be detrimental to veterans due to:

* Diversion of funding to the private sector, leading to reductions to VHA staff, program cutbacks, and facility closures.
* Dismantles the VHA's integrated healthcare model, transitioning it from a primary provider of healthcare to a payer for private sector care.
* Despite claims of offering more choice, the bill diminishes healthcare options for veterans, particularly service-connected veterans who rely on tailored VHA care.
* Lack of transparency in the private sector, such as wait times, care quality, and provider training, hinders well-informed healthcare decisions for policymakers and patients.
* The bill jeopardizes the VHA's ability to collect data, conduct research, and train healthcare professionals, potentially impacting veterans' healthcare innovations and its role as an emergency backup resource.

It is critical to ensure that these government-initiated programs stay on a path towards new discoveries, especially as VA medical research continues to play a significant component to our dedication to deliver the highest standard of healthcare to our veterans. We strongly encourage the committee to appropriate a minimum of $980 million in funding for VA medical research in the fiscal year 2024. We express our gratitude for your thoughtful consideration of our nation’s veterans.