LEGISLATIVE SCORECARD ISSUE: NIH/NEI FUNDING

House and Senate Mark Up Spending Bills with NIH/NEI Increases

As of late June, both the House and Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittees had marked up their FY2016 spending bills, which were subsequently approved by the full Appropriations Committee in each chamber. Since both bills proposed overall funding below that in FY2015 (House by $3.7 billion, Senate by $3.6 billion) and below that proposed by the President for FY2016 (House by $14.6 billion, Senate by $14.5 billion), Democratic members offered up amendments that would restore funding overall—as well as for specific programs—that were defeated along party lines.

ARVO, NAEVR Witness Testifies at House Hearing

On April 29, ARVO member and ocular immunology researcher Daniel Carr, Ph.D. from the Dean McGee Eye Institute at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center testified on behalf of ARVO and NAEVR at the House Subcommittee’s Public Witness hearing. Dr. Carr addressed the impact of NIH/NEI funding on “people and products, patient outcomes, and private industries.” He was nominated to testify by ARVO and endorsed by NAEVR after he participated in the February ARVO Advocacy Day. Commenting on his first experience in testifying before Congress, Dr. Carr made the following observation: “Little did I know that, when I participated in the Advocacy Day in February, ARVO would nominate me to testify in April. I was honored to be one of the 23 public witnesses chosen out of 157 nominations and was humbled to be among so many dedicated advocates for the important programs funded by the LHHS bill. I encourage my fellow researchers to be responsive when ARVO and NAEVR ask the vision community to contact Congress to support vision research funding.”

Another ARVO member, Robert Anderson, M.D., Ph.D., also from Dean McGee/University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, testified about the impact of the NIH’s Institutional Development Award (IDeA) program in building and sustaining DMEI’s vision research program.

Senate Launches NIH Caucus

Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. looked on. Commenting on the purpose of the Caucus, Senator Durbin said, “We know the intent is there to support the NIH, and we have to find a way to pay for it. We all need to tell a story—Dr. Collins regarding the benefits of NIH research, and the Caucus to tell the political story to ensure funding.” Senator Graham added that the Caucus will “shine a light on the fact that the NIH is a good investment.” He also emphasized that sequestration “is a dumb idea when it is applied to such federal programs as the NIH.”

Senators Durbin and Graham were joined by fellow Subcommittee member Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS), who commented that the Caucus “needs to get beyond symbolic support to allow Dr. Collins and his colleagues to do their valuable work.” He expressed concern about young investigators and their ability to commit to a career in biomedical research. Dr. Collins added that, at this time, a young scientist’s chance of getting an NIH grant is the lowest in its history. He acknowledged that the creation of the Caucus “sends ripples of encouragement” to the biomedical research community.

At press time, the Caucus membership reflected 21 bipartisan members.