August 11, 2020

The Honorable Elinore McCance-Katz, MD, PhD
Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Assistant Secretary McCance-Katz:

On behalf of the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA) and its 260 accredited PA programs, we are writing to thank you for the opportunity to discuss PAEA’s response to the national substance use disorder epidemic and the persistent clinical education barriers faced by PA programs nationwide. We appreciate your commitment to highlighting the need for SAMHSA grantees to serve as clinical preceptors for PA students to help prepare the future PA workforce to provide high-quality care to patients suffering from substance use disorders.

Since 2018, SAMHSA funding has served as a critical resource in PAEA’s efforts to respond to the opioid and broader substance use disorder epidemic. As a result of funding administered via the State Target Response – Technical Assistance program, the percentage of PA programs requiring or offering the training necessary to obtain a waiver to prescribe buprenorphine in office-based settings has risen from 3% in 2018 to over 70% in 2020. Additional support provided through the Provider’s Clinical Support System – Medication Assisted Treatment program has equipped PAEA to directly facilitate waiver trainings for faculty and practicing providers. Most recently, Expansion of Practitioner Education (PRAC-ED) funding has directly led to the development and administration of a standardized substance use disorder curriculum for PA students to a cohort of pilot programs. Each of these investments has demonstrably increased the capacity of the current and future PA workforce to respond to the substance use disorder epidemic, and we thank you for your leadership in the administration of these programs.

As we discussed, inspiring students to practice in specialties that care for patients suffering from substance use disorders is dependent upon the availability of high-quality behavioral health clinical
training experiences. While securing these rotations was already a challenge prior to the emergence of COVID-19, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the ability of PA programs to obtain rotations in mental and behavioral health.

Despite increased adoption of telemedicine, which we agree has only limited substitution potential for in-person training and care, over 55% of PA programs report that it is either harder or much harder to obtain rotations in mental/behavioral health settings as a result of the pandemic, contributing to delayed program completion, graduation, and matriculation of future cohorts.¹ This disruption threatens the ability of PA education to assist in expanding access to care to patients with substance use disorders.

We believe that SAMHSA can play a critical leadership role in restoring the workforce pipeline. In addition to publicly communicating the importance of SAMHSA grantees training PA students, we urge you to formally incentivize grantees to do so through direction provided via future funding opportunity announcements for delivery sites such as Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics. We look forward to working with you on this priority and on providing follow-up estimates in the coming weeks regarding the dissemination PAEA’s PRAC-ED curriculum to all PA programs.

We welcome the opportunity to serve as a continued resource to you and your staff. Should you have specific questions, or if you would like additional information, please contact Director of Government Relations Tyler Smith, MPH, at 703-667-4356 or tsmith@PAEAonline.org.

Sincerely,

Howard Straker, EdD, MPH, PA-C
President

Mary Jo Bondy, DHEd, MHS, PA-C
Chief Executive Officer