Dear ACOS-R&Ds, AOs, investigators and research staff:

I am writing to provide you the first update on the VA Office of Research and Development (ORD) response to Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Please feel free to distribute this notice to any appropriate individuals.

First, as Secretary Wilkie did in his message yesterday, I want to reiterate that the health and safety of members of the VA workforce and VA Research community are a top priority. ORD is monitoring VA and national communications related to infection control and staff response, and we will follow all VA and government guidance in these areas.

We also, of course, must prioritize the health and safety of our research participants and other Veterans who are seen at VA facilities as we develop our continuity of operations plans (COOP) for research.

Breakthroughs in the prevention, treatment, and management of COVID-19 will come from research. Our VA Research community has an opportunity and responsibility to provide leadership and support to national research efforts. We are engaging with an interagency group focused on COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2 research efforts, who eagerly welcomed VA Research participation.

Communication will be essential in our response to this formidable challenge. You will receive regular updates from ORD under this subject line, “ORD COVID19 Research Update #”. In addition, we will focus a substantial portion of next Monday’s (March 16) Field call on the COVID-19 response.

We want to efficiently respond to your questions and other communications about research and COVID-19. Thus, I ask that you use the ORDCOVID19@va.gov email address for those purposes.

Before moving on to specific updates, I want to assure you that we in central office are aware that this global health event will impact the execution of research in the field and that we are sharing this message with our leadership.

In this update, I would like to specifically highlight several ongoing COVID-19 research activities:

1) Continuity of research operations

   a. The Office of Research Policy, Protection & Education (ORPPE) has issued guidance for any human subjects research (i.e., irrespective of disease focus) within VA. This guidance can be found here www.research.va.gov/resources/policies/guidance/ImplementingScreening-COVID19.pdf.

      If you have any questions regarding what to do with study participants who may be affected by COVID-19, please email ORDCOVID19@va.gov (NOTE: this email address is a change from an earlier version of the notice from ORPPE, which has since been updated).

   b. Michael Fallon, DVM, PhD, ORD Chief Veterinary Medical Officer, has emailed guidance to the field (including animal lab facilities) on operations at research animal facilities. If you did not receive this communication, please email ORDCOVID19@va.gov.
2) ORD also has assembled a COVID-19 Steering Committee to help with coordinating and prioritizing new research that ORD will support on COVID-19 within VA and in collaboration with other federal agencies. Below are highlights of these efforts. The current membership of the Steering Committee follows this message.

a. The ORD COVID-19 Steering Committee has been identifying research activities to study, diagnose, treat, and manage COVID-19 infections. In addition to national studies done by NIH, DOD, or industry, the committee will help coordinate VA-supported studies. This approach allows us to deploy resources quickly to most efficiently support the national research response to COVID-19.

We ask that if you have started or intend to start a new study directly on COVID-19, or that is related to understanding this disease, please notify ORDCOVID19@va.gov. We ask for this information so we can ensure full awareness of VA’s research activities, optimize communication within the VA research community, and match interests and research opportunities with investigators within and outside of VA.

b. Among the targets for VA research activities are multisite studies (e.g., clinical trials, specimen collections, etc.). We need to be prepared to have investigators and sites who are willing to support the nation in this way. If you or any VA colleague you know are interested, please email ORDCOVID19@va.gov with the subject heading “COVID-19 Research Site Interest.” In that email, please provide information about the potential site Principal Investigator(s), site/facility name, and any other relevant details.

I sincerely thank you for all you do in support of our Veterans every day and for your help in VA’s efforts to respond to COVID-19.

With gratitude,

Rachel

Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD
Chief Research and Development Officer (10X2)
Department of Veterans Affairs
ORD COVID-19 Steering Committee

Victoria Davey, PhD, MPH - Assoc Chief Research and Development Officer (CRADO), Epidemiology and Public Health

Jane Battles, PhD – Scientific Program Manager, Infectious Diseases, Biomedical Laboratory & Clinical R&D Services

Robert A. Bonomo, MD – Chief, Medical Service, Cleveland VAMC

Sheldon Brown, MD – Chief, Infectious Diseases, James J. Peters (Bronx) VAMC

Scott DuVall, PhD – Director, VINCI, Salt Lake City VAMC

Sarah George, MD – Staff Physician, Infectious Diseases, St. Louis VAMC

Mark Holodniy, MD – Director, Public Health Surveillance & Research Program and Public Health Reference Laboratory, Palo Alto VAMC

Ex Officio

Rachel Ramoni, DMD, ScD – CRADO

Wendy Tenhula, PhD – Deputy CRADO

Grant Huang, MPH, PhD – Deputy CRADO – Enterprise Optimization (Acting)

Molly Klote, MD – Director, Office of Research Protections, Policy and Education

Marisue Cody, PhD - Director, ORD Operations

Larry Mole, PharmD – Deputy Chief Officer, VHA Public Health (Acting)