Vision Community Must Maximize Political Will for Funding Increases

President's Message

First, I wish to commend NAEVR/AEVRS Executive Director James Jorkasky and Director of Government Relations and Education David Epstein for two recent accomplishments:

- At least $5 million more for vision research in Fiscal Year (FY2012), consisting of the net $2 million National Eye Institute (NEI) increase and $3.2 million Vision Trauma Research Program (VTRP) funding in Department of Defense (DOD) appropriations. In light of the discussion of draconian cuts due to deficit reduction, as well as a Senate bill that would have cut funding, this is a notable achievement. This edition of the Report summarizes the final FY2012 appropriations on the next page.

- In a January 10 letter, National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D. applauded the Alliances’ work to convey the importance of sustained funding for NIH and NEI. Last month, President Obama released a proposed FY2013 budget (see story, inside middle) that would level-fund the NIH and cut the NEI—the latter primarily due to the NIH Office of AIDS Research no longer funding NEI clinical studies on cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis. Per NEI’s comprehensive Congressional Justification (CJ), it will increase Research Project Grant (RPG) funding such that it retains one of the highest success rates—29 percent as compared to 18 percent for NIH overall. I encourage you to read NEI’s CJ, since it offers an excellent summary of NEI’s priorities and features several examples of breakthrough research.

The proposed FY2013 budget still means that NIH/NEI funding would decrease when biomedical inflation is factored in. After nearly a decade of budgets below inflation, NIH’s inflation-adjusted funding is close to 20 percent lower than in FY2003. This doesn’t even take into account the threat of sequestration—the budget cuts mandated by the Budget Control Act totaling $1.2 trillion over 10 years to defense and non-defense discretionary spending since the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction was unable to make recommendations. The cuts, estimated at eight to ten percent for NIH, are scheduled to begin in January 2013 unless Congress acts to void them or find alternative cuts or sources of revenue.

As NAEVR Legislative Counsel John Porter has often reminded the NAEVR Board, Congress must first have the “political will” to get anything done. In that regard, NAEVR will be working with the vision community and its coalition partners to strengthen the political will of Congress to adequately fund vision research at NEI and DOD. Stories featured herein demonstrate the foundation that has been laid in the first quarter of the year:

- AEVRS Congressional briefing to educate about the impact of glaucoma, which also featured the release of The Silver Book®: Vision Loss Volume II reference book on aging eye disease incidence and the NEI-funded research to diagnose and treat it.

- NAEVR’s meeting with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ensure the timely approvals of ophthalmic drugs and continued involvement in the joint NEI/FDA Endpoints Symposia.

- NAEVR’s meeting with the White House’s Wounded Warrior Project to seek its support for adequate funding for deployment-related vision trauma research.

I can’t stress strongly enough how, in each case, the Alliances’ efforts to garner political will were enhanced and amplified by the partnership and participation of member organizations and coalition partners.

Second quarter 2012 will offer numerous other opportunities, built around upcoming appropriations hearings, the release of the Cost of Military Blindness Study, and the ARVO Annual meeting, where the NAEVR Central booth will once again serve as the “Town Hall” for vision research advocacy. That effort will be enhanced even further through NAEVR’s partnership with Research!America’s Your Candidates, Your Health educational program. Vision community members will be able to review candidates’ positions on medical research and customize their email letters to those offices regarding requested support.

I appreciate the commitment of financial and manpower resources that members have already made to the Alliances in 2012. We look forward to maintaining that level of engagement as we work to maximize political will in this pivotal year.

Stephen J. Ryan, M.D.
President, NAEVR/AEVRSBoards
sryan@doheny.org