House NIH Reauthorization Bill Expected in September

When Congress returns after the Labor Day recess, the House Energy and Commerce Committee is expected to introduce bipartisan legislation to reauthorize the NIH, which has not been reauthorized since 1993. On July 12, the Committee released a “Discussion Draft” of legislation that would greatly expand the authority of the NIH Director and authorize only a four line item budget for the NIH—the Office of the Director; a new Division of Program Coordination, Planning and Strategic Initiatives; a cluster of 15 mission-specific Institutes (including the NEI); and a cluster of 9 science-enabling Institutes/Centers—as opposed to the current 27 line item budget.

On July 19, the Committee held a hearing at which it questioned NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni about various aspects of NIH’s potential implementation of the “Discussion Draft.” Both Republican and Democratic Committee members expressed concerns about the extensive nature of the changes proposed, including the elimination of line item budgets for individual Institutes. This has been a major concern of the eye and vision research community, as presented in two sets of NAEVR comments submitted to the Committee, which were developed in conjunction with an ARVO NIH Working Group that represented the breadth of eye and vision research. Although NAEVR generally supports many of the 2003 IOM report’s recommendations to strengthen the Office of the Director and increase transparency that are included in the draft legislation, NAEVR opposes the elimination of line item budgets since Congressional review of individual Institute line item budgets provides an important “check and balance” to the proposed extensively-revised internal NIH budget development process driven by the NIH Director.

At press time, the July 12 draft was the subject of negotiations between Republican and Democratic leaders on various aspects, in addition to the authorizing amounts and line item budgets, such as how to establish a “common fund” for trans-NIH collaborative projects and any increase to the current one percent cap in the NIH Director’s authority to transfer funds from an Institute. Working with its network members, NAEVR will analyze revised draft legislation, develop appropriate comments and alert our community about messages to send to the Committee/Congress through the NAEVR Web site at www.eyeresearch.org.

"Congressional review of line item budgets is an important check and balance to the internal NIH budget process."

—NAEVR Comments to Energy and Commerce Committee

Dr. Zerhouni testifies at July 19 hearing, at which he announced as a major breakthrough the discovery by NEI-funded investigators of a gene associated with AMD

Steven Grossman (EyeRx), Norman Lanphear (AAO), NAEVR Counsel John Porter, Dr. Stephen Rose (FFB) and David Danielson (AOA) were among those participating in an August 10 NAEVR-sponsored vision community strategy session on NIH reauthorization