



PA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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December 6, 2023

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chairman
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Cassidy, M.D.
Ranking Member
Committee on Health, Education,
Labor and Pensions
United States Senate
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Sanders and Ranking Member Cassidy:

On behalf of the PA Education Association (PAEA), the national organization representing all 306 accredited PA programs in the United States, we are writing to applaud your leadership in introducing the bipartisan SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Reauthorization Act. As more than 100,000 Americans each year continue to succumb to fatal overdoses, Congress must continue its efforts to increase access to substance use disorder treatment. An essential component of achieving this goal is investing in the creation of a sufficient supply of well-trained health care professionals to ensure patients receive the care they need.

Throughout the history of the profession, PA graduates have played a critical role in responding to public health crises, including, but not limited to, the drug overdose epidemic. As a condition of graduation, every PA student is required to complete clinical training in

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mental and behavioral health, positioning PA graduates uniquely to be able to treat both substance use disorders and other comorbidities impacting patients in need.

In recent years, Congress has taken important actions to strengthen the capacity of the PA profession to expand access to behavioral health services. In 2016, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act allowed PAs and other advanced practice providers to prescribe buprenorphine in office-based settings for the first time, thereby significantly expanding access to medication for the treatment of opioid use disorder. In 2018, the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act recognized PAs as substance use disorder treatment providers for the purposes of the Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Recovery Loan Repayment Program (STAR-LRP). The reauthorization of the SUPPORT Act provides a critical opportunity to build upon these efforts by addressing the exclusion of PAs practicing in mental and behavioral health from other areas of federal law. As such, PAEA would like to offer the following comments on the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Reauthorization Act.

Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training Grants

As PA programs work to prepare the future workforce, a critical challenge they face is a shortage of clinical training sites, particularly in mental and behavioral health. According to a recent survey, nearly 50% of programs report that it is either harder or much harder to secure behavioral health rotations now when compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ **This shortage of clinical training sites is the most significant threat to the continued ability of programs to produce a sufficient supply of behavioral health PAs to meet demand for care.**

Historically, Congress has recognized the need to expand clinical education capacity through the Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training grant program. However, while the authorization of these grants includes other professions with a similar scope of practice such as psychiatric nurse practitioners, this program has historically excluded support for training PAs in mental and behavioral health. **To help ensure a sufficient supply of clinical sites,**

¹ Physician Assistant Education Association. (2022). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report 4*. <https://paea.edcast.com/insights/ECL-ad856ca6-efad-44cf-ac1b-dccb52bca51c>.



PAEA urges the HELP Committee to ensure the inclusion of PA programs as eligible recipients for Mental and Behavioral Health Education and Training grants in section 204 of the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Reauthorization Act.

Substance Use Disorder Treatment and Recovery Loan Repayment Program

In addition to expanding clinical education capacity, a key component of ensuring a sufficient workforce is appropriate incentives to encourage specialization in behavioral health. For this reason, PAEA endorsed the creation of the STAR-LRP in the SUPPORT Act in 2018 and the inclusion of PAs as eligible recipients for the program. However, while the program has done important work since its creation, the funding level provided to it has proven inadequate to meet applicant demand. **For this reason, PAEA strongly supports the reauthorization of the STAR-LRP and applauds the increase in the program's authorization level to \$50 million annually through fiscal year 2028 in section 202 of the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Reauthorization Act.**

PAEA appreciates the opportunity to provide the Association's perspective on the reauthorization of the SUPPORT Act and looks forward to serving as a resource to members and staff. Should you require additional information or have questions, please contact Tyler Smith, Senior Director of Government Relations, at tsmith@PAEAonline.org or 703-667-4356.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Sekhon". The script is fluid and cursive.

Linda Sekhon, DHSc, PA-C
President

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

Sara Fletcher, PhD
Chief Executive Officer