

NAEVR and ARVO Host Webinars with Key Research Funding Agencies



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With the cancellation of the 2020 ARVO Annual Meeting in Baltimore, NAEVR joined with ARVO in presenting collaborative Webinars with key funding Agencies—specifically the NEI and the Department of Defense (DOD)—which would have been held at the meeting. The May 19 DOD session, co-hosted by ARVO Immediate-Past President Daniel Stamer, PhD and NAEVR's James Jorkasky, and the June 26 NEI session, co-hosted by ARVO President Stephen Pflugfelder, MD and NAEVR's James Jorkasky, attracted more than 450 participants total and provided valuable, detailed presentations on funding priorities. Recordings of the Webinars are posted on the ARVO Web site.

DOD Identifies its Vision Program Priorities as FY2020 Program Announcement Issues



CDMRP Vision Program Manager Tian Wang, PhD

At the May 19 Webinar, Q. Tian Wang, PhD, Program Manager for DOD's Vision Research Program (VRP) within its Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP), discussed the VRP's history, the two-stage process used for reviewing proposals—Scientific Peer Review followed by Programmatic Review of how it meets DOD-identified research priorities—and the FY2020 Program Announcement, which was released the next day. She described VRP research priorities, funding mechanisms, application process, and dollar amounts and expected number of funded projects for each award from the total \$20 million in funding provided by Congress—the second year in which the VRP has been funded at that level. The VRP, which is one of 35 medical research programs managed by DOD's CDMRP, was established by Congress in FY2009 and through FY2019 has funded 117 projects for a total of \$118 million.

The FY2020 Program Announcement, posted on the CDMRP Web site, details three funding mechanisms which are similar to that in the FY2019 process but at increased funding levels:

- Investigator Initiated Research Awards (IIRA, with two funding levels)
- Translational Research Awards (TRA)
- Focused Translational Team Science Awards (FTTSA)

Pre-proposals were due on July 28, and full proposals will be due November 18.

Dr. Wang also discussed additional funding opportunities, including the Broad Agency Announcement (BAA), the Small Business Innovative Research (SBIR) Program, and DOD Request for Information (RFI) /Request for Project Proposals (RPP). DOD funding opportunities are available to domestic and international researchers, and those who navigate the VRP are more likely to apply for funding from other DOD programs with key words ("sensory" and "rehabilitation") and diseases with a vision impact. Through twelve different DOD funding programs, including the VRP, vision researchers have received upwards of \$222 million since FY2001.

See the back page for more about NAEVR's Defense-related Vision Research Advocacy

NEI Budget Highlights

In FY2019, 85 percent of NEI's budget was spent on the Extramural Program, 11 percent on the Intramural Program, and 4 percent on Research Support (Administration).

While the FY2019 NIH Success Rate was 20 percent, NEI's was 28 percent, due to its focus on Research Project Grants (RPGs) and by maintaining the average costs of grants. RPGs reflect 73.2 percent of the Extramural budget.

Of NEI's six program areas, Retinal Diseases reflects 44 percent of the budget, followed by Strabismus, Amblyopia & Visual Processing (23 percent), Corneal Diseases (13 percent), Glaucoma (10 percent), Lens & Cataract (7 percent), and Low Vision (3 percent).

NEI Reports on Funding, Reviews Priority Programs and Activities



NEI's Director, Extramural Programs Michael A. Steinmetz, PhD

On June 26, Michael Steinmetz, PhD, Director of NEI's Extramural Science Programs, first reviewed the Institute's final FY2019 Operating Budget (\$793.8 million, down from enacted \$796.5 million due to a Secretary transfer) and its FY2020 Operating Budget of \$823.3 million.

Dr. Steinmetz emphasized that vision researchers have benefited from other NIH funding programs, such as the Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Technologies (BRAIN) Initiative and the Regenerative Medicine Initiative, both mandated by the *21st Century Cures Act*. Vision has received almost a quarter of Regenerative Medicine Initiative funding, while NEI estimates that "vision" (defined as past-funded NEI investigators and researchers studying brain circuitry through the visual route) in FY2019 received 80 new grants, or 44 percent of the 182 new grants, for a total of \$93 million in new grant funding. The six-year total of new grant funding to "vision" from BRAIN is more than \$310 million.

He discussed changes in the NIH Peer Review process in detail, as well as the status and timeline of NEI's Strategic Plan, developed as part of NIH's overall Congressionally mandated Strategic Plan. He described NEI's new Anterior Segment Initiative, designed to complement the Audacious Goals Initiative for retina, and which will consider inflammation, ocular pain, dry eye, and the ocular microbiome. In response to a Request for Information (RFI) which NEI issued in fourth quarter 2019, more than half of the 52 respondents (reflecting over 200 stakeholders) wanted NEI to support more work in inflammation, including new models for research, infectious disease, ocular pain, and regenerative medicine.

He concluded by reminding participants about a variety of COVID-19 Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) since vision researchers have received funding from several trans-NIH initiatives.