



PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
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Statement for the Record
Submitted to
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Health
Hearing on “The Future of Telehealth: How COVID-19 Is Changing the
Delivery of Virtual Care”
March 2, 2021

The Physician Assistant Education Association (PAEA), representing the 267 accredited PA programs in the United States, welcomes the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the future delivery of telehealth services.

This hearing comes at a time of significant transformation for the traditional paradigm of health care delivery in the United States. As the pandemic has limited the ability or willingness of patients to receive in-person care, increased adoption of telehealth by health care providers has played a critical role in ensuring continued access to needed services. Less attention has been paid, however, to the role of telehealth in bolstering the pipeline of future providers and how lessons learned during the pandemic can be used to improve provider preparedness to meet anticipated high demand for telehealth services beyond the scope of the current public health emergency.

Since the inception of the profession in the 1960s, PA education has been based upon an intensive, modified form of physician training. Over the course of, on-average, a 27-month continuous program, PA students complete a rigorous curriculum divided almost evenly

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between classroom-based/didactic and clinical education. During the clinical year, students complete a series of required rotations in family medicine, internal medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, emergency medicine, and behavioral medicine in a variety of clinical settings with a heavy emphasis on in-person exposure to patients.

The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 resulted in a wave of clinical rotation suspensions mandated either by health care settings or by the sponsoring institutions of PA programs in an effort to protect students and conserve health system resources. According to PAEA's first survey of members related to the operational impact of COVID-19, a majority of programs reported either clinical site-mandated or institutionally mandated suspension of rotations - policies that were also instituted for medical, nursing, and other health professions students.¹ While these policies caused significant disruption to the ability of students to complete their required clinical education and graduate on time, many programs were able to limit this impact by supplementing traditionally in-person rotations with telehealth experiences. According to PAEA's most recent *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report*, 57.5% of responding PA programs reported increased adoption of telehealth for students' clinical year as a result of COVID-19.¹

In spite of the success of many programs in rapidly increasing the use of telehealth for clinical year students, the realities of treating patients during the pandemic has revealed new opportunities to better prepare graduates to practice in a future environment with a significantly increased demand for telehealth services. Compared to in-person care, there are important nuances associated with preparing students to provide telehealth services such as special privacy and security considerations and modifications to traditional patient communication strategies. However, due largely to competing demands within a crowded curriculum, PAEA's most recent COVID-19 survey indicates that only 10.5% of programs provided their didactic year students with dedicated telehealth content prior to COVID-19.²

In recognition of increased demand for telehealth services , 37% of programs have signaled a desire to expand telehealth content in their didactic curriculum in the future.² **It is therefore crucial that any legislation designed to facilitate increased long-term utilization of telehealth**

¹ Physician Assistant Education Association. (2021). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report 3*. <https://paea.edcast.com/pathways/covid-19-rapid-response-reports/cards/8454047>.



services include authorized funding to support the development of telehealth curriculum for PA programs to ensure students are as equipped as possible to provide the high-quality virtual services patients require.

PAEA stands ready to collaborate with the Subcommittee on effective legislative options to ensure workforce preparedness for the future of telehealth delivery. Should you require additional information or have questions, please contact Tyler Smith, Director of Government Relations, at tsmith@PAEAonline.org or 703-667-4356.