This edition highlights the NAEVR staff and member networks’ extensive outreach with Capitol Hill and the administration, especially with the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Subcommittees in the House and Senate on a Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 spending bill and with the House Energy and Commerce Committee on reauthorization—both with a significant impact on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Eye Institute (NEI).

These activities are characterized by images taken by NAEVR Executive Director James Jorkasky and Advocacy Manager David Epstein. On June 20, I accompanied Jim and David on a series of Capitol Hill visits with key Members of Congress and their staff, and many visits are documented in images herein. I wish to offer a “back story” on these images based on my impressions and strategy discussions with Jim and David, as well as NAEVR Legislative Counsel John Porter.

Although medical research has broad bipartisan support, increasing NIH funding in the current fiscal environment faces many challenges. For example, despite the sense of the House in its Budget Resolution that health/education funding should be increased by $7.1 billion over the President’s FY2007 budget proposal, the LHHS allocation was increased by only $4.1 billion, none of which went to the NIH. In heralding the bill’s restored or increased funding for education and community health programs, House Appropriations Committee Chair Jerry Lewis (R-CA) noted that the NIH had already experienced a 120 percent funding increase during the past decade. And in verbal comments at the June 7 Subcommittee markup, he stated that he had urged NIH budget constraints. On June 20, I related my experience as a member of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) Committee that reviewed NIH management to caution Energy & Commerce Committee members to “do no harm” in NIH reauthorization, emphasizing that it should not jeopardize the NEI Director’s authority to lead the nation’s vision research commitment with an accompanying dedicated budget.

The vision community has been incredibly responsive in offering up examples to Congress on the impact of its actions on vision research, especially through emails and letters sent directly to Congress. I appreciate this input and ask you to redouble your efforts in that regard, as literally anything can still happen in this session of Congress—before and after the November election.

Dr. Ryan meets with Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA) (top) and Sen. Mike DeWine (R-OH) (bottom). Both Senators are appropriators and members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee, with Senate jurisdiction over NIH reauthorization legislation.

“NAEVR has ratcheted down these "40,000 foot level" statements on NIH funding and management into detailed examples of the real-life consequences for vision researchers and the patients they ultimately serve.”

— Stephen J. Ryan, M.D.
Doheny Eye Institute
NAEVR/AEVR Boards President
sryan@doheny.org
In addition to inviting NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni to testify at a May 19 hearing of the Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee, Chairman Arlen Specter (R-PA) invited selected representatives of the medical research advocacy community. NAEVR was represented by Dr. Peter McDonnell (Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine), who testified about the impact on vision research from the cut to the NEI budget, as proposed in the President’s FY 2007 budget (see funding chart inside).

Dr. McDonnell focused on missed research opportunities into age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the leading cause of blindness in the United States, since Dr. Zerhouni has heralded the NEI-funded discovery of an AMD gene as an NIH breakthrough. The budget’s impact on vision was also cited by other organizations—including the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International (JDRF) regarding diabetic retinopathy and the Christopher Reeve Foundation regarding nerve regeneration in glaucoma—demonstrating the trans-Institute nature of vision research.

Visit www.eyeresearch.org for the full text of Dr. McDonnell’s statement and NAEVR’s comprehensive testimony.

“*The President’s proposed FY2007 budget will have a detrimental impact on the entire NEI research portfolio, especially its aggressive research programs into AMD which are the direct result of the past NIH budget-doubling.*” —Dr. Peter McDonnell

**NEI AMD Research Jeopardized**

- Diagnostics for early detection of at-risk individuals and studies of promising new therapies.
- Protective effects against progression to advanced AMD demonstrated by additional dietary supplements.
- Studies of current and new anti-angiogenic therapies to stop disease progression and restore vision in AMD and diabetic retinopathy.
On June 2, NAEVR met with House Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Joe Barton (R-TX) and Cong. Darrell Issa (R-CA), an E&C Committee member. Chairman Barton announced that NIH reauthorization remains a priority. He intends to issue an NIH reauthorization legislative draft by mid-July 2006 that would significantly revise drafts from the July-August 2005 timeframe, about which NAEVR has commented extensively.

Chairman Barton's highlights of the impending draft focused on the creation of a “common fund” for trans-Institute research and a base level of funding for each Institute within the three-year reauthorization cycle, with additional resources available through participation in trans-Institute research. Chairman Barton acknowledged that the previous drafts’ proposed budget clusters creating three budget line items for NIH—including that for the Office of the Director, “mission specific” Institutes (such as the NEI) and “science enabling” Institutes/Centers—has been a controversial issue that Committee staff is still addressing, potentially through expanded NIH Director discretion to implement organizational changes.

Comments about the need for expanded NIH oversight were also voiced during the June 7 House LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee markup. While noting how impressed he was with the NIH, House Appropriations Committee Chair Jerry Lewis (R-CA) stated that he has urged NIH Director Zerhouni to “examine the programs that work and those that do not.” Even Cong. Mike Castle (R-DE), who led moderate Republican efforts to increase health and education funding in the House Budget Resolution, commented at a June 15 breakfast that “NIH is a significant budget expenditure and reauthorization potentially has more pros than cons.”

NAEVR has continued to educate staff of the House E&C/Senate HELP Committees about the vision community’s concerns with previous drafts. NAEVR supports the recommendations for NIH reform made in the Institute of Medicine’s (IOM) Report, issued in 2003 and entitled Enhancing the Vitality of the National Institutes of Health. NAEVR has opposed the budget cluster concept since the NEI Director must retain the authority and accompanying dedicated budget to lead the nation’s vision research commitment. Visit www.eyeresearch.org to view NAEVR’s NIH Reauthorization Talking Points.

“Reauthorization would enable NIH to tell its story, educate Congress and prove its worth.”

—Cong. Mike Castle (R-DE) (above)
Contributor Report

“Anything Can Still Happen” Describes FY2007 Budget/Appropriations Process

House
Despite passing its Budget Resolution on May 18 with amendment language recognizing the need for an additional $7.1 billion above the President’s FY2007 budget request for health and education programs, which was brokered by moderate Republicans led by Cong. Mike Castle (R-DE), the House LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee marked up a bill on June 7 with only $4.1 billion additional—none of which increases NIH/NEI funding. On June 13, the House Appropriations Committee approved the bill, which has not been scheduled for House floor action due to the inclusion of a controversial provision to increase the minimum wage.

Senate
Despite passing its Budget Resolution on March 17, which included the Specter/Harkin amendment for an additional $7.1 billion above the President’s FY2007 budget request for health and safety programs, on June 15 the Senate deemed the budgetary spending cap at $873 billion, well below that which includes the addition of the Specter/Harkin amendment. On June 22, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved the allocations for its 11 spending bills, including an additional $5 billion for LHHS. The Senate LHHS bill markup, scheduled for July 20, will confirm whether there is additional funding for NIH/NEI.

Bottom Line
When and if House and Senate LHHS spending bills pass is currently uncertain, although most pundits are predicting action in a “lame duck” session after the elections, and potentially on an omnibus spending bill.

Visit www.eyeresearch.org for detailed reports on the above summaries.

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*President’s Budget and House LHHS bill; Senate Markup July 20
Vision Community Urges House Support for Increased Funding

The April 30-May 3 ARVO Annual Meeting and May 1-3 American Optometric Association (AOA) Congressional Conference enabled the vision community to urge the House to increase health and education funding just as it was debating its Budget Resolution. Hundreds of emails were sent by ARVO members, while AOA members made their requests personally in hundreds of Capitol Hill visits.

Left to right: AOA Texas advocates BJ Avery, Dr. Tom Annunziato and Dr. John Cable

ARVO Board Trustee Dr. Todd Margolis (University of California/San Francisco) at the Contact Congress Booth, sponsored by NAEVR and the ARVO Public Policy Network
NIH Leadership Meets with the Community of Support

On May 8, NIH Deputy Director Dr. Raynard Kington spoke at a National Health Council NIH Issue Team meeting about the role of the newly-created Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI), which will manage NIH trans-Institute research.

Dr. Kington and Sue Nelson (American Heart Association)

On June 8, NIH Director Dr. Elias Zerhouni spoke to the National Advisory Eye Council, reiterating NIH’s ongoing support for basic research and commitment to investigator-initiated research.

Dr. Zerhouni
Working with the office of Cong. James Walsh (R-NY), NAEVR has secured language in the FY2007 House Military Quality of Life appropriations bill, passed on May 19, which would retain the eligibility of vision research funding through the Department of Defense’s Congressionally-directed Medical Research Program (CDMRP). On June 20, NAEVR met with David Lewis in the office of Senate “champion” Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), a member of the Senate Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. Mr. Lewis, a sight-impaired Iraq war veteran treated at Cullen Eye Institute at Baylor College of Medicine, has urged the Senator to strongly support the inclusion of vision research in the Senate bill, scheduled for markup in July. NAEVR has been working with its Texas network members to communicate the vision community’s support.

Vision research initially became eligible for DOD funding in FY2006, with grant submissions due this past May and awards announced this coming August. Visit www.eyeresearch.org to learn more about eligible defense-related vision research.
Senate Leaders Call for Vote to Expand the Embryonic Stem Cell Policy

On May 16, bipartisan members of the Senate called for Senate floor action on S 471, the companion bill to HR 810, The Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act passed by the House on May 24, 2005. The legislation would expand federally-funded research to stem cell lines created after the Bush Administration’s implementation of its policy in August 2001. At the event, Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT) read a letter from former First Lady Nancy Reagan imploring the Senate to act. On June 15, Cong. Mike Castle (R-DE), co-sponsor of HR 810, commented that “advances in other countries or through private research in the United States may ultimately place more pressure on the Senate to take action.”

Visit www.eyeresearch.org to send an email letter urging passage of S 471.

“For those who are waiting every day for scientific progress to help their loved ones, the wait for United States Senate action has been very difficult and hard to comprehend.” —Former First Lady Nancy Reagan
NAEVR Coordinates with UAB on Alabama Delegation Advocacy

On April 26-27, James Jorkasky met with researchers from the Department of Ophthalmology and School of Optometry at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), in addition to addressing the Board of the EyeSight Foundation of Alabama.

NAEVR has subsequently coordinated a number of UAB researcher and EyeSight Foundation contacts with the Alabama delegation, primarily Sen. Richard Shelby, a member of the Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee who was recently honored with the dedication of the new Richard and Annette Shelby Interdisciplinary Biomedical Research Building on the UAB campus. At the Subcommittee’s May 19 hearing (see McDonnell story), Sen. Shelby committed to ensuring that the NIH was adequately funded. As Sen. Shelby is also a lupus research advocate, Dr. McDonnell was able to cite the connection between lupus and vision impairment in response to questions from the Senator.

Following up on letters from UAB researchers to Sen. Shelby thanking him for his commitment to NIH funding, NAEVR President Dr. Ryan met with Greg Polley on the Senator’s staff to discuss NAEVR’s appropriations and NIH reauthorization concerns.

“The UAB visit is a great example of how NAEVR works with the vision community around the country to coordinate advocacy that brings home the value message of vision research.”
—James Jorkasky