

AMERICAN GERIATRICS SOCIETY
Written Testimony for the Record – Fiscal Year 2022 Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States House of Representatives

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Testimony for FY 2022 Appropriations for the Department of Veterans Affairs

- **Medical and Prosthetic Research Program**
- **Veterans Affairs Research Facilities**
- **Office of Information and Technology**

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The American Geriatrics Society (AGS) greatly appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony. The AGS is a national non-profit organization of nearly 6,000 geriatrics healthcare professionals and basic and clinical researchers dedicated to improving the health, independence, and quality of life of all older Americans. As the Subcommittee works on its fiscal year (FY) 2022 Appropriations Bill, **we ask that the Subcommittee consider the following funding levels for the Medical and Prosthetic Research Program and the physical and information technology infrastructure within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in FY 2022:**

- **\$902 million for the 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.**

We are appreciative of your ongoing support of the VA research programs that 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.

To ensure meaningful growth above inflation and continued investment in groundbreaking research initiatives as well as support to improve the health of Veterans and all Americans, we request that Congress provide additional investments necessary to allow for new efforts to address COVID-19, health disparities, clinical trials access, and the restricted IT capacity; renew support for existing programs like the Million Veteran Program (MVP) and research on chronic and emerging needs of our nation's veterans; and upgrade resources in order to have enhanced research facilities.

RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Medical and Prosthetic Research Program (\$902 million)

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program funds nearly 2,000 high-priority research projects – expanding knowledge in areas critical to Veterans' healthcare needs – most notably for enhanced understanding of mental illness, aging, health services delivery, cancer, and heart disease. 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.

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 85² – 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.

VA researchers continue to provide benefits to Veterans and all Americans. The VA research program 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

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Available at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=veterans&t=Veterans&tid=ACST1Y2019.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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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 longstanding experience in the field of aging research.

PHYSICAL AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

VA Research Facilities (\$100 million) / OIT within VA (\$42 million)

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 increase the real-world impact of VA research and constraints to the MVP and other VA Big Data/Data Science programs. To address this issue, we ask the Subcommittee to provide a FY 2022 appropriation of \$100 million for the VA research facilities and \$42 million of the OIT budget to be assigned to VA research.

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,

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

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.

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.

We greatly appreciate the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We look forward to working with you to improve the health and well-being of all who served our country as they age.