



BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

477 H STREET NORTHWEST • WASHINGTON DC 20001-2694 • (202) 371-8880

January 11, 2010

The Honorable Daniel K Inouye
Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Capitol, S 131
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Thad Cochran
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
The Capitol S-146A
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Inouye and Ranking Member Cochran:

As organizations dedicated to serving our nation's veterans, we are pleased to join in supporting the programmatic request of continuing directed funding in Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 for the **Peer Reviewed Medical Research-Vision (PRMR-Vision) extramural research line item, funding it at \$10 million.** This program, which is managed by the Department of Defense's (DoD) Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center (TATRC), was initially created by Congress in FY2009 appropriations and funded at \$4 million. In FY2010, it was funded at \$3.75 million.

Defense-related vision research warrants a more vigorous investment, especially since Defense Secretary Robert Gates has identified research into Restoration of Sight and Eye-care as one of four top priorities for funding, along with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Prosthetics.

Today, battlefield conditions have resulted in 10 percent of all those wounded/evacuated having penetrating eye injuries and TBI-related visual dysfunction due to blast forces. With the U.S expanded presence in Afghanistan, that number is rising even greater. Serious combat eye trauma from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) is now the second most common injury and trails only hearing loss, according to an Office of VA Research & Development article published in October 2008. The November 2008 Medical Surveillance Defense Monthly Report from the Armed Forces Health Center reported that, over the past ten years and of the 188,828 ocular injuries reported, there were 4,970 moderate-to-severe penetrating combat eye injuries, 8,441 retinal and choroidal hemorrhage injuries (including retinal detachment), 686 optic nerve injuries, and 4,294 chemical and thermal eye burn injuries. In addition, each VA Poly Trauma Center reports that upwards of 80% of all TBI-injured patients have visual dysfunction associated with their exposure to powerful blasts. VA Poly Trauma Centers in Palo Alto, Tampa, and Richmond, along with Chicago and San Antonio VA Low Vision Clinics, are all reporting similar findings with TBI vision screening. Vision TBI screening programs and accompanying research are vital to ensuring more treatment options for these visual complications. Not unlike the existing specialized research programs on burns, prosthetics, PTSD, and spinal cord injuries, a more vigorously funded PRMR-Vision extramural research program will enable the exploration of new and promising research opportunities that directly meet battlefield needs.

Although we appreciate that Congress established the dedicated PRMR-Vision line item in FY2009 and funded it at \$4 million, that level of support has been insufficient to fund the full extent of research needed to address these various battlefield conditions. An FY2011 increase in PRMR-Vision extramural research funding to \$10 million would encourage the individual and institutional commitment that will be necessary for projects that aim at preventing blindness and restoring vision for those already living with an eye injury or TBI visual impairment.

Whether a soldier is engaged directly in combat conditions or in activities that support the military, vision is the most critical of the five senses for optimal performance, accounting for 70% of our total sensory awareness. It is also the sense most vulnerable to injury, both acute and chronic. Treatment of acute eye injury can determine the extent of resulting vision impairment or chronic eye disease and the associated need for vision rehabilitation. As a result, the ability to effectively treat acute eye damage can have long-term implications for an individual's vision health, productivity, and quality of life for the remainder of their military service and into their civilian lives, as well as that of their family members. This also has a potentially significant economic impact in terms of the long-term cost of veterans' healthcare.

CHARTERED BY THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

Our nation has seen great advances in the fight against many diseases, but much remains to be done for those who have returned with serious penetrating eye wounds and other eye trauma so that we can begin to improve the visual outcomes for our veterans. **We strongly urge your support for the directed Peer Reviewed Medical Research-Vision extramural research line and urge that it be increased to \$10 million in the FY 2011 appropriations process.** We appreciate your leadership on these vital defense research programs. The following organizations respectively ask for your full support.



THOMAS ZAMPERI
Director of Government Relations
Blinded Veterans Association



CARL BLAKE
Legislative Director
Paralyzed Veterans of America



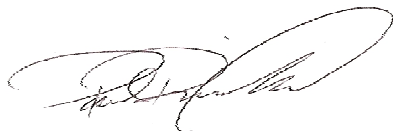
HERB ROSENBLEETH
National Executive Director
Jewish War Veterans of the USA



Eric Hilliman
Director Government Relations
Veterans of Foreign Wars
of the United States



Hershel Gober
National Legislative Director
Military Order of Purple Heart USA, Inc.



PAUL REICKOFF
Executive Director
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America