March xx, 2018

The Honorable Thad Cochran, Chairman

Senate Committee on Appropriations

Dirksen Senate-122

Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen, Chairman   
House Committee on Appropriations

U.S. House of Representatives

H-305, the Capitol

Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Ranking Member

Senate Committee on Appropriations

Dirksen Senate-122

Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member

House Committee on Appropriations

U.S. House of Representatives

H-305, the Capitol

Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cochran, Ranking Member Leahy,   
Chairman Frelinghuysen, Ranking Member Lowey:

This letter is submitted on behalf of the Blinded Veterans Association and nine additional organizations dedicated to serving our nation’s service members and veterans. The undersigned organizations request that the Peer Reviewed Vision Trauma (PRMR-Vision) Program, extramural research line item, be funded at $20 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019. We have appreciated your staunch support for increased appropriations for this program during the past several years. The PRMR-Vision program, which is managed by the Department of Defense (DoD) Telemedicine and Advanced Technology Research Center (TATRC), was initially created by Congress in FY 2009 appropriations to provide for vital translational battlefield eye injury research and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) vision system dysfunction research.

We believe that defense-related vision research warrants a more vigorous investment due to significant gaps in DoD research that have been identified by vision research experts into sensory injuries- vision and hearing- resulting from trauma sustained during deployment, and have indicated that addressing these gaps is one of their top funding priorities in the field of research related to war trauma. Since 2010, DoD has repeatedly presented analyses highlighting these gaps in Vision Trauma Research. Per the DoD Vision Center of Excellence, 14.9% of all those wounded/evacuated from today's battlefields have some form of penetrating eye injuries and TBI-related visual system dysfunction due to the force of IED blasts.

With the U.S continued presence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, the risk of more eye injuries is still rising. The Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) wars have produced the highest percentages of war eye injuries evacuated since World War I. Figures released by the Veterans Health Administration in 2015, covering the period between October 1, 2001 and June 30, 2015, indicate that 211,350 OIF/ OEF/OND individual veterans were enrolled in the VA healthcare system with injuries impacting their vision. 49% of service members sustaining such injuries are under the age of 36. In addition, the VA Poly Trauma Center reports that 80% of all TBI-injured patients complain of visual symptoms associated with their exposure to IED blasts and the VA has a total of 66,968 patients with such TBI vision symptoms. Vision TBI screening programs and accompanying research are vital to ensuring more treatment options for these visual complications.

As with the existing specialized research programs for burns, orthopedics, and spinal cord injuries, a more vigorously funded PRMR-Vision Trauma extramural research program will enable the exploration of new and promising research opportunities that result in improved outcomes for those who sustain visual injuries on the battlefield. Research into deployment-related vision injuries resulting from blast trauma is not currently conducted by VA, or any other federal agency. On the other hand, the DoD VRP has produced more than 80 peer reviewed published papers on the care and treatment of vision trauma, which benefit both civilian trauma centers, and our military allies by improving the care and prevention of blast injuries around the world.

We appreciate the fact that Congress established the dedicated PRMR-Vision Trauma Program line item in FY 2009 and that bipartisan support for the program continues to be strong. In order to fund the full extent of vision restoration research needed to address these various battlefield vision injuries, we ask for $20 million in funding for PRMR-Vision extramural research in FY 2019 appropriations. Current funding levels allow for funding of less than ten percent of the vision research grant proposals the program receives each year. Current levels must increase if the program is to fund vision research grants that will address the remaining gaps in eye trauma research. An additional $5 million would encourage the individual and institutional commitment that will be necessary to award more grant awards aimed at preventing blindness as well as possible vision restoration for those already living with severe combat eye injury or TBI visual impairment.

Whether a soldier is engaged directly in combat conditions or in activities that support the military, vision is the most critical of the five senses for optimal performance, accounting for 70% of our total sensory awareness. It is also the sense most vulnerable to injury, both acute and chronic. Treatment of acute eye injury on the battlefield and in early stages of medical evacuation can determine the extent of resulting vision impairment or chronic eye disease later and the associated need for vision rehabilitation. As a result, the ability to effectively treat acute eye damage can have long-term implications for an individual's vision health, productivity, and quality of life for the remainder of their military service and into their civilian lives.

Our nation has seen great advances in the fight against a wide range of medical conditions, but much remains to be done for those who sustain severe eye injuries on the battlefield. Combat translational research should continue to be a top priority so that our veterans who suffer serious penetrating eye wounds and/or TBI during the course of deployment will have opportunities for improved visual outcomes. We appreciate your bi-partisan leadership in support of these vital defense trauma research programs. The undersigned organizations respectfully ask for your continued support in the FY 2019 appropriations.

Sincerely,

Blinded Veterans Association

Disabled American Veterans

Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America

Jewish War Veterans

Military Officers Association of America

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Paralyzed Veterans of America

Veterans of Foreign Wars

Vietnam Veterans of America

Veterans Health Council