Dear Chairmen Frelinghuysen and Dent and Ranking Members Lowey and Wasserman-Schultz:

On behalf of the Friends of the VA Medical Center and Health Research (FOVA), we respectfully urge you to adopt the $722 million for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical and Prosthetic Research Program that was included in the amended fiscal year 2018 (FY) Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill (S 1557) approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee on July 13, 2017.

FOVA is a diverse coalition representing national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veterans service organizations. FOVA was founded almost 25 years ago, to ensure that America’s veterans receive high-quality healthcare. We believe an important connection exists among VA health care, VA’s academic affiliated, and the VA Research and Development programs. This relationship supports advanced practice and effective, safe care for veterans, helps veterans recover from war, disease and illness, and pays even more dividends to the nation, including promoting better health for all.

The $722 million for the Medical and Prosthetic Program for FY 2018 approved by the Senate Appropriations Committee will provide critically needed funds to support current research on chronic conditions of aging veterans. In addition, this funding level will advance emerging research on conditions prevalent among younger Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn veterans.

The VA Research program also needs additional funds to advance genomic medicine through the Million Veteran Program (MVP), an effort that seeks to collect genetic samples and general health information from 1 million veterans over the next five years. When completed, the MVP will constitute one of the largest genetic repositories in existence, offering tremendous potential to study the health of veterans. To date, more than 550,000 veterans have enrolled in MVP. Although the VA is uniquely positioned to transform this field of research and support innovative projects like MVP, this program should not impede other critical VA research priorities.
Despite numerous successes in research and innovation, since FY 2010 appropriated funding for VA research and development has lagged behind biomedical research inflation, resulting in stagnant VA purchasing power. As estimated by the Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Institutes of Health, to maintain VA research at current service levels, the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research appropriation would require at least a 2.8 percent increase over the FY 2017 level.

The funding level recommended by the Senate achieves and exceeds the 2.8 percent target and would allow the VA to fund additional meritorious research proposals that are integral to improving care for the nation’s veterans. Areas of research that remain critically underfunded and could benefit from additional resources include:

- post deployment mental health concerns such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicide
- the gender-specific health care needs of the growing population of women veterans
- engineering and technology to improve the lives of veterans with prosthetic systems that replace lost limbs or activate paralyzed nerves, muscles, and limbs
- studies dedicated to understanding chronic multi-symptom illnesses among Gulf War veterans and the long-term health effect of potentially hazardous substances to which they may have been exposed
- innovative health services strategies, such as tele-health and self-directed care, relatively new concepts that lead to accessible, high-quality, cost-effective care for all veterans as VA works to address chronic patient backlogs and reduce waiting times

FOVA also urges you to reject a provision that was included in the House Defense, Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, Legislative Branch, and Energy and Water Development National Security Appropriations Act of 2018 that bars the VA Medical and Prosthetics Research program from conducting research using dogs. Animal models are used to reveal basic cell and tissue function, discover disease processes, understand disease progression and test interventions to treat disease. Dog studies have led to advances in immunodeficiency, narcolepsy, metabolic disease, cancer, autoimmune function, vision and epilepsy. Animal models, including dogs, have helped save human and animal lives. We believe implementation of this provision will impede progress on medical research and unnecessarily delay advances for our nation’s veterans.

Thank you for your continued support of the VA research program. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues to ensure that VA has the resources necessary to improve the lives of veterans through innovations in basic, translational, clinical, health services, and rehabilitation research.

Sincerely,

The FOVA Executive Committee

cc: The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chair, Senate Appropriations Committee
    The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations Committee
    The Honorable Jerry Moran, Chairman Senate Mil-Con/VA Subcommittee
    The Honorable Brian Schatz, Ranking Member, Senate Mil-Con/VA Subcommittee
    The Honorable Richard Durbin
FY 2017 FOVA Endorsers

AcademyHealth
Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine
Alliance for Aging Research
American Academy of Neurology
American Academy of Neuromuscular and Electrodiagnostic Medicine
American Academy of Ophthalmology
American Academy of Pain Medicine
American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases
American Association of Anatomists
American Association of Colleges of Nursing
American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Neurological Surgeons
American Association of Nurse Anesthetists
American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons
American College of Clinical Pharmacology
American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine
American Federation for Medical Research
American Gastroenterological Association
American Geriatrics Society
American Heart Association
American Liver Foundation
American Lung Association
American Military Retirees Association
American Optometric Association
American Pain Society
American Physiological Society
American Podiatric Medical Association
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
American Society for Bone and Mineral Research
American Society for Investigative Pathology
American Society of Nephrology
American Thoracic Society
Arthritis Foundation
Association for Clinical and Translational Science
Association of Academic Physiatrists
Association of American Medical Colleges
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
Association of VA Nurse Anesthetists
Catholic War Veterans of the U.S.A., Inc.
Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation
Coalition for Clinical and Translational Science
Congress of Neurological Surgeons
Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America
Digestive Disease National Coalition
Disabled American Veterans
Disabled Sports USA
Dystonia Medical Research Foundation
Endocrine Society
FAIR Foundation
Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology
GBS|CIDP Foundation International
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.
International Foundation for Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders
Interstitial Cystitis Association
Men's Health Network
Military Officers Association of America
National Alliance for Eye and Vision Research
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Alopecia Areata Foundation
National Association for the Advancement of Orthotics and Prosthetics
National Association for Uniformed Services
National Association of VA Dermatologists
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
National Multiple Sclerosis Society
NephCure Kidney International
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Paralyzed Veterans of America Spinal Cord Research Foundation
Parkinson’s Action Network
Pulmonary Hypertension Association
Research Society on Alcoholism
Scleroderma Foundation
Sleep Research Society
Society for Investigative Dermatology
Society for Women’s Health Research
Society of General Internal Medicine
Society of Military Widows
The Clinical Research Forum
The Marfan Foundation
US Hereditary Angioedema Association
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the US