LEGISLATIVE SCORECARD ISSUE: NIH/NEI FUNDING

FY2015: NEI Budget Issues

At the January 22 National Advisory Eye Council (NAEC) meeting, Director Paul Sieving, M.D., Ph.D. updated attendees about NEI’s FY2015 budget, finalized in December 2014 through the “CROMibus” spending bill, formally the Consolidated and Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015:

- NEI’s FY2015 appropriation of $684.2 million (1.3 percent over FY2014) will be reduced by $7.4 million as a result of the transfer back to NIH Central for the successfully completed Studies of the Ocular Complications of AIDS (SOCA) for an Operating Net of $676.7 million, or 0.2 percent increase over FY2014. The FY2015 net funding level is down $24.7 million from the FY2012 pre-sequestration level.
- NEI’s appropriations increase of 0.3% was in line with most other Institutes and Centers (I/Cs), unless they were funded for special programs.
- The budget is split 85.6 percent Extramural ($579.2 million), 10.8 percent Intramural ($73.1 million), and 3.6 percent Administrative ($24.2 million).
- The FY2015 Success Rate is proposed at 22 percent, down from 27 percent in FY2014 but still higher than the NIH average of 17 percent. The FY2015 rate is down because of a higher denominator associated with the turnover of the four-year portfolio duration.

FY2016: President Proposes NIH, NEI Increases

On February 2, the President sent a $4 trillion FY2016 spending plan to Congress. The proposed budget, which replaces sequestration with a balanced approach to deficit reduction, increases the discretionary budget by $75 billion—$37 billion more for nondiscretionary spending in biomedical research, science, public health, education and infrastructure, and $38 billion more to defense programs. Highlights include:

- NIH would be funded at $31.3 billion, a $1 billion or 3.3 percent increase over the FY2015 level of $30.3 billion. NIH would support 10,303 new and competing Research Project Grants (RPGs)—an increase of 1,227 above the FY2015 estimate—for a total of 35,447 grants. NIH projects its FY2016 Success Rate at 19.3 percent, compared to its FY2015 estimate of 17.2 percent.
- NEI would be funded at $702.1 million, an increase of $18.4 million over its FY2015 operational budget of $673.7 million, or a 2.7 percent increase over the NIH FY2012 pre-sequestration funding level of $702 million. Per NEI’s Congressional Justification, it will support a total of 1,095 RPGs in FY2016. Noncompeting RPGs will decrease by 45 awards, while competing RPGs will increase by 56 awards.
- The Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) Initiative would be funded at $135 million, or a $70 million increase over the FY2015 level. Funded initially at $46 million in FY2014, vision researchers received $22 million in awards in the first funding cycle.
- NEI plans to spend $200 million on the Precision Medicine Initiative to focus on developing treatments tailored to the individual characteristics of each patient.

As expected, since the President’s budget exceeds the caps mandated in the Budget Control Act by proposing a new mix of cuts and taxes, it has faced intense scrutiny since Congressional appropriations hearings began in late February.

Dr. Collins Testifies: “Least Favorable Environment for Young Investigators”

On February 5, new House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Tom Cole (R-OK) met with research advocates and promised a series of timely appropriations hearings. True to his word, the Subcommittee held a March 3 hearing with NIH Director Dr. Collins, which was attended by all but one member. Although Chairman Cole was joined by members from both sides of the aisle in praising NIH’s accomplishments, he acknowledged the appropriators’ funding challenges in light of the Budget Control Act’s deficit reduction targets.

“So sequester is the law of the land. We might not be able to do all absent a larger bipartisan budget agreement—which I hope that we achieve. I am especially concerned about young investigators.” Dr. Collins admitted that the issue of young investigators “wakes me up at night when I try to contemplate the future of where biomedical research can go in the United States,” adding that:

“They are finding themselves in a situation that is the least supportive of that vision in 50 years. They look ahead of them and see the more senior scientists struggling to keep their labs going and suffering rejection after rejection of grants that previously would have been supported. And they wonder, ‘Do we really want to sign up for that?’ And many of them, regrettably, are making the decision to walk away.”

He also cautioned that, given current NIH funding that does not even meet inflation, the increased funding for medical research in other countries will result in the U.S. “relinquishing its historical international lead in biomedical research in the next decade unless certain measures are undertaken.”

NAEVR Requests NIH Funding at $32 Billion, NEI at $730 Million

Although NAEVR recognized the President’s proposed FY2016 NIH/NEI increases as encouraging, the Alliance is urging FY2016 NIH funding of at least $32 billion and NEI funding of $730 million—waiving NIH from sequester cuts and Budget Control Act caps. For NIH, this reflects a 5 percent increase for modest growth and biomedical inflation (2.4 percent in FY2016). For NEI, the $730 million level reflects restoration of the remaining sequestration cut and a 5 percent increase for modest growth and biomedical inflation.

In its advocacy and testimony, NAEVR is leading with the compelling results from AEVR’s September 2014 poll entitled The Public’s Attitudes about the Health and Economic Impact of Vision Loss and Eye Disease that was executed by Research!America from Zogby Analytics and sponsored by a grant from Research to Prevent Blindness. The poll, the most rigorous conducted to-date of attitudes about vision and vision loss among ethnic and racial groups, found that a majority of Americans describe losing vision as potentially having the greatest impact on their day-to-day life.

Visit the NIH/NEI funding section of NAEVR’s Web site at www.eyeresearch.org for full details