

# The Characteristics of Physician Assistants in the National Guard and Reserves

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## Abstract

To understand the duality of civilian-military PA roles, a census of the armed forces was undertaken. As of 2020, there were 1,944 PAs in the five military reserve components with the majority (1,597) in the Army. Most National Guard, Air National Guard, and Reserve PAs fill medical officer roles, drill with units, and are subject to active duty. As soldiers, sailors, and airmen, military PAs are trained in health, safety, warfare readiness, casualty, trauma, and crisis response. The tenure of a reserve component PA in the military ranged between 10.2 and 17.8 years. In their civilian roles, most PAs are licensed and clinically active—the majority report they work in family/general medicine, emergency medicine, general surgery, or orthopedic medicine and surgery. This dual-career role and responsibility suggests the utility and flexibility of the US PA is broader than previously reported.



U.S. Army Maj. Leah Triolo, left, and U.S. Navy Lt. j.g. Ayleigh Armaya assist an Afghan in Afghanistan's Farah province in 2012. Triolo is an orthopedic surgeon with the 67th Forward Surgical Team Airborne and Armaya is a physician assistant with Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah. (U.S. Air Force photo)

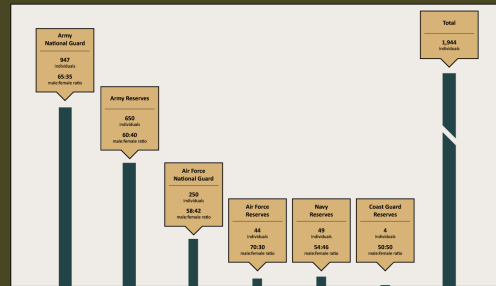


Exhibit 1. PAs in the US armed forces reserves, National Guard, and Air National Guard, from a survey of senior military officers in 2020

## Methods

We contacted an active-duty senior PA officer in each of the military branches of the Armed Forces. The items queried were:

- As of 2020, how many PAs are in the [identified reserve service]?
- What are the characteristics of PAs in the reserve components?

The second source of data on PAs in the reserve component of the Armed Forces was from the workforce data in the PA Professional Profile compiled by the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants (NCCPA).



Lt. Jeremiah Thompson, an emergency medicine physician assistant at Naval Hospital Jacksonville, checks Chief Aviation Electrician's Mate Robert Frieheffer's heart. Thompson holds a Master in Health Sciences Degree from Drew University's physician assistant program. "My father served in the Air Force for 26 years. My mother died when I was very young. That had motivated me to be in military medicine. I provide emergent critical health care to my fellow service members and their families." (U.S. Navy photo by Jacob Sippel, Naval Hospital Jacksonville)



Capt. Timothy Quinn, a physician assistant with the 720th Area Support Medical Company, South Dakota Army National Guard, treats a young patient at the Indian Health Services (IHS) clinic in Lower Brule, S.D. in 2013. National Guard Soldiers provided immunizations, physicals and health education to Native American patients as a part of their two-week annual training during the 29th annual Golden Coyote training exercise. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Fawn Craig)

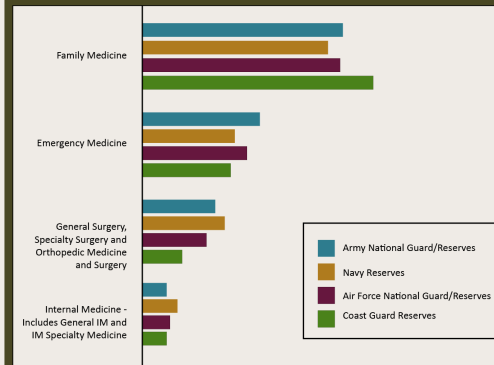


Exhibit 3. PA civilian medical specialty by branch of service (present or past, 2020)  
 All figures are percentages. Navy PAs may be extended to the Marines, a branch of the Navy.



Lt. Lauren Moses, center, physician assistant aboard the U.S. Navy's forward deployed aircraft carrier USS George Washington (CVN 71), from Port Townsend, Wash., and other medical department Sailors gather medical information and medical needs from Philippine De Maria Flores at the Rural Health Center during Operation Damayan. The George Washington Strike Group supports the 3d Marine Expeditionary Brigade to assist the Philippine government in response to the aftermath of Super Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda in the Republic of the Philippines. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Beverly Lesonko)

## Conclusion

The US military draws on PAs to provide healthcare to diverse populations, and the reserve components of the Armed Forces mirror this active-duty mission. PAs have become a critical element of reserve components as medical officers by providing a flexible and adaptable resource for military missions, both in domestic and international settings. The difficulty of recruiting board-certified physicians and surgeons has compelled the uniformed services to adapt and use PAs in unprecedented ways.



Lt. Col. Joann Shoffner, Arizona Army National Guard Medical Detachment, nurse, and Maj. Mary Kehl, 996 Area Support Medical Company, physician assistant, fill syringes with the COVID-19 vaccination at the pharmacy in a COVID-19 vaccination distribution facility on Phoenix, Feb. 9, 2021. More than 600 Arizona National Guardsmen continue to assist at vaccination sites, testing locations and food banks throughout Arizona. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Michael Macklin)

## Introduction

Most physician assistant in the reserve components, hold a full-time civilian job while serving part-time as commissioned officers. In this capacity, they bring a broad array of skills and experiences to their assigned unit, especially in medical service delivery. The organization and delivery of civilian healthcare are enhanced by the PAs' experience with battlefield trauma, medical and surgical care of diverse populations such as refugees, and medical assets management during natural disasters. We set out to understand the characteristics of PAs in the National Guard of the Army and Air Force and the reserves of the Navy, Coast Guard, Army and Air Force.