The Federal Budget Season

November 01, 2007

Apple-picking, leaf piles, and pumpkins — all things that come with fall here in the East. But there's another thing that's synonymous with fall hereabouts: the annual Congressional scramble to pass the federal budget that keeps our government (and a good deal of research) running.

In February of this year, the President released his federal budget request for fiscal year (FY) 2008. In the spring, both chambers of Congress held hearings — during which APS testified on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and behavioral science funding (see April 2007 *Observer*) — and debated changes to the President's numbers. In this era of tight budgets due to the Iraq war and a growing deficit, Congress was hard-pressed to give large boosts to the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education (a.k.a. Labor-HHS) bill, which funds NIH.

Here's the process in a nutshell: The federal budget consists of 12 large spending bills, each of which must be passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate. For each bill, any differences between the two sides of the Capitol are reconciled into a joint House-Senate proposal that is then sent to the President for signature. That's how it's *supposed* to work anyway. But in any given year, some bills are passed, some aren't, and some of those that aren't get rolled into a giant package called an omnibus bill. At press time, the House passed all 12 of their bills and the Senate has passed six, not including the Labor-HHS/NIH budget bill. And the Senate just passed the Commerce Justice Science bill, which includes the National Science Foundation (NSF; more on them later).

At press time, the Labor-HHS bill was slated to be debated on the Senate floor and will go to the President for signature in early November. The President has promised to veto the bill as it exceeds his top line by $11 billion, so there are one or two more rounds that need to play out before all is said and done.

Even though the budget wasn't finalized by the beginning of the fiscal year (FY 2008 started on October 1, 2007), we probably won't see a repeat of last year, which had a year-long continuing resolution that kept the government running at the previous year's funding levels.

Here's the lowdown on how federal research agencies are doing for FY 2008.

NIH

As is all too well known in the scientific community, NIH has had flat rates of growth overall (adjusted for inflation) since its budget was doubled during the five-year period 1998-2003. This year is no different for NIH overall, but there are small increases for those institutes housing behavioral research programs.

The President requested $28.6 billion for NIH in FY 2008, which is actually a cut of $279 million compared with 2007. The House bill asks for $29.6 billion, 2.6 percent over 2007. APS joined with several research and health coalitions in calling for $30.87 billion, a 6.7 percent increase, to adjust for inflation and get NIH back on a growth track. At this writing, however, it looks like the House figure will prevail. The Senate's numbers for NIH, while not yet finalized are slightly higher (3.46 percent over 2007), but with the threat of a presidential veto the House numbers are probably the safer bet. However, the unified front presented by research advocates continues to put pressure on Congress and NIH to improve funding for federally supported science. As a member of the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding, an influential coalition of groups that advocate for NIH as a whole, APS is joining with other groups in urging Congress to adopt the Senate's numbers.

The increases are small for the individual institutes, but they fared better than many other programs within the Department of Health and Human Services. The National Institute of Mental Health is slated for a 1.5 percent increase over 2007, as are the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the National Institute on Aging, and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. These figures are on par with the other institutes within NIH. Though the overall increase for NIH is 2.6 percent, it includes extra HIV/AIDS money, and on top of that the Office of the Director absorbed most of the increase for a new entity called OPASI, which is turning out to be a major figure in the future of basic behavioral science research at NIH (see the sidebar below for details).

The NIH Director's office, which houses OPASI, is slated to receive a sizeable increase of 6.4 percent, primarily aimed at fattening the so-called Common Fund that supports trans-NIH research. Congress recently mandated yearly increases for the Common Fund, and the Common Fund is the main well that OPASI will dip into to support these initiatives. In the Common Fund's first incarnation, the separate NIH institutes contributed most of its budget, but now Congress designates a separate pot of money. For FY 2008, the House recommends $495 million whereas the Senate is pushing for $531 million. The final figure will likely fall somewhere in between.

What about the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS), that seemingly perennial issue that we keep telling you about? Congress continues to pressure NIH to establish a stable and secure home for basic behavioral research at NIGMS. This year was no different, and slow but sure progress was made. Both the House and the Senate set deadlines for NIH to submit reports to Congress about this issue — the House asked for an assessment of recent basic behavioral research across NIH and a strategic plan for basic behavioral research, whereas the Senate asked for a leadership plan for establishing a basic behavioral research program. See the sidebar below for the Congressional report language on basic behavioral science research at NIH, and stay tuned for how NIH responds. In keeping with our traditional leadership role, APS worked with Congressional offices to encourage this focus on basic behavioral research at NIH.

As we reported previously, we should note that NIGMS has taken a small step by funding a biobehavioral research training program (*Observer*, September 2007).

NSF

There is a bright spot in the budget horizon: NSF. As a whole, NSF saw substantial increases, largely due to the President's American Competitiveness Initiative, aimed at boosting math and science

education and a re-commitment to basic research. Recently legislated as the America COMPETES Act in the House, it authorized a total of $43.3 billion for fiscal years 2008-2010 for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) research and education programs.

All this fanfare resulted in a hefty 8.7 percent increase in FY 2008 for NSF, for a total of $6.4 billion in the President's budget. It is possible the final figure will be even higher if the House figure of $6.51 billion gets passed (as of this writing, the bill is slated to go to the Senate floor in mid-October, and will likely be one of the early bills sent to the President for signature). Most research directorates will receive increases of 4 to 9 percent for the second year in a row, after two straight years of cuts.

Unlike NIH and its 27 Institutes and Centers, whose budgets are separately appropriated by Congress, NSF receives one large amount for research and the funds are internally split among the directorates. The Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate is slated to receive a cool $222 million, if the president's budget level is approved. This is quite a change from $200 million allocated in the FY 2007 continuing resolution — a whopping 11 percent increase. As large as this is, it's actually one of the smaller increases compared to other directorates within NSF, such as engineering. Overall, it's great for the field, but we have to continue fighting for equal increases.

Watch for more in-depth coverage of NSF in an upcoming *Observer*. ?

Congressional FY 2008 Appropriations Report Language on Basic Behavioral Science

House Report Language

Basic Behavioral Research —The Committee is aware that basic behavioral research focused on such areas as cognition, perception, emotion, social interaction, and learning have led to important advances and improved treatments for depression, bipolar and other affective disorders, diabetes, compliance on behavior change related to diabetes, heart disease, cancer, obesity, and more effective public health announcements and interventions. In view of the fact that eight out of the 10 leading causes of death have a significant behavioral component and that basic research is the underpinning of advances in behavioral research, the Committee is concerned with the continued lack of focus of scientific leadership at NIH for this important field of science. However, the Committee views the new Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives (OPASI) within the Office of the Director as a potentially important source of leadership in encouraging NIH investment in behavioral science research. The recent NIH reauthorization placed OBSSR within OPASI. As OPASI begins to perform its function of analyzing balance and content in all areas of NIH research, it would be appropriate for OPASI to set as an initial task a review of the NIH basic behavioral research portfolio, The Committee requests that the Director of NIH instruct OPASI, using OBSSR expertise, to prepare a strategic plan for basic behavioral research. This plan should include the amounts spent in fiscal years 2006 and 2007, by institute and center, on basic behavioral research, and a plan for NIH's investment in basic behavioral research for fiscal year 2008 and beyond. This strategic plan should also identify any gaps in the NIH basic behavioral research portfolio. The Committee expect to receive the strategic research plan no later than May 1, 2008. [HRpt 110-231, pp. 156-157]

Senate Report Language

National Institute Of General Medical Sciences

Behavioral Research —The Committee continues to be concerned that the NIGMS does not support basic behavioral research. The Institute's statutory mandate includes basic behavioral research and training, and the Committee believes that the NIGMS has a scientific mandate in this area because of the clear relevance of fundamental behavioral factors to a variety of diseases and health conditions. To date, the NIGMS has not responded to this concern despite the recommendation of an NIH working group that called for the establishment of such a program, and similar recommendations from the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine, and others. The Committee expects the NIGMS to support basic behavioral research and training. [SRpt 110-107, p. 130]

Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research

Basic Behavioral Research —The Committee is aware that basic behavioral research focused on such areas as cognition, perception,emotion, social interaction, and learning have led to important advancesand improved treatments for depression, bipolar and otheraffective disorders, diabetes, compliance on behavior change relatedto diabetes, heart disease, cancer, obesity, and more effective publichealth announcements and interventions. In view of the fact thateight out of the 10 leading causes of death have a significant behavioral component and that basic research is the underpinning of advances in behavioral research, the Committee is concerned by the continued lack of focus of scientific leadership at NIH for this important field of science. It is therefore requested that the Director submit a report to the Committee by December 1, 2007, indicating the scientific leadership structure for this field within the appropriate grant-making Institute. [SRpt 110-107, p. 156]

A New Acronym at NIH: OPASI

For those of you who haven't been keeping up with internal NIH news, there's a new sheriff in town, complete with its own posse — or make that OPASI: that's the recently established Office of Planning and Strategic Initiatives. OPASI is charged with identifying trans-NIH research initiatives and developing mechanisms for accelerating such research. The office does not have grant-making authority, so ultimately the separate NIH Institutes and Centers (ICs) will award the grants. NIH spent a considerable amount of time searching for OPASI's director, and in July of this year Alan M. Krensky was brought on to run the office. Krensky hails from the Stanford University School of Medicine, where he was professor of pediatrics, chief of the division of immunology and transplantation biology, associate chair for research in the department of pediatrics, and associate dean for children's health. He is an immunology expert and has co-authored over 240 research papers.

Interestingly, one of the first tests of OPASI involves behavioral science. Congress called on OPASI and the Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research to provide a strategic plan for basic behavioral research by May 2008 **(**see Report Language excerpt on p. 14). APS Executive Director Alan Kraut and Director of Government Relations Amy Pollick met with Krensky in October to discuss the report and reinforce why NIGMS is the right home for basic behavioral science. They emphasized that this would complement, not replace, the basic behavioral research being supported by other NIH institutes and would fill a gap in the infrastructure for basic behavioral science at NIH.

In a follow-up letter to the OPASI director, Kraut wrote that "what is needed is for NIGMS to reach out to the most basic of behavioral scientists to support their efforts to improve the tools, methods, and concepts in areas such as cognitive processes, emotion, judgment and decision making, individual

differences, behavioral genetics, methodology, and social processes, in a way that is complementary to other ICs. This is the model for the other basic sciences that NIGMS supports, and the same should hold for basic behavioral science."

Watch for updates on this issue in future issues of the *Observer*.