

Statement for the Record Submitted by
the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research
to the
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2023"
210 House Visitors Center and Virtual
April 28, 2022

The Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) respectfully submits this statement in support of continued strong funding for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program at the Department of Veterans 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 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.

FOVA urges Congress to continue reliable and robust growth in the VA research program without recessions. For FY 2023, FOVA recommends for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

- \$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 reflects an intent to continue the incredible progress of basic, translational, and clinical research discoveries leading to better care and health outcomes for veterans.

Sustaining Investments in Veteran Research

FOVA believes an investment of \$980 million 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 efforts to address COVID-19, health disparities, and clinical trials access, while renewing support for groundbreaking programs like the Million Veteran Program (MVP) and research on chronic and emerging needs of our nation's veterans. This recommendation also includes 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.

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, 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, 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.

[A 2012 congressionally mandated report](#) found a clear need for systematic infrastructure improvements for VA research laboratories. VA completed [a Phase II assessment](#) in 2020 of fewer than one-third of sites inspected in Phase I, and provided [a status update](#) to House and Senate appropriators. The Phase II findings show that while certain projects have received funding, significant deficiencies remain. Over \$200 million was estimated to correct all deficiencies identified in the Phase II report, including \$99.5 million in Priority 1 deficiencies, representing immediate needs such as life safety hazard corrections. 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.

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 2023, FOVA recommends at least \$22 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 commitments 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.

- Collaborating with partners to leverage taxpayers' investment through 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 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.
- 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.

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 2023 recommendation of \$980 million 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.

One example of how the VA research program is uniquely positioned to advance genomic medicine is through the MVP, which seeks to collect biological samples and general health information from one million veterans. It is currently the world's largest genomic database connected to one health care system with nearly 850,000 enrollees; in fact, MVP harnessed the power of its volunteer network to learn more about veterans' experiences with COVID-19, including impacts to physical and mental health and to support VA's research efforts to better respond to COVID-19 and its lasting symptoms. A portion of the \$980 million recommendation will continue to support this important program.

Funding growth in the research program also will help the VA expand its research priority areas to support the entire, diverse veteran's community, including: the gender-specific health care needs of the VA's growing population of women veterans; post-deployment 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; and innovative health services strategies, such as telehealth and self-directed care, that lead to accessible, high-quality, cost-effective care for all veterans.

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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 over 90 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 2023 recommends: \$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 OIT budget.