



August 11, 2014

Honorable Robert McDonald  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

On behalf of the more than 95,000 clinically practicing physician assistants (PAs) represented by the American Academy of Physician Assistants (AAPA), I offer congratulations on your recent confirmation as U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I hope you will consider the AAPA to be a resource as you strive to ensure that all veterans receive timely access to quality healthcare and as you build increased efficiencies and accountability into the VA health system. I also encourage you to consider the critical role of the PA profession, both in and outside of the VA health system, in expanding veterans' access to quality medical care.

The PA profession has a longstanding connection and commitment to veterans and veterans' health. The first PA students were Navy Corpsmen, veterans of the Vietnam War. Recruitment of and support for veterans in PA educational programs continues to this day. Nearly 12% of PAs are veterans, active duty, or retired military in the National Guard and Reserves. Over 2,000 PAs are employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

PAs provide high quality, cost effective medical care in virtually all health settings and in every medical and surgical specialty. PAs are one of three healthcare professions providing primary medical care in the U.S. Unfortunately, until the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress passed legislation to require the VA to establish a full-time Director of PA Services at the VA Central Office, there was no in-house expertise regarding the optimal utilization of the VA's PA workforce. The Director of PA Services, Denni Woodmansee, has made important strides since his appointment in 2010 to ensure that PAs are utilized to the top of their education and expertise within the VA health system. Still, additional work must take place to fully maximize the value of the VA PA workforce.

Accordingly, AAPA encourages you to utilize provisions in Titles III and VIII of the newly enacted *Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014* to recruit and retain an optimal PA workforce. With the increased need for veterans' medical care, the Department's rural health and primary care initiatives, and the projected physician shortage, we believe there will be significant need to grow the VA's PA workforce to meet the Department's mission. Specifically, we request the VA consider:

- fully utilizing and growing its PA workforce in light of the review of critically needed healthcare occupations
- extending VA health professions scholarships to PAs, and

- utilizing Title VIII's authority for increased appropriations to augment the VA PA workforce to extend veterans' access to needed healthcare services.

We believe there will be challenges in recruiting PAs into VA health clinics with the existing disparity in pay between PAs employed by the VA and the private market. Additionally, PAs employed by the VA are at a competitive disadvantage with nurse practitioners (NPs) employed by the VA. NPs often start at a higher grade, and it is not uncommon for NPs in the VA to receive as much as \$30,000 more than PAs while providing the same medical care. We believe utilizing your authority to include PAs in the locality pay system with other critical occupations will help resolve the existing pay disparity and enhance PA recruitment and retention.

AAPA supports VA efforts to recruit and retain PAs, including:

- salary studies of PAs employed by the VA
- the use of scholarships and loan repayment programs to recruit PAs
- VA support for the Continuing Medical Education needs of PAs
- use of pay incentives and bonuses to retain the VA's PA workforce
- the availability of clinical rotation sites in VA medical facilities for PA students.

PAs have flexibility in the types of medicine they practice and can be responsive to changing healthcare needs. AAPA believes that the PA profession can be an important part of the solution to the VA's projected healthcare workforce shortage.

We welcome a meeting with you or your staff to discuss ways in which AAPA may support your efforts to ensure veterans' timely access to quality medical care. Please do not hesitate to have your staff contact Sandy Harding, AAPA senior director, federal advocacy, at 571-319-4338 or [sharding@aapa.org](mailto:sharding@aapa.org) to arrange a meeting.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John McGinnity". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping tail.

John McGinnity, MS, PA-C, DFAAPA  
President