



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

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February 4, 2022

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Richard Burr
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Murray and Ranking Member Burr:

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 applaud your leadership in working to strengthen federal preparedness for future pandemics and offer our organization's comments on the current discussion draft of the PREVENT Pandemics Act.

Throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerabilities created by chronic underfunding of our country's public health and clinical infrastructure have been starkly illustrated. In response to these lessons learned, the PREVENT Pandemics Act proposes significant policy changes to bolster biosurveillance capabilities, accelerate the development of critical medical countermeasures, and improve coordination among federal and state stakeholders. As you seek to develop final legislation, we welcome the opportunity to recommend additional provisions for your consideration specifically to ensure the availability of a robust clinical workforce to respond to future public health crises.

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BIO Preparedness Workforce Act (S. 3244)

Since the emergence of COVID-19, the pre-existing issue of clinical workforce shortages has considerably worsened. Shortages of frontline providers, particularly in rural and underserved communities, have contributed to clinician burnout, increased costs for health systems forced to rely on out-of-state travel providers, and delays in access to needed care for patients. While provider shortages have been observed across specialties, it is particularly critical to ensure an adequate supply of infectious disease clinicians to prepare for the threat posed by the likely future emergence of new pathogens.

To address this challenge, PAEA urges you to include S. 3244 - the BIO Preparedness Workforce Act - as a component of the PREVENT Pandemics Act. This bipartisan legislation led by Senators Baldwin and Collins builds upon existing federal loan repayment programs for clinicians by specifically targeting shortages of infectious disease clinicians in underserved communities. For each year of practice in an underserved community, PAs specializing in infectious disease care, as well as an array of other clinicians such as physicians and nurse practitioners, would receive up to \$50,000 in loan repayment aid. Based upon the success of comparable programs like the National Health Service Corps in recruiting and retaining clinicians to areas of highest need, this program would meaningfully strengthen the preparedness of health systems to respond to future public health threats, and PAEA strongly supports its inclusion in the PREVENT Pandemics Act.

Student Assisted Vaccination Effort Act (S. 2114)

In addition to a sufficient supply of well-trained, practicing providers, a critical component of preparedness for future pandemics is fully leveraging the skills of all individuals capable of contributing to response efforts - including students. As mass vaccination efforts against COVID-19 began in early 2021, states and localities were challenged to mobilize an adequate supply of vaccinators to respond to initial demand. The Department of Health and Human Services responded to this challenge in March of 2021 by issuing an amendment to the Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act Declaration allowing trained, qualified, and supervised health professions students to participate in mass vaccination efforts with immunity from liability claims. While this action meaningfully accelerated early vaccination efforts, this authority will expire at the end of the current federal public health emergency without congressional action.

To avoid unnecessary delays in the response to future public health crises, we urge you to permanently authorize supervised PA and other health professions students to contribute to efforts like mass vaccination campaigns with immunity from liability.



PAEA has endorsed S. 2114 - the Student Assisted Vaccination Effort Act - led by Senators Kelly and Collins, which would allow currently eligible students permanent authority to contribute to future response efforts without action by the Secretary of Health and Human Services as is now required. We encourage you to include this or similar legislative language in a final version of the PREVENT Pandemics Act to further bolster preparedness for future pandemics.

Physician Assistant Education Public Health Initiatives Act (H.R. 3890)

A final component of optimal preparedness for emerging public health challenges is mitigating disruption to the preparation of the future clinical workforce. As health systems have mobilized to care for patients with COVID-19 throughout this pandemic, many providers have been forced to either limit the number of students that they train or stop serving as a clinical preceptor altogether. According to a recent survey of PA programs throughout the country, nearly 85% of respondents indicated that their existing clinical sites are taking fewer students than before the pandemic.¹ This significant reduction in clinical education capacity has exacerbated the pre-existing clinical site shortage, resulting in both delayed graduations and reduced class sizes for future cohorts of students. As illustrated throughout the pandemic, an insufficient supply of providers is among the most significant threats to the ability of health systems to effectively respond to public health crises, and clinical training site availability must be prioritized as a component of any comprehensive preparedness proposal.

To both expand clinical training capacity and provide a pathway for students to practice in underserved settings post-graduation, PAEA has endorsed the Physician Assistant Education Public Health Initiatives Act, which is currently introduced in the House of Representatives as H.R. 3890. This legislation would authorize a clinical training demonstration for PA students modeled after the successful Teaching Health Center Graduate Medical Education program for physicians. Specifically, the demonstration would provide funding to PA programs to facilitate clinical rotations in underserved practice settings such as federally qualified health centers, critical access hospitals, and rural health clinics. **By providing dedicated resources to support clinical rotations in traditionally underserved settings, future disruptions to clinical workforce development and public health preparedness efforts can be effectively mitigated, and we encourage you to integrate this bill into the final iteration of the PREVENT Pandemics Act.**

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



We appreciate the opportunity to provide the Association's perspective on the PREVENT Pandemics Act and look forward to continued opportunities to support the work of the committee. 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.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kara Caruthers". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Kara Caruthers, MSPAS, PA-C
President

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara F. Fletcher". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Sara Fletcher, PhD
Interim Chief Executive Officer