The Honorable Robert Aderholt
Chair
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
Chair
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies

DATE

Dear Chairs Aderholt and Capito, and Ranking Members DeLauro and Baldwin:

On behalf of the Alliance for Vision Research and the undersigned organizations representing patients, providers, researchers, and industry, we thank you for your continued bipartisan leadership in supporting the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Eye Institute (NEI). As you develop the FY27 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, we respectfully urge you to prioritize vision and vision research as a national priority by maintaining NEI as an independent institute, rejecting harmful policy proposals impacting the research ecosystem, and providing $1 billion for NEI.

Vision impairment and eye disease affect nearly 100 million Americans and impose an estimated $200 billion annually in direct and societal costs. Vision loss is closely tied to loss of independence, increased risk of injury, diminished quality of life, and broader health complications. At the same time, vision research represents one of the most translationally successful and innovation-driven areas within NIH and patient-impactful areas within NIH, delivering breakthroughs that improve health outcomes, reduce long-term healthcare costs, and preserve quality of life for millions of Americans.

Vision Research Drives Biomedical Innovation
The NEI's focused and strategic investments have positioned vision research at the forefront of biomedical innovation, generating breakthroughs that extend far beyond ophthalmology and fundamentally shape modern medicine. Vision research has repeatedly served as a catalyst for transformative advances across genetics, artificial intelligence, imaging, regenerative medicine, and precision health, including:

- The first FDA-approved gene therapy for an inherited disease, transforming treatment pathways across medicine
- The first FDA-approved autonomous AI diagnostic tool for diabetic retinopathy, expanding access to care and early detection and care
- Pioneering advances in stem cell science and regenerative medicine, including emerging therapies for corneal repair and retinal disease
- The development of advanced imaging technologies such as optical coherence tomography (OCT), now considered foundational across multiple medical specialties
- Leadership in artificial intelligence, big data, and emerging fields such as oculomics, where the eye is used to detect, monitor and better understand systemic disease

These breakthroughs underscore the uniquely cross-cutting nature of vision research and its ability to accelerate innovation across the broader healthcare ecosystem. Investments in vision science not only advance treatments for blinding and vision-threatening diseases, but also drive discoveries that improve

diagnostics, expand access to care, reduce healthcare costs, and enhance patient outcomes across medicine.

Vision Must be a National Public Health and Research Priority
Vision is fundamental to quality of life, independence, and overall health. The eye's accessibility and connection to systemic health make it a powerful platform for early detection and intervention across diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and neurodegeneration.

As the burden of vision loss continues to grow alongside an aging population, maintaining a dedicated federal focus on vision research within the NIH is essential. The NEI's independence ensures the specialized scientific expertise, targeted investments, and strategic leadership necessary to advance discovery, accelerate translational research, and improve patient outcomes.

Preserving NEI Independence is Essential to Sustained Progress
Proposals to consolidate NEI into a broader institute would jeopardize decades of scientific progress and undermine one of the most innovation-driven models within NIH. Vision science encompasses a wide range of diseases, biological systems, technologies, and translational pathways that do not align with a singular neurological framework and require dedicated expertise and prioritization. The potential consequences of consolidation include:

- Loss of dedicated scientific focus and specialized peer review expertise
- Dilution of already limited vision research funding within broader research categories
- Disruption to established clinical trial networks and translational research pipelines
- Reduced attention to non-neurological eye diseases, pediatric vision conditions, and vision rehabilitation research
- Slower progress toward treatments, cures, and preventative strategies for blinding diseases

Preserving NEI as an independent institute is critical to maintaining momentum in scientific discovery, public health advancement, and patient-centered care.

Concerns Regarding Forward Funding Proposals
We are increasingly concerned about proposals to implement a universal 100% forward funding model across all NIH grants. While multi-year funding mechanisms can provide stability in certain contexts, broadly applying this approach risks significantly reducing the number of new and competing awards in a given fiscal year.

Recent implementation of expanded forward funding in FY25 has demonstrated that such policies can lead to:

- Fewer grant opportunities for investigators, particularly early-career scientists
- Reduced flexibility to respond to emerging scientific priorities and public health needs
- Increased uncertainty across the biomedical research workforce and institutional planning processes
- A constrained pipeline for innovative and high-risk scientific ideas

A balanced funding approach is necessary and is essential to ensure both long-term stability and continued investment in scientific discovery.

Reject Arbitrary Indirect Cost Caps and Support Thoughtful Reform
We strongly oppose proposals to impose a blanket 15% cap on indirect (F&A) cost reimbursement. Such caps would significantly undermine the infrastructure that supports biomedical research nationwide and would disproportionately harm academic medical centers, research institutions, and underserved communities.

At the same time, we recognize the importance of transparency, accountability, and responsible stewardship of research funding. We support thoughtful, bipartisan reforms developed in partnership with the research community. Frameworks such as the FAIR model (referenced in the FY26 appropriations process as worthy of further consideration) offer a more constructive path forward by improving clarity and efficiency while preserving the integrity and competitiveness of the national research enterprise.

We urge Congress to continue rejecting arbitrary caps and instead pursue reforms that are:

- Developed in partnership with the research community
- Transparent, data-driven, and evidence-based
- Bipartisan, sustainable, and operationally feasible
- Designed to strengthen, not weaken, America's global research leadership

Our Requests to Congress
In light of these considerations, we respectfully request that Congress:

- Maintain the NEI as an independent institute within the NIH to ensure sustained focus on vision research
- Recognize vision and vision research as a national priority a national public health and biomedical research priority
- Provide $1 billion in funding for NEI in FY27 to sustain innovation, address the growing burden of vision loss in the United States, and support the leading role that vision research plays across biomedical science innovation
- Reject universal forward funding proposals that would reduce new grant opportunities and destabilize the research pipeline
- Reject blanket caps on indirect costs and instead pursue thoughtful bipartisan reforms such as the FAIR model
- Continuing strong bipartisan support for NIH to ensure stability, predictability, and continued global leadership in biomedical research innovation

Thank you for your leadership and continued support of vision research and the NEI. If you have any questions or would like to discuss these issues further, please contact Dan Ignaszewski, Executive Director of Alliance for Vision Research at dan@eyeresearch.org or 202-742-1885.

We stand ready to work alongside Congress to ensure that vision research remains a central pillar of the nation's biomedical research enterprise and public health strategy.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Vision Research

(Serving as Friends of the National Eye Institute and with support from the undersigned organizations)