

**U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
Office of Research and Development (ORD)
Quarterly Meeting of the National Research Advisory Council (NRAC)
September 7, 2022**

Minutes

Committee Members Present

Dr. Ronald Poropatich, Chair
Dr. Sanjay Doddamani
Dr. Steven Dubinett
Matthew Kuntz, JD
Dr. Paula Schnurr
Dr. Melina Kibbe
Dr. Dallas Hack
Dr. Julie Tamaska
Thomas Zampieri, PA

Committee Members Excused

Dr. Rajeev Ramchand
Dr. Cato Laurencin
Dr. Sidney Hinds

Speakers

Dr. John Kaplan
Mr. Antonio Laracuent
Christopher Britt, JD
Dr. Christopher Bever
Dr. Latonya Small
Dr. Karen Sanders
Dr. Gerhard Schulteis
Dr. Mark Roltsch
Dr. Cendrine Robinson
Dr. Ronald Poropatich
Dr. Melina Kibbe
Dr. Dallas Hack
Mr. Hawk Tran
Dr. Gil Alterovitz

Attendees

Liza Catucci, DFO
Rashelle Robinson, Alternate DFO
Lakeisha Skinner, Consultant/Note-Taker

The virtual meeting of the VA's National Research Advisory Council (NRAC) took place on September 7, 2022. Dr. Ronald Poropatich opened the meeting with announcements about the presentation materials and details on the public comment period. He then invited Ms. Liza Catucci, Designated Federal Officer (DFO), to make opening comments.

Dr. Poropatich called the meeting to order. He opened the floor by asking committee members to introduce themselves briefly and describe the line of work they do at their respective sites. He described the purpose of the NRAC as described in the charter and reviewed key takeaways from the previous NRAC Meeting. He also briefly described the NRAC happenings following the last meeting. He then invited Dr. Wendy Tenhula, Deputy CRADO, to comment on behalf of Dr. Rachel Ramoni, CRADO, who was unable to attend the meeting.

Dr. Tenhula discussed the importance of the NRAC work within the VA and various accomplishments of the NRAC. Some of these accomplishments include advancing IT support with the VA Network.

Dr. John Kaplan, Director of Technology Transfer, led the first presentation with an **Update on the Veteran Royalty Subcommittee** that is under development. He provided a brief description about the Office Technology Transfer whose work focuses on protecting VA patents and inventions. He provided a financial history of the program stating they received \$300,000 in 2015 compared to \$7,000,000 more recently. These funds result from patents and inventions of VA employees at medical centers that ultimately benefit Veterans. There is a \$250,000 cap for inventors and a \$250,000 cap for medical centers on royalty payments; funding in excess of the caps remains with ORD. During the presentation, Dr. Kaplan proposed to the NRAC the creation of a new subcommittee to provide recommendations to ORD on how to manage the remaining funds.

The second presentation was an **Overview of Section 209 & Its Impact on VA Research** led by Mr. Antonio Laracuente and Attorney Christopher Britt. Mr. Britt presented first with a brief description of Section 209, which is a statute stating that if a VA employee only does federal work, the VA employee can only be compensated on a federal pay scale with very limited exceptions. In addition, according to the statute VA researchers cannot do additional work outside their tour and get paid by outside affiliates. The new legislation would require drastic changes for research, as VA researchers/investigators often receive compensation from non-VA affiliates. The new bill was stuck in the House Committee but advanced on the House floor; it is now stuck on the Senate side and awaiting Congressional action. Mr. Laracuente discussed the legislative process for making changes to VA researchers' compensation. He suggested that ORD get over eighty universities vetted and approved for the State Treasury exemptions. Legislative changes would permit VA employees to receive compensation for non-VA work through universities and affiliates.

The third presentation was a **Research Enterprise Update and Overview of Actively Managed Portfolios** led by Dr. Christopher Bever. Dr. Bever reminded the group that during the NRAC Meeting in May 2022, Dr. Ramoni led the Research Enterprise presentation and described the nine initiatives started that are underway. He focused on different Actively Managed Portfolios (AMPs) that the Research Enterprise wants to highlight. The main areas currently being developed within the Enterprise structure include a) focus on staff to apply their advanced skills to the enterprise b) Central Research Human Resource (HR) Function: previous issues were due to local HR rules with transition plan established, and c) organizational realignment to make ORD more closely aligned with the clinical side of VA. His office plans to complete Phase One by October 1, 2022, with six phases underway.

AMPs are related research portfolios operating as part of a larger learning health system with the priorities of communication, coordination, and collaboration. The AMPs would include the collaboration of clinical partners and Veterans to provide input on clinical questions the VA must tackle. The first AMP the Research Enterprise is working on as a pilot is the Lung Precision Oncology Program (LPOP). This portfolio would involve collaborative efforts from the ORD Research arm and Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Clinical arm. There are five key AMP capabilities.

The fourth presentation was the **VA Advisory Committee Management Office (ACMO) Annual Briefing & Role and Process for Establishment of Subcommittees** presented by Dr. Latonya Small. Dr. Small gave an overview of the requirements for the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). The process includes the following requirements to fulfill: establishing the purpose of a subcommittee, promoting openness and accountability when a non-federal employee looks for advice and recommendations, charter established with articles of incorporation (a DFO must be in place to make sure it is going accordingly), meetings must be public, meeting announcements published within 15 days of meetings, and record keeping of meetings provided. These requirements are vital, and the Committee Chair must sign off on all meetings. Meeting announcements should be submitted to ACMO within 90 days of publication in the Federal Register.

What constitutes a Federal Advisory Committee (FAC) is publication in the federal register, provision of advice and recommendations; a quorum of half plus one (seven people) for meetings, and an approved agenda.

Closed meetings can include trade secrets, classified information, and criminal matters. They also can include personal information, tours, etc., of Veterans that cannot be disclosed to the public. Closed meetings must be approved by the Office of General Counsel (OGC).

Members can meet privately, and those meetings are not published in the federal register. Qualifications for private meetings include preparatory work for meetings, administrative work, and matters of the FAC. Administrative calls could include ethics training, conducting FACA 101 sessions, and providing or obtaining SGE Certification statements.

Committee members can testify if it is in their personal capacity. It can be their own opinion, not speaking on the committee's behalf. What is not permissible is speaking on behalf of FAC/VA

or a committee member looking to get reimbursement; both activities are in violation of the FACA.

The VA FACs' best practices include mastering their calendar and scheduling key meetings 18 months in advance, committee members knowing their roles, committee members formally establishing subcommittees, members reviewing meeting mechanics, forming cross committee collaborations, creating templates, utilizing VA Library services and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), conducting annual field visits, and asking FACA and ethics questions.

A subcommittee's purpose serves to collect information and focus on specific issues within ORD, and it must provide information to the parent committee, the NRAC.

The fifth presentation was the **Update on Extramural Funding Subcommittee** by Dr. Karen Sanders and Dr. Gerhard Schulteis. Dr. Schulteis led the first portion of the presentation, stating that the final copy of the subcommittee's white paper was sent to the NRAC leadership, and the subcommittee awaits feedback. He listed three successful practices with academic affiliates, VA non-profit corporations & medical centers that the subcommittee wishes to implement. The practices include creating successful communications, creating written documents to memorialize agreements, and having an overall picture of forming partnerships. He also identified three critical needs to include ORD formalizing research affiliation agreements, creating people development, and creating NPCs (non-profit corporation) development. Dr. Sanders noted that the white paper draft report was attached to the NRAC Meeting agenda. She asked everyone to read it and send the Extramural Funding Committee feedback on it. Proceeding this meeting, the subcommittee will submit it to ORD leadership, then GAO.

The sixth presentation was **Updates on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Initiatives** presented by Dr. Cendrine Robinson and Dr. Mark Roltsch, Co-Chairs of the ORD DEI Work Group. Dr. Robinson led most of the presentation with an overview of the VA DEI Work Group which consists of DEI representatives from each ORD office. The program began in July 2020 to have a formal footprint. There are three main goals the DEI program wants to accomplish in three installments which include promoting DEI efforts in the office, promoting DEI efforts in the field, and working to help build a health equity portfolio for Veterans and VA employees. DEI funds will go to field and professional development for VA employees. Dr. Robinson emphasized the importance of DEI volunteers at field locations. She also stated that the volunteers at other VA offices, along with academic and VA stakeholders, have formed four main subcommittees to help advance the mission of the DEI office. Dr. Robinson listed major accomplishments of the DEI program. They include establishing a supplement to promote diversity to recruit (awarded 21 awardees, salaries covered for up to 2 years), organizing seminars to help educate offices in DEI efforts, and establishing core recruitment at Morehouse College and the Atlanta VA to facilitate outreach efforts to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and creating and establishing summer research programs. The summer research programs expanded quickly, with 21 stations and over 100 students participating. The summer programs are slated to have a three-year pilot. The goal is to develop a future program that can go nationwide and enroll more students. Some of the lessons learned with the pilot program include having funding upfront for programs, having co-chairs, allowing team members

to develop ideas, setting up subcommittees, having co-chair support subcommittees' ideas, and communicate complete support from leadership. The summer research program received outstanding support from the NRAC and has been a successful program so far. The new person taking over from Dr. Robinson's Co-Chair role is Dr. Shakeria Cohen.

The seventh presentation was the **Proposal to Establish two New Subcommittees** a) Expanding the VA Research Reach by Dr. Melinda Kibbe and b) National Research Action Plan/Brain Health by Dr. Dallas Hack.

The Proposal to Establish VA Research Reach Subcommittee was presented by Dr. Melina Kibbe. She discussed the formation of a new subcommittee and the two issues the new subcommittee would focus on: a) improving the process for non-VA Ph. Ds to apply for VA eligibility and b) removing barriers to working with academic affiliates. Solutions for removing barriers include improving the process for leasing space, streamlining the process for partial and filling offsite waivers, needing more data on how the process occurs, and expanding the number of research projects. A motion was made and seconded to approve the new subcommittee with a unanimous vote to approve from the NRAC.

The Proposal to Establish the National Research Action Plan (NRAP)/Brain Health Subcommittee was presented by Dr. Dallas Hack. This would be a brain health subcommittee with a lifespan of about one year. The subcommittee would provide strategic counsel when needed. It would be led by Dr. Hack with research led by Dr. Stuart Hoffman. The subcommittee would ultimately serve as the advisory arm of the Development of a Brain Health AMP with a corresponding Brain Health Research Roadmap. A motion was made and seconded to approve the new subcommittee with a unanimous vote to approve from the NRAC.

Ms. Catucci will help both subcommittee chairs in the next steps to establish their respective subcommittees.

The eighth presentation was the Overview of **Alternative Strategies Subcommittee Next Steps** presented by Dr. Ron Poropatich. Dr. Poropatich discussed ongoing partnerships with academic affiliates and leveraging partnerships more with academic affiliates and other stakeholders that the subcommittee wants to establish. He believes the subcommittee should seek out Congressional special interest groups and academic leads. The two stakeholders working together would benefit the subcommittee's legislative agenda and advance the NRAC advocacy. He also believes that the subcommittee should work more closely with the Department of Defense and work with the pharmaceutical industry.

Dr. Poropatich asked fellow subcommittee members what next steps or direction the subcommittee should take/follow. Mr. Matthew Kuntz commented that other transactional authority did require Congressional action. Dr. Tenhula was uncertain whether the legislative language was included as a section in VIPER (VA Infrastructure Powers Exceptional Research Act of 2021). If Congressional action is approved, they can move to the next steps in advancing their legislative agenda. For the white paper, some follow-up actions are needed from the NRAC members which include the NRAC members submitting recommendations to the Secretary of the VA and reviewing the white paper again to see if any actions need to be taken immediately.

Dr. Poropatich said ORD has not yet provided a response to the white paper submitted by the subcommittee. The next steps he would like the subcommittee to take include sending out a white paper to NRAC leadership and to ORD, soliciting recommendations from ORD, and receiving and interpreting feedback to create recommendations to the Secretary of the VA.

The ninth presentation was the **Overview of the National Association of Veteran's Research and Education Foundation (NAVREF)** presented by Mr. Hawk Tran, interim CEO of NAVREF. Mr. Tran gave an overview of the organization which was established in 1992. It is not a legislated organization but a non-profit serving on behalf of Veterans. NAVREF is committed to reforms that will increase the quality of care for all Veterans. Mr. Tran highlighted accomplishments of NAVREF over the years and provided a list of current NAVREF staff. The focus areas of NAVREF are membership management involving mentorships for non-profit directors, senior staff members, and board members; education in conferences, workshops and webinars; advocacy in legislative and policy matters with FOVA (Friends of VA Medical Care and Research) and trials connecting industry to VA research to deliver clinical trials to Veterans. He emphasized the status of NAVREF as a nonprofit with unique public and private dynamics to help broaden the VA's ability to benefit from private and non-VA public support for research conducted by VA. He stated that NAVREF is the number one choice for several VA offices to administer non-VA research funds because it is a cost-effective organization that provides outstanding support for VA researchers.

The final presentation was the **Overview of VA National Artificial Intelligence Institute (NAII)** by Dr. Gil Alterovitz. According to Dr. Alterovitz, the NAII at VA lead the way in trustworthy artificial intelligence (AI) as a premier global program. The NAII focus areas include an advisory board, Veteran input, medical centers, AI at VA communities, and AI task force. For the AI Task Force focus area Dr. Alterovitz emphasized the AI Tech Print program. It is a program using data as a bidirectional link between the government and using the data across industry and government laboratories. An example Dr. Alterovitz provided was the accomplishment of the AI Tech print results of the Medication Adherence (CuraPatient) project. There is a legislation named Executive Order 13960: Promoting the Use of Trustworthy AI in Federal Government that calls for AI officials to work together to collect AI cases and pilot processes. The main task the executive order focuses on is VA working to establish two tracks: the NAII currently piloting an AI IRD Track and the VA AI Strategy released with 20+ offices working together. The NAII hopes to work with the NRAC soon on tasks such as the brain summit, forming other partnerships, and advancing AI at VA further. The NAII presentation served as the concluding presentation before transitioning to public remarks and questions.

The public nor NRAC members had any comments to share.

The next NRAC Quarterly meeting will be held on December 7, 2022, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. ET. Ms. Catucci reminded the invitees that the NRAC meets quarterly on the first Wednesday of the month in March, June, September and December each year.

Actional Items:

- The group will reach out to NAAC's Dr. Hildreth for a call. The aim is to have the NAAC provide an overview of the organization for the December 7 NRAC Meeting.
- Liza Catucci will assist Dr. Kibbe and Dr. Hack in establishing their respective subcommittees.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:52 p.m. ET.

Submitted,

DocuSigned by:
Ronald Poropatich
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Dr. Ronald Poropatich

Chair, National Research Advisory Council