

May 1, 2020

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

The Honorable John Carter
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Granger, Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, and Ranking Member Carter:

We appreciate your collective support of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research program. These programs are improving the care of older Veterans across the United States. On behalf of the American Geriatrics Society (AGS), we respectfully request your strong support for increased fiscal year (FY) 2021 funding for Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and the Million Veteran Program (MVP) within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The AGS is a national non-profit organization comprised of nearly 6,000 geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers specializing in aging. Many of our members work within the VA healthcare system, serving in a variety of roles to advise VA leadership on the unique needs of older, medically complex Veterans. These roles include leading the demonstration of new care models; performing cutting-edge research; and training the VA workforce to provide the highest standard of care for older Veterans and their families.

As a member of Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA)—a diverse coalition representing national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations—**the AGS requests that the Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and MVP be funded at \$860 million in FY 2021, a \$60 million (7.5 percent) increase over FY 2020.** This funding level would allow for meaningful growth above inflation and continued investment in groundbreaking research initiatives, while also allowing VA research to support improving the health of Veterans and all Americans.

The AGS also requests that the Committee provide sufficient funding to support VA research facilities within the VA. The funding shortage for facilities has been established since 2012 in a congressionally mandated report that systematic research infrastructure improvements, indicating the need for upgraded resources in order to have enhanced facilities. For state-of-the-art research, aging research facilities need state-of-the-art facilities, technology, and equipment. The VA's recent assessment of facilities showed significant insufficiencies remain even with the already received funding. The assessment also allowed the discovery of substantial and immediate need for life safety hazard correction. The failure to provide sufficient infrastructure and maintenance funding for VA research purposes impacts the VA's ability to expand Veteran's access to high quality clinical trials and increases the real-world impact of VA research and constraints to the MVP and other VA Big Data/Data Science

programs. For example, research and development efforts typically spend between five to ten percent of their overall budget on IT, yet VA research receives far less than this benchmark. Notably, the FY 2021-2025 multi-year plan submitted by VA research includes approximately 20 projects in five major program areas and the total development and sustainment amount in the portfolio is approximately \$100 million. We encourage the Committee to make available sufficient funding in the FY 2021 Military Construction, Veteran Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill to ensure aging research facility requirements are being met.

Sustained and enhanced federal investment in VA research is essential to delivering high-quality, coordinated, and efficient care to our nation's growing population of older Veterans. As of 2018, nearly 50.1 percent of the 18 million Veterans in the U.S. were 65 or older¹, and more than 1.6 million were over the age of 85² – including over 450,000 surviving World War II Veterans and increasing numbers of Korean and Vietnam Veterans.³ The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program aims to improve the health of our Veterans and to lay the foundation for improved care within the VA – the largest managed healthcare system in our nation.

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program funds nearly 2,000 high-priority research projects. This work expands knowledge in areas critical to Veterans' healthcare needs, most notably for enhanced understanding of mental illness, aging, health services delivery, cancer, and heart disease. VA researchers continue to provide benefits to Veterans and all Americans. Today, VA researchers are on the cutting-edge of research on Alzheimer's disease; diabetes; exercise in the older adults; prosthetic limb use; safety and quality improvement for healthcare settings; management and rehabilitation from stroke and traumatic brain injury; end-of-life care models; osteoporosis and osteoarthritis diagnosis, management, and prevention; and the use of electronic technology for telemedicine, telemonitoring, and tele-education.

The VA research program also develops and supports innovative health research initiatives, including programs that focus on high-priority issues important to the health and well-being of aging Veterans and their caregivers. For example, the Center for Access & Delivery Research and Evaluation (CADRE), funded by VA Health Services Research and Development program, are helping push research findings into infection control in VA community living centers and are an integral part of accessing high quality care for rural Veterans through innovative applications of telehealth in specialty care, community care, and dual use. In particular, as our nation faces an unprecedented public health emergency, the novel coronavirus, research, prevention, infection control, and treatment of illnesses linked to SARS-CoV-2 must address the threat to our Veterans.

The MVP, with over 800,000 Veteran partners in alignment with the VA Office of Research and Development, is a research program specific to learning how genes, lifestyle, and military exposures affect health and illness. MVP's research currently includes risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, complications of diabetes, gene variation, Gulf War illness, kidney disease, macular degeneration,

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=veterans&hidePreview=true&table=S2101&tid=ACSST1Y2018.S2101&t=Veterans&lastDisplayedRow=15#>. Accessed April 29, 2020

² National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Retrieved from https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp. Updated November 8, 2019. Accessed April 29, 2020.

³ Ibid.


mental health (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder, depression), osteoarthritis, Parkinson's disease, substance use disorders, suicide prevention, traumatic brain injury, and tinnitus. The program also provides opportunities for Veterans to engage in services after their military careers have ended to inform better care practices. Veteran participation will allow valuable input and perspectives to assess and evaluate new models of care delivery for the older VA population.

The Veterans Health Administration is the nation's largest provider of graduate medical education and plays a critical role in nurturing health scientists across their careers. In order to recruit and retain talented researchers, sufficient funding is needed to support the promising and often groundbreaking research undertaken by new investigators and the aging research facilities utilized by researchers. Support also helps sustain important work and mentoring conducted by those with long-standing experience in the field of aging research.

We are concerned that without adequate appropriations, the VA not only could fall behind in its role as a major contributor to medical and scientific research, but also be unable to meet its statutory mission of training a new generation of investigators to serve the needs of Veterans and the nation. Congress must ensure that we can properly care for Veterans and ensure they can thrive long after their service to our country.

Thank you for your consideration of our funding request for VA research. If you have comments or questions about this request or other issues related to the well-being and healthy aging of older Veterans, please contact Anna Kim, Manager of Public Affairs & Advocacy, at 212-308-1414 or akim@americangeriatrics.org.

Sincerely,



Sunny Linnebur, PharmD, FCCP, BCPS, BCGP
President



Nancy E. Lundebjerg
Chief Executive Officer

May 1, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

Dear Chairman Shelby, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairman Boozman, and Ranking Member Schatz:

We appreciate your collective support of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research program. These programs are improving the care of older Veterans across the United States. On behalf of the American Geriatrics Society (AGS), we respectfully request your strong support for increased fiscal year (FY) 2021 funding for Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and the Million Veteran Program (MVP) within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The AGS is a national non-profit organization comprised of nearly 6,000 geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers specializing in aging. Many of our members work within the VA healthcare system, serving in a variety of roles to advise VA leadership on the unique needs of older, medically complex Veterans. These roles include leading the demonstration of new care models; performing cutting-edge research; and training the VA workforce to provide the highest standard of care for older Veterans and their families.

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of their overall budget on IT, yet VA research receives far less than this benchmark. Notably, the FY 2021-2025 multi-year plan submitted by VA research includes approximately 20 projects in five major program areas and the total development and sustainment amount in the portfolio is approximately \$100 million. We encourage the Committee to make available sufficient funding in the FY 2021 Military Construction, Veteran Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill to ensure aging research facility requirements are being met.

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Chief Executive Officer