

**STATEMENT OF  
MARK ZHANG, D.O., MMSC, FMXR  
ACTING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
DISCOVERY, EDUCATION, AND AFFILIATE NETWORKS (DEAN)  
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA)  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
ON  
ADVANCING THE MISSION: EVALUATING THE FUTURE OF VA RESEARCH  
July 22, 2026**

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss VA's research enterprise, its impact on Veterans' lives, the work underway today, and the future of Veteran-centered research. The standard governing our work is to ensure every dollar VA invests in research is directly tied to Veterans' health and wellbeing. Joining me today from VHA, are Ms. La' Toya Prieur, Chief of Human Capital Management, and Dr. Michael Kelley, Executive Director, National Oncology Program.

**A Century of Mission-Focused Research**

For 100 years, VA's research has produced advances that have changed clinical practice well beyond VA, including the first implantable cardiac pacemaker, the nicotine patch, and foundational work on the modern computed tomography scan, while keeping Veterans at the center of every study. That same principle shapes the research we do not pursue. VA research is not a general-purpose science portfolio; it is a targeted investment in questions that matter to Veterans. Scientific peer review, institutional review boards, and the Office of Research Oversight enforce that discipline at every

stage, and VA continues to strengthen these internal mechanisms to ensure every study advances Veteran-centered priorities and aligns with VA's strategic direction.

## **Strengthening Veteran-Focused Research**

This Administration has taken a disciplined, Veterans First approach to research—ensuring every taxpayer dollar invested advances the health and well-being of Veterans. The President's Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 Budget requests \$488.2 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, an increase of \$34.9 billion, or 7.7%, over FY 2026, including \$150.6 billion in discretionary funding and \$54.6 billion through the Toxic Exposures Fund to expand care for Veterans impacted by Environmental and Occupational Exposures. Within that historic investment, VA has sharpened its research enterprise by prioritizing projects that deliver measurable clinical benefits, strengthen accountability, and accelerate the translation of scientific discovery into improved care for Veterans.

That strategy is already producing results. This Administration has expanded Veterans' access to precision oncology by growing the Cancer Clinical and Research Network to more than 100 VA medical facilities, giving more Veterans the opportunity to participate in cutting-edge clinical trials closer to home. VA's Lung Cancer Precision Oncology Program has delivered more than one million lung cancer screening scans, helping identify cancers earlier when treatment is most effective.

The Administration also continues to build on the strength of the Million Veteran Program, which now includes more than one million enrolled Veterans and provides an unparalleled resource for advancing precision medicine and improving care for future generations of Veterans. Together, these accomplishments reflect an approach that measures success not by the number of research projects funded, but by the number of Veterans whose lives are improved through research that delivers real-world clinical impact.

## **Emerging Therapies, Toxic Exposures, and Brain Health**

President Donald J. Trump's April 28, 2026, Executive Order 14401, Accelerating Medical Treatments for Serious Mental Illness, recognizes that not all Veterans respond to standard mental health treatments. VA is taking swift action in that regard. On May 26, 2026, the Department announced a randomized, placebo-controlled trial of methylenedioxymethamphetamine-assisted therapy, or MDMA-assisted therapy, for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and alcohol use disorder that will enroll approximately 80 Veterans at the VA Providence Healthcare System (HCS), with recruitment from Providence and the VA Connecticut HCS in West Haven. This work is part of a broader VA psychedelic research portfolio that includes 19 other active clinical trials, supported by more than \$23 million in external funding. All studies use pharmaceutical-grade drugs, structured psychotherapy, and rigorous safety protocols in compliance with Federal regulations.

VA's Military Exposure Research continues to deliver tangible improvements for Veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other service-related hazards. VA also continues to lead research on traumatic brain injury (TBI) and blast over pressure exposures, following large Veteran cohorts to develop next-generation brain health biomarkers and conducting a national clinical trial of a potential treatment for mild TBI and its associated symptoms.

## **Looking Ahead: Strategic Vision for the Future**

VA's commitment to a Veterans First-approach is a foundational method of operation. Our strategy, reflected in VA's FY 2027 research budget request, is built on three priorities: 1) expanding access to high-quality clinical trials; 2) delivering real-world clinical impact; and 3) leveraging VA's data for Veterans' benefit.

These priorities are executed through VA's proven research infrastructure:

- The Cooperative Studies Program continues to lead landmark trials, including a study comparing non-invasive colorectal cancer screening with colonoscopy, with deliberate outreach to rural Veterans who have or may have limited access to healthcare.
- The Quality Enhancement Research Initiative accelerates the translation of findings into routine care.
- The Million Veteran Program now exceeds 1 million enrolled Veterans and has supported rigorous research on the genetic underpinnings of PTSD, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other conditions that inform services for Veterans.

Building on this foundation, VA is responsibly integrating artificial intelligence (AI) -- under human control -- into research and clinical care, including the deployment of AI tools in suicide prevention, opioid safety, oncology, and diagnostic imaging under VA's Trustworthy AI Framework, which prioritizes privacy, security, and clinical validation at every stage.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, VA's research legacy is one of groundbreaking discovery and relentless innovation benefiting Veterans and the American public. VA will continue strengthening the internal oversight and mission-focused discipline that keeps this enterprise Veteran-centered and aligned with our strategic priorities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you and the Committee for the opportunity to discuss VA's research program and our vision for its future. We welcome any questions you or other Members of the Committee may have.