



**Association of
American Medical Colleges**

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Darrell G. Kirch, M.D.
President and Chief Executive Officer

July 31, 2015

The Honorable John Tester
United State Senate
311 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Tester:

Thank you for your leadership in helping ensure that our nation's veterans have access to physicians. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) is pleased to endorse the expansion of Medicare funding for Graduate Medical Education (GME) under the "Delivering Opportunities for Care and Services (DOCS) for Veterans Act" (S. 1676).

The AAMC is a not-for-profit association representing all 144 accredited U.S. and 17 accredited Canadian medical schools; nearly 400 major teaching hospitals and health systems, including 51 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers; and nearly 90 academic and scientific societies. Through these institutions and organizations, the AAMC represents 148,000 faculty members, 83,000 medical students, and 115,000 resident physicians.

VA physician shortages are symptomatic of a broader trend, the proverbial "canary in the coal mine." The AAMC projects a nationwide shortage of between 46,000-90,000 physicians by 2025. Though these shortfalls will affect all Americans, the most vulnerable populations in underserved areas will be the first to feel the impact (e.g., the VA, Medicare and Medicaid patients, rural and urban community health centers, and the Indian Health Service).

To address this shortage, the nation's medical schools have done their part by expanding enrollment by 30 percent. However, there has not been a commensurate increase in the number of GME residency training positions. The primary barrier to increasing residency training at teaching hospitals — and the U.S. physician workforce in turn — is the cap on Medicare GME financial support, which was established in 1997. Thankfully, the DOCS for Veterans Act helps address this hurdle.

Just as Medicare GME supports Medicare's share of training costs at institutions that care for Medicare beneficiaries, VA GME supports residency training programs based at VA medical centers. The Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 instructs VA to add 1,500 GME residency slots over five years at VA facilities that are experiencing shortages. However, without an increase in Medicare GME support, there may not be enough affiliate residency positions to accommodate this VA expansion.

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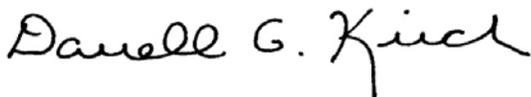
Most VA residency programs do not operate independently. They rely upon the existing administrative and training infrastructure maintained by the nation's medical schools and teaching hospitals. Nearly all VA residency programs are sponsored by an affiliate medical school or teaching hospital. Currently, 127 VA facilities have affiliation agreements for physician training with 130 of the 144 U.S. medical schools.

To assure that VA-based residents receive the highest quality training possible, they need diverse and supervised experiences in a variety of clinical settings. This includes training experiences at the nation's teaching hospitals and the multispecialty practices run by the nation's medical schools. While there is considerable variability among VA medical centers, programs, and specialties, on average medical residents rotating through the VA spend approximately three months of a residency year at the VA (i.e., a quarter of their training).

As such, simply increasing VA GME funding alone will not address the VA crisis. Without a corresponding increase in Medicare GME support, VA medical centers will be unable to capitalize fully on increases in VA GME funding. The DOCS for Veterans Act will allow affiliate teaching hospitals that are already at or above their 1997 Medicare GME cap to receive Medicare support for VACAA residents while they are training at a non-VA facility. This will allow the VA and its academic affiliates to build on an already successful 70-year partnership.

Thank you again for your leadership on this important matter. I look forward to working with you to improve care for our nation's veterans and on legislation to help address nationwide physician workforce shortages.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darrell G. Kirch". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Darrell G. Kirch, M.D.
President and Chief Executive Officer