



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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July 7, 2021

The Honorable Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, 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 Delphin-Rittmon:

On behalf of the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), the national organization representing all 273 accredited PA programs in the United States, we are writing to congratulate you on your recent confirmation. As your tenure begins, we look forward to opportunities to continue PAEA's recent track record of collaboration with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to prepare a workforce equipped to provide the high-quality behavioral health care that patients deserve.

Since the PA profession was created in response to a primary care provider shortage over 50 years ago, PA education programs have played a key leadership role in expanding and promoting the development of a high-quality health workforce. Over a rigorous 27-month period comprised of seven continuous semesters, PA students complete a year of classroom-based education and more than 2,000 hours of clinical training. This intensive curriculum, based upon the fast-track model of training physicians during World War II, allows PAs to enter the workforce at an accelerated rate and rapidly address gaps in patient access to care.

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Following graduation, PAs are licensed to practice medicine and have prescriptive authority in all 50 states. **PAs practice in most medical and surgical subspecialties, and, critically, the generalist training PA students receive uniquely prepares them to prevent, recognize, and treat substance use disorders as well as common comorbidities.**

As early progress in reducing drug overdose deaths has reversed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, PA graduates will play an increasingly critical role in ensuring access to treatment for those in need. We welcome the opportunity to share additional details about the Association's partnership with SAMHSA and thoughts on new opportunities for collaboration.

MAT Waiver Training Initiative/PCSS-MAT

To address the significant increase in opioid-related overdose deaths in the mid-2010s, Congress expanded eligibility for the waiver necessary to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid use disorder to PAs in the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act. In response to this expanded authority, PAEA immediately acted to ensure PA graduates were prepared to increase access to care as quickly as possible. From 2018-2021, PAEA administered the MAT Waiver Training Initiative, a SAMHSA-funded project to integrate X-waiver training into the curriculum of PA programs nationwide. These efforts resulted in an increase in the percentage of PA programs requiring or offering training to their students from 3% in 2018 to over 70% in 2021. In addition to these efforts, PAEA has worked to further expand waiver-eligible faculty and students by directly facilitating live trainings supported by a Provider's Clinical Support System - Medication Assisted Treatment subaward. Beyond the scope of SAMHSA funding, PAEA is committed to continuing to encourage waiver training among our member programs to ensure that these initial SAMHSA-supported investments are sustainable.

PRAC-ED-PA

In addition to waiver training, PAEA has also partnered with SAMHSA in efforts to holistically strengthen education on substance use disorder issues. In 2019, PAEA received a grant



through SAMHSA's Expansion of Practitioner Education program to support the development of an 8-hour standardized substance use disorder curriculum, which has been piloted to 20 PA programs over two years. This curriculum is designed to be comprehensive, including content on stigma, common and uncommon substance use disorders, evidence-based interventions, and special considerations for the care of vulnerable patients. Early outcomes data indicate that this curriculum has materially improved the capacity of students to diagnose, treat, and manage patients suffering from substance use disorders. PAEA was proud to work with SAMHSA to expand this work based upon our initial track record of success and will be working to administer the curriculum to all interested PA programs beginning this year utilizing a new SAMHSA-supported funding stream.

Ongoing Needs

While substantial progress has been made in strengthening classroom-based/didactic SUD education provided to PA students, there are significant barriers remaining in clinical education to fully achieving the potential of PA graduates as high-quality behavioral health providers. Due to capacity and safety restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19, 84% of PA programs report that their clinical training sites are now taking fewer students than prior to the pandemic. This reduction in clinical education capacity is particularly acute in mental and behavioral health settings, and nearly 60% of PA programs report that it is now either harder or much harder to secure clinical training sites in these specialties than before the pandemic.¹ A lack of high-quality clinical training experiences threatens the ability of PA programs to encourage graduates to specialize in behavioral health – ultimately limiting access to care for patients suffering from substance use disorders. **Throughout your tenure, we urge you to leverage SAMHSA funding opportunities to encourage behavioral health providers to serve as clinical preceptors for PA students to address this crisis.**

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these and other behavioral health workforce issues in more detail and look forward to serving as a resource to you and your staff. Should you have

¹ Physician Assistant Education Association. (2021). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report 3*. <https://paea.edcast.com/insights/covid-19-rapid-response-report-3>.



specific questions or if you would like additional information, please contact Director of Government Relations Tyler Smith at 703-667-4356 or tsmith@PAEAonline.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M Statler".

Michel Statler, MLA, PA-C
President

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Jo Bondy".

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