



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 16, 2018

The Honorable Johnny Isakson
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The enclosed copy of the 2017 Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs including recommendations from the National Research Advisory Council is forwarded in accordance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

A similar letter has been sent to other leaders of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert L. Wilkie".

Robert L. Wilkie
Acting

Enclosures



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 16 , 2018

The Honorable Tim Walz
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Walz:

The enclosed copy of the 2017 Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs including recommendations from the National Research Advisory Council is forwarded in accordance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

A similar letter has been sent to other leaders of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert L. Wilkie", is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Robert L. Wilkie
Acting

Enclosures



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 16 , 2018

The Honorable David P. Roe, M.D.
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The enclosed copy of the 2017 Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs including recommendations from the National Research Advisory Council is forwarded in accordance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

A similar letter has been sent to other leaders of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert L. Wilkie".

Robert L. Wilkie
Acting

Enclosures



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

May 16 , 2018

The Honorable Jon Tester
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Tester:

The enclosed copy of the 2017 Report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs including recommendations from the National Research Advisory Council is forwarded in accordance with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

A similar letter has been sent to other leaders of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert L. Wilkie", is positioned above the typed name.

Robert L. Wilkie
Acting

Enclosures



February 1, 2018

Office of the Chairman

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The Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D.
Secretary

Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

On behalf of the National Research Advisory Council (NRAC), I am submitting our annual assessment on the scientific research program management of the Office of Research and Development (ORD). We specifically rate quality and portfolio balance, and are pleased to rate both an A.

The broad goal of VA research during calendar year 2017 was emphasizing and ensuring continued care for Veterans throughout their life span. ORD's comprehensive research program served VA's commitment to the health and care of Veterans, through a several cutting edge programs focused on your Top Priorities. One new initiative for suicide prevention is a clinical initiative, entitled Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health – Veterans Enhanced Treatment or REACH VET, utilizes predictive modeling and existing medical record data to identify Veterans at highest risk of suicide.

The VA has conducted groundbreaking trials, and with its integrated health-research system, it continues to be of great interest to pharma; of note, the Colonoscopy Versus Fecal Immunochemical Test in Reducing Mortality from Colorectal Cancer (CONFIRM) trial just enrolled its 50,000th participant. Additionally, two Veterans received their Life Under Kinetic Evolution (LUKE) arm – the world's most advanced commercial prosthetic. Rehabilitation Research & Development became the Clinical Partner at the inception of DARPA's Revolutionizing Prosthetics Program. The Industry Partner funded by DARPA was DEKA Research & Development Corporation.

ORD also enhanced research on genomic medicine and continued to grow the Million Veteran Program (MVP) with enrollment reaching more than 639,000 as of February 2017 and utilizing collaborative efforts to nurture capabilities. ORD made a commitment to MVP participants to leverage their data to advance knowledge and care of Veterans and the public and are now beginning to deliver on that promise. Thirty-five MVP-based abstracts have been presented at scientific meetings this year. Beginning early 2018, ORD will begin conducting cutting-edge data science in collaboration with the DOE.

Requests for research to benefit Gulf War Veterans increased as it has in past years. Interagency agreements were continued with the Departments of Energy and Defense, and the National Institutes of Health to enable data access to a broader group of researchers and effectively use resources.

More specifically, the research priorities included: Care for Returning Service Members (such as mental health including suicide prevention, polytrauma, traumatic brain injury, sensory loss, pain management, military sexual trauma, homelessness, caregiver issues and addictive disorders); Continued Care for the Veteran (such as cancer, diabetes, women's health, integrated health, smoking cessation, obesity and chronic pain); and Care for the "Golden Veteran" (such as dementia, Parkinson's Disease, Alzheimer's Disease, heart failure, long-term care, and end-of-life care.)

In 2017 the NRAC was asked by ORD leadership to advise on how to better integrate operations with research, how to make the best use of the DOE collaboration, and how ORD can measure success. The NRAC also provided guidance on the assets from the Air Force Health Study, since a 2016 NRAC recommendation regarding assets of the Air Force Health Study has prompted discussions across DoD and VA. A memo from the Office of the Air Force Surgeon General supported restarting and re-energizing work on the assets of the Air Force Health Study to preserve this valuable and worthy resource for more scientific research. ORD is working with DoD toward the successful transfer of biospecimens from Wright Patterson Air Force Base.

The sub-committee made three recommendations:

1. To address VA's critical shortage of adequate wet-lab research space, the Department should work rapidly to remove the "pre-commitment restriction" currently in place that prohibits VA facilities from entering into agreements to secure research space with research partners at the construction phase. This change will enhance the flexibility of Research and Development (R&D) field programs and hospital directors to collaborate with their affiliated Academic institution/s and Non-profit Corporations on the creation and or building of new research space that VA might lease and could be one component of a broader research infrastructure plan for VA ORD. VA should complete this recommendation by January 2020.
2. VA Modernization processes should modify the organizational reporting structure for ORD and Academic Affairs' Chief Officers to report directly to the Under Secretary for Health (USH) as has been the case in the past. VA should complete this recommendation through Modernization implementation plans in 2019.
3. The Technology Transfer Program (TTP) should work to immediately hire five (5) additional Technology Transfer Specialists (TTSs) thereby increasing TTP to ten (10) TTSs to provide improved technology transfer services to the various research facilities and innovation initiatives across the Department to maximize the technology being transferred/licensed to the private sector in order to provide better products and services to Veterans and the American Public and bolster revenue into the VA in order to fund additional research. VA should complete this recommendation by September 2019 and annually publish revenue results by December of each year.

These recommendations were accepted by ORD leadership for implementation as appropriate.

As the NRAC Chair, I am honored to submit this report summarizing the outstanding research efforts of ORD.

Sincerely,



John R. Feussner, M.D., M.P.H
NRAC Chair
Distinguished University Professor
Executive Dean, Clinical Affairs (Emeritus)
College of Medicine
Medical University of South Carolina
Charleston, SC

**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
NATIONAL RESEARCH ADVISORY COUNCIL (NRAC)
RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS
FEBRUARY 1, 2018**

Recommendation 1: To address VA's critical shortage of adequate wet-lab research space, the Department should work rapidly to remove the "pre-commitment restriction" currently in place that prohibits VA facilities from entering into agreements to secure research space with research partners at the construction phase. This change will enhance the flexibility of Research and Development field programs and hospital directors to collaborate with their affiliated academic institutions and non-profit corporations on the creation and/or building of new research space that VA might lease, and could be one component of a broader research infrastructure plan for VA Office of Research and Development (ORD). VA should complete this recommendation by January 2020.

VA Response: Concur in principle. VA recognizes the importance of collaborating with research partners to better advance the health care of Veterans. VA will explore options to ensure access to more advanced equipment and facilities, enhance academic and industry collaborations for innovative research, and reduce overall costs.

Recommendation 2: VA Modernization processes should modify the organizational reporting structure for ORD and Academic Affairs' Chief Officers to report directly to the Under Secretary for Health (USH) as has been the case in the past. VA should complete this recommendation through Modernization implementation plans in 2019.

VA Response: Non-Concur. VA recognizes the importance of aligning program offices responsible for key statutory missions at the highest levels of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The Secretary is steadfast in his support of VA's research mission and clinical education mission. VA is currently implementing an extensive modernization plan of the VHA Central Office. ORD will be prominently realigned to assure agency support of the research mission.

Recommendation 3: The Technology Transfer Program (TTP) should work to immediately hire five additional Technology Transfer Specialists (TTS) to increase TTP to ten TTS. This will improve technology transfer services to the various research facilities and innovation initiatives across the Department, maximizing the technology transferred/licensed to the private sector to provide better products and services to Veterans and the American Public, bolstering revenue into VA to fund additional research. VA should complete this recommendation by September 2019 and annually publish revenue results by December of each year.

VA Response: Concur. VA understands the need to hire five additional TTS. VA is currently processing the job announcement to hire three additional TTS and a database manager by the end of 2018. VA will reevaluate staffing needs after the four additional employees have been in place for 6 months.

Actions to Implement:

VA Action Plan– NRAC Recommendations, February 2018						
Steps to Implement Recommendation	Lead Office	Other Offices	Tasks	Due Date	Current Status	Contact Person
<p>Recommendation 1: Remove the “pre-commitment restriction” currently in place that prohibits VA facilities from entering into agreements to secure research space with research partners at the construction phase.</p>	Office of Research and Development		ORD will coordinate with the Office of Legislative Affairs to develop a Legislative Proposal.	FY2020	Ongoing FY 2019-2020	Marisue Cody, ORD, 202-461-5681
<p>Recommendation 2: Modify the organizational reporting structure for ORD and Academic Affairs’ Chief Officers to report directly to the Under Secretary for Health (USH).</p>	Office of the Under Secretary for Health (USH)			FY2019	Ongoing FY 2018	Marisue Cody, ORD, 202-461-5681
<p>Recommendation 3: The Technology Transfer Program (TTP) should work to immediately increase staff to provide improved technology transfer services to the various research facilities and innovation initiatives across the Department to maximize the technology being transferred/licensed to the private sector in order to provide better products and services to Veterans and the American Public and bolster revenue into VA in order to fund additional research.</p>	Office of Research and Development	USH	ORD will coordinate with the office of the USH to secure the Hiring Exemption approval, then work with HR to hire additional staff.	FY2018	Ongoing FY 2018	John Kaplan, ORD, 202-632-7271