For the first time, Congress adds “vision research” to the 20+ areas of research eligible for funding within the $50 million line in Defense appropriations for the Peer Reviewed Medical Research Program (PRMRP) within the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program (CDMRP). Vision researchers competed effectively, receiving a total of $7.5 million in PRMRP awards, or 15 percent of the $50 million total pool of funds.

Congress again includes “vision research” in the $50 million pool of PRMRP/CDMRP funding in Defense appropriations. Vision researchers receive $5.9 million in PRMRP awards, or 12 percent of the $50 million total pool of funds.

For the first time, Congress passes a Defense appropriations bill with a dedicated Vision Trauma Research Program (VTRP) line, funded at $4 million. Cong. James Moran (D-VA) served as the lead champion for the dedicated line, and continues to do so.

Congress funds VTRP in Defense appropriations at $3.75 million.

Congress funds VTRP in Defense appropriations at $4 million.

Congress funds VTRP in Defense appropriations at $3.2 million, due to an across-the-board 20 percent cut to Defense Health Programs.

House Proposes VTRP at $10 Million

The House Appropriations Committee reports out a Defense appropriations bill that funds VTRP at $5 million. On July 18, 2012, during House floor debate on the bill, Cong. Tim Walz (D-MN), the highest ranking enlisted veteran to serve in Congress, is joined by Cong. Rodney Frelinghuysen (R-NJ) in supporting a successfully passed amendment to increase VTRP funding by $5 million to a total of $10 million. Cong. Walz had previously served as the author of a “Dear Colleague” letter to fellow House members urging VTRP funding at $10 million.

Excerpt from Cong. Walz’s Floor Statement: “The brave warriors that sustain these [eye injuries], whether they’re puncture injuries or whether they’re from concussive blast injuries, start to manifest themselves in loss of vision and eye injuries. Of all of the TBI’s that happen in the war zone, 70 percent suffer some type of vision loss. The research to deal with this has long-term benefits.”

In his floor Statement, Cong. Frelinghuysen acknowledged a blinded Marine from his district, First Lieutenant Tim Fallon, who lost his vision in combat operations in Afghanistan. Left to right: In late 2011, Blinded Veterans Association’s Tom Zampieri, Ph.D. accompanied First Lt. Fallon in meeting with Cong. Frelinghuysen’s Senior Policy Advisor Steve Wilson.

VSOs/MSOs Support the VTRP

In February 2012, the 26th annual edition of the Independent Budget—an annual set of recommendations to Congress regarding defense and veterans affairs funding which is developed by AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and supported by 59 other Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and Military Service Organizations (MSOs)—once again recommends that Congress fund the VTRP at $10 million to address combat eye injuries. The IB has recommended adequate funding for defense vision research since the February 2008 edition issued regarding the FY2009 budget.

Concurrent with the Independent Budget release, the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) sends a letter to Congressional defense appropriators also requesting FY2013 VTRP funding at $10 million. BVA was joined by signatories Paralyzed Veterans of America, Military Order of the Purple Heart USA, Inc., Veterans of Foreign Wars, Jewish War Veterans of the USA, National Association of Uniformed Services, and AMVETS. The American Legion also submitted its own letter of support.

Blinded veteran Specialist Travis Fugate (retired) with Cong. Moran who has stated that, “If we are going to send our armed forces in harm’s way, then we have an obligation to invest in the development of the best possible care and treatment.” (Military Times, October 10, 2011).

Does the VTRP Have Bipartisan Congressional Support?

Since the VTRP is a relatively new deployment-related budget line in defense appropriations, the vision and veterans communities have been engaged in educating Capitol Hill and seeking bipartisan champions. House defense appropriations bills have traditionally specified a VTRP line funding level, while Senate defense appropriations bills have included vision research with other areas of research within a pool of funds, meaning that final VTRP funding is a result of the conferencing of these two different bills.