

Statement for the Record



Presented by

Rick Weidman
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Before the

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health and
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

Regarding

Department of Veterans Affairs
Medical and Prosthetic Research Program

May 17, 2018

Good morning, Dr. Wenstrup and General Bergman, and other distinguished members of these two very important subcommittees. Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is pleased to have the opportunity to present for your consideration our Statement for the Record on the VA's medical and prosthetic research program. Also, for the record, we want you to know how much we appreciate the work you do for our nation's veterans.

As we all know, VA research is different from research sponsored by other federal research agencies. According to the VA it is focused entirely on veterans' needs. It is intramural, and more than 60 percent of VA researchers are also clinicians who provide direct patient care.

In your letter to VVA you requested that we address three issues related to VA research, which we do in this statement. However, we would like to emphasize that our biggest issue with the Department's research program is that it does not fulfill, in our minds, the purpose for which it was established. And that is to conduct research that is focused entirely on veterans' needs. We would, therefore, request that you do a few things:

- Request a Government Accountability Report (GAO) that takes a comprehensive look at the VA research program, including projects funded, the amount of funding expended, the source of the funding and bench-to-bedside focused treatments and the reality of that goal in as much as it is accomplished by the VA.
- We ask that this be a report that takes a retrospective look over the last 5 to 15 years of the program.

Issue 1: Department of Veterans Affairs partnership with nonprofit research and education corporations, academic affiliates, and other entities regarding administration of research funding as well as to conduct and support research efforts.

The VA's total actual budgetary resources for Research & Development for Fiscal Year 2017 was \$1.8 billion, of which \$673 million was direct appropriations. VA's research program also relies on other sources of

funding, non-federal as well as federal. For FY'17, in addition to the direct appropriations, the department received \$535 million for Medical Care Support, \$425 million from other federal agencies, and \$170 million in non-federal funding. Though this pales when measured against federal research dollars for the National Institutes of Health, the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs of the Department of Defense, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is certainly not insignificant.

VA proudly, and rightfully, points to some of the major accomplishments coming out of its research program, e.g., the heart pacemaker, the nicotine patch, the first successful liver transplant, improvements in wheelchair design. However, we must question: How much of what VA research has produced *recently* is of significant benefit to veterans?

Conceptually, VVA has no argument with enlisting outside researchers from not-for-profit research and educational corporations and academic affiliates. For several years now, we have proposed the creation of an *external* entity, headed by a qualified individual who would be confirmed by the Senate, which would engage independent scientists and medical researchers to conduct research on specific health conditions of immediate consequence to veterans, conditions stemming from battlefield trauma, e.g., the ingestion of toxic substances from burn pits in Afghanistan and Iraq, and other military exposures such as oil well fire, sulfur fire, sand, dust, and particulate matter.

We say this because for several years after the advent of the 21st century, it is our understanding that little or no research was conducted, for instance, on the long-term effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other toxins that were so liberally sprayed in South Vietnam. When the former head of the VA's Office of Research and Development was asked pointblank a few years ago if and when Agent Orange research would be funded, he replied with empty rhetoric and could not cite any specific research program then underway or being planned for the immediate future.

We would urge you to investigate how much money was expended on just what specific, *peer-reviewed* research was conducted that has been of salient benefit to our wounded warriors.

Finally, in brief response to the essence of the first question, VVA has no qualms about expanding and enhancing the universe of researchers who would respond to a Request for Proposal (RFP) for specific areas of research, as long as there is strict oversight by the appropriate staff at the VA and by you in Congress.

Issue 2: The extent to which VA's research projects and priorities display a concentrated focus on issues and conditions that are specific to or prevalent among the veterans population.

Much of our answer to this question is alluded to above. Basically, we have not seen any concentrated focus in this regard. Why? Because we believe VA researchers have been funded for the most part to conduct research in their individual areas of interest which are not always of relevance to specific health conditions unique to veterans exposed to the inherent dangers in a combat zone.

Issue 3: The extent to which VA effectively translates research findings to clinical settings to the benefit of veteran patients.

Again, the nugget of our comment here is in our responses to Issues 1 and 2. This is not to say that all research projects funded by the VA are of little consequence to veterans. Important research has been conducted in improving prosthetic arms and legs, for instance. But this is the exception, not the rule.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit for your consideration our Statement for the Record. Should you have any questions, we would of course be pleased to reply.

**VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
May 17, 2018**

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For Further Information, Contact:

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Richard F. "Rick" Weidman is Executive Director for Policy and Government Affairs on the National Staff of Vietnam Veterans of America. As such, he is the primary spokesperson for VVA in Washington. He served as a 1-A-O Army Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War, including service with Company C, 23rd Med, AMERICAL Division, located in I Corps of Vietnam in 1969.

Mr. Weidman was part of the staff of VVA from 1979 to 1987, serving variously as Membership Service Director, Agency Liaison, and Director of Government Relations. He left VVA to serve in the Administration of Governor Mario M. Cuomo as statewide director of veterans' employment & training (State Veterans Programs Administrator) for the New York State Department of Labor.

He has served as Consultant on Legislative Affairs to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and served at various times on the VA Readjustment Advisory Committee, the Secretary of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment & Training, the President's Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities - Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans, Advisory Committee on Veterans' Entrepreneurship at the Small Business Administration, and numerous other advocacy posts. He currently serves as Chairman of the Task Force for Veterans' Entrepreneurship, which has become the principal collective voice for veteran and disabled veteran small-business owners. In 2002 he was named as one of the most effective small business advocates in Washington by INC. magazine.

Mr. Weidman was an instructor and administrator at Johnson State College (Vermont) in the 1970s, where he was also active in community and veterans affairs. He attended Colgate University (B.A., 1967), and did graduate study at the University of Vermont.

He is married and has four children.