Written Statement
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Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs
Appropriations Committee
In Support of FY26 Appropriations and Animal Models at the Department of Veterans Affairs

Chair Boozman, Ranking Member Ossoff, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the Society for Neuroscience (SfN), I am honored to present this testimony in support of robust funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical and Prosthetic Research Program at a level of $1.2 billion in FY 2026 and for the continued responsible and ethical use of animals in research at the VA. For researchers nationwide, the ability to make life-changing advancements in neuroscience depends on the availability of animal models.

One area of my lab's research at the University of California, Davis, focuses on the neurobiology of aging and neurodegenerative disorders, particularly as they relate to cellular and synaptic organization of the cerebral cortex. My lab is developing a comprehensive model of synaptic health in the cerebral cortex and how molecular and structural deviations from this profile, induced by age and Alzheimer's Disease, impact cognitive performance. Continued progress depends on sustained federal funding at a level that, at a minimum, keeps pace with inflation.

The VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program seeks to improve the health and well-being of veterans through basic, translational, clinical, health service, and rehabilitative research. Continued support for research at the VA is essential to preserve the VA's legacy of scientific excellence and will empower the VA to recruit and retain top scientific talent, fuel groundbreaking discoveries, and ensure veterans continue to benefit from cutting-edge treatments. With support from this committee, the VA can remain at the forefront of medical research, delivering breakthroughs that improve veterans' lives and strengthen the U.S. global leadership in research.

<u>The Importance of the Use of Animals in VA-Funded Research</u>
SfN is grateful to Congress for its support of the important mission of the VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program, which includes a focus on improving the lives of veterans through basic, translational, and clinical research. Animal models are critical to continue this research because they are currently the best way researchers have to advance lifesaving medicines and treatments specifically in neuroscience. The use of animal models is already heavily regulated, including requiring the use of as few animals as possible to achieve reliable results. More than 99 percent of the animals studied in VA research are rats and mice because these are good models for many scientific questions. However, some questions that need to be answered cannot be done by studying rats or mice alone, thus research with canines, felines and non-human primates remains necessary. Large animal models share closer physiological, genetic, and metabolic similarities with humans, making them indispensable for studying complex diseases such as ALS, Parkinson's, and heart disease, as well as spinal cord injury.

For the United States to remain the world leader in biomedical research and to maintain and grow opportunities across areas of science, Congress must continue to allow the use of animal models at the VA. If the U.S. does not maintain strong support for responsible animal research, it risks losing its leadership position to countries like China. Although nonanimal models (often known as new approach methods, or NAMs) like organ chips, 3D cell cultures, AI models, and

others provide valuable insights into biological processes, they cannot replicate the complexity of a whole living system like animals and do not provide the same level of validation. Neuroscientists use a wide range of animal models that create discoveries – sometimes unexpected discoveries – expanding knowledge of biological processes. This level of discovery reveals new targets for research to treat all kinds of brain and spinal cord disorders affecting millions of people in the United States including veterans as explained in the below example of VA-funded research.

Researchers Use Non-Human Primate Models to Study Spinal Cord Injuries
Researchers in San Diego, funded by the VA, are currently using non-human primates to explore the possibility that neural stem cells can be used to help bridge the damaged tissue and restore communication across the site of a spinal cord injury. This research is vital to improving the lives of more than 40,000 veterans and millions of other people across the globe with spinal cord injuries. This research could not be done without the use of non-human primate models because previous work with stem cell transplantation revealed key differences in how the stem cells behaved in non-human primates compared to in rodents; furthermore, the fine motor control of the hand, which is of particular interest in this research, is unique to primate species. In pursuit of the best science, it is critical that scientists have access to the models that will promote further discovery.

Congress Must Support Access to Models Necessary for Neuroscience Discovery

SfN urges the Committee to appropriate funding for biomedical research without restriction against the use of animal models. Adequate funding is necessary to advance our understanding of the brain; however, full realization of this funding's promise requires appropriate access to research models, including canine, feline, non-human primates and other animal models. Animal research is highly regulated to ensure the ethical and responsible care and treatment of animals, and SfN and its members are committed to the highest legal and ethical standards. While SfN embraces the goal of the reduction, refinement, and eventual replacement of animal models in biomedical research, much more research and time are needed before such a goal is attainable. Premature replacement of animal models may delay or preclude the discovery of treatments and cures—not only for neurological diseases like Alzheimer's disease, addiction, and traumatic brain injury, but also for communicable diseases and countless other conditions. There are currently no viable alternatives available for studying biomedical systems that advance our understanding of the brain and nervous system, or when seeking treatments for diseases and disorders like depression, addiction, neurodegenerative disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorders.

Efforts to curtail the use of animal models in this research present major obstacles to scientific breakthroughs and discoveries that aim to improve the health and lives of our nation's service members and veterans. Existing appropriations bill language that requires the VA to phase out the use of canines, felines, and non-human primates in its research by 2026 could delay scientific progress and put the discovery of lifesaving treatments for veterans at risk. SfN urges Congress to work with the VA to ensure this important and well-regulated research with animal models can continue to improve the lives of veterans across the country.

Call for Funding in Regular Order and Stabilization to the Research Enterprise

SfN joins the biomedical research community in supporting an increase in VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program funding to $1.2 billion in FY 2026. Equally important as providing a reliable increase in funding for biomedical research is ensuring funding is approved in a timely

manner. Year-long continuing resolutions have significant consequences on research, including restricting the VA's ability to fund new grants and to fully fund continuation grants. For some of our members, this means waiting for a final decision to be made on funding before knowing if their highly scored grant will be activated or delayed resulting in diminished productivity until appropriations are final. These consequences can be particularly devastating for trainees seeking to begin their careers. Reliable funding allows researchers to plan long-term studies, develop technologies, and engage in groundbreaking science without disruption.

In addition, recent federal hiring freezes and the recent mass dismissal of VA employees will immediately and adversely impact veteran care, patient safety, and research at VA medical centers nationwide. These terminations will disrupt research projects that are vital to veterans' health, including studies on cancer treatments, opioid addiction, prosthetics, suicide prevention, and toxic exposures. The sudden halt of these initiatives not only undermines advancements in medical care but also jeopardizes the safety and well-being of veterans who rely on these critical services and access to life-saving medications and treatments. According to data collected by the National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations, the hiring freeze could result in the suspension or cancellation of 370 extramural studies and clinical trials, the loss of $35 million in VA research funding, and up to 10,000 veterans losing access to clinical treatments. Additionally, efficiency in animal research requires strategic investment, not across-the-board cuts. Improving research efficiency means investing in scientific resources, technologies, and staff while supporting regulatory streamlining. Blanket funding cuts and job reductions risk slowing progress and reducing oversight. For studies with animals, this jeopardizes their health and welfare. Thus, it is imperative to reverse these policies and dismissals in order to protect veteran health and continue this life-saving research with animals.

Ensuring federal funding for biomedical research remains uninterrupted is essential to the future of research in the United States. All the positive benefits research provides in this country are negatively impacted by these real-time considerations and destabilization efforts. SfN strongly supports the appropriation of VA Medical and Prosthetic Research Program funding in a timely and efficient manner to avoid delays in approving new research grants and the continued availability of animal models to continue this work and urges the Subcommittee to discontinue language that prematurely restricts or prohibits research with animal models.