

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) FY26 Budget Report Language

April 8, 2025

As Congress considers the Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), we urge robust support for VA's research enterprise, which for the past 100 years has been essential to improving veterans' health and has played a critical role towards American discovery. We respectfully request the inclusion of the following language in the final appropriations report to safeguard and strengthen VA research:

1. Exempting Research Positions from Hiring Freezes

The progress of clinical research relies on a stable and well-supported workforce. We urge Congress to direct VA to exempt all research positions from any department-wide hiring freezes. The VA research enterprise cannot afford delays in recruiting and retaining top talent, which jeopardizes critical studies that directly benefit veterans.

2. Addressing Privacy and Confidentiality in Psychological Care

The return-to-work process for VA psychologists and therapists has exposed gaps in infrastructure, particularly concerning privacy and confidentiality. VA must ensure full compliance with HIPAA standards by providing appropriate physical and digital spaces for mental health professionals to conduct therapy sessions securely. We call on Congress to direct VA to prioritize investments in infrastructure that uphold patient confidentiality while enabling providers to deliver uninterrupted, high-quality care.

3. Preserving Research Integrity

The current climate of legislative and budgetary uncertainty threatens the continuity of research vital to veterans' healthcare. Interruptions in funding and administrative delays stall clinical trials, risk setbacks in scientific advancements, and diminish VA's ability to recruit top-tier researchers. Congress must consider reaffirming its commitment to insulating VA research from political disruption by ensuring predictable and sustained investment.

4. The Transformative Impact of VA Research on Veterans

VA research is not just about healthcare advancement—it is about changing American lives. For over a century, groundbreaking VA discoveries have transformed lives, from the most recent discovery of the GLP-1 hormone paving the way for Ozempic all the way back to developing the first pacemaker and successful organ transplants. These innovations haven't just saved lives – they've vastly improved the health and well-being of millions of Veterans and Americans nationwide.

Veterans like Chris Blomgren exemplify how groundbreaking studies can provide hope and healing where traditional treatments have fallen short. A former Army nurse and firefighter, Chris struggled with PTSD for years, cycling through medications and therapies with little success. It

wasn't until he participated in a VA research study on Stellate Ganglion Block (SGB) that he finally found relief.

Initially, Chris felt no change. But within weeks, his mood lifted, and he began regaining control of his life. Today, he remains on a minimal dose of medication while closely monitoring his mental health with VA follow-ups. His story underscores a fundamental truth: research isn't just about discovery—it's about ensuring veterans have access to the most effective treatments available.

5. Strengthening VA's Ability to Recruit Research Professionals

VA must remain competitive in attracting top-tier researchers, scientists, and clinicians. We urge Congress to support initiatives that:

- Streamline the hiring process for research personnel.
- Offer competitive incentives to attract leading experts in veteran-specific medical research.
- Establish stronger career pipelines to retain skilled professionals within VA's research infrastructure.

6. Ensuring Continuity in Clinical Trials and Treatment Access

Clinical trials are critical to discovering new treatments for conditions that disproportionately affect veterans. Disruptions in these trials—whether from funding gaps, administrative delays, or external pressures—can have life-threatening consequences. We have significant concerns about veterans being removed from life-saving medications due to trial interruptions, jeopardizing their health and well-being.

We urge Congress to direct VA to establish safeguards that prevent abrupt discontinuation of medications for veterans enrolled in research studies. Continuity of care must be a top priority, and clear protocols should be implemented to ensure veterans do not experience harmful treatment interruptions.

VA research is a national asset that has transformed the lives of countless veterans. Congress must act decisively to protect and enhance this research ecosystem. By exempting research positions from hiring freezes, strengthening mental health privacy protections, ensuring continuity in clinical trials, and amplifying veteran voices, we can uphold VA's mission of providing world-class care to those who have served. We urge Congress to include these provisions in the FY26 appropriations bill and safeguard the future of VA research for the veterans who depend on it.