Preparing Now for a Challenging Funding Future

In mid-October, I joined NAEVR/AEVr Executive Director James Jorkasky and Legislative Counsel John Porter to discuss the current legislative environment and plan for the future. Anything can happen with respect to the federal budget short- and long-term, so NAEVR is not only preparing for these imminent developments but already planning its strategy and key deliverables to make its case for vision research funding in 2012.

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The next few weeks will be critical as the failure of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to make recommendations regarding how to cut $1.2 trillion from the budget over the next ten years, primarily to discretionary and defense spending—the former key to National Institutes of Health (NIH) and National Eye Institute (NEI) funding, and the latter critical for defense-related vision research funding. Unless Congress acts, cuts would be automatic through sequestration.

This process, among other factors, has also delayed completion of Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 appropriations, resulting in what may turn out to be a series of Continuing Resolutions, or a full-year CR. Congress has passed two FY2012 CRs, the most recent on November 18 which funds the government until December 16. Due to Congressionally negotiated spending levels for FY2012 that are below FY2011, the CRs have imposed a 1.503 percent cut on agency funding. As a result, the NEI is currently operating at a funding level of $690.3 million, which is just slightly above the FY2009 baseline level (absent economic stimulus funding), prior to enactment of a final FY2012 funding bill, if one is even passed.

Although NEI stated at its October 13 National Advisory Eye Council meeting that it had a 29 percent success rate and funded critical programs despite experiencing a $6.2 million cut in FY2011, further cuts in FY2012 and beyond may have a “draconian effect,” as stated by NIH Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. He made that comment at the NIH’s Scientific Management Review Board’s (SMRB) October 26 meeting, where he announced that NIH has posted on its Web site a document entitled Ways of Managing NIH Resources and is seeking input. For the first time that I can remember, NIH is presenting a number of grant management options that may be necessary in light of reduced funding, including reducing the size of awards, limiting the number of awards/amount of funds a Principal Investigator (PI) can hold, and limiting PI salaries. NAEVR is working with ARVO to prepare comments on these options, which will be addressed at the December 21 SMRB meeting and most certainly debated rigorously for the foreseeable future.

The NAEVR and A EVR Boards approved a number of actions at their October 23 meetings that will position the Alliances with deliverables to support eye and vision research funding. These include:

Your Candidates, Your Health: NAEVR has become a sponsor of this Research!America educational program—the only vision organization to do so—in which Congressional and Presidential candidates are asked to provide their positions on medical research.

Cost of Military-Related Blindness/Vision Impairment: NAEVR is working with Kevin Frick, Ph.D. (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health) to estimate, for the first time, the lifetime costs incurred by all government programs from blindness and vision loss associated with battlefield injuries. This study, expected first-quarter 2012, will complement NAEVR’s key points about defense-related vision research: it is military-relevant, addresses Department of Defense (DOD)-identified gaps, and may be rapidly translated into battlefield applications. These data will be important when speaking to the press, as NAEVR has done in October 10 articles in both the USA Today and Military Times about cuts to defense vision research.

Silver Book: Vision Loss 2.0: A EVR is updating for release in first-quarter 2012 the initial Silver Book: Vision Loss, produced in partnership with the Alliance for Aging Research. This hard copy and Web-based resource will be distributed at each of the six Congressional briefings planned for 2012.

NAEVR and A EVR will need the vision community’s financial support to produce these important deliverables. In that regard, NAEVR and A EVR will issue 2012 renewals in early December, and I urge all members to continue their support for next year. In NAEVR and AEVR we have strong and trusted Alliances that will help guide us through the funding uncertainty of the months—and likely years—to come.

I appreciate your commitment to the Alliances, and I wish all of you a happy and healthy holiday season.

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Dr. Ryan with NAEVR Legislative Counsel John Porter