

# Federal Funding for Vision Research is Vital

Within the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Eye Institute's (NEI) mission is to eliminate vision loss and improve quality of life through vision research. Congressional support for NEI has proven essential to the advancement of eye and vision care in the United States.

Based on 2010 Census data, NEI estimates more than 90 million Americans over the age of 40 (60%) are living with age-related eye disease, blindness, or significant vision impairment, and is expected to increase with an aging population. With the annual cost of vision disorders in the U.S. topping an estimated \$201 billion in 2026 and expected to grow to \$373 billion by the year 2050, the direct medical costs of vision disorders are the fifth highest, only less than heart disease, cancers, emotional disorders, and pulmonary conditions.

## **To address this and achieve NEI's mission, increased research funding is vital to improve eye and vision diagnosis, care, and interventions for all Americans.**

Congress last increased NEI's budget in FY23 to \$896.5 million and the FY26 maintained the NEI as an independent institute and included level funding for the third consecutive year. Prior to three years of flat funding, NEI has historically received the base increase for all institutes (3.8% in FY23) and has operated below inflation-adjusted dollars since FY12. While the current NEI investment represents a 27.6 % increase over its 2012 enacted budget of \$702.7 million, this lags the more than 35.8% inflation that occurred resulting in a deficit of over \$46 million annually in vision research funding.

## **Funding vision research results in improved outcomes for tens of millions of Americans**

- NEI's \$896.55 million enacted budget in FY26 represents a fraction of a percent of the annual U.S. economic burden of vision disorders estimated at \$201 billion in 2026. The U.S. is spending over \$587 per American on the treatment of vision disorders this year, while only spending \$2.64 per American on research that can prevent these conditions and improve outcomes.
- Each day more than 10,000 Americans turn 65 and will be at the greatest risk for age-related eye disease.
- Vision disorders disproportionately affect black and Latin Americans with black Americans five times more likely, and Latin Americans two-and-a-half times more likely to develop major vision conditions.
- Vision impairment and loss can be a co-morbid condition of chronic diseases, such as diabetes. With an estimated 34 million Americans living with diabetes, cases of diabetic retinopathy are estimated to double from 7.69 million in 2010 to 14.6 million in 2050.
- A 2016 JAMA Ophthalmology article reported that Americans across racial and ethnic lines describe losing vision as potentially having the greatest impact on their day-to-day life, more so than the loss of limb, memory, hearing, and speech. Vision loss is also associated with increased depression and accelerated mortality.
- The U.S. is the world leader in vision research. The NEI's audacious goal is "to restore vision through regeneration of neurons and neural connections in the eye and visual system." Without substantial increases in NEI funding, restoring vision to ensure individuals' quality of life and ability to live independently cannot be achieved.