DEFENSE-RELATED VISION FUNDING

Since it was created by Congress in FY2009 DOD appropriations and through the FY2014 process, the VRP will have awarded 67 grants totaling $50 million to vision researchers. Research projects funded in the first two VRP funding cycles (2009-2010 and 2011-2012) have resulted in 80 published papers that are advancing knowledge about the diagnosis and treatment of eye trauma injuries.


In October 2014, DOD’s CDMRP, which now manages the VRP, made notifications to researchers about FY2013 grant awards—13 Translational Research Awards (funding up to $1 million) and 9 Hypothesis Development Awards (funding up to $250,000), for a total of $15.2 million. Although the CDMRP is still finalizing FY2014 awards, as of mid-June 2015 it has announced 10 awards for a total of $8.5 million.

FY2015: Program Announcement Expected Shortly

In December 2014, Congress finalized FY2015 DOD appropriations with passage of the “CROMnibus” spending bill, which funded the VRP at $10 million. The CDMRP is currently developing a Program Announcement and anticipates releasing it shortly, and NAEVRF and ARVO will alert researchers when it issues.

FY2016: House Appropriations Bill Funds VRP at $10 Million

On June 2, the House Appropriations Committee approved an FY2016 Defense funding bill that includes $10 million for the VRP—the fourth year of VRP funding at that level. On June 11, the Senate Appropriations Committee reported its DOD appropriations bill but, per its practice, did not include funding for most DOD medical research programs, instead accepting what is included in the House bill when the two chambers conference their bills. NAEVR had worked closely with BVA in advocating for FY2016 VRP funding at $15 M—a $5 million increase.

NAEVR Participates in Project Gemini Exchange Program

For the first time since 2012, NAEVR participated in Project Gemini, a joint exchange program between BVA and its British counterpart, Blind Veterans United Kingdom (BVUK). NAEVR Director of Government Relations David Epstein joined six United States veterans—four of whom recently lost their sight due to combat trauma—in traveling to the UK for a week of activities with a group of blinded British and South African veterans.

The objective of Project Gemini is to provide veterans who have recently lost their sight with opportunities to interact with other veterans who are leading productive lives despite their blindness. During the week, veterans discussed blind rehabilitation and readjustment training, adaptive technology for the blind, and vision research. Previous U.S. participants have subsequently become involved in BVA’s advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill, focusing attention on the need to support trauma-related medical research programs, such as DOD’s VRP. Several also attended ARVO’s 2015 Annual Meeting in Denver and participated in the Veterans Vision and Traumatic Brain Injury session (see story in this Report). NAEVR’s participation enables the Alliance to relate to Congress and their staff the veterans’ life experiences and their thoughts about the current state of medical treatment for traumatic eye injury and blindness and vision loss.

This year marks the centenary of BVUK, formerly known as St. Dunstan’s, which was founded during World War I in response to the large numbers of British troops returning from the battlefields of France having lost their vision due to explosions or exposure to chemical weapons. Since BVUK is one of Queen Elizabeth’s preferred charities, a highlight of the week’s activities included a Royal Garden Party—held in honor of BVUK’s centenary—on the grounds of Buckingham Palace, which was hosted by the Queen’s daughter-in-law Sophie, Countess of Wessex. That evening, the group had dinner at Wellington Barracks, the Headquarters for the various British Army Guard units that protect Buckingham Palace and other locations throughout London.

In late August, the British participants in this year’s program will travel to Louisville, Kentucky, where BVA is holding its annual convention.

As part of their bonding activities, the veterans competed in archery, cricket and bowling, and visited the Imperial War Museum in London to learn about World War I. Other excursions included visiting Hastings, site of the 1066 Battle of Hastings, exploring Newhaven Fort—a Victorian fortress at which a military museum demonstrates its role through two World Wars—and spending time touring the city of Brighton, home to BVUK.

During the week, multiple media outlets, including Forces TV (the service of the UK’s military) and ITV interviewed Project Gemini participants.

NAEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky participated in Project Gemini in 2012.

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Visit the Defense-related Vision Research section of NAEVR’s Web site for more details