



April 7, 2017

Scott Blackburn  
Interim Deputy Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Interim Deputy Secretary Blackburn,

On behalf of the more than 115,000 nationally certified PAs (physician assistants), thank you for taking the time on Thursday, March 30, to discuss ways the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) can maximize the ability of PAs to provide medical services throughout the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) system. I appreciated our conversation, and I wanted to follow up with you on the issues we discussed.

PAs represent a highly educated and experienced VA workforce that provides the comprehensive care veterans desperately need across a wide range of clinical settings and specialties. PAs often serve as the first point of contact for patients at the VA and are tasked with providing efficient and high quality care to veterans as part of a collaborative team. Additionally, many of the PAs who are employed by the VA are themselves veterans and have a strong desire to serve veterans.

A previous lack of attention to recruitment and retention of PAs by the VA, coupled with the high demand and economic reward for PAs in the private healthcare market, has resulted in a significant challenge for the VA to retain PAs and fill vacant PA positions. Both the January 2015 and September 2015 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports recognized the importance of PAs as part of VHA's healthcare team and both reports identify PAs as one of the five critical occupations with the "largest staffing shortages." AAPA believes if the VA places a greater emphasis on investing in its PA workforce, it will be in a significantly improved position to recruit and retain PAs. This issue is likely to become even more critical as approximately 40 percent of the VA PA workforce is eligible for retirement within the next five years. On a positive note, AAPA believes the VA has a significant opportunity to improve its ability to more efficiently utilize its PA workforce and improve its efforts to recruit and retain PAs.

### **Granting Full Practice Authority to PAs**

AAPA supported the recent regulatory change that gave full practice authority to advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) in the VA. As we stated at the time, AAPA believes the VA should now extend full practice authority to PAs as well. Timely access to quality healthcare continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing our nation's veterans, and it is certainly one of the VA's most urgent challenges. PAs are an integral part of the VA's solution to providing high quality, timely medical care for veterans – but only if the VA creates a more efficient and effective way to utilize its PA workforce, allowing PAs employed by the VA to practice to the top of their educational preparation, experience and ability.

There is a clear body of clinical evidence and real-world examples from across medical specialties that demonstrate the quality of medical care provided by PAs. AAPA hopes the VA will quickly initiate the process to grant PAs at the VA full practice authority in order to increase access for veterans, as well as to provide PAs the opportunity to effectively and safely provide more comprehensive levels of care to our nation's veterans.

### **VA Compensation Practices**

PAs at the VA are not currently included in a market based pay system, despite the fact other providers, such as physicians and nurse practitioners (NPs), are included. This means compensation for PAs in the private-sector is significantly higher than it is at the VA. Additionally, PAs and NPs employed by the VA perform nearly identical functions, but PAs are at a competitive disadvantage. It is not uncommon for NPs in the VA to be compensated by as much as \$30,000 more than PAs while providing the same medical services. These pay differences within the VA result in difficulty in recruiting PAs and provide PAs with a significant financial incentive to take positions outside the VA, where NP and PA salaries are comparable when performing nearly identical functions.

The VA has the authority to include PAs as a covered occupation in the Locality Pay System for Nurses and other Healthcare Professionals, but has thus far chosen not to do so. We urge you to develop competitive compensation for the PA workforce by bringing PA grade and pay levels in line with private sector market based pay and including PAs in the VA Locality Pay System used by NPs.

### **Service in Rural Communities**

Since the first PAs graduated and began to practice in 1967, PAs have been an integral part of the healthcare system in rural areas. Recent workforce studies show that PAs are nearly twice as likely to practice in rural areas as physicians. In many rural areas, PAs are the only healthcare provider available. The rigorous education and clinical training of PAs makes them fully qualified and equipped to manage the treatment of patients who present with conditions ranging from routine to complex.

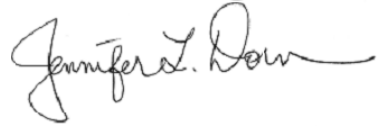
AAPA is eager to work with the VA to reach PAs who may be interested in working in VA facilities in rural areas, using our online networks and career services resources. Progress on the issues identified makes our outreach more effective. Additionally, we believe recruitment efforts would be greatly enhanced if the VA offered more clinical rotations sites for PA students. Many private sector hospitals have found these opportunities not only give them more insights about potential job candidates, but make it much more likely PAs will apply for openings at the facility upon graduation.

As the VA Commission on Care noted in its final report, released June 30, 2016, the VA's challenges related to access to care begin with inadequate numbers of providers. AAPA supports the Commission's premise that an adequate VA workforce is essential to addressing veterans' access to quality medical care.

AAPA stands ready to assist the VA in meeting its challenge and to support your and Secretary Shulkin's transformation agenda. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out to either me or to Tate Heuer, AAPA Vice President, Federal Advocacy, at 571-319-4338 or at [theuer@aapa.org](mailto:theuer@aapa.org).

Thank you for your assistance, and I look forward to continuing to work with you on these important issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer L. Dorn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "n".

Jennifer L. Dorn  
Chief Executive Officer

cc: Robert Merchant