

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

CELEBRATING 35 YEARS

This year marks the 35th anniversary of the Alliances and this year we are reminded of just how important it is to raise awareness about and advocate for vision research. National Eye Institute (NEI) leadership is focused on driving innovative research in the second full year of their five-year strategic plan and are highlighting advancements that vision scientists are making. Congress is closely divided. With Republicans regaining control of the House and Democrats remaining in control of the Senate, the FY2024 budget process remains fraught with challenges, not least of which are calls from the House to reduce federal spending by over \$150 billion which would surely have an impact on research funding.

On behalf of the NAEVR and AEVR Boards, I want to thank all of you for your continued support of the Alliances this year. With an uncertain federal funding environment, the Alliances recognize a need to lead efforts and align messaging in support of vision research.

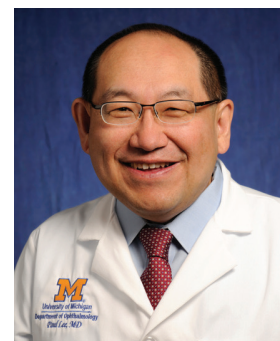
While the Alliances have continued to emphasize the need for increased vision research funding as it relates to the inflationary gap of the last decade, we are also stressing just how vital vision researchers are to not only vision research but across medical science. With vision researchers leading innovation in areas like genetics, imaging, artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and regenerative medicine, there's no question of the importance that vision researchers play in the future, and Congress is starting to take notice.

You'll see in the *Legislative Update* section of this report details around the passage of the Federal FY23 budget which increased funding for the NIH and NEI for the 8th consecutive year. Unfortunately, the increase for NEI continued to represent the base-level increase Congress allotted for the Institutes during that time. With funding levels uncertain for the FY2024 budget, and with the Administration requesting largely flat funding for most institutes, we need your voice to share why increasing vision research funding at NEI is so important.

The Alliances are growing and expanding programs this year to meet these challenges and we thank you again for your support. We look forward to working with you in 2023 as we continue to raise awareness of and advocate for vision research.

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NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR EYE AND VISION RESEARCH (NAEVR) LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

	FY2021 Final	FY2022 Final	FY2023 Final	FY2024 NAEVR Request	FY2024 President's Budget	FY2024 House Budget	FY2024 Senate Budget
NIH	\$42.93 B +3%	\$44.96 B +4.72%	\$47.46 B +5.6%	\$50.924 B +7.3%	\$48.265 B +1.7%	TBD	TBD
NEI	\$835.71 M +1.4%	\$863.9 M +3.4%	\$896.55 M +3.8%	\$975 M +8.7%	\$896.55 M +0%	TBD	TBD

- FY2023 funding does not include new relief funding for NIH grantees but extends funding availability for projects impacted by COVID
- FY2023 budget includes funding for ARPA-H within NIH and includes an increase of \$500 million to \$1.5 B

FY2023 BUDGET PASSED IN DECEMBER

On December 29, 2022, President Biden signed the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023*, a \$1.7 trillion Omnibus Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Appropriations bill which combined all FY2023 spending bills into one package.

The FY2023 budget provides \$47.459 billion for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a \$2.5 billion increase (+5.6%) over the FY2022 level, and \$896.549 million for the National Eye Institute (NEI), an increase of \$32.631 million, or approximately 3.8%, which is higher than the 3.2% that had originally been approved by the House.

In addition, the budget authorizes the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) as a separate entity within the NIH and provided \$1.5 billion in FY2023.

The FY2023 budget also includes funding for the Department of Defense's (DOD) Vision Research Program (VRP) at \$20 million, the 5th year that the VRP is funded at that level. Most of the DOD medical research programs received level funding, the second consecutive year that most programs were largely flat-funded.

FY2024 BUDGET STATUS

PRESIDENT RELEASES FY2024 BUDGET REQUEST

On March 9, President Biden formally submitted his FY2024 Budget to Congress. The Administration has requested \$48.265 billion for the NIH base, an increase of \$811 million, or 1.7%, over FY2023 funding levels. The proposal would fund the NEI at \$896.55 million, the same level as in FY2023. Most of the individual NIH Institutes are proposed to be level funded, with limited exceptions.

In addition, the President's proposal would fund ARPA-H at a level of \$2.5 billion, an increase of \$1 billion, or 66.7%, over FY2023. The budget proposal also requests a supplement to NIH's base budget with \$2.7 billion in mandatory funding for pandemic preparedness and proposes to extend mandatory funding for the 21st Century Cures Act Cancer Moonshot initiative.

While the President's budget proposal identifies the Administration's priorities, the House and Senate ultimately set the budget. The House and Senate Budget Committees begin the FY2024 budget process by releasing their respective budget plans and drafting the Committee allocations to each

chamber's Appropriations committees, at which point the subcommittees will begin drafting their respective bills.



HOUSE AND SENATE FY2024 UPDATES

During the House Speaker votes in January, news reports indicated Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) may have agreed to set House budget caps at FY2022 spending levels which would result in a decrease of over \$150 billion in federal spending if enacted. Additionally, House Freedom Caucus members have called for an even lower topline amount and caps on spending for the next decade. Official House and Senate budget plans and allocations are expected later this spring and debt limit negotiation impacts on the budget are yet unknown.

Through March 2023, NAEVR met with all 17 offices of the House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee (LHHS) and all 17 members of the Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee. Each meeting focuses on raising awareness about the value

of vision research and advocating for increased funding for NEI. NAEVR staff continues to conduct meetings with the remaining 44 members of the House Appropriations Committee and the remaining 11 members of the Senate Appropriations Committee.

In addition, NAEVR has submitted testimony for the record to the House and Senate Committees highlighting the advancements in vision research and how vision researchers continue to lead the way, particularly in areas of gene therapies, imaging, big data, artificial intelligence (AI), and nerve and cell regeneration.

NAEVR is also working to establish meetings with NIH leadership and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) staff to share how NEI-funded researcher continues to lead the way not only in vision but in all of science.

ARVO ADVOCATES AMONG FIRST TO REQUEST FY2024 NIH/NEI FUNDING INCREASES

On February 28, the ARVO Annual Meeting Program Committee (AMPC) held its Capitol Hill Advocacy Day, returning to in-person meetings after two years of virtual events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As in past years, the February date for the NAEVR-supported advocacy efforts resulted in vision researchers being among the first advocates on Capitol Hill to request FY2024 NIH/NEI funding increases. The Advocacy Day also preceded the March 9 release of the President's FY2024 budget proposal.

ARVO's domestic and international advocates — including AMPC members and Science Communication Training Fellows -- made 30+ delegation office visits, mostly in-person but some virtual, including Members assigned to key committees with NIH funding and oversight jurisdiction. They thanked Congress for past funding increases for the NIH and NEI and requested increases for FY2024.

The FY2024 NIH funding request from ARVO advocates supports that of the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research, which has been endorsed by more than 125 member organizations, including NAEVR and ARVO. Regarding NEI, ARVO advocates met with Congressional offices to describe their research, highlight breakthroughs and opportunities, and emphasized the importance of past training grants provided

by the Institute. The international advocates added their unique perspectives on the global nature of vision research, identifying their collaborations with US investigators.

The advocates proceeded to request continued, robust funding increases for FY2024 that included:

- NIH funding at \$50.924 billion, a \$3.5 billion or 7.3 percent increase over the FY2023 funding level of \$41.7 billion; and
- NEI funding at \$975 million, a \$78.5 million or 8.7 percent increase over the FY2023 funding level of \$896.55 million.

The advocates were accompanied in office visits by NAEVR's Dan Ignaszewski and David Epstein, as well as ARVO's Jason Spessard, Cathy Conley, Laura Lanford, Salewa Akintilo, Abdullo Sayfidinov, and John Saville.



*Arathy Kartha, PhD
(Johns Hopkins University) with
Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD)*



*Jason Meyer, PhD (Indiana University School of Medicine),
center, with John Graham (Senate Special Committee on
Aging), left, and Senator Mike Braun (R-IN)*

DEFENSE-RELATED VISION FUNDING

Since it was created by Congress in FY2009 Defense appropriations for the Vision Research Program (VRP) within the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP) has received \$184.95 million through NAEVR advocacy efforts, and through FY2021 has made 154 awards for a total of \$151 million.

SCHEPENS EYE RESEARCH INSTITUTE HOLDS 8TH MILITARY VISION SYMPOSIUM

NAEVR was pleased to support and participate in the Military Vision Symposium on March 2-3, held in Boston, Massachusetts at the Schepens. The event was sponsored by the Harvard Medical School Department of Ophthalmology, the Cornea Center of Excellence, the National Eye Institute (NEI), and NAEVR/AEVR.

In addition to the sponsors, representatives from the joint Department of Defense and Veterans Affairs Vision Centers of Excellence, and the U.S. Army Medical Research & Material Command (where the VRP is housed within CDMRP) presented on the importance of military vision research. NAEVR Executive Director Dan Ignaszewski presented an update on federally funded vision research and the historical trends and prospects for federally funded vision research in FY2024.

The event focused on combat-related eye injuries—one of the most common, yet less-publicized types of war injuries and included a virtual presentation by Adam Wylegala, MD, from the Department of Ophthalmology Railway Hospital, Silesian Medical University, in Katowice, Poland VAMC, who discussed ocular injuries in civilian and military personnel in Ukraine. It was evident from the panel discussions that today's soldiers are facing significant threats from devices that cause extensive injury to the eyes.

This symposium brought together military leaders, clinicians, and scientists, to propel research that can lead to improved treatment and prevention strategies for combat-related eye injuries. The meeting encompassed a variety of topics that covered diagnosis, mitigation, and regenerative medicine aspects of eye injuries in mass casualties.

FY2024: NAEVR BEGINS ADVOCACY EFFORTS FOR VRP FUNDING

NAEVR Director Government Relations David Epstein has met with Congressional staff in key appropriations offices and has submitted Programmatic Requests to request Congress increase funding for the VRP in FY2024. NAEVR is requesting an increase for the VRP to \$30 million, an increase of \$10 million over FY2023.

FY23: VRP FINALIZING PROGRAM ANNOUNCEMENT

On March 10, 2023, the VRP Program Committee held its Vision Setting Meeting to choose funding mechanisms, submission dates, and research focus areas for the FY2023 VRP funding cycle. The Committee expects to release the FY2023 Program Announcement in early Spring 2023. NAEVR Executive Director Dan Ignaszewski serves as a Consumer Advocate on the Program Committee.

FY2022: VRP PROGRAM COMMITTEE SELECTS AWARDS

On March 9, 2023, the VRP Program Committee met to review grants from the FY2022 funding cycle. The Program Committee reviews scores and summaries from the Scientific Review Committee and then scores the proposals on how they address the goals described in the Program

Announcement to select funding awards. The grants are ranked, and the Program Committee typically recommends funding as many of the top-scoring grants as the funds allow. The selected researchers are then contacted, and grant contracts are negotiated.

DEFENSE HEALTH RESEARCH CONSORTIUM HOSTS CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING

On March 7, 2023, the Defense Health Research Consortium (DHRC), of which NAEVR is a member, hosted a Briefing to share with Congressional staff the important medical research being conducted by the DOD. The briefing featured Col. Sarah Goldman, Director of the CDMRP, along with several individual Program Managers, who also displayed posters

highlighting program research activities. Col. Goldman gave an overview of the CDMRPs – their funding history, the range of medical research programs, and the review processes to fund projects. VRP Program Manager Tian Wang, PhD, was one of the Program Managers in attendance and met with congressional staff after the presentation.

ARPA-H

The Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health (ARPA-H) supports transformative research to drive biomedical and health breakthroughs – ranging from molecular to societal – to provide transformative health solutions for all.

On September 12, 2022, President Biden announced his intent to appoint Dr. Renee Wegrzyn as the first Director of ARPA-H and has been busy identifying opportunities, programs, and priorities over the past six months.

On March 15, 2023, ARPA-H announced its “ARPA-H Dash to Accelerate Health Outcomes,” a collaborative online competition open to researchers across health, science, technology, and the general public to identify bold ideas that need breakthrough science. ARPA-H will use a bracket format and online discussion, debate, and voting to narrow submissions. Sixty-four submissions will be grouped within ARPA-H’s strategic focus areas of **Health Science Futures**, **Scalable Solutions**, **Proactive Health**, and **Resilient Systems**. Nominations for the ARPA-H Dash program will be accepted through an online portal for review between March 29 and April 7, 2023. Each submission requires supporting evidence published after January 1, 2018, a short descriptive title for display, the targeted focus area for transformation, and answers to three questions about the proposed transformation with up to two nominations allowed per participant. The competition will conclude on May 16 with a \$15,000 grand prize awarded to the winning topic and additional prizes for runners-up.

In addition to the Dash competition, ARPA-H announced it’s open for business with an **Agency-wide Open Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) Solicitation**. The solicitation seeks funding proposals for research aiming to improve health outcomes across patient populations,



communities, diseases, and health conditions. The BAA calls for proposals to outline breakthrough research and technological advancements and applicants are advised to include unconventional approaches and challenge accepted assumptions to enable leaps forward in science, technology, systems, or related capabilities. A specific focus on the Cancer Moonshot is identified, however, this solicitation is open and vision researchers are encouraged to consider submissions immediately. Additional information about the BAA can be found below:

Vision Researchers May be Competitive for ARPA-H Funding: Use this QR code to learn more about the ARPA-H BAA Solicitation:



ARPA H



RESEARCH SAVING SIGHT, RESTORING VISION INITIATIVE: GLAUCOMA CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING

On March 15, the Alliance for Eye and Vision Research (AEVR) held its annual glaucoma Congressional Briefing recognizing World Glaucoma Week 2023. The Congressional Briefing was supported by Alliance members representing all major glaucoma societies and research organizations.

Entitled Advancements in Glaucoma: The Silent Thief of Sight, the event featured clinician and researcher, Sarah Wellik, MD, who serves as a Professor of Clinical Ophthalmology and Director of Glaucoma Service at UHealth Plantation at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, within the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

Dr. Wellik demonstrated how glaucoma presents in patients utilizing video illustration and the National Eye Institute's Virtual Reality mobile app: NEI-VR See What I See which allowed attendees to experience glaucoma in a virtual environment.

Dr. Wellik also highlighted that 1 in 50 people in the US, and 1 in 10 people over age 80 have glaucoma. Additionally, she shared that certain characteristics such as age, ethnicity, and high intraocular pressure (IOP) are associated with disease development. She highlighted that groups at highest risk include African Americans who are over four times more likely to experience glaucoma and 15 times more likely to lose vision from glaucoma than white Americans. Additionally, Hispanic Americans are two times more likely to have glaucoma. Others at higher risk for glaucoma include individuals over age 60 and those with a family history of the disease.

Highlighting the value of NEI-funded research, Dr. Wellik shared that advancements in the treatment of glaucoma include pressure-reducing therapies in the form of eye drops to help eye fluid drain more effectively or lessen fluid production. In addition to therapeutic eye drop regimens, glaucoma is also treated through traditional and minimally invasive surgical techniques, including laser surgery that can help reduce fluid pressure and



conventional surgery that can insert stents to help drain fluid out of the eye resulting in lower interocular pressure.

Dr. Wellik also highlighted her own research and the potential for big data and artificial intelligence (AI) to improve diagnosis and identify those at greatest risk for disease progression and blindness.

Dr. Wellik concluded by encouraging attendees to recognize glaucoma as a public health concern and priority among healthcare planners and policymakers with an emphasis on early detection and treatment to prevent blindness.

In addition to speaking at the Briefing, in NAEVR-hosted visits, Dr. Wellik met with the office of Senator Rick Scott (R-FL) who indicated Senator Scott's support for NIH and indicated their intent to sign the support letter for NIH this year. Dr. Wellik also met with the office of Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) whose staff member expressed that her own family had an extensive history of glaucoma and was appreciative of the work Dr. Wellik was doing and the role of NEI-funded research.

Special thanks to our event sponsors for making this event possible:



About World Glaucoma Week 2023

The first *World Glaucoma Day* was held on March 6, 2008, and the United States House of Representatives passed H.R. 981, which recognized the event and supported the NEI's efforts to research the causes of and treatments for glaucoma. Since 2010, the day has expanded into a week of educational events held worldwide.

EMERGING VISION SCIENTIST PROGRAM

AEVR's Research Saving Sight, Restoring Vision Initiative is currently organizing events associated with its ninth annual Emerging Vision Scientists (EVS) Day on Capitol Hill, which will be held on September 20 and 21, 2023.

The EVS program was developed to provide emerging vision scientists with critical training and perspective on how to effectively share and communicate the value of their research with a non-scientific audience to promote professional development and stakeholder engagement. In addition, the program provides training to better understand the legislative and budget process and become effective advocates for vision research.

The program allows participants to:

- Participate in a virtual training with AEVR prior to the event to align expectations and effectively prepare for program activities.
- Attend a Congressional Briefing to see how vision research is presented to a largely non-scientific, policy-oriented audience.
- Present a viewer-friendly poster of their research at a Congressional Reception and discuss the importance and impact of their research with Members of Congress and Congressional staff.

- Meet with their Congressional delegation to raise awareness and advocate for the research being conducted in their district/state for vision research funding within the NEI.

The EVS program is largely supported by a Research to Prevent Blindness grant to increase efforts among emerging vision researchers to further their careers and get involved in advocacy and awareness activities. Historically the EVS program has accepted 20-25 participants each year but is looking to grow to 40 participants in 2023.

Eligible applicants include post-degree (e.g., PhD, MD, OD) researchers and junior faculty who have not yet been awarded their first NIH R01 grant. Candidates are eligible if they have received training grants or fellowship support from the NIH or other federal or private grants. Applicants must be nominated or recommended by their Department and participants are asked to take responsibility for travel to and from the event in Washington, D.C., with room accommodations and meals provided by AEVR.

AEVR will evaluate applications and will schedule half-hour interviews with each candidate. After the interviews, AEVR will notify participants by June 23 to begin planning for the in-person events in Washington, D.C. AEVR will issue specific information and materials to participants throughout the summer as the event approaches.



2022 Emerging Vision Scientist Program Participants

Apply or Nominate an Emerging Scientist Today



NAEVR/AEVR
5515 Security Lane, Suite 500
Rockville, Maryland 20852-1606

SPECIAL THANKS TO MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS OF THE ALLIANCES

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