FY2019 Appropriations: NEI Budget Reduced by DHHS Secretary Transfer

As noted in the Fall 2018 edition of this report, on September 28, 2018, the President signed the Conference Report for H.R. 6157, the “minibus” appropriations bill that combined FY2019 Defense and Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) spending bills that contained nearly $30 million more for vision research than a $24.2 million, or 3.1 percent increase, for NEI funding to a level of $796.5 million and Department of Defense (DOD) Vision Research Program (VRP) funding at a record level of $20 million, or a $5 million increase from the prior funding level of $15 million in each FY2017 and FY2018 (see back page).

In early March 2019, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Secretary Alex Azar announced a Secretary’s transfer of $385 million from the public health and research programs within DHHS, including NIH, to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. As a result, NEI’s FY2019 funding of $796.5 million has been reduced by $2.74 million to an operating level of $793.8 million. In FY2018, a similar Secretary transfer reduced NEI’s enacted funding level of $772.3 million by $1.8 million to an operating level of $770.5 million. Although NAEVR has not issued a statement on the transfer, the Coalition for Health Funding to which it belongs has issued a letter expressing deep concerns about the Trump administration refugee policies, as well as the impact of these funding transfers on “chronically underfunded health programs.”

NAEVR Comments on the President’s Proposed FY2020 Budget

NAEVR supported the statement by the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research, to which it belongs, that the President’s FY2020 budget proposal would “decimate the nation’s longstanding commitment to improving and saving lives through federal support for medical research.” Recognizing the constraints that the discretionary budget caps in place from the Budget Control Act still impose on non-defense discretionary spending, the Ad Hoc Group’s statement also urges Congress to enact “a bipartisan budget agreement that raises the discretionary spending caps and enables a robust investment in NIH in FY2020.”

NAEVR added that, “The demographics of vision impairment and blindness simply do not support federal funding for vision research moving backwards.”

FY2020 Appropriations: President Proposes Drastic Cuts to Non-Defense Discretionary Spending

NIH: $34.4 B    NEI: $686 M

On March 11, the White House released its FY2020 budget request for federal spending, and on March 18 it released spending details. The President proposes a total of $34.4 billion in NIH funding, a cut of $4.7 billion, or 12.1 percent, from the FY2019 funding level of $39.08 billion. This is slightly higher than the level at which NIH was funded in FY2017. It also proposes an NEI funding level of $686 million, a cut of $511 million, or 13.9 percent, to a level approximately the same at which it was funded in FY2015. In its Congressional Justification, the NEI proposes to fund 854 noncompeting research projects, a reduction of 24 awards from FY2019. The number of renewed competing grants would be cut from 248 to 145, and the number of new competing grants would be cut from 218 to 145.

As proposed in FY2019, the President’s FY2020 budget would move the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) into the NIH, renaming it the National Institute for Research on Safety and Quality (NIRSQ), and funding it at a level of $256 million. Unlike in the FY2019 proposal, the FY2020 budget would not transfer the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) or the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILR) into the NIH. In final FY2019 appropriations, Congress rejected these structural changes. In both FY2018 and FY2019, Congress also rejected proposed funding cuts and policy changes.

As is often stated, “The President proposes, the Congress disposes,” meaning that the Congress—especially the Appropriations Committees that deal with appropriations—will have the final say on the FY2020 budget. And unlike the FY2019 appropriations process, the President will be negotiating federal spending with a chamber controlled by the Democratic party.

House and Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittees Announce Hearings

Although Congress has not passed an FY2020 Budget Resolution, appropriators are proceeding with hearings, including:

Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), House LHHS Chair

April 2 Hearing with NIH Director Francis Collins, MD, PhD
April 9 Public Citizen Witness Hearing

Roy Blunt (R-MO), Senate LHHS Chair

April 11 Hearing with Dr. Collins

NAEVR will submit testimony to the hearing files and post summaries on the Web site.

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