On March 6, NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni testified before the LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee, chaired by Cong. David Obey (D-WI), with Cong. James Walsh (R-NY see related story inside) serving as Ranking Member. Responding to Chairman Obey’s request that he describe challenges the country will face ten years out, Dr. Zerhouni identified NIH’s priority challenges: the shift from acute to chronic disease; the aging population; health disparities; emerging/re-emerging infectious diseases; emerging non-communicable diseases (e.g., obesity); and biodefense. He explained in “plain English” that NIH’s goal is to determine the complex, inter-related cellular mechanisms that drive both health and disease. In that regard, he reiterated how NIH’s shift of the paradigm for research/clinical practice to that which is preemptive, predictive, preventive, and personalized will lead to an “era of precision medicine,” with the intent of reducing the burden and cost of disease. He concluded by stressing the importance of investigator-initiated research and the scientific peer review process.

On March 27, the vision community was represented by NAEVR Board President Dr. Stephen Ryan (Doheny Eye Institute) and Dr. Karla Zadnik (Ohio State University School of Optometry, representing the American Optometric Association) in Public Witness hearings before Chairman Obey and the Subcommittee.

Both chambers passed resolutions that included specific language regarding the importance of NIH funding. On March 23, the Senate-passed resolution included an amendment introduced by Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) to increase health programs by $2.2 billion. On March 29, the House-passed resolution recommended an increase of $1.3 billion above the President’s request for the NIH. Although the resolutions reflect a larger framework for spending, it is the allocations to the specific budget categories (in NIH’s case, Budget Function 550) that determine the extent to which increases in funding can be made. Those are expected by late April, just prior to markup hearings. Full details of hearings appear in the NAEVR Web site Advocacy Center’s section on NIH/NEI Appropriations.