



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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Statement for the Record
Submitted to
U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
Subcommittee on Primary Health and Retirement Security
“A Dire Shortage and Getting Worse: Solving the Crisis in the Health Care Workforce”
May 20, 2021

The Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), representing the 275 accredited physician assistant (PA) programs in the United States, welcomes the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding the issue of growing health workforce shortages.

Throughout the history of the profession, PAs have played a critical role in addressing gaps in the health workforce. In response to a significant shortage of primary care physicians in the 1960s, the PA profession was created to rapidly and effectively train and deploy graduates to the communities in greatest need. The generalist training that all PA students receive through clinical rotations in family medicine, internal medicine, emergency medicine, surgery, pediatrics, women’s health, and behavioral health, in addition to electives, uniquely prepares PA graduates to fill a variety of different workforce deficits, as demand shifts over time, given their flexibility to easily change specialties as needed.

The critical importance of a sufficient supply of well-trained health care providers has been widely recognized once again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 has drawn renewed attention to the implications of workforce shortages, this issue will persist in the absence of significant congressional intervention. As of March 31, 2021, the Health Resources

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and Services Administration (HRSA) has designated more than 7,300 primary care health professional shortage areas with a combined population of more than 83 million people.¹ To remove these designations, HRSA projects that 15,275 primary care clinicians would be needed, an estimate that is expected to grow under existing law.¹

While the PA profession holds unique promise to address growing workforce shortages, COVID-19 has presented considerable challenges to PA education as programs across the country work to prepare the next generation of providers. According to a recent survey of PA programs, more than 85% of respondents indicated that their clinical training sites are now taking fewer students than prior to the pandemic.² Beyond clinical sites now accepting fewer students, programs are also encountering challenges in securing new rotations, particularly in specialties with the most acute provider shortages. For example, nearly 70% of programs report that it is now either harder or much harder to secure clinical rotations for students in obstetrics/gynecology/women's health, with 50% indicating this is the case for family medicine rotations. **This reduction in clinical education capacity is the single most important factor constricting the expansion of PA programs as workforce shortages continue to grow.**

Beyond the particularly acute issue of clinical training site shortages, the racial and ethnic health disparities exacerbated by the pandemic illustrate the need to prioritize workforce diversity in any legislative solution to the issue of broader workforce shortages. Throughout health professions education, underrepresented minority students have historically faced considerable socioeconomic barriers to matriculation. According to PAEA's most recent Student Report, only 3.9% of first-year PA students identified as Black or African American and 9.1% identified as Hispanic or Latino as of 2019.³ **To ensure patients are able to access the culturally competent care they deserve, creating a strong pipeline of students representative of the communities they serve must be a priority.**

¹ Health Resources and Services Administration. (2021). *Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2021 Designated HPSA Quarterly Summary*. <https://data.hrsa.gov/Default/GenerateHPSAQuarterlyReport>

² Physician Assistant Education Association. (2021). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report 3*. <https://paea.edcast.com/insights/ECL-c621408d-c82a-43f5-a067-75a03494d8be>.

³ Physician Assistant Education Association. (2020). *By the Numbers: Student Report 4: Data from the 2019 Matriculating Student and End of Program Surveys*. <https://paeaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/imported-files/student-report-4-updated-20201201.pdf>.



As legislative solutions to the issue of health workforce shortages are considered, PAEA urges the subcommittee to advance the following Senate-introduced legislation and to integrate the following House-introduced bill into broader workforce legislation:

The Rural MOMS Act (S. 1491)

The Rural MOMS Act, recently reintroduced on a bipartisan basis by Sen. Tina Smith and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, is intended to address long-standing and persistent workforce shortages in rural areas by facilitating training opportunities for students in these communities with the goal of promoting long-term retention. Specifically, this bill would authorize \$5 million over five years to support interprofessional clinical training opportunities in obstetrics/gynecology/women's health for PA and other health professions students in rural areas.

The Perinatal Workforce Act (S. 287)

In response to disproportionate rates of maternal mortality among Black women, Sen. Tammy Baldwin and Sen. Jeff Merkley introduced the Perinatal Workforce Act in February 2021 to improve the capacity of providers to render culturally competent care. Specifically, this critical legislation would authorize \$15 million annually over five years to support PA and other programs training maternal health providers in their efforts to recruit and retain diverse cohorts of students intending to specialize in obstetrics/gynecology/women's health.

The Physician Assistant Higher Education Modernization Act (H.R. 2274)

Under the Higher Education Act, existing sources of aid to support minority-serving institutions explicitly prioritize the development of programs for certain named high-demand professions, not including the PA profession. Rep. Karen Bass and Rep. David Trone recently reintroduced the Physician Assistant Higher Education Modernization Act, which would explicitly prioritize PA program development at minority-serving institutions, such as historically Black colleges and universities, and Hispanic-serving institutions to create a sustainable pipeline of diverse PA students to the health workforce.

PAEA appreciates the opportunity to provide the Association's perspective on effective solutions to combat health workforce shortages and looks forward to the opportunity to serve



as a resource to the subcommittee. Should you require additional information or have questions, please contact Tyler Smith, Director of Government Relations, at tsmith@PAEAonline.org or 703-667-4356.