

U.S. SCIENCE FUNDING

DOE Cures Pork Project With Peer Review

Long dependent on the patronage of a powerful U.S. senator, a New Mexico neuroimaging center has discovered a new route to government research dollars: the front door at the Department of Energy (DOE). But the way it got there has left some lawmakers with the impression that the center is still benefiting from its congressional patron.

Like other facilities with special ties to Capitol Hill, the Mental Illness and Neuroscience Discovery (MIND) Institute at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque began this year with a daunting challenge. The final 2007 federal budget was largely devoid of earmarks (see graph): money that lawmakers designate for pet projects, bypassing an agency's competitive funding procedures. The MIND Institute has received roughly \$10 million a year from DOE since 1999 courtesy of Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), a longtime chair or ranking member of the Senate panel that oversees DOE's Office of Science and an outspoken advocate of mental health research.

But this spring, for the first time, the MIND Institute successfully ran the gauntlet of DOE's peer-review system and is about to receive \$7 million for neuroimaging studies on schizophrenia, addiction, and criminal behavior. The MIND Institute is one of only a handful of institutions to avail themselves of an unusual opportunity: After Congress stripped earmarks from the 2007 budget, DOE said it would be willing to review proposals from institutions that were in line to receive earmarked funds. Even before DOE officially announced that offer, however, the MIND Institute had already submitted a 700-page proposal. DOE spokesperson Aimee Whitelaw says three others have applied, and one is pending.

Created in 1999, the center has shared a large fraction of each year's earmark with its partners, including Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. In 2003, the MIND Institute moved into the new Pete and Nancy Domenici Hall, and 2 years later, Domenici said he hoped that the MIND Institute was

"moving in a direction of self-sufficiency." Indeed, last year the institute won a \$2.2 million competitive grant from the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency to study accelerated learning; it also hired two researchers who had funding from the National Institutes of Health.

Staffers say the money has been put to good use, and outsiders generally agree. Neuroscientist Kent Kiehl says that distributed computing facilities worthy of "a Fortune-500 company" helped attract him from Yale University. The ability to pool subjects drawn from the MIND Institute's network of partners, he adds, will enhance his research with magnetic resonance imaging to diagnose psychotic disorders. Neuroscientist Don Rojas of the University of Colorado, Denver, unaffiliated with the MIND Institute, sees "a lot of

domestic earmarks from the final bill, MIND Institute staffers immediately sought guidance from DOE staffers and Domenici's office. In January, DOE's Michael Viola visited the institute. "He told us what the format should be, what they expected," says institute science director Vincent Clark. On 30 January, says MIND Institute Director John Rasure, his team submitted its proposal.

That rapid response gave the institute a jump on the competition. On 2 February, DOE circulated an internal memo explaining that the agency would fund "meritorious proposals" from earmark recipients and asking staff to look out for such projects. On 14 February, Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a critic of such pork-barrel projects, entered the memo into the Congressional Record as part of a statement trumpeting the lack of earmarks in 2007.

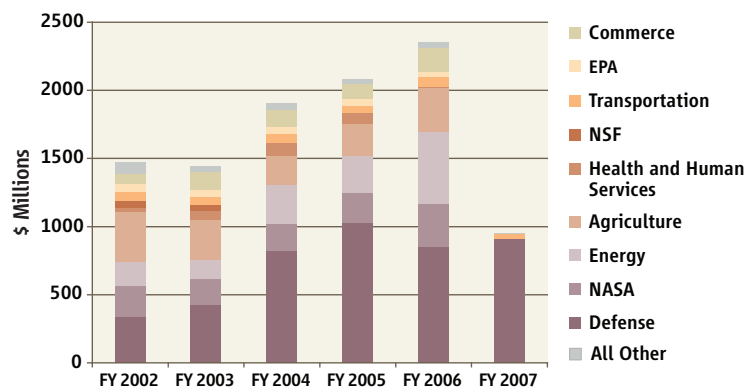
After House members of DOE's spending panel learned of the MIND Institute application, they scolded Raymond Orbach, director of DOE's Office of Science, for not telling them directly about DOE's new policy. "So what we're all getting at here is fairness," said Representative David Hobson (R-OH), ranking member of the House Energy and Water spending panel, at a 14 March hearing. Representative Mike Simpson (R-ID) said the Administration's "unwilling[ness] to have transparency" on DOE's earmarks was "hypocrisy" given the White House's stated aversion to pork. Six days after the hearing, Orbach sent a letter to the roughly 125 institutions that received earmarked DOE funds in 2006 informing them of the memo. "Everyone was treated the same," says Whitelaw of the process.

It's not clear how many earmarks will make it into the 2008 budget wending its way

through Congress. A House appropriations aide says that there's been an avalanche of requests, and House Appropriations Chair David Obey (D-WI) is considering omitting them again. But few expect Domenici and Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), chair of the Senate spending panel and a prodigious earmarker, to give up without a fight.

—ELI KINTISCH

A Slowdown in Special Favors



Funding squeeze. Last year's decision to tighten the spigot on the flow of congressional earmarks in annual spending bills forced the MIND Institute (*above*) to seek another way to obtain federal support.

potential" in the institute's solid infrastructure and personnel. "But they don't have a measurable scientific product yet," he says.

Despite the institute's positive steps toward independence, Domenici sought \$12 million for it in the 2007 spending bill moving through Congress last year. When the new Democratic majority decided in December to remove all