Congress Increases Funding for NIH by $2 Billion, NEI by $31 Million

On December 18, 2015, President Obama signed into law the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2016, which was facilitated by the earlier passage of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015 (signed by the President on November 2) that raised the debt limit through March 2017 and provided sequester relief equally to both nondefense discretionary and defense funding in fiscal years 2016 and 2017. The FY2016 omnibus spending bill funds NIH at $32.08 billion, a $2 billion or 6.5 percent increase over FY2015 funding—which is the largest dollar and percent increase since FY2003—and NEI at $715.9 million, a $31 million or 4.6 percent increase over its FY2015 appropriation of $684.2 million. NEI's enacted level is reduced to a $708 million operating budget due to pass-throughs.

The bill maintains the Extramural Salary Cap at Executive Level (ELIII) ($185,100 in FY2016), avoiding the House-proposed reduction to ELIII ($170,400 in FY2016). With respect to major NIH initiatives, the bill funds as follows:

- $200 million for the new Precision Medicine Initiative (PMI);
- $150 million for the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Technologies (BRAIN) Initiative, or Bi, an increase of $85 million (to-date, vision researchers and those studying the brain through the visual route have been awarded $31 million in the first two years of Bi awards);
- $936 million (an increase of $350 million) for Alzheimer's disease research; and
- $100 million increase for antimicrobial resistance research.

NAEVR issued a statement commending Congress for the increased funding as a first step in the rebuilding of the NIH and NEI budgets.

NEI Budget Grows in FY 2016, still eroded by inflation

The left graphic shows that the FY2016 NEI operating budget of $708 million has, for the first time in four years, exceeded the FY2012 level of $702 million—albeit by a modest 0.8 percent—after the devastating $36 million sequester cut in FY2015. The right graphic shows that biomedical inflation has continued to reduce NEI's purchasing power by 25 percent since FY2003. NAEVR has used these graphics on Capitol Hill in urging Congress to support predictable and sustained increases in NIH/NEI funding.

President Issues FY2017 Budget Request that Relies on Mandatory Funding

On February 9, the President sent a $3.1 trillion FY2017 spending plan to Congress requesting NIH funding of $33.1 billion, an $825 million or 2.6 percent increase over FY2016. The budget request includes mandatory funding of $1.825 billion, reflecting 1 billion of that which was previously discretionary funding—essentially supplanting the discretionary base—and $825 million for new and existing trans-NIH initiatives (see below).

The proposal would fund NEI at $708 million—the same as its FY2016 operating budget. It would flat-fund all of the Institutes and Centers (IC) at their FY2016 operating budget levels, except for the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the Office of the Director (OD) due to new initiatives. The flat-funding relies, however, on mandatory funding—without it, ICs would be funded at the level proposed in the President's FY2016 budget request. For NEI, that would be $687 million. The budget proposal essentially reduces the discretionary funding base for the ICs.

New and enhanced trans-NIH initiatives include:
- $680 million for the National Cancer “Moonshot” (although included in the NCI budget, awards can go to researchers from a variety of disciplines);
- $100 million increase for the Precision Medicine Initiative Cohort Program, building on $130 million of funding for that portion of the PMI in FY2016; and
- $45 million increase for the BI, building on $150 million funding in FY2016.

NIH states that Research Project Grants (RPGs) remain a high priority, estimating that it will support 10,753 new and competing grants in FY2016—the largest amount since FY2003. Per NEI's Congressional Justification, it will support a total of 1,119 RPGs in FY2017. Noncompeting RPGs will increase by 50 awards and $3.7 million, while competing RPGs will decrease by 25 awards and $13.5 million.

NAEVR Disappointed in President’s FY2017 Budget, Requests 7.5 Percent Appropriated Increases

On February 9, NAEVR issued a statement that read (in part):

“NAEVR is disappointed in the President’s reliance on mandatory funding in the FY2017 budget request, due to its politically sensitive nature and since it essentially reduces the discretionary base. We are especially concerned about the NEI budget. Although proposed to be flat-funded in FY2017 at its FY2016 operating level of $708 million, the budget essentially cuts the NEI base to $687 million and replaces the difference with mandatory funding.

NEI's discretionary budget cannot go backwards, as it did with the devastating $36 million sequester cut in FY2013. It has taken four years for Congress to restore the NEI budget and grow it above the pre-sequester FY2012 level of $702 million—albeit minimally (0.8 percent). During that timeframe, the NEI continued to lose purchasing power due to biomedical inflation.

NAEVR is urging Congress to appropriate at least $34.5 billion for NIH and $770 million for the NEI in FY2017, a 7.5 percent increase over FY2016 for each that reflects five percent real growth above the projected 2.5 percent rate for biomedical inflation.”

Visit the NIH/NEI funding section of NAEVR’s Web site at www.eyeresearch.org for full details.