



January 13, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President-Elect
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
Vice President-Elect
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear President-Elect Biden and Vice President-Elect Harris:

On behalf of the American Academy of PAs (AAPA) and more than 140,000 PAs (Physician Assistants) serving patients across the United States of America, congratulations on your election as President and Vice-President of the United States. AAPA looks forward to working closely with the Biden-Harris Administration and the 117th Congress, specifically on several health policy issues raised during your presidential campaign that are also core to AAPA's policy goals and mission.

First and foremost is continuing the fight against COVID-19 and bringing the pandemic to an end. Secondly, is expanding access to quality and affordable healthcare for all Americans by protecting and expanding upon advances made under the Affordable Care Act. And finally, is the goal of improving and strengthening our nation's healthcare system. As practicing clinicians that often serve as the principal provider for patients, PAs play a critical role in a patient-centered healthcare system.

COVID-19

PAs work across all practice settings and are a significant part of the on-the-ground efforts to diagnose and treat COVID-19. As clinicians who have been fighting on the frontlines of the COVID battle for the past eleven months, the PA workforce remains committed to fighting COVID-19. We ask the Biden-Harris Administration to empower them to work to the fullest extent of their education, training, and experience. Ensuring that this workforce is fully utilized, especially at a time when the healthcare system is buckling under the weight of a pandemic, will expand America's ability to care for patients and bolster our healthcare workforce, both during this pandemic and beyond. Therefore, AAPA strongly encourages the Biden-Harris Administration to continue to extend the public health emergency (PHE), currently set to expire on April 21, 2021, until the COVID-19 pandemic has abated. Such action will safeguard needed flexibilities, including critical waivers related to the Medicare program through the duration of the COVID-19 crisis.

AAPA also encourages the new Administration to exercise its authority to protect our healthcare workforce. This includes the federal government using its power to ensure personal protective equipment (PPE) is available to everyone that needs it, including healthcare providers and other frontline workers. In addition, a strengthened national approach to testing must include sufficient testing capacity for all healthcare workers both in and outside of the hospital setting, and ensure timely results are available. Despite the widespread recognition of how vital healthcare workers are to the pandemic response, healthcare workers continue to face shortages of adequate PPE and often lack access to testing and the ability to receive timely results. We must protect all Americans, especially those serving on the front lines to protect and care for others.

Through patient education about the safety of our national immunization program, AAPA and PAs are dedicated to addressing vaccine hesitancy in an effort to end this pandemic and promote public health. AAPA supports every effort by policymakers to ensure that vaccinations for COVID-19 are distributed in a manner that ensures priority access for both healthcare workers and vulnerable populations.

AAPA also recommends that the federal government expeditiously institute permanent full-practice authority for PAs working at all federal agencies operating under a federal scope of practice. The need to effectively utilize our healthcare workforce is particularly critical at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. As COVID continues to rage, taking this action at the VA, specifically, will ensure PAs can be fully utilized to set up emergency response centers, streamline care, and increase access to care for VA patients. It will also allow the VA to meet its fifth mission -- taking care of overflow patients from private hospitals. Current requirements for a PA to have a tether, such as a practice agreement with a physician, do not align with how PAs actually practice or how today's healthcare is delivered to patients. Requiring any tether between a PA and another provider in order for the PA to practice is incredibly burdensome, not only to the provider but also for federal agencies and facilities in their quest to efficiently deliver care to patients. Evidence demonstrates the most successful clinical teams are those that fully utilize the skills and abilities of each team member, despite some physician groups maintaining they have an exclusive right to provide medical services or control other competing professions.

And finally, the long-term physical and psychological ramifications of COVID-19 are still unknown. Many patients continue to experience symptoms months after being diagnosed with the virus. While the long-term effects of COVID-19 are yet to be determined, we can expect that these effects will impact an already fragile and over-burdened healthcare system. Harnessing our nation's PA work force and ensuring they can practice to the top of their education, training, and experience will be critical to ensuring we have a robust workforce; one that is prepared to treat the long-term effects of COVID-19, including mental, behavioral and substance use disorders, while also meeting the existing health care challenges our nation is facing.

Expanding Access to Healthcare for All Americans & Strengthening our Healthcare Workforce

Our country continues to face a growing shortage of healthcare providers, particularly primary care providers, that data indicates will only grow worse in the coming years. The Association of American Medical Colleges projects a shortfall of between 54,100 and 139,000 physicians in both primary care and specialty care by 2033. This healthcare provider shortage is particularly acute in rural areas and areas that are economically struggling. Americans deserve access to care irrespective of where they live. PAs are named in the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act* as one of three healthcare professionals who provide primary care in the United States. In addition to primary care, PAs practice in every medical specialty and setting across the US. And according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the PA profession is expected to grow 31% between 2019 and 2029. We can only increase access to care and meet patient needs if we are fully utilizing our entire healthcare workforce, including PAs.

To do this, federal policy changes must be made. Barriers continue to exist in federal laws and regulations that impede access to medical care provided by PAs, particularly within Medicare. Federal barriers in Medicare, such as restrictions on PAs certifying the need for patients to receive diabetic shoes or certifying the need for patients to receive hospice services are often more restrictive than state laws and impede progress toward more collaborative, patient-centered, value-based care.

As the Biden-Harris Administration continues the work started under the Obama-Biden Administration to modernize Medicare to deliver greater value to patients and taxpayers, AAPA supports the creation of innovative payment models that include necessary incentives to strengthen primary care. It is also critical to include the PA profession when developing national strategies to increase the number of high-quality healthcare providers available to meet the needs of patients.

We look forward to working with the Biden-Harris Administration to continue to break down federal barriers to care in order to increase access to high-quality patient care.

Improving our Healthcare System

It is only when all members of the healthcare team are able to practice to the full extent of their education and training that our fractured healthcare system will be able to serve every American. As qualified, highly trained medical providers, PAs need swift federal action to allow them to truly serve patients, through the course of this pandemic and beyond.

AAPA looks forward to working collaboratively with your Administration on developing and implementing policies that will improve our healthcare system by focusing on:

- Affordable access to high-quality and cost-efficient healthcare for all patients
- Evidence-based medicine and the utilization of comparative-effectiveness research

- Optimal utilization of primary care
- Basic services being provided to all patients
- Patient choice of qualified providers, including PAs
- Greater emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention
- Enhancing the relationship between the patient and clinician
- Permanently continuing the temporary (PHE) expansion of Medicare's telehealth benefit

We appreciate the opportunities we have already had to meet with your healthcare team, and we welcome future opportunities to continue this dialogue on the role of the PA profession, AAPA's healthcare agenda, and how we can work together to improve patient-centered care.

Please do not hesitate to have a member of your team contact Tate Heuer, Vice President Federal Advocacy, at theuer@aapa.org or 571-319-4338, if you have any further questions.

Sincerely,



Beth R. Smolko, DMSc, MMS, PA-C, DFAAPA
President and Chair, Board of Directors



Lisa M. Gables, CPA
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