

FOVA

Friends of VA Medical Care and
Health Research

A coalition of national organizations
committed to quality care for
America's veterans

Executive Committee

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STATEMENT OF

THE FRIENDS OF VA MEDICAL CARE AND HEALTH RESEARCH (FOVA)

ON

THE FISCAL YEAR 2011 APPROPRIATIONS

FOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS MEDICAL AND PROSTHETIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

BEFORE

THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION, VETERANS AFFAIRS AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

PRESENTED BY

Dona Upson, MD

March 23, 2010

Mr. Chairman, my name is Dona Upson MD and I am testifying on behalf of FOVA – the Friends of VA Health Care and Medical Research – a coalition of over 80 veteran’s service, voluntary health and medical professional organizations that support funding for veteran’s health programs. We are especially committed to ensuring a strong VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program. FOVA recommends that the Subcommittee provide \$1 billion for the VA medical and prosthetic research program in fiscal year 2011.

Our request is structured somewhat differently than previous years. In the past we have requested funding for the VA research program and a separate request for upgrading VA lab spaces in the minor construction budget. This year we are combining the recommendations to highlight the need to view the research program and its infrastructure, as one complete entity – not two separate unrelated budget lines.

Unfortunately, for too long, policy makers have viewed the research program and its infrastructure as two unrelated accounts. The good news is that this Subcommittee and its Senate counterpart have been generous in providing additional funds for the VA research program. We are grateful for the resources and they are being well used. The bad news is that funds available to maintain the VA lab infrastructure are woefully insufficient and are threatening the ability of the VA research program to conduct state-of-the-art research.

State-of-the-art research requires state-of-the-art technology, equipment, and facilities in addition to highly qualified and committed scientists. Modern research cannot be conducted in facilities that more closely resemble high school science labs than university-class spaces. In recent years, funding for the VA Minor Construction Program has failed to provide the resources needed to maintain, upgrade, and replace aging research facilities. In addition to impeding medical discovery, poor research infrastructure undermines the ability of the VA to recruit and retain the clinical investigators who would normally be drawn to the VA system for its unique research opportunities. FOVA recommends Congress provide at least \$300 million for VA laboratory renovations in the FY11 VA minor Construction budget.

This issue has been brought to the attention of the subcommittee before. In House Report 109-95 accompanying FY 2006 VA appropriations, the House Appropriations Committee expressed concern that “equipment and facilities to support the research program may be lacking and that some mechanism is necessary to ensure the Department’s research facilities remain competitive.”

VA is conducting an internal audit to gauge the infrastructure needs of the VA Medical and Prosthetics Research Program. To date, a total of 53 sites within 47 research programs have been surveyed. Approximately 20 sites remain to be assessed in FY 2010. Internally, VA estimates that the combined total estimated

cost for improvements exceeds \$570 million. About 44% of the estimated correction costs constitute “priority 1” deficiencies — those with an immediate need for correction to return components to normal service or operation; stop accelerated deterioration; replace items that are at or beyond their useful life; and correct life-safety hazards.

Unless funds are provided to address the infrastructure deficiencies in the VA system, VA researchers will be unable to answer the pressing health questions facing veterans. I urge the committee to provide \$300 million in the minor construction budget to address the laboratory infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman, I started out my testimony talking about a problem. I want to spend my remaining time assuring you that the VA research program is in the business of solving programs – the health problems of our nations veterans.

For over 60 years, the VA research program has been improving veterans’ lives through innovation and discovery that has led to advances in health care for veterans and all Americans. The VA research program hosts three Nobel Laureates, 6 Lasker Award recipients, and produces an increasing number of scientific papers annually, many of which are published in the most highly regarded peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The VA Research Program is veteran-centric – Like NIH, all projects funded by the VA research program are peer-reviewed for scientific merit. Unlike the NIH, research proposals are also reviewed to ensure they are relevant to the health needs of veterans. While the research findings help all Americans, the additional programmatic review ensures that the VA research program continues to serve the special needs of men and women who are served in our nation’s armed forces.

In FY 2009 VA awarded more than 2,200 new grants to VA-based investigators designed to enhance the health care the VA provides to veterans. Among other initiatives, VA researchers are currently:

- Developing new assistive devices for the visually impaired, including an artificial retina to restore vision.
- Working on ways to ease the physical and psychological pain of veterans now returning from two current overseas wars.
- Gaining new knowledge of the biological and behavioral roots of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and developing and evaluating effective PTSD treatments.
- Developing powerful new approaches to assess, manage, and treat chronic pain to help veterans with burns and other injuries.
- Learning how to deliver low-level, computer-controlled electrical currents to weakened or paralyzed muscles to allow people with incomplete spinal cord injury to once again walk and perform other everyday activities.

- Studying new drug therapies and ways to enhance primary care models of mental health care.
- Identifying genes associated with Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and other conditions.
- Studying ways to prevent, diagnose, and treat hearing loss.
- Pioneering new home dialysis techniques.
- Developing a system that decodes brain waves and translates them into computer commands to allow quadriplegics to perform routine daily tasks such as using e-mail.
- Exploring organization of care, delivery methods, patient outcomes, and treatment effectiveness to further improve access to health care for veterans.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for your support for the VA research program. FOVA respectfully requests \$1 billion for the VA research program, including \$700 million for the VA research program and an additional \$300 million for VA laboratory infrastructure. I look forward to your questions.