

FOVA

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

October 22, 2012

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The Honorable Ann Marie Buerkle
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Health
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
338 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madame Chairwoman:

The Executive Committee and members of the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) express our deep appreciation to you for your leadership in gaining public release of a key report detailing the status and unmet needs of research infrastructure in the Department of Veterans Affairs. We had been frustrated for years by VA's failure to release that report, all the while knowing full well from our contacts that those needs were growing more acute. As the leader of the Committee with full jurisdiction over VA health care, however, your insistence and perseverance in obtaining the report proved conclusive.

As you know, the report shows that 74 VA research laboratories are rife with needs, at an estimated cost of \$774 million to address. Despite spending some \$270 million in recent years to address the most urgent deficiencies identified in the report, including clear life-safety dangers for their research staffs, other VA employees, and veterans and others who participate as research subjects or who visit these laboratories as a part of their work, much remains to be done.

The Executive Committee plans to advocate with new energy that Congress and the Administration should begin to address these crucial matters in the Fiscal Year 2014 budget and appropriations that support construction and facility maintenance and repair. Now that we have the confirming data our job will be made easier. We thank you for this opportunity.

Sincerely,

THE FOVA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Enclosure: VA Research Infrastructure Report summary

FOVA was founded over 20 years ago to ensure that America's veterans receive high-quality health care. Today, FOVA is a diverse coalition representing national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA works in concert with the *Independent Budget* veterans service organizations.

**Summary: Final Report of the VA Research Infrastructure Program
Veterans Health Administration, Office of Research and Development
July 2012**

At the request of Congress, the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Office of Research and Development (ORD) performed an in-depth survey and analysis of the physical condition of VA's aging research infrastructure including containment facilities and animal research facilities (vivaria), as well as the supporting systems (plumbing, heating, ventilation, HVAC systems, electrical, and fire protection) for: 1) physical deficiencies, (2) capacity (to include projected program growth), and (3) suitability of the space to conduct research. All stations with a minimum of \$500,000 in current year VA research funding and with on site biomedical research were assessed. A total of 74 VA sites representing all 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) were assessed beginning with the Pilot Phase in June 2006 and progressing through December 2010.

The average VA building housing research laboratories and/or vivaria is over 50 years old. Research buildings date back as far as 1897, with many being constructed in the early 20th century. Most of these buildings were not designed for research purposes or to provide a standard environment to support research laboratories or animals. The laboratories in many of the buildings have been retrofitted from former patient rooms, dormitories, or other structures on hospital grounds. However, recent funding for new construction has provided for buildings specifically designed for research. Having space designed specifically to meet the needs of research is critical in ensuring VA is able to produce the best and most effective research for veterans.

The following grading criteria were used in review of materials and systems within the research infrastructure: A = new or like new condition or "excellent"; B = above average condition or "very good"; C = average or workable condition or "average"; D = poor condition; F = critical condition or "failing". Only items graded "D" or "F" were identified as deficiencies.

Each deficiency was assigned a priority based on the following criteria: Priority 1: Immediate needs (within 0-1 year); Priority 2: Critical but not immediate (within 1-2 years); Priority 3: Necessary, but not critical (within 3-5 years); Priority 4: Recommended (within 6-10 years); Priority 5: Code or program enhancements (10 years or more).

Research infrastructure assessments and reports have been completed for all research sites surveyed, encompassing 171 buildings at 74 VA campuses covering over 1.7 million square feet of laboratory space including over 4,000 square feet of Biosafety Level (BSL)-3 laboratory space, 567,291 square feet of vivaria space, and 450,505 square feet of administrative/clinical research offices.

The sites surveyed range from small (under 1,000 square feet of laboratory and animal research space) to very large (nearly 90,000 square feet of laboratory and animal research space). The reports indicate that there is a clear need for research infrastructure improvements throughout the system, including many Priority 1 deficiencies that are needed to return to normal operation, stop accelerated deterioration, replace items that are at or beyond their useful life expectancy, and/or correct life safety hazards.

<u>Discipline</u>	<u>Cost to Correct</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Architectural	\$ 232,986,199	30%
Plumbing	\$ 70,295,216	09%
HVAC	\$ 333,927,730	43%
Electrical	\$ 119,172,306	16%
Fire Protection	\$ 17,582,024	02%
Total	\$ 773,963,475	100%

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<u>Priority</u>	<u>Cost to Correct</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Priority 1	\$ 301,768,836	39%
Priority 2	\$ 243,606,249	32%
Priority 3	\$ 141,637,708	18%
Priority 4	\$ 40,127,547	05%
Priority 5	\$ 46,823,135	06%
Total	\$ 773,963,475	100%

While documenting the nearly \$774 million in deficiencies, a pattern of recurring trends became apparent at sites across the nation. These common deficiencies relate to architectural details, as well as the support systems serving research space.

A number of programmatic trends emerged as well. Nearly all the sites surveyed lack central core space for shared equipment and for storage of supplies and other necessary items, resulting in overcrowding within laboratories. There also is a growing need for dedicated space in which to conduct clinical research.

At the same time, the Infrastructure Program staff members participating in the assessments noted some very positive programmatic trends. At nearly every site surveyed, VA medical center leadership expressed their support of the local research program and their interest not only in sustaining the program, but also in promoting its continued growth. With this support comes an understanding that, in order to flourish, the research infrastructure must be well maintained and enhanced whenever possible.

Remedial Actions

During the course of the program, the VHA Office of Capital Asset Management & Support (OCAMS) has provided substantial funds for remediation of research facility deficiencies and/or for construction of new research facilities. To upgrade the VA research physical infrastructure, the OCAMS provided \$271,504,560 for NRM and Minor Construction projects from FY 2007-2011.

In addition, major construction projects in Denver, Las Vegas, New Orleans, Omaha, Orlando, and Pittsburgh will add 320,000 square feet of research space. To upgrade VA research equipment, ORD has expended over \$99 million to purchase equipment for laboratories, common resource rooms, and research animal facilities, and to assist stations with activation funding (following construction or large renovation projects) from FY 2007 through FY 2011. Additionally, in July 2011, ORD provided \$1.1 million to field sites to assist in the remediation of outstanding life safety hazards. An additional \$1.1 million was available for this remediation, but the support was declined by several stations due to their inability to obligate the funds by the end of FY 2011. ORD had hoped to offer this support again in early FY 2012 but was unable to due to funding constraints.

Future Plans

While funding for minor construction and non-recurring maintenance projects affecting research infrastructure has increased dramatically in the past few years, much remains to be done. ORD is an active participant in the Strategic Capital Investment Planning (SCIP) process and hopes to obtain funding for additional worthy research infrastructure improvements as the program moves forward. VA medical centers will also be able to request NRM funding for projects under \$1 million through a separate NRM process. With the data obtained through the Research Infrastructure Program, ORD is in a position to identify additional sites for improvements using a peer review process.

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In August 2011, ORD convened a group of field and Central Office staff to identify specific criteria to be used in the peer review process. Participants included stake holders from four VA medical centers with active research programs, as well as Research Infrastructure Program staff, and representatives of both the Office of Construction and Facilities Management and the VHA Office of Strategic Planning and Analysis. Review criteria as well as the framework for an overall project management plan were developed.

Conclusions

The physical assessments of 74 VA research sites resulted in detailed data on architectural and systems deficiencies, the estimated cost to remediate those deficiencies, and the cost to replace the buildings housing the research space. Overall, VA research space is in need of substantial corrections to bring the space to what would be considered industry standard.

The past two years have resulted in a substantial increase in funding to correct VA research infrastructure deficiencies, many of which were identified during the Research Infrastructure Program assessments. When compared to the nearly \$774 million in identified deficiencies, the corrections and new construction funded in FY 2010-2011 constitute only about 27% of those needed.

The findings of this report are in line with the 1996 VHA Research Realignment Advisory Committee report which found “. . . the research infrastructure will need continuing attention in order to maintain the capability and capacity for high quality research.”