

**Statement for the Record Submitted by the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research to the Senate Appropriations Committee for the hearing titled, “Biomedical Research: Keeping America’s Edge in Innovation.”**

**April 30, 2025**

The Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record for the Senate Appropriations Committee’s April 30, 2025, hearing, “Biomedical Research: Keeping America’s Edge in Innovation.” FOVA thanks the Committee for its longstanding bipartisan leadership in recognizing investment in biomedical research as an urgent national priority, and we applaud the hearing’s focus on maintaining the nation’s leadership role in biomedical research and highlighting the importance of federal investments in biomedical research across federal agencies and programs, including at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

FOVA is a diverse coalition representing nearly 80 national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA was founded over 35 years ago 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.

The VA Office of Research and Development and its dedicated staff play a key role in advancing the health and care of veterans and is uniquely positioned to continue to lead in delivering transformational outcomes for those who have served. As part of the largest integrated health care system in the United States, VA Research and Development has the access needed to study the causes and most effective treatments of conditions commonly afflicting our servicemembers and veterans. Sustained and predictable funding for VA’s Medical and Prosthetic Research program saves veterans’ lives. Delays and lack of robust funding disrupts research projects that are vital to veterans’ health, including studies on brain health, cancer treatments, opioid addiction, prosthetics, suicide prevention, and toxic exposures.

VA research seeks to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of our nation’s veterans and endeavors to extend life expectancy for all Americans through VA discoveries. Achieving a remarkable milestone, in November 2023, the VA enrolled its one millionth veteran into the precision medicine-focused Million Veteran Program (MVP), which looks at how genes, lifestyle, military experiences, and exposures affect health and wellness in veterans. Additionally, in 2024, VA research projects included studies addressing military environmental exposures; suicide prevention and created a clinical trial database to be used for future systematic reviews or clinical practice guidelines; improving lung cancer screening by completing more than 680,000 screenings for over 350,000 veterans since 2021; a neuro-prosthetic system to provide sensory feedback from a prosthetic hand; and continuing research on pain and opioid use, creating an injectable gel that shows potential treatment for degenerative disc disease.

VA Research and Development also funded clinical trials for experimental treatments for bone regeneration and spinal cord injuries as well as precision medicine for several cancer types. Prosthetic research studies included those that sought to improve lower limbs, foot, and ankle prosthetics and to better understand the unique challenges faced by women using prosthetics. These novel treatments and diagnostics do not just benefit our country's veterans, they benefit all Americans who suffer from complex disease processes.

It is imperative that Congress demonstrates a continued commitment to VA research and encourages a health care system for our nation's veterans that is as innovative and effective as they are.

FOVA urges Congress to continue reliable and robust growth in the VA research program without recessions. For FY 2026, FOVA recommends for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

- \$1.2 billion for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program;
- At least \$100 million for Major and Minor Construction in VA research facilities; and
- At least \$25 million for VA research in the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) budget.

This recommendation reflects an intent to continue the incredible progress of basic, translational, and clinical research discoveries leading to better care and health outcomes for veterans. Outlined below is additional detail on specific ways that reliable, robust investment in VA's research program improves veteran health and allows the U.S. to maintain its leadership role in biomedical innovation.

### **Sustaining Investments in Veteran Research**

FOVA believes an investment of \$1.2 billion for the VA research program is necessary to achieve a sustained trajectory of meaningful growth above biomedical research and development price inflation, allowing for new and continuing efforts to deliver cutting-edge diagnostics, treatments, cures, and clinical trials access, while renewing support for groundbreaking programs including MVP and research on chronic and emerging needs of our nation's veterans. FOVA also supports increased investments to support the strained research information technology (IT) capacity, to be used for software-as-a-service and cloud computing to enhance the collection and use of big data. Sustained and predictable funding growth for VA research is imperative to help ensure the best return on investment in improving the health of veterans and all Americans. VA research has a proven track record of finding new discoveries despite having a fractional budget compared to other federal research budgets.

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 and urges Congress to ensure that VA continues to be able to expend that funding on the full scope of promising, meritorious research proposals without disruption, delay, or other interference.

## **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, appropriations for construction, maintenance, and IT have not provided the resources VA needs to replace, maintain, or upgrade its aging research and IT infrastructure to support the research program. FOVA believes designating funds specifically for research facilities is the only way to make significant improvements. For capital infrastructure, renovations, and maintenance, FOVA recommends at least \$100 million for VA research facilities to address the most pressing repairs as found in VA reports.

VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) is responsible for IT development and maintenance for programs including clinical, health management, benefits, security, and research. To advance and modernize the VA research program, OIT funding must be designated specifically for research use on a yearly basis. For FY 2026, FOVA recommends at least \$25 million of the OIT budget to be assigned for VA research to allow the purchase and maintenance of IT infrastructure, increased data storage and access capabilities, enhanced data security, improved interoperability with affiliated partners, and transition to more robust and functional cloud computing platforms. We believe this infrastructure investment is critical to sustaining a modern and competitive research program focused on veteran-centric conditions, which allows for swift translation of research findings to improved patient care.

## **A VA-Based Research Program is Critical for Improving Health Care for Veterans**

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

Strong investments in the Medical and Prosthetic Research program lead to improved health outcomes by:

- Recruiting and retaining clinicians to care for veterans through the unique intramural program, in which VA awards grants only to VA employees through a dedicated funding source to attract high-quality physicians and clinical investigators.
- Investigating a veteran-centric research portfolio in biomedical, clinical science, health services, and rehabilitation. All research proposals must affect veterans' health.
- Helping veterans from bench to bedside, with more than 60% of VA researchers also providing direct clinical care to veterans and who have developed a cultural competency for the unique needs of veteran patients.
- Collaborating with partners to leverage taxpayers' investment through partnerships with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other federal research agencies, private 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 to develop and retain talented postdoctoral researchers in clinical, translational, and basic science disciplines.
- Fostering excellence in veterans' health research as evidenced by VA researchers having 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.

### **Addressing Growing Health Care Needs While Supporting Long-Term Investments**

Sustained and predictable funding growth for VA research is imperative to help ensure the best return on investment in improving the health of veterans and all Americans. FOVA's FY 2026 recommendation of \$1.2 billion for VA research would enhance the investment in veteran-centric research on a trajectory of meaningful growth above inflation across established and emerging areas of medical research. Increased funding for the VA research program will also support researchers as they recover from slowed research progress during the pandemic and allow for additional investments to support the strained IT capacity through computational science purchases to enhance the collection and use of big data.

FOVA's members acknowledge the competing priorities in the VA spending bill and appreciate the commitment Congress has shown to the VA research program. Research at the VA has been an integral component of veteran patient care for 100 years, and the VA must keep up with advancing technology to be able to provide the best care possible to veterans informed by cutting-edge medical research.

To summarize, FOVA recognizes the value of a continued strong commitment to VA Medical and Prosthetic Research and for FY 2026 recommends: \$1.2 billion for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program; at least \$100 million for Major and Minor Construction in VA research facilities; and at least \$25 million for VA research in the OIT budget.