

June 5, 2024

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Susan Collins
Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Chair
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies

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

Dear Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, Chair Sinema, and Ranking Member Boozman:

The American Geriatrics Society (AGS) is a national non-profit organization comprised of 6,000+ geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers specializing in aging. The AGS believes in a just society – one where we all are supported by and able to contribute to communities and where ageism, ableism, classism, homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of bias and discrimination no longer impact healthcare access, quality, and outcomes for older adults and their caregivers. We advocate for policies and programs that support the health, independence, and quality of life of all of us as we age. Many of our members work within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (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.

The AGS appreciates your ongoing support of the VA research programs that improve the care of older Veterans across the U.S. and respectfully request your strong support for fiscal year (FY) 2025 funding to improve the Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and the physical and information technology infrastructure within the VA as follows and outlined in further detail below:

- **\$1.05 billion for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program,**
- **\$100 million for VA research facilities, and**
- **\$25 million of the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) budget to be assigned to VA research.**

Medical and Prosthetic Research Program

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 be funded at \$1.05 billion in FY 2025, a \$107 million (10.19 percent) increase over FY 2024.**

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. Additionally, the increased investment would help strengthen the VA's participation in the Cancer Moonshot Initiative and effort to build on recent successes in precision oncology as well as support recruitment and retention of researchers and address the restricted IT capacity while renewing support for existing groundbreaking programs like the Million Veteran Program (MVP) and research on chronic and emerging needs of our nation's Veterans.

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 2022, nearly 50 percent of the approximately 16.2 million Veterans in the U.S. were 65 or older¹ and 1.3 million were over the age of 85,² including over 167,000 surviving World War II Veterans and more than 6.7 million Korean and Vietnam Veterans.³ The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program aims to improve the health of our Veterans and lay the foundation for improved care within the VA – the largest managed healthcare system in our nation.

VA research actively supports more than 7,000 research projects across the country each year. This work expands knowledge in areas critical to Veterans' healthcare needs, most notably for enhanced understanding of mental health conditions, aging, health services delivery, cancer, and heart health. VA researchers continue to provide benefits to Veterans and all Americans, developing and supporting 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. As an example, a national VA study demonstrated that VA telehealth made opioid use disorder treatment easier for Veterans, reducing the stress and burden that prevent some Veterans from seeking care and increasing access for underserved Veterans such as those experiencing housing instability and multiple mental and medical health issues.⁴

Furthermore, the Veterans Health Administration is the nation's second largest funder 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 facilities utilized by aging researchers. Support also helps sustain important work and mentoring conducted by those with longstanding experience in the field of aging research.

The AGS is 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.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2022 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables: Veteran Status. Accessed May 6, 2024. <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST1Y2022.S2101?q=veterans&t=Veterans&hidePreview=true>

² National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Table 1L: Vet Pop 2020 Living Veterans by Age Group, Gender, 2020-2050. Accessed May 6, 2024. https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/Demographics/New_Vetpop_Model/1L_VetPop2020_National_NCVAS.xlsx

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⁴ Lin L, Zhang L, Kim HM, Frost MC. Impact of COVID-19 telehealth policy changes on buprenorphine treatment for opioid use disorder. *Am J Psychiatr.* 2022;179(10):740-747. doi:[10.1176/appi.ajp.21111141](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.21111141)

Physical and Information Technology Infrastructure

The AGS also requests that the Committee provide at least \$100 million to support VA research facilities and assign at least \$25 million of the OIT budget to VA research.

The funding shortage for facilities has been established since 2012 in a congressionally mandated report on systematic research infrastructure improvements, indicating the need for upgraded resources in order to have enhanced facilities.⁵ For state-of-the-art research, facilities utilized for aging research need state-of-the-art facilities, technology, and equipment. The VA's assessment of facilities in 2020 showed that significant insufficiencies remain and estimated more than \$200 million was needed to correct the deficiencies found in the report, including \$99.5 million for substantial and immediate needs to correct life safety hazards.⁶ The failure to provide sufficient capital infrastructure, maintenance, and renovations funding for VA research purposes impacts the VA's ability to expand Veteran's access to high-quality clinical trials and the real-world impact of VA research and increases constraints to the MVP and other VA Big Data/Data Science programs. Moreover, to advance and modernize the VA research programs, the AGS believes increased funding would support IT development and maintenance, including the purchase and maintenance of IT infrastructure; increased data storage and access capabilities, data security, interoperability with affiliated partners; and transition to more robust and functional cloud computing platforms for clinical, health management, benefits, security, and research programs. We encourage the Committee to increase funding in the FY 2025 Military Construction, Veteran Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill to ensure aging research facility and IT infrastructure requirements are being met.

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, Senior Manager, Public Affairs & Advocacy, at 212-308-1414 or akim@americangeriatrics.org.

Sincerely,



Donna M. Fick, PhD, GCNS-BC, AGSF, FGSA, FAAN
Board Chair



Nancy E. Lundebjerg, MPA
Chief Executive Officer

⁵ Veterans Health Administration Office of Research and Development. Final Report of the VA Research Infrastructure Program. Published July 2012. Accessed May 7, 2024. <https://www.aamc.org/media/26531/download>

⁶ Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research. A Budget Proposal for FY 2025. Published 2024. Accessed May 10, 2024. https://www.friendsofva.org/files/ugd/26cec6_ba095f11c5d949d98ee438b995ba8f05.pdf

June 5, 2024

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations

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

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

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