



March 7, 2017

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Dirksen Senate-122
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Appropriations
Dirksen Senate-122
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen, Chairman
House Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-305, the Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-305, the Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cochran, Ranking Member Leahy,
Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Lowey:

This letter is being sent to you by the Blinded Veterans Association and ten additional organizations dedicated to serving our nation's service members and veterans. The undersigned organizations request that in Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the Peer Reviewed Vision Trauma (PRMR-Vision) Program- extramural research line item, be funded at \$15 million. We appreciated your support for this level of funding in the FY 2017 appropriations. 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 FY 2009 appropriations to provide for vital translational battlefield eye injury research and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) vision system dysfunction research.

We believe that defense-related vision research warrants a more vigorous investment. Vision research program experts have identified DoD gaps in research into sensory injury- vision and hearing- for translational deployment trauma research as one of the top priorities for war related trauma funding. As with priority funding for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, TBI, and orthopedic care, vision injuries are life altering. Since 2010, DoD has also repeatedly presented analyses highlighting these gaps in Vision Trauma Research.

Per the DoD Vision Center of Excellence, 14.9% of all those wounded/evacuated from today's battlefields have some form of penetrating eye injuries and TBI-related visual system dysfunction due to the force of IED blasts. With the U.S continued presence in Afghanistan, in inherit resolve in Iraq the risk of more eye injuries is still rising. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) wars produced the highest percentages of war eye injuries evacuated since World War I. Figures released by VHA in 2015, covering the period between October 1, 2001 and June 30, 2015 indicate that 211,350 OIF/ OEF/OND individual veterans were enrolled with injuries impacting their vision. 49% of service members sustaining such injuries are under the age of 36. In addition, the VA Poly Trauma Center reports that 80% of all TBI-injured

patients complain of visual symptoms associated with their exposure to IED blasts and the VA has a total of 66,968 patients with such TBI vision symptoms. Vision TBI screening programs and accompanying research are vital to ensuring more treatment options for these visual complications. As with the existing specialized research programs for burns, orthopedics, and spinal cord injuries, a more vigorously funded PRMR-Vision Trauma extramural research program will enable the exploration of new and promising research opportunities that directly meet our battlefield needs.

We appreciate the fact that Congress established the dedicated PRMR-Vision Trauma Program line item in FY 2009 and that there has been bipartisan support since for funding at \$10 million in FY 2013, through FY 2016. We again appreciated your support of \$15 million in FY 2017 defense appropriations. In order to fund the full extent of research needed to address these various battlefield vision injuries, we ask for \$15 million in funding for PRMR-Vision extramural research. This would encourage the individual and institutional commitment that will be necessary for projects aimed at preventing blindness as well as possible vision restoration for those already living with severe combat 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 on the battlefield and in early stages of medical evacuation can determine the extent of resulting vision impairment or chronic eye disease later 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. This also has a potentially significant economic impact. One Johns Hopkins University study found that eye injuries are costing \$2.5 billion per year in direct and indirect costs. The resulting long-term cost of veterans' healthcare and benefits are as yet unknown.

Our nation has seen great advances in the fight against a wide range of medical conditions, but much remains to be done for those severely eye injured on the battlefield. Combat translational research should continue to be a top priority so that our veterans who suffer serious penetrating eye wounds and/or TBI during the course of deployment will have opportunities for improved visual outcomes. We strongly urge your support for the directed Peer Reviewed Vision Trauma Research Program (VTRP) extramural research line and urge that it be \$15 million in the FY 2018 defense appropriations. We appreciate your bi-partisan leadership on these vital defense trauma research programs. The under-signed organizations respectfully ask for your continued support in the FY 2018 appropriations.

Sincerely,

Blinded Veterans Association
Disabled American Veterans
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
Jewish War Veterans
Military Officers Association of America
Military Order of the Purple Heart of the USA
Paralyzed Veterans of America
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Veterans Health Council
Vietnam Veterans of America
American Council of the Blind