

Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA)

FOVA

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Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research

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

February 11, 2008

TO: Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate

SUBJECT: Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research: Statement on the President's FY 2009 Budget Proposal for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program

FY 2008 Appropriation	FY 2009 President's Proposal	FY 2009 FOVA Recommendation
\$480	\$442	\$555

On behalf of the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA)-the diverse coalition representing more than 80 national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused organizations-thank you for your continued support of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical and Prosthetic Research Program. We are deeply concerned about the President's proposed fiscal year (FY) 2009 budget for the VA research program. A time of war is not the time to cut research on the grievous injuries being suffered by veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

FOVA Recommendations: For FY 2009, FOVA recommends an appropriation of \$555 million for VA Medical and Prosthetic Research and an additional \$45 million for necessary research facilities upgrades appropriated via the VA Minor Construction account.

Prior Year Support: FOVA thanks the Committee for its strong support of VA research as evidenced by your FY 2008 views and estimates with regard to the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program. The Committee's recommendation-\$500 million-was an \$89 million increase over the previous fiscal year and the President's FY 2008 proposal. Your support for the program undoubtedly encouraged both chambers to adopt a significant increase in the program's final appropriation. FOVA encourages you to develop a views and estimates statement for FY 2009 that reflects this same strong commitment to biomedical research for the benefit of veterans, and ultimately, all Americans.

VA Research Improves Veterans' Lives: The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program is one of the nation's premier research endeavors, attracting high-caliber clinicians to deliver care and conduct research in VA health care facilities. The VA research program is patient-oriented and focused entirely on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of conditions prevalent in the veteran population. Recent successes to which VA has contributed include the implantable cardiac

pacemaker, a new vaccine for shingles, and state-of-the-art prosthetics, including a new bionic ankle.

President's Budget Request Falls Short: Considering the proven success of the VA research program, FOVA is disappointed with the President's proposal of \$442 million for VA research in FY 2009. The proposal fails to maintain funding at the level appropriated in FY 2008. If enacted, the proposed \$38 million (8%) cut will lead to significant programmatic reductions and will impede research advances in diseases and injuries that impact the veteran population. According to the President's proposal, VA will cut funding for research in central nervous system injury by 20%; acute and traumatic injury, military occupations and environmental exposure, and substance abuse by 18%; and mental illness by 15%. The cuts are counter to the Committee's report

language calling for VA to "expand its research into the areas of neurotrauma, sensory loss, and post traumatic stress disorder with a focus on developing clinical practices using evidenced-based medicine." The President's budget request assumes the cut in the VA research account will be made up by large increases in federal funding from other agencies, nonprofits, and private industry. We are skeptical these sources will be able to materialize such gains in VA.

Research Advances Require Sustained Investment: While FOVA appreciates the significant increase in funding approved last year, a one-time investment in research will not lead to the medical advances required to improve the lives of the nation's veterans. VA research grants are awarded on a three- to five-year cycle; funding must be maintained over the grant cycle to sustain the investigator's research. Cuts in funding require VA to cut award levels for ongoing projects, thus diminishing productivity and output. In addition, funding fluctuation may limit the number of investigators willing to enter-and remain in-the VA system. The VA research program offers a dedicated funding source to attract and retain high-quality physicians and clinical investigators to the VA health care system, who in turn provide first-class health care to our nation's veterans. FOVA encourages the Committee to consider the long-term needs of veterans and VA investigators when promoting future funding allocations for the program. The coalition encourages Congress to support planned growth for the VA research budget over the course of the next three years to continue the upward trajectory of the program in an orderly fashion.

Thank you for considering our views.