On January 28, members of ARVO’s Annual Meeting Program Committee were among the first on Capitol Hill in the 112th Congress to advocate for the finalization of FY2011 NIH appropriations. Since Congress had not yet finalized any FY2011 spending bills, the ARVO advocates requested NIH funding at the $31.8 billion level, as proposed in the Senate omnibus bill from last session, which would ensure that NIH funding keeps pace with biomedical inflation. NIH funding at that level would result in NEI funding of $723.22 million, a $17 million increase.

In 30 meetings during this NAEVR-hosted Advocacy Day, the 11 domestic and 6 international ARVO advocates thanked staffers for FY2009 and FY2010 NIH/NEI funding increases, as well as stimulus funding through ARRA, noting the impact on their departments in terms of breakthrough vision science and employment of highly-trained technical personnel. To emphasize the return on investment, the advocates stressed the potential of their research to improve quality of life and save expenditures to the healthcare system.

Pablo Argueso, Ph.D. (Schepens Eye Research Institute/Harvard University) stated to staff that “the flow of NIH funding not only helps the institutional researcher, but also drives the local economy with non-institutional contracts,” adding that “cutting edge research directly drives industries with cures, which helps to save money on future healthcare costs.” In his visits, John Ash, Ph.D. (University of Oklahoma) emphasized the value of NIH research by challenging staff to “find a government agency that spends money more efficiently than the NIH.” The advocates also described the impact of delayed appropriations, in terms of the continuity of research and retention of trained staff. “If a department does not have bridge or philanthropic funding to retain staff while awaiting full funding of awards, they will need to let staff go, and that usually means that a highly trained person is lost to an institution in another state—or even another country,” said Joel Schuman, M.D. (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center).

As in the past, the international ARVO advocates provided global perspectives on the far-reaching impact of the U.S. biomedical enterprise, in terms of research collaborations and training opportunities. Earlier that week on January 26, President Obama emphasized the importance of innovation to economic recovery, including biomedical research, in his State of the Union address.