



**PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION**  
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January 25, 2022

Carole Johnson  
Administrator  
Health Resources and Services Administration  
5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857

Dear Administrator Johnson:

On behalf of the Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), the national organization representing all 282 accredited PA programs in the United States, we are writing to congratulate you on your recent appointment. Throughout the history of the PA profession, HRSA has played an invaluable role in equipping PA programs to provide rigorous training, diversify their student bodies, and direct graduates to practice in rural and underserved areas. Throughout your tenure, PAEA is committed to continuing these efforts with HRSA in pursuit of a well-prepared health workforce that is reflective of the patient populations it serves.

As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose unprecedented challenges to both the nation's health system and health professions education, sustained HRSA investments will be critical to ensuring that all patients have uninterrupted access to the high-quality, timely care they deserve. As such, we welcome the opportunity to share the following thoughts on both the obstacles currently facing PA programs nationwide and the opportunities for PA education to expand access to care through new and continued partnerships with HRSA.

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## **Background on PA Education and the PA Profession**

For more than 50 years, PAs have played a unique role in addressing chronic provider shortages in underserved communities throughout the country. Originally developed in response to a significant shortage of primary care physicians in the mid-1960s, PA education is based upon a fast-track model of physician training that was used during World War II. The typical PA graduate program is approximately 27 months in length, divided between a didactic/classroom-based phase and a clinical phase during which students complete a series of rotations in a wide range of specialties under the supervision of practicing preceptors. **Due to the generalist model of education that students receive, PA graduates have unique flexibility to switch specialties throughout their career based upon the workforce needs of their communities without having to complete a post-graduate residency or fellowship prior to entering practice.**

In response to looming provider shortages and in recognition of the potential of the PA profession to mitigate projected shortfalls, PA education has grown significantly in recent years with the number of accredited programs rising from 149 in 2010 to 282 as of 2022. While this clearly demonstrates workforce demand for PA services, both this growth rate and the COVID-19 pandemic have placed new pressures on PA education related to clinical site availability, student diversity, and program financing, among other concerns. Sustained and expanded access to funding administered by HRSA will be critical in equipping PA programs to address these key challenges.

## **Clinical Training Site Shortages**

As PA programs have worked to sustain their operations throughout the pandemic, one of the most daunting barriers they have confronted is shortages of clinical training sites for students. As a condition of graduation, all PA students are required to complete a series of core rotations in specialties such as family medicine, pediatrics, and behavioral health, among others, and barriers to securing these rotations limit the capacity of PA programs to expand to meet workforce demand. In a recent survey of programs, nearly 85% of respondents indicated that their existing clinical sites were taking fewer students than before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Of particular concern, programs have reported significant challenges in

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



securing high-priority specialty rotations with 49.4% of respondents indicating that it is either harder or much harder to secure family medicine placements for students than prior to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

To assist programs in overcoming this barrier, HRSA has taken commendable steps to provide support. Specifically, in September 2021, HRSA released the Primary Care Training and Enhancement - Physician Assistant Rural Training (PCTE-PAR) funding opportunity to increase the availability of longitudinal clinical rotation opportunities in rural communities, including via direct payment to preceptors. **PAEA applauds the creation of this funding opportunity and urges you to continue to dedicate PCTE and other resources authorized under Title VII of the Public Health Service Act specifically to expanding clinical education capacity throughout your tenure.**

### **Workforce Diversity**

Beyond the issue of clinical site shortages, a key priority for PA education in alignment with HRSA's mission is supporting the development of a diverse health workforce with the capacity to provide culturally competent care to patients. However, as is true across many health professions, underrepresented minority (URM) students have historically faced daunting barriers to matriculation in PA education with approximately 4% of first-year PA students identifying as Black or African American and 9% identifying as Hispanic or Latino.<sup>2</sup>

HRSA programs play a critical role in expanding pathways to PA education for URM students. Investments such as the Health Careers Opportunity Program provide the educational and experiential resources necessary for students to learn about the process of becoming a PA while the Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students program provides the financial support needed to allow students to successfully complete their programs. **As PA programs continue their efforts to promote student diversity, we encourage you to leverage all available opportunities to integrate health equity as a priority for HRSA's funding opportunities.**

### **National Health Service Corps**

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<sup>2</sup> 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>.



To reduce the burden of student debt and provide graduates with the financial flexibility necessary to choose careers in primary care and in underserved areas, PAEA has long been a vigorous advocate on behalf of service-based scholarship and loan repayment opportunities such as the National Health Service Corps. In 2020 and 2021, PAEA prioritized advocacy for significant new investments in the NHSC alongside a coalition of health professions education stakeholders, eventually resulting in over \$800 million for the program being included in the American Rescue Plan Act. As a result of HRSA's expeditious administration of this funding, over 1,800 PA students and graduates are now participating in the NHSC, providing critical access to care in communities in need of providers.<sup>3</sup>

While the number of PA participants in the NHSC's scholarship and loan repayment programs has recently reached a new high, PA students and graduates have historically been excluded from some NHSC opportunities such as the Students to Service (S2S) program. PAEA strongly advocated for the expansion of S2S to include PA students in 2020 and 2021 and applauded HRSA's decision to expand the program as of the latest funding cycle. **This action will have a demonstrable positive impact on the health of communities across the nation, and PAEA looks forward to continued collaboration with HRSA to publicize these valuable opportunities for our members and stakeholders.**

Congratulations once again on your appointment, and we welcome the opportunity to further discuss these issues, as well as how PAEA might serve as a resource to you in your new role. Should you have specific questions or if you would like additional information, please contact Senior Director of Government Relations Tyler Smith at 703-667-4356 or [tsmith@PAEAonline.org](mailto:tsmith@PAEAonline.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kara Caruthers".

Kara Caruthers, MSPAS, PA-C  
President

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara F. Fletcher".

Sara Fletcher, PhD  
Chief Operating Officer

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<sup>3</sup> Health Resources and Services Administration. (2021). *Bureau of Health Workforce Field Strength Dashboard*. <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/field-strength>.