



April 29, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi  
Speaker of the House  
United States House of Representatives  
H-222, US Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
S-230, US Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy  
Republican Leader  
United States House of Representatives  
H-204, US Capitol  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
Senate Democratic Leader  
United States Senate  
S-221, US Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer,

On behalf of the American Academy of PAs (AAPA) and the more than 140,000 PAs (physician assistants) serving patients across the United States, thank you for the bipartisan leadership Congress has shown in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. These are difficult times for patients, healthcare providers, and the general public. While Congress has taken critical steps to help mitigate the impact of this pandemic, there is need for additional action to further strengthen and protect our healthcare workforce.

PAs are highly trained healthcare providers who practice medicine in all 50 states, diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications and often serve as a patient's principal healthcare provider. PAs work across all practice settings and are already a significant part of the on-the-ground efforts to diagnose and treat COVID-19. PAs are qualified, well-trained medical providers ready to deliver care.

AAPA asks Congress to build on the actions it has already taken by considering the following requests, which will help to protect and bolster our healthcare workforce:

Improve Access to PPE and Testing

First and foremost, AAPA calls on Congress to prioritize the safety of our healthcare workforce by improving access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing for healthcare workers delivering

care in and outside the hospital setting. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), healthcare workers make up 19% of all COVID-19 cases. Despite recent efforts, healthcare workers are still facing dangerous shortages of lifesaving PPE and testing. We must protect those who protect us.

#### Provide Full Practice Authority for Federally Employed PAs, Especially Department of Veterans Affairs

AAPA strongly recommends the federal government immediately institute permanent full-practice authority for all PAs working at all federal agencies that operate under a federal scope of practice. Due to the nature of the COVID-19 crisis, the pressing need to effectively utilize our healthcare workforce is particularly acute at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). More than 6,000 VA patients have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and more than 2,000 VA health care workers have gotten the coronavirus, with 20 deaths. With 3,600 of the 300,000-plus VA health care employees currently quarantined and unable to work, there is a need to make certain PAs are fully utilized within the VA system. AAPA specifically recommends Congress pass legislation providing full-practice authority for PAs at the VA. This action will ensure PAs can be fully utilized to set up emergency response centers, streamline care, provide increased access, and allow the VA to meet its fifth mission of taking care of overflow patients from civilian hospitals.

#### Utilize PA and NP Workforce to Improve Access to Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation

AAPA urges Congress to include the Cardiac and Pulmonary Rehabilitation and Care Act (S. 2842, HR 3911) in the next legislative vehicle responding to COVID-19. This bipartisan legislation would authorize PAs and NPs to order cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation services; it would also authorize PAs and NPs to begin supervising these programs earlier than 2024, the date currently set in law. COVID-19 demands that we take steps to increase the capacity to provide these services and minimize unnecessary additional patient visits to a physician to receive authorization, resulting in a more efficient healthcare workforce. Early research indicates many COVID-19 patients may face lasting heart and lung problems.

#### Pass Medicare Direct Payment for PAs, Ensuring Payment for COVID-19 Testing

AAPA urges Congress to include the PA Direct Pay Act (S. 596, HR 1052) in the next legislative vehicle responding to COVID-19. This bipartisan, cost-saving bill would authorize PAs to receive direct payments from the Medicare program like all other healthcare providers. This critical piece of legislation authorizes PAs to seek reimbursement for testing COVID-19 patients. This is especially important for rural areas, including at PA-owned rural health centers (RHCs) where PAs are required to bear the costs of COVID-19 and flu testing and other laboratory services that are not included in the payment bundle for RHC primary care services, and as we look to ramp up testing in these underserved areas and across the country.

### Authorize PAs and NPs to Order Diabetic Shoes for Medicare Patients

AAPA urges Congress to include the Promoting Access to Diabetic Shoes Act (S. 237, HR 808) in the next legislative vehicle responding to COVID-19. This bipartisan bill would authorize PAs to order diabetic shoes for Medicare patients, which they are currently unauthorized to do despite being authorized to provide care to diabetic patients that is significantly more complicated. This would eliminate unnecessary paperwork and the cost of an additional physician visit while also removing a barrier for diabetic Medicare patients to receive a low-cost preventative diabetic shoe, limiting the potential for more costly, dangerous conditions such as foot ulcers, diabetic neuropathy or amputations for this high-risk COVID-19 population.

### Provide Hazard Pay for Essential Healthcare Workers and Support Providers Facing Financial Loss

AAPA urges Congress to include legislation creating hazard pay for frontline healthcare workers that expressly includes PAs in the next legislative vehicle responding to COVID-19. PAs and other critical healthcare workers are working in situations where there is an increased risk of infection from COVID-19, exposing PAs and families to considerable health risks as they provide care to others. AAPA also asks Congress to include legislation that would create and expand grants for healthcare providers and practices facing significant losses due to the current crisis, such as a fund like the one included in S. 3559

### Improve Access to Hospice Care at this Critical Time by Better Utilizing PA Services

Following enactment of the Medicare Patient Access to Hospice Act as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018, and subsequent regulatory changes, CMS now recognizes PAs as hospice attending physicians who are able to order services for hospice patients. However, despite the intention of these policy changes to include PAs as care providers to hospice patients, restrictions persist. AAPA asks that at this critical time 42 USC 1395(x)(dd)(1)(F) be clarified to specify that physician services include those provided by PAs. As a result of this statutory change, regulatory restrictions should be removed in relation to hospice-employed PAs. These restrictions include the inability to order drugs under 42 CFR 418.106(b)(1)(iii)(B) or the ability to serve hospice patients if an attending physician has not been selected by a patient under section 40.1.3.3 of Chapter 9 of the Medicare Benefits Policy Manual. PAs also need to be listed under 42 USC 1395f(a)(7)(D)(i)(I) in order to perform face-to-face visits that are required to recertify hospice patients after 180 days, and be permitted to conduct these face-to-face encounters via telehealth, as recently permitted by Section 3706 of the CARES Act.

### Further Increase Access to Telehealth Services for Patients

AAPA urges Congress to include the Creating Opportunities Now for Necessary and Effective Care Technologies (CONNECT) for Health Act (S. 2741/H.R. 4932), in the next COVID relief package to improve access to telehealth. The CONNECT Act would expand the use of telehealth and remote patient monitoring services in Medicare toward the goal of cost savings and quality care, of particular importance

during the time of COVID-19 as we seek to limit exposure and transmission and make the best use of our healthcare workforce and PPE.

Thank you for the actions Congress has already taken to strengthen America's healthcare workforce and provide the PAs and other healthcare providers with the flexibility and support they need to effectively fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Please let us know if we may answer any questions by reaching out to Tate Heuer at [theuer@aapa.org](mailto:theuer@aapa.org) or 571-319-4338.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lisa M. Gables". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lisa Gables  
Interim Chief Executive Officer