THE AMERICAN GERIATRICS SOCIETY
40 FULTON STREET, 18TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10038
212.308.1414 TEL 212.832.8646 FAX
www.americangeriatrics.org

March 25, 2021

The Honorable Rosa L. DeLauro
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Debbie Wasserman Schultz
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

The Honorable John Carter
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

Dear Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger, Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, and Ranking Member Carter:

The American Geriatrics Society (AGS), a national non-profit organization comprised of nearly 6,000 geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers specializing in aging, appreciates your ongoing support of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) research program. These programs are improving the care of older Veterans across the United States. Many of our members work within the VA healthcare system, serving in a variety of roles to advise VA leadership on the unique needs of older, medically complex Veterans. These roles include leading the demonstration of new care models; performing cutting-edge research; and training the VA workforce to provide the highest standard of care for older Veterans and their families.

On behalf of the AGS, we respectfully request your strong support for fiscal year (FY) 2022 funding to improve the Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and the physical and information technology infrastructure within the VA as follows and outlined in further detail below:

- **$902 million for the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program;**
- **$100 million for VA research facilities; and**
- **$42 million of the Office of Information and Technology (OIT) budget to be assigned to VA research.**

Medical and Prosthetic Research Program

As a member of Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA)—a diverse coalition representing national academic, medical, and scientific societies; voluntary health and patient advocacy groups; and veteran-focused associations—**the AGS requests that the Medical and Prosthetic Research Program be funded at $902 million in FY 2022, an $87 million (10.7 percent) increase over FY 2021.** This funding level would allow for meaningful growth above inflation and continued investment in groundbreaking research initiatives, while also allowing VA research to support improving the health of Veterans and all Americans. Additionally, the increased investment would allow for new efforts to address COVID-19, health disparities, clinical trials access, and the restricted IT capacity while renewing

support for existing groundbreaking programs like the Million Veteran Program (MVP) and research on chronic and emerging needs of our nation's veterans.

Sustained and enhanced federal investment in VA research is essential to delivering high-quality, coordinated, and efficient care to our nation's growing population of older Veterans. As of 2019, nearly 50.4 percent of the approximately 18 million Veterans in the U.S. were 65 or older[1], and nearly 1.6 million were over the age of 85[2] – including over 430,000 surviving World War II Veterans and increasing numbers of Korean and Vietnam Veterans.[3] The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program aims to improve the health of our Veterans and to lay the foundation for improved care within the VA – the largest managed healthcare system in our nation.

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research program funds nearly 2,000 high-priority research projects. This work expands knowledge in areas critical to Veterans' healthcare needs, most notably for enhanced understanding of mental illness, aging, health services delivery, cancer, and heart disease. VA researchers continue to provide benefits to Veterans and all Americans. The VA research program also develops and supports innovative health research initiatives, including programs that focus on high-priority issues important to the health and well-being of aging Veterans and their caregivers. In particular, as our nation continues to face a public health emergency and with emerging evidence that Post-Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC), often referred to as Long COVID, affects approximately 10-30 percent of individuals who had COVID-19,[4,5] research, prevention, infection control, and treatment of illnesses linked to COVID-19 must address the threat to our Veterans. Continued funding for research that advances medical understanding of PASC and real-time results to support providers in developing best practices for care is imperative.

Furthermore, the Veterans Health Administration is the nation's largest provider of graduate medical education and plays a critical role in nurturing health scientists across their careers. In order to recruit and retain talented researchers, sufficient funding is needed to support the promising and often groundbreaking research undertaken by new investigators and the aging research facilities utilized by researchers. Support also helps sustain important work and mentoring conducted by those with long-standing experience in the field of aging research.

We are concerned that without adequate appropriations, the VA not only could fall behind in its role as a major contributor to medical and scientific research, but also be unable to meet its statutory mission of training a new generation of investigators to serve the needs of Veterans and the nation. Congress must ensure that we can properly care for Veterans and ensure they can thrive long after their service to our country.

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[1] U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available at https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=veterans&t=Veterans&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S2101&hidePreview=true.

[2] National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Available at https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp. Updated December 14, 2020.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Rubin R. As Their Numbers Grow, COVID-19 "Long Haulers" Stump Experts. *JAMA*. 2020; 324(14):1381–1383. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.17709.

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Physical and Information Technology Infrastructure

The AGS also requests that the Committee provide $100 million to support VA research facilities and $42 million to support the OIT within the VA. The funding shortage for facilities has been established since 2012 in a congressionally mandated report on systematic research infrastructure improvements, indicating the need for upgraded resources in order to have enhanced facilities.[6] For state-of-the-art research, aging research facilities need state-of-the-art facilities, technology, and equipment. The VA's recent assessment of facilities showed that significant insufficiencies remain even with the already received funding. The assessment also allowed the discovery of substantial and immediate need for life safety hazard correction. The failure to provide sufficient capital infrastructure, maintenance, and renovations funding for VA research purposes impacts the VA's ability to expand Veteran's access to high quality clinical trials and increases the real-world impact of VA research and constraints to the MVP and other VA Big Data/Data Science programs. Moreover, support for IT development and maintenance, including the purchase and maintenance of IT infrastructure, increased data storage and access capabilities, increased data security, increased interoperability with affiliated partners, and transition to more robust and functional cloud computing platforms, for programs including clinical, health management, benefits, security, and research will advance and modernize the VA research program. We encourage the Committee to make available sufficient funding in the FY 2022 Military Construction, Veteran Affairs and Related Agencies appropriations bill to ensure aging research facility and IT infrastructure requirements are being met.

Thank you for your consideration of our funding request for VA research. If you have comments or questions about this request or other issues related to the well-being and healthy aging of older Veterans, please contact Anna Kim, Manager of Public Affairs & Advocacy, at 212-308-1414 or akim@americangeriatrics.org.

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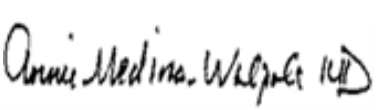
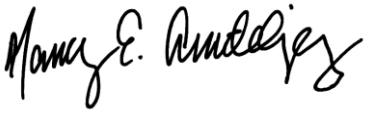


Annette Medina-Walpole, MD, AGSF
President



Nancy E. Lundebjerg, MPA
Chief Executive Officer

[6] Veterans Health Administration Office of Research and Development. (July 2012). Final Report of the VA Research Infrastructure Program. Available at https://www.aamc.org/media/26531/download.

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The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Martin Heinrich
Chairman
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction,
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Dear Chairman Leahy, Vice Chairman Shelby, Chairman Heinrich, and Ranking Member Boozman:

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Physical and Information Technology Infrastructure

The AGS also requests that the Committee provide $100 million to support VA research facilities and $42 million to support the OIT within the VA. The funding shortage for facilities has been established

[1] U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available at https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=veterans&t=Veterans&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S2101&hidePreview=true.
[2] National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Available at https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Veteran_Population.asp. Updated December 14, 2020.
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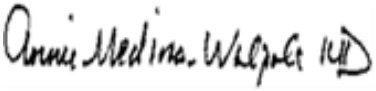

Annette Medina-Walpole, MD, AGSF
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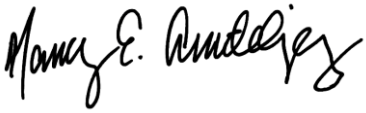

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