As featured inside this Report, I had the privilege of hosting AEVR’s recent Congressional Reception at which 21 Emerging Vision Scientists (EVSs) from all around the U.S. displayed posters of their breakthrough research. This first-ever event, held in conjunction with World Sight Day 2015 and supported by a grant from Research to Prevent Blindness (RPB), almost did not happen as just a week prior Congress was still wrestling with passage of a Continuing Resolution (CR) to fund the government with the start of Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 and avoid a shutdown.

Congress came through, and AEVR’s October 7 Capitol Hill educational events and NAEVR’s October 8 EVS Advocacy Day took full advantage of the fact that many advocacy groups did not schedule activities at that time to focus Hill attention on federal funding for vision research. As NAEVR/AEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky advised the EVSs, they have a “cachet” as a young investigator, and several Members of Congress met with them personally to hear about their challenges. Concurrent with their arrival on the Hill and attendance at the World Sight Day 2015 Congressional Briefing Burden of Uncorrected Refractive Errors in Vision, hosted by VISION 2020 USA and managed by AEVR, the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee held a hearing with National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. at which the impact of tight NIH budgets on early-stage investigators was discussed. As Dr. Collins stated, when he meets with young investigators they speak more about their funding challenges than their actual research.

AEVR’s Congressional Reception enabled the EVSs to focus on their research, and I absolutely agree with National Eye Institute (NEI) Deputy Director Belinda Seto, Ph.D., who stated in her welcome comments that the best part of her job is meeting with passionate young investigators. She related their emerging research to two important programs, NEI’s Audacious Goals Initiative (AGI)—with the goal of regenerating neurons and neural connections in the eye and visual system and which issued its first round of $5 million in awards in June—and NIH’s Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative, which is developing new tools and technologies to understand neural circuit function. She noted that $10.7 million of the $38 million, or 28 percent, of the FY2015 BRAIN awards announced on October 1 had issued to a current or former NEI grantee. This builds on the $22 million of the $46 million, or 48 percent, of the initial round of FY2014 BRAIN awards issued to NEI funded investigators or those who approached neural circuitry through the visual system.

Her emphasis on these NEI/NIH programs reinforces the theme of my Message—that opportunities abound—although with respect to funding, you may need to identify them within new initiatives (such as the AGI and BI) and non-traditional funding sources, such as the Department of Defense (DOD). On October 13, the DOD’s Vision Research Program (VRP) issued an FY2015/2016 Program Announcement seeking pre-proposals by December 2 for research that addresses DOD-identified gaps. Since FY2009, when the VRP was created by Congress through NAEVR advocacy, the DOD has awarded 71 grants totaling $56 million from the VRP and other DOD programs. As researchers have learned about and become comfortable with seeking funding through the DOD programs—primarily through NAEVR’s Defense Vision Funding Opportunities session each year at the ARVO Annual Meeting—this has become an important funding stream, especially at a time when the NEI operational budget is still down by $25 million from its pre-sequestration FY2012 level of $702 million.

The next few months will be critical for NIH/NEI funding as Congress attempts to develop a budget deal that raises the Budget Control Act caps for both defense and nondefense discretionary spending, potentially paving the way for a robust NIH increase. As Dr. Collins noted in his Senate testimony, if Congress simply defaults to a full-year FY2016 CR that locks in sequestration, it would have “devastating” consequences for the NIH. As a result, NAEVR will maintain its vigilance on Capitol Hill to maintain bipartisan support for an NIH/NEI funding increase—and we will call upon you to raise your voices in support.

In early December, the Alliances will issue 2016 invitations for NAEVR dues and AEVR contributions. As always, I want to thank the vision community organizations that have committed their financial resources and time to the Alliances in 2015, and we respectfully ask for your support in 2016.

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DOD/VRP Issues FY2015/2016 Program Announcements

On October 13, the DOD/VRP released its FY2015/2016 Program Announcements, with an expected $20 million available over the next two years through two funding mechanisms. A Letter of Intent is due December 2, and full applications are due December 16.

For more information, contact NAEVR’s David Epstein at depstein@eyeresearch.org, or visit NAEVR/AEVR’s Web page with links to the Program Announcements.