



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
655 K Street NW, Ste. 700, Washington, DC 20001
PAEAonline.org • 703-548-5538

November 3, 2021

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
520 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chris Murphy
136 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Cassidy and Murphy:

On behalf of the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), the national organization representing the 277 accredited PA programs in the United States, which collectively graduate more than 10,000 new PAs each year, we are writing in response to your request for information regarding existing mental and behavioral health programs and new policy opportunities.

Since your initial introduction of the Mental Health Reform Act and its subsequent integration into the 21st Century Cures Act in 2016, PAEA has cultivated a leadership role in the national effort to expand access to critically needed mental and behavioral health services. Following the authorization of PAs to receive the waiver necessary to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid use disorder, PAEA launched the MAT Initiative, a campaign that resulted in the percentage of PA programs requiring or offering waiver training to their students rising from 3% in 2018 to over 70% as of this year. The Association built upon these efforts from 2019-2021 by developing an 8-hour, comprehensive substance use disorder curriculum via SAMHSA's Expansion of Practitioner Education program to ensure all PA students graduate with the standardized skills necessary to provide high-quality behavioral health services to

2021 PAEA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Michel Statler, MLA, PA-C
PRESIDENT

Kara L. Caruthers, MSPAS, PA-C
PRESIDENT ELECT

Howard Straker, EdD, MPH, PA-C
IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT

Janie McDaniel, MS, MLS(ASCP)SC
SECRETARY

Carl Garrubba, DMSc, PA-C, CPA
TREASURER

Jonathan Bowser, MS, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Shalon Buchs, MHS, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Nicole Burwell, PhD, MSHS, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Shaun L. Grammer, DMSc, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Robert D. Hadley, PhD, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Linda Sekhon, DHSc, PA-C
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

Mary Ruggeri, MEd, MMSc, PA-C
STUDENT MEMBER AT LARGE

Mary Jo Bondy, DHEd, MHS, PA-C
EX OFFICIO MEMBER



patients. These efforts are just a few examples of the meaningful impact that federal investments in workforce development have made on the capacity of graduates to address the nation's increasing mental and behavioral health care needs.

While authorities granted and investments made since 2016 have had a significant impact in strengthening workforce preparedness to expand access to care, new challenges have emerged that must be addressed to allow PA graduates to reach their full potential when responding to this crisis. According to a recent PAEA-administered survey, nearly 60% of PA programs are reporting that it is either harder or much harder to secure required clinical rotations for students in mental and behavioral health settings than before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ **This shortage of clinical training opportunities is the greatest challenge facing PA programs nationwide, including the four programs in Louisiana and six programs in Connecticut, and we urge you to prioritize expanding clinical education capacity in any legislative effort to build upon the Mental Health Reform Act.**

As you collaborate on new legislation to address the growing need for expanded access to mental and behavioral health services, PAEA welcomes the opportunity to provide the following recommendations.

Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training Grants (42 U.S.C. §294e-1)

In recognition of the need for a significantly expanded mental and behavioral health workforce to respond to the opioid epidemic, the 21st Century Cures Act extended the authorization for mental and behavioral health education and training grants at a level of \$50 million annually. This program, along with many of the other workforce development programs authorized under Title VII of the Public Health Service Act, provides critically needed funding to support the training of a sufficient number of providers to meet workforce demand.

¹ Physician Assistant Education Association. (2021). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report 3*. <https://paea.edcast.com/insights/ECL-c621408d-c82a-43f5-a067-75a03494d8be>.



Per the accreditation standards which regulate PA education, all PA programs are required to provide both didactic and clinical training focusing on mental and behavioral health issues to students. Based upon this training and in response to increased demand for services, the number of PAs specializing in psychiatry has risen by 57% between 2016 and 2020.² While significant growth in this field occurred pre-pandemic, the devastating impact of COVID-19 on clinical training site availability in mental and behavioral health threatens to impede continued progress.

Despite both the extensive training provided to PA students in mental and behavioral health and the unique capacity of PA graduates to simultaneously manage the multiple comorbidities often presented by patients seeking mental health services, PAs are often not explicitly named in definitions of mental health professionals under federal law. This is true in the case of the authorization for mental and behavioral health education and training grants, which are available to support programs for disciplines with a similar scope of practice to psychiatric PAs such as psychiatric nurse practitioners. **As you develop legislation to reauthorize this program, we encourage you to ensure that PA programs are explicitly named as eligible entities as a means of expanding access to clinical training opportunities for programs.**

Minority Fellowship Program (42 U.S.C. §290II)

As part of PAEA's vision of Health for All, the Association is deeply committed to advocating for the elimination of health disparities based upon race and ethnicity, including disparities in mental and behavioral health outcomes. A critical component of addressing these long-standing inequities is ensuring that the health workforce reflects the communities it serves and is equipped to provide culturally competent care. As is true across health professions, however, underrepresented minority students have faced significant barriers to matriculation in PA education. As of 2019, only 4% of first-year PA students identified as Black or African

² National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants. (2021). *2020 Statistical Profile of Certified PAs*. <https://www.nccpa.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Statistical-Profile-of-Certified-PAs2020.pdf>.



American while 9% identified as Hispanic or Latino, both significantly below the representation of the general population.³

To improve workforce diversity, the 21st Century Cures Act authorized the Minority Fellowship Program to increase provider knowledge on the unique barriers faced by racial and ethnic minority populations seeking mental and behavioral health care. The program provides funding to support postbaccalaureate training for mental health professionals including through scholarships and professional development resources. As is the case for mental and behavioral health education and training grants, PA students are not currently named as eligible recipients for the purposes of the Minority Fellowship Program, thereby limiting a potential opportunity to improve workforce diversity. **We encourage you to expand eligibility to PA students in any legislative proposal to reauthorize the program.**

Additional Opportunities

To ensure that PA education has the resources necessary to continue producing the number of graduates needed to meet patient demand for mental and behavioral health services, significantly increasing clinical training capacity must be a top priority. While expanding eligibility for existing workforce development programs under Title VII is a crucial first step, the scale of the shortage being reported by programs nationwide calls for sustained and dedicated resources solely intended to expand clinical placement opportunities for students.

As you develop legislation building upon the Mental Health Reform Act, we encourage you to consider innovative policy proposals that focus on both expanding the number of providers trained while also focusing on long-standing workforce distribution issues impacting rural and underserved communities. The Physician Assistant Education Public Health Initiatives Act, currently introduced in the House as H.R. 3890, proposes the creation

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/wpcontent/uploads/imported-files/student-report-4-updated-20201201.pdf>.



of a clinical training demonstration for PA programs modeled on the successful Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education program which supports physician residency training. This legislation would authorize \$5 million annually for 5 years to support clinical rotations, particularly in mental and behavioral health, in federally qualified health centers, critical access hospitals, and rural health clinics. According to a recent survey of graduating PA students, over 90% of respondents reported that experiences during their clinical rotations positively influenced their specialty choice, indicating the critical importance of ensuring high-quality mental and behavioral health rotations during the clinical training phase.³ **We encourage you to integrate this provision into your legislation to ensure that students have these impactful experiences in communities where their services are needed most.**

We appreciate the opportunity to offer the perspective of PA education in response to your request for information. Should you have 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