

The Health Care Workforce: Addressing Shortages and Improving Care

*Submitted to the Senate Committee on Health, Education Labor and Pensions
Physician Assistant Education Association
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The Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), the only national organization representing the 235 accredited PA education programs in the United States, welcomes the opportunity to emphasize the vital role of Title VII programs under the Public Health Service Act in creating a high quality physician assistant (PA) workforce.

This hearing comes at a time of both great challenges and new opportunities for PA education. As PA program directors across the United States confront such issues as shortages of clinical training sites and experienced faculty, Title VII programs provide PA educators and students with the resources necessary to meet workforce demand for PA services. Specifically, Title VII programs have allowed PA educators to provide innovative primary care instruction to students, expanded access to the PA profession for underrepresented minorities, and facilitated the practice of PA graduates in underserved communities.

As the committee considers Title VII and Title VIII reauthorization, PAEA would like to illustrate the value of several key programs to PA education.

Primary Care Training and Enhancement Grants

Historically, the PA profession has been known for its emphasis on primary care education and for expanding primary care services to rural and medically underserved populations. As the PA profession and PA education have expanded rapidly in recent years, Primary Care Training and Enhancement grants have allowed PA programs, among other accomplishments, to:

- Increase recruitment of veterans seeking to become PAs and practice in primary care;
- Develop competency-based primary care assessments; and
- Fund a student-engaged medical clinic focusing on the provision of primary care services.¹

Moreover, these investments have been shown to surpass the targets identified by the Health Resources and Services Administration. According to the most recent outcomes data available from HRSA, in FY 2016:

- 1,138 PA students were training in a funded program;
- 357 PAs graduated from a funded program, exceeding HRSA's target by nearly 200%; and
- 53% of PA and medical students who were funded completed at least a portion of their clinical training in an underserved area.²

In recognition of these significant outcomes, PAEA supports the reauthorization of Primary Care Training and Enhancement programs at a level of \$125 million annually, with at least 15% of appropriated funds directed to PA education programs.

Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students

Beyond improving the quality of primary care instruction provided to PA students, another goal of the PA education community is to expand access to the PA profession by underrepresented minorities, while simultaneously improving health equity across populations in the US.

However, the significant cost of health professions education, due to such factors as increased

¹ Health Resources and Services Administration. (2018). *FY 2019 Congressional Budget Justification*. Rockville, MD: HRSA.

² Health Resources and Services Administration. (2018). *FY 2019 Congressional Budget Justification*. Rockville, MD: HRSA.

rates of payment for clinical training sites, often presents a challenge in improving recruitment rates of disadvantaged students. Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students provide PA programs with assistance in overcoming this challenge by offering increased financial assistance to students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds.

Currently, PA programs such as those at Methodist University in North Carolina and Samuel Merritt University in California, are receiving grants under the Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students program, which have significantly contributed to the diversity of their student populations.

In addition to expanding access to the PA profession for disadvantaged students and underrepresented minorities, these grants have played a critical role in facilitating the practice of PA graduates in medically underserved areas.

According to HRSA, of the 621 students who received scholarships under this program and graduated in academic year 2016-17:

- 59% intended to work or pursue additional training in medically underserved communities; and
- 59% intended to work or pursue additional training in primary care.³

PAEA supports the reauthorization of Training for Diversity programs, including Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students, at a combined level of \$116 million annually.

Area Health Education Centers

³ Health Resources and Services Administration. (2018). *FY 2019 Congressional Budget Justification*. Rockville, MD: HRSA.

In order to both achieve the goal of directing students to practice in rural and medically underserved areas and meet the clinical training standards required by PA education, many PA programs have found the resources offered by Area Health Education Centers to be invaluable. Beyond facilitating clinical rotation placements for PA students, AHECs improve the linkages between PA programs and local health care organizations, expose students to the unique health conditions of underserved populations, and guide students as they navigate their careers.

As is the case with Primary Care Training and Enhancement grants and Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students, recent data shows the significant impact of these activities. According to HRSA outcomes data from FY 2016/academic year 2016-17:

- 402,045 trainees received health career guidance and information from AHEC programs, significantly exceeding HRSA's target of 325,000; and
- AHEC grantees partnered with 6,574 sites to provide 40,688 clinical training experiences to health professions students.

PAEA supports the reauthorization of Area Health Education Centers at a total level of \$125 million annually.

PAEA appreciates the opportunity to submit comments to the committee on the value of Title VII health workforce programs. By reauthorizing and continuing to make substantial investments in these programs, Congress can join with PA educators in our mission to improve the health of all Americans.