

Thursday, May 24, 2018

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Room S-128, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chair, Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Room S-146A, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Roy Blunt
Chair, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
Room S-128, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
Room S-146A, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Shelby, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairman Blunt and Ranking Member Murray,

We write to thank you for preserving the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) in the FY 18 Department of Health and Human Services budget, and for increasing its funding by \$1M over FY 17.

We respectfully ask for your continued support for this important program in FY 19, and for maintaining it within the Administration for Community Living in HHS.

The proposed FY 19 budget for the Department of Health and Human Services calls for absorbing the NIDILRR program into the National Institutes of Health. At a time when breakthroughs and innovations in computing, robotics, the built environment, and cyber-physical systems are poised to have a transformative impact on improving the quality of life of citizens with disabilities, the NIDILRR has been critical in advancing technologies that are specifically focused on this goal. NIDILRR has already had a large impact on a broad range of aspects of daily life beyond NIH's health domains, including seminal work in accessible technology, buildings, and transportation networks.

The President's budget proposal indicates that it will continue to support the work of NIDILRR. However, this move will likely end up impeding the pace of the development of this critical multi-technology, multi-disciplinary research.

The work supported by NIDILRR is very well-aligned with the HHS mission, with a focus on health and wellbeing associated with aging/independence and the ability to meaningfully engage in communities. NIDILRR funding is overwhelmingly directed at topics that industry and charitable organizations will not reliably fund. Developing new technology for people with disabilities is not particularly lucrative, but advances can lead to dramatic government cost savings. For example, better access to information technology and transportation support greater access to employment. Likewise, better access to community resources leads to reduced healthcare costs and greater independence.

NIDILRR awards funding through open competition, so success is a reflection of quality and reputation. Sustained support from NIDILRR for cutting edge R&D, combined with focused training grants, has allowed participating research institutions to establish first-class expertise in this field. Without continued focused NIDILRR funds, this expertise and the impact on the community it supports will likely decline.

For example, NIDILRR research and development efforts have been central to making computer, telecommunication, and web technologies accessible to people with disabilities. Early work under NIDILRR funding led to many of the accessibility features present in current commercial systems. Without NIDILRR funding many computer and internet systems would likely still be inaccessible or prohibitively expensive to modify. This line of work is well outside of NIH's focus but critical to independent living and employment. We have also attached a recent summary of work within just one of NIDILRR's funding mechanisms, the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center program. This provides a detailed review of the broad impact NIDILRR has made in many sectors of the economy and daily life.

We therefore respectfully urge that Congress work to preserve the NIDILRR program's budget separate from the NIH budget to ensure a continued focus on all aspects of independent living by people with disabilities. We would be pleased to brief you in more detail on the important work that is ongoing under this program.

Thank you for your support, your vision and your leadership as together we work on this important mission for our nation.

Sincerely,

The Computing Research Association

IEEE-USA

Carnegie Mellon University

University of Pittsburgh

University of Washington

Georgia Tech

Duquesne University

Penn State University

SUNY Buffalo