Despite Fears, NIH Grants to Bay State Organizations Hit a Record High in 2017

By Jessica Bartlett

In early 2017, the future of the budget for the National Institutes of Health looked bleak. President Donald Trump had threatened a $1.2 billion cut to what remained of the fiscal 2017 budget, and cutting the $34.1 billion 2018 budget by about a fifth—a startling blow that mobilized health care heavyweights in Boston to try to protect critical research funding.

A year later, those cuts never materialized. NIH funding, which supports research funding throughout the country, actually increased $2 billion in fiscal 2017 to $34 billion. Of the funding that gets doled out in grants, a record $26.3 billion was awarded throughout the country.

The final fiscal 2018 budget, just approved by Congress in March, also increased 9 percent from the prior year, to $37.1 billion.

While the fiscal 2018 grant data isn’t yet complete, data from fiscal 2017 suggests that Massachusetts has remained fiercely competitive in receiving those funds. The Bay State reported $2.7 billion in funding in fiscal 2017—the largest amount the state has received in the last seven years, and a 6 percent increase from fiscal 2016.

“In general, the bipartisan support has always been there, but it became even more important when the announcements were made publicly about desires to cut budgets,” said Dr. Maurizio Fava, director of the division of Clinical Research of the MGH Research Institute.

In Massachusetts, that support came from US Sen. Ed Markey, a Democrat who urged hospital executives to call colleagues in other states and talk about the importance of the funding. Republican Gov. Charlie Baker also condemned the cuts to the NIH, speaking out in a rare condemnation of a Trump proposal.

Dr. Maurizio Fava, the director of the division of clinical research at the MGH Research Institute, said that support for research comes from the top.

The preservation of the funding is critical for Massachusetts, whose health care economy relies heavily on governmental funding. “It was a big sigh of relief after the craziness of the political world in the last few months,” said Dr. Kerry Ressler, chief scientific officer for McLean Hospital.

The fiscal 2017 funding fueled nearly 33,000 jobs and more than $6.3 billion in economic activity in Massachusetts, according to the New England Council. Not only did fiscal 2017 represent the highest funding amount for the state in recent memory, the NIH also funded a record number of Massachusetts researchers. There were 5,185 grants received in the Bay State in fiscal 2017, a 156 percent increase over the prior year.

Culture of Research

While Massachusetts has done well to receive federal research funding, one institution stands out from the rest:
Massachusetts General Hospital, the largest hospital in the state by patient revenue, has remained the most highly awarded institution in the state year after year. In fiscal 2017, MGH received $394.5 million from NIH, a $70.5 million increase from the year prior, when it was also the highest receiving institution.

At MGH, Fava said, hospital leadership and the structure of the organization have helped MGH stay at the top. “Many organizations that view research kind of as a second thing … The Mayo Clinic is primarily clinical. Clinical comes first,” Fava said. “At MGH, clinical is extraordinarily important, but research is also important, and we feel that from the leadership.”

That support spurred the creation of the Massachusetts General Hospital Research Institute in 2014, a front door to the vast research enterprise at MGH. Within that, the hospital has appointed executives that ensure adequate IT support, research management, philanthropic support and clinical support for researchers.

Fava said research is also tied to the educational mission of the hospital, which attracts the best and the brightest doctors who in turn conduct meaningful research recognized at the federal level.

The Ongoing Fight

Samantha Rice, assistant director of neuropathology at the Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center at McLean Hospital. The center is one of thousands in the state that receives NIH grants.

The sustained funding from the federal government is helping keep the lights on at the Harvard Brain Tissue Resource Center, one of the largest brain banks in the country that is two-thirds funded by NIH.

But the fight for funding is far from over at McLean, the hospital that oversees the brain bank and which relies on NIH to fund approximately half of its $50 million research budget. Though the NIH budget may have increased in recent years, the portion allocated to mental health has remained flat, said Ressler of McLean Hospital. Meanwhile, the number of scientists in the field has grown tenfold, making funding fiercely competitive.

McLean researchers have subsequently submitted more grant applications, and are collaborating with small businesses to win small-business grants.

“Our ongoing goal is how do we stay nimble to stay at the cutting edge of what funders are looking for, in addition to maintaining the expertise we already have?” Ressler said.

Ressler noted that the dollars investigators do win don’t go as far today as they did two decades ago due to inflation. And until all diseases have a cure, he said, the funding in the budget is never enough.