



Testimony Submitted for the Record
by
Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) Executive Committee
to
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
oversight hearing, titled
“Investing in a Better VA: Examining the Role of Infrastructure in Veterans’ Access to Care and Benefits”
May 27, 2021 2:30 p.m.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Bost, and Committee Members. As members of the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) Executive Committee, we thank you for holding this hearing to examine all aspects of infrastructure at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), particularly in light of the ongoing conversation that is taking place in Congress and with the Biden Administration on developing and passing major infrastructure legislation. We are especially pleased that the Committee is taking a comprehensive approach to reviewing the VA’s infrastructure needs including physical spaces and facilities, information technology (IT), advances in research, investments in human capital including VA’s workforce, and systems of support to ensure veterans can access VA services and benefits, including high-quality health care informed by state-of-the-art research.

FOVA was founded over 30 years ago to ensure that America’s veterans receive high-quality health care supported by veteran-centric research conducted through the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program. Today, FOVA is a diverse coalition representing nearly 100 national academic, medical, and scientific societies; health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations. FOVA works in concert with the Independent Budget veterans service organizations.

VA’s Aging Research Infrastructure Needs New Resources

We were encouraged to see President Biden’s proposed \$18 billion for VA hospital infrastructure improvements in the recently unveiled American Jobs Plan. We write to urge inclusion of this proposed funding in any package considered by Congress to boost infrastructure improvements in health care facilities that take care of our nation’s veterans. We also write to encourage that those funds be available to improve the infrastructure of VA research space, which supports the veteran-centric mission of VA’s Medical and Prosthetic Research program. This request is also reflected in our [May 20 letter to leadership in the House and Senate](#). FOVA believes designating funds specifically for research facilities is the only way to make significant improvements.

State-of-the-art research requires an investment in state-of-the-art facilities, technology, and equipment. For decades, appropriations for construction, maintenance, and information technology have not provided the resources VA needs to replace, maintain, or upgrade its aging research infrastructure. A [2012 congressionally mandated report](#) found a clear need for systematic infrastructure improvements for VA research laboratories. VA completed a [Phase II assessment](#) in 2020 of fewer than one-third of sites inspected in Phase I, and recently provided a [status update](#) to House and Senate appropriators. The Phase II findings show that while certain projects have received funding, significant deficiencies remain.

Investigators estimated over \$200 million was required to correct all deficiencies identified in the Phase II report, including \$99.5 million in Priority 1 deficiencies, representing urgent needs such as life safety hazard corrections.

The Phase II report divided VA's existing research facilities into three regions – Central, Eastern, and Western. As noted in the Executive Summary of the Western region report, "Despite the projects that had been funded and completed, not all the sites had overall improved research space. In the case of San Diego, only a small portion of their space was in process of being renovated and the remaining laboratory and VMU [Veterinary Medical Unit] space all needed (and continues to need) a complete renovation. This campus also has a significant shortage of research space relative to the size of the program. Long Beach also had few improvements completed in the interim and none that improved the overall appearance of the research space."

The Executive Summary of the Central region report similarly states, "Despite the projects that had been funded and completed, not all the sites had overall improved research space. For example, the two facilities with the worst research space – Hines and Milwaukee – remain the worst in Central Region. The Edward Hines Jr. VA has done little to improve their research space. Milwaukee, although the laboratories remain in very poor condition, did accomplish several large infrastructure projects including roof replacements and a major upgrade of the electrical system. And the Milwaukee VA has submitted proposals for complete renovation of their research space."

Both the 2012 report and Phase II reassessment submitted to Congress in 2020 clearly demonstrated that VA's research facilities and labs would benefit significantly from renovation and construction projects.

IT Investments Are Critical to VA's Research Infrastructure

VA's Office of Information and Technology (OIT) is responsible for IT development and maintenance for programs including clinical, health management, benefits, security, and research. To advance and modernize the VA research program, OIT funding must be designated specifically for research use on a yearly basis.

Investments in research IT infrastructure are necessary to facilitate life-saving studies with big data to maintain the VA research program's competitiveness in an environment increasingly dependent on cloud computing and data science resources. We also urge Congress to approve infrastructure investments to provide IT support for the VA research program to allow the purchase and maintenance of IT infrastructure, increased data storage and access capabilities, enhanced data security, improved interoperability with affiliated partners, and transition to more robust and functional cloud computing platforms. We believe this infrastructure investment is critical to sustaining a modern and competitive research program focused on veteran-centric conditions, which allows for swift translation of research findings to improved patient care.

VA's Research Workforce

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program has made significant contributions to improved care for veterans, as well as the nation's entire health care system. Although focused on veterans' health, VA's collaboration with university partners, non-profits, and private industry to advance research on health care and prevention strategies benefits all Americans. The ability to conduct research while also treating veterans is frequently cited as a reason why clinician-scientists are attracted to careers at the VA and continues to be a significant recruitment tool for the VA. Continuing to invest in the research program will allow VA to retain high quality health care professionals and clinician-scientists to serve our nation's veterans.

Investments in Groundbreaking VA Programs Will Ensure That Veterans Receive the Best Care

Since launching in 2011, the groundbreaking Million Veteran Program (MVP) has enrolled over 825,000 veteran partners who have voluntarily consented to join one of the world's largest programs on genetics and health. MVP is a national research program to learn how genes, lifestyle, and military exposures affect health and illness. Veterans who partner with MVP contribute to improving the lives of fellow veterans as well as others in society. Scientific discoveries from MVP are already underway, helping to achieve the goal of transforming health now and for future generations.

Understanding differences in genetics can help explain why some people get diseases and respond to certain treatments while others don't. This can also help health care providers offer better preventive care and treatments for illnesses and diseases. In fact, MVP harnessed the power of its volunteer network to learn more about veterans' experiences with COVID-19, including impacts to physical and mental health, to support VA's research efforts to better respond to COVID-19.

Presently, access to shared data from MVP is limited by constraints on VA's IT systems. There are more researchers who would like to utilize MVP data in their work on diverse disease areas than the system can accommodate. Additional investments in VA's computing capacity will allow the MVP to meet its full potential as a research tool, leading to improved health outcomes for veterans and all Americans.

Concluding Comments

FOVA thanks the committee for your commitment to our nations' veterans. We urge Congress to work in a bipartisan manner to invest in VA hospital and research facility improvements to continue supporting those who have served by providing care in world-class facilities informed by state-of-the-art research. To achieve this goal, FOVA supports the following principles:

- Designating funds specifically for research facilities is the only way to make significant improvements in VA research infrastructure.
- To advance and modernize the VA research program, OIT funding must be designated specifically for research use on a yearly basis.
- Investing in the research program will allow VA to recruit and retain high quality health care professionals and clinician-scientists to serve our nation's veterans.
- Investing in VA's research computing capacity will allow MVP and other novel VA programs to meet their full potential as research tools, leading to improved health outcomes for veterans and all Americans.

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