NAVREF
National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations

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Accelerating Impact

Strategic Actions to Power Up VA's Research Partnerships for Veterans

2026 Annual Report

Prepared by the National Association of Veterans Research & Education Foundations

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The National Association of Veterans Research & Education Foundations (NAVREF), founded in 1992 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, represents over 75 research and education foundations affiliated with U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers. These foundations, authorized by Congress more than thirty years ago, have established a flexible funding infrastructure to advance the VA's research and education missions. Annually, they facilitate over $340 million in clinical research investments from a range of supporting organizations including federal agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Defense), nonprofit organizations (e.g., Prostate Cancer Foundation, PCORI), and industry sponsors (e.g., pharmaceutical and biotech companies). These investments have had a significant and lasting impact on veterans' lives and have transformed the VA's approach to clinical research, allowing the VA to maximize and augment its research capabilities.

NAVREF's Industry Partner Consortium (IPC) convenes leading biopharmaceutical companies, medical device manufacturers, and other research experts to collaborate on how to expand the clinical trials pipeline for veterans leveraging VA's vast infrastructure. In 2024, NAVREF launched a new annual report - "Enhancing Excellence: Strategic Recommendations for Optimizing Extramural Research Across the VA" – in collaboration with our IPC. This report underscores our commitment to advancing and expanding clinical trials across the VA, ensuring that veterans nationwide have access to cutting-edge treatments and interventions that are essential for high-quality healthcare. By highlighting key developments, successes, and strategic recommendations, we aim to foster robust industry partnerships to enhance research opportunities and ultimately improve healthcare outcomes for veterans.

We extend our gratitude to our IPC Members—Astrazeneca, BCG, BioAffinity Technologies, Booz Allen Hamilton, Bristol Myers Squibb, Cognition Therapeutics, Eli Lilly & Company, Genentech, GSK, Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, Siemens Healthineers, Smith+Nephew, and Takeda —whose support has been instrumental in this endeavor.

For questions about this report, please email inquiries@navref.org.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The VA stands at a pivotal moment. With unprecedented interest from private-sector partners, a rich tradition of research-driven care that spans a century, and transformative capabilities in data, clinical infrastructure, and precision medicine, the opportunity to cement VA as the nation's leader in clinical trials has never been greater. As it stands today, the VA offers an unparalleled environment for high-impact clinical research. With over 9 million enrolled veterans receiving care across a nationally integrated system, the VA combines scale, diversity, and real-world clinical complexity—assets increasingly recognized by private-sector partners developing next-generation therapies.

Building on this momentum, the report outlines strategic recommendations to position the VA as a national leader in clinical trials and further improve veteran health:

1. **Simplify Regulatory Processes:** Streamline legal and regulatory reviews to accelerate industry partnerships and increase timely veteran access to emerging therapies.
2. **Leverage Site-Level Data:** Provide external partners with secure access to localized data to optimize trial design, site selection, and population targeting.
3. **Optimize EHR Modernization:** Integrate advanced, AI-powered tools within the new Oracle Cerner EHR system to enhance clinical trial matching, recruitment, and veteran engagement.

Implementing these strategic recommendations will unlock VA's full potential, accelerate the development of therapies, and directly improve the health and lives of veterans nationwide. The time to act is now: with focused investment and aligned effort, VA can translate decades of innovation into immediate, measurable impact for the veteran community and the broader scientific enterprise.

BACKGROUND

VA's Research Program is the only federal research enterprise dedicated exclusively to improving the health and lives of our nation's veterans. For more than a century, it has evolved in step with the needs of those who served and with VA researchers pioneering discoveries in toxic exposures, traumatic brain injury, chronic care, mental health, and countless other areas where veterans have unique risks and unmet needs.

Today, the VA offers an **unparalleled** environment for high-impact clinical research in the United States. With over 9 million enrolled veterans receiving care across a national, integrated system, the VA has the scale, diversity, and real-world clinical complexity that research partners need to accelerate the development of emerging therapies and cures.

Increasingly, private-sector biopharmaceutical leaders recognize the VA as a unique strategic asset for clinical research. Companies developing next-generation therapeutics—especially in areas like oncology, neuroscience, cardiometabolic disease, and precision medicine—are seeking partners who can deliver both scientific rigor and access to patient populations that reflect real-world complexity. The VA's groundbreaking integrated system, diverse patient base, and deep bench of clinician-investigators create an environment that leading industry sponsors rarely find elsewhere.

This momentum is already visible: industry sponsors are seeking to expand their VA footprints, aligning clinical trials with the Department's strengths in complex chronic disease management, data analytics, and long-term monitoring. They are seeking out the VA not only because of its national reach and stability, but because of VA's commitment to producing high-quality data in support of innovative interventions that will advance veteran health. When these capabilities are fully and consistently deployed, these factors reduce risk, improve trial performance, and help companies bring therapies to market more efficiently.

As the demand for meaningful, inclusive, and impactful clinical trials grows, the private sector's interest in partnering with the VA is only accelerating. Investment in VA research is investment in a system that can scale innovation, reach underserved populations, and generate evidence that truly reflects those unique experiences and medical histories of those who have served. For sponsors seeking both scientific excellence and societal impact, the VA stands out as a premier (and increasingly indispensable) partner.

Below, we outline the key achievements and progress to date, along with our 2025 recommendations. With focused investment and aligned effort, these recommendations can strengthen the VA's research infrastructure and create a lasting foundation for long-term success.

CELEBRATING SUCCESS

2025 marked a historic milestone for the VA – the 100th Anniversary of the VA Research Program. Over the past century, VA researchers have driven breakthroughs that have reshaped modern medicine, from foundational innovations such as the implantable cardiac pacemaker and nicotine patch to more recent advances, including the early discoveries of GLP-1 based therapies and groundbreaking precision medicine strategies. This legacy of innovation continues to shape the future of veteran care and broader scientific community.

We applaud VA leaders, researchers, and other policymakers for the following efforts led in the last year:

Enrolling more than 1 million veterans in VA's Million Veteran Program (MVP)

In late 2024, VA's Million Veteran Program (MVP) surpassed 1 million enrolled participants, a historic achievement that officially makes it the world's largest and most diverse genetic biobank. This milestone solidifies the VA's leadership in precision medicine and creates an unprecedented foundation for advancing discoveries that can directly improve veteran health. Equally important, VA leadership began exploring how private sector collaborations could further bolster MVP's growth and impact. The Department's release of a RFI seeking industry collaborators for MVP projects in heart failure reflects a promising shift toward deeper public–private partnership and signals strong momentum for expanding MVP's scientific reach in the years ahead.

Strong bipartisan support for VA Research

In a year of uncertainty across the biomedical research space, VA research has benefitted from strong, bipartisan support. As part of the FY26 budget, House and Senate leadership increased funding for VA research, highlighting the importance of addressing health conditions that disproportionately affect the veteran population. We also commend the new Administration and VA leadership for ensuring high visibility and transparency around research priorities, reinforcing the Department's commitment to advancing science that directly improves veterans' health.

Pioneering Health Discoveries

VA researchers continue to demonstrate extraordinary scientific prowess, leading discoveries that are reshaping medicine on a global scale. In early 2025, one of the most comprehensive studies of GLP-1 therapies to date was completed by VA researchers. Leveraging the medical records of roughly 2.5 million veterans, VA scientists revealed that GLP-1 drugs may influence more than 170 diseases and conditions, showcasing both the scope and depth of their analytical and clinical expertise.

Additionally, VA researchers continued to push the boundaries of biomedical innovation across the year – in Cleveland, VA leaders pioneered a new therapeutic that could repair damaged brain tissue, potentially preventing the cognitive decline associated with traumatic brain injury and Alzheimer's disease. In West Haven, VA researchers created the first molecular map of PTSD's footprint in the human brain.

These 2025 breakthroughs are a testament to the unmatched talent, vision, and dedication of VA investigators, whose work not only transforms care for veterans, but drives advances that benefit the entire nation

2025 RECOMMENDATION LIST

Below, we highlight key opportunities and actionable steps that could position the VA as the nation's leader in clinical trials. By capitalizing on these strategies, the VA can not only strengthen trial performance and innovation but also accelerate the development of therapies that directly improve the health and well-being of veterans. Implementing these recommendations will reinforce VA's reputation for high-quality, impactful research while maximizing benefits for the veteran community.

1 Simplify Regulatory Processes to Ensure Veterans have Timely Access to New Interventions

Central to VA's mission is ensuring veterans have access to cutting-edge innovations and emerging therapeutics as part of their routine care. Building strong, collaborative relationships with industry sponsors who are advancing new treatments to prevent and manage disease is critical to achieving this goal. VA's unique resources, particularly its extensive patient data, make it an unmatched partner for clinical research.

However, unpredictable timelines and lengthy legal and regulatory reviews (e.g., CRADA reviews, PO/ISSO approvals) have emerged as significant barriers for industry partners seeking to collaborate. To address this, we recommend a comprehensive review of VA's legal and regulatory processes for clinical trials - conducted in collaboration with industry partners - with the goal of streamlining reviews to focus solely on essential regulatory and legal factors. As part of this effort, VA and industry partners should explore opportunities to responsibly integrate AI-enabled tools to support document review, risk assessment, and workflow management, while maintaining appropriate oversight and compliance. Simplifying these processes would significantly accelerate partnerships, strengthen engagement with industry, and expand the clinical trials pipeline for veteran communities.

VA could draw inspiration from recent federal successes, such as the White House's revitalization of the FedRAMP process, where streamlined procedures and accelerated timelines transformed technology delivery across government. A similar approach could be piloted within VA to create a faster, more predictable framework for research collaboration.

2 Leverage VA Site-Level Data to Inform Clinical Trials

Currently, external partners have limited visibility into the landscape of veteran needs across VA catchment areas. Access to site-level data would allow sponsors to strategically identify clinical trial locations, optimize resource allocation, and better match research initiatives to the populations most in need.

We recommend that VA design new data tools and pilot programs to enable secure, data-driven decision-making for external partners, while fully safeguarding personal health information. While budget constraints may limit full-scale implementation, there are opportunities for leveraging external funding through VA's flexible nonprofit infrastructure to support these efforts.

3 Optimize the EHR Modernization Transition to Advance Clinical Trial Matching

The ongoing transition to the new Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) system with Oracle Cerner presents a unique opportunity to enhance VA research capabilities. Sites with major research programs are already preparing for this change, creating a prime moment to integrate advanced, AI-powered tools that improve clinical trial matching.

We recommend that VA leaders leverage this transition to deploy algorithms within the Oracle Cerner platform, enabling clinicians and researchers to efficiently identify eligible participants, accelerate recruitment, and optimize trial design. In the long-term, integrating these capabilities with VA's mobile app could allow veterans to receive timely notifications about clinical trial opportunities, further expanding access to innovative therapies. By aligning the EHRM transition with research priorities, VA can strengthen its clinical trial infrastructure and improve outcomes for veterans nationwide.

CONCLUSION

As the VA enters its second century of research, it stands at a transformative point in its history. The Department has a unique combination of scientific capability, growing interest from private-sector partners, bipartisan support in Congress, and a legacy of research that has shaped modern medicine for veterans and for the nation. With strategic improvements that streamline regulatory timelines, expand access to site-level data, and integrate advanced tools into the modernized electronic health record, the VA can convert this momentum into stronger clinical trial performance and more rapid access to emerging therapies.

These recommendations are designed to produce clear results. By reducing barriers for industry partnerships, improving clinical trial matching and recruitment, and enabling smarter data-driven decisions, the VA can expand research capacity and bring innovative treatments to veterans more efficiently. The outcome will be a research environment that is easier to navigate, more competitive, and better aligned with the pace of scientific advancement.

NAVREF and its Industry Partner Consortium remain committed to supporting VA efforts that strengthen research infrastructure and elevate clinical trial excellence. The opportunities outlined in this report are achievable and meaningful. Advancing them will help ensure that veterans receive care informed by the most current science and that VA research continues to lead in innovation, access, and impact.