

DRAFT

House Letter: Approps and LHHS Subcommittee Chair/Ranking

Dear Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Lowey, Chairman Cole, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

Senate Letter: Approps and LHHS Subcommittee Chair/Ranking

Dear Chairman Cochran, Vice Chairwoman Mikulski, Chairman Blunt, and Ranking Member Murray:

As the [House] [Senate] plans its markup of the Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (LHHS) spending bill, the undersigned Chairs of the Academic Departments of Ophthalmology from across the United States request that you support a National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding level of at least \$32 billion and a National Eye Institute (NEI) funding level of at least \$730 million, waiving these critical agencies from sequester cuts and Budget Control Act caps.

Due to flat funding, lack of inflationary increases, and sequester cuts, the NIH and NEI budgets have each declined by almost 25 percent since 2003, adjusting for inflation. Combined, these actions have significantly limited the ability of NIH/NEI to sustain current research capacity, explore promising new areas of science, support mid-stage investigators, and train the next generation of emerging scientists.

NEI's FY2015 funding of \$677 million—down \$25 million from its pre-sequester FY2012 level of \$702 million—is less than 0.5 percent of the \$145 billion annual cost of vision disorders, which will grow to a \$717 billion annual cost by year 2050, in inflation-adjusted dollars. The U.S. is spending only \$2.10 per-person, per-year for vision research, while the cost of treating blindness and low vision is \$6,680 per-person, per year. Additionally, the direct medical costs associated with eye disorders are now the fifth highest, only less than heart disease, cancers, emotional disorders and pulmonary conditions.

These costs will only continue to grow due to increased healthcare costs associated with the aging of the population, the disproportionate incidence of eye disease in fast-growing minority populations, and vision loss associated with chronic diseases, such as diabetes. The NEI estimates that, by 2020, more than 50 million Americans age 40+ will be blind, have low vision, or an age-related eye disease, such as age-related macular degeneration (AMD), glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, or cataract. NEI-funded research activities to identify the genetic basis of these blinding eye diseases and to regenerate neurons/neural connections in the eye and visual system through its *Audacious Goals Initiative* deserve adequate support.

A 2014 public opinion poll found that a majority of Americans across racial and ethnic lines describe losing vision as potentially having the greatest impact on their day-to-day life, more so than other conditions including loss of limb, memory, hearing and speech. They also support an increase in NEI funding. In that regard, bipartisan Members of Congress expressed their support for NIH funding at both the House and Senate LHHS Appropriations Subcommittee hearings, and the House Energy and Commerce Committee has established an important marker in authorizing annual NIH funding increases of \$1.5 billion and a new \$10 billion Innovation Fund in its proposed 21st Century Cures Act legislation.

NIH/NEI funded research is making a difference in the lives of all Americans. We ask that you support FY2016 NIH funding of at least \$32 billion and NEI funding of at least \$730 million to build upon the past investment in life-saving and life-improving research and to ensure the health—and eye health—of all Americans.

Thank you for considering our request, and we stand ready to assist in any way.

Sincerely,