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American Academy of PAs Commitment Statement on Countering the U.S. Opioid Epidemic

The American Academy of PAs (AAPA) is the national membership organization for all PAs (physician assistants). PAs are medical professionals who conduct physical exams, order and interpret tests, diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, assist in surgery, and counsel on preventative healthcare. PAs often serve as a patient's principal healthcare provider.

Of the more than 131,000 PAs practicing in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, every U.S. territory, and the uniformed services, approximately 30,000 practice in addiction medicine or primary care, where they commonly work with patients who struggle with opioid use disorder (OUD). Another 45,000 PAs practicing in surgical specialties and emergency medicine may prescribe opioids to their patients for pain control or treat patients with OUD.

AAPA is a leader in providing educational content focusing on responsible opioid prescribing for PAs and a founding partner of the Collaborative on Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy (REMS) Education (CO*RE). Since 2013, AAPA has provided at least 100 hours of free instructional content to more than 10,000 PAs, which includes pain management treatment guidelines, early detection of opioid addiction, and the treatment and management of opioid dependent patients.

There are currently too few addiction specialists to meet the growing demand for medication assisted treatment (MAT) programs. Since 2016, the Comprehensive Addiction Recovery Act (CARA) permits PAs to become waived to prescribe buprenorphine for the treatment of opioid addiction. AAPA is an approved provider of the training, which permits qualified clinicians to obtain a waiver to prescribe and dispense buprenorphine. Training PAs to prescribe buprenorphine and manage MAT patients increases the availability of providers to treat patients with OUD.

AAPA supports removing federal barriers in order to further expand access to treatment. In order to obtain a waiver to prescribe buprenorphine, physicians are required to complete eight hours of training while PAs are required to complete 24 hours. AAPA believes all prescribers of buprenorphine for MAT should be subject to the same Continued Medical Education (CME) training requirements to qualify for a waiver. The content included in the first eight hours of training for PAs is identical to the content required for physicians, and there is no evidence that supports requiring an additional 16 hours for PAs.

AAPA provides CME promoting the appropriate, safe, and effective use of opioids to manage chronic pain such as the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) Fundamentals of Addiction Medicine, an innovative educational program empowering PAs in primary care and other specialties to diagnose and treat patients at risk for or with addiction.

PAs are on the front lines of treating patients with OUD. The epidemic of overdoses and deaths from the abuse of opioids has devastated countless families and communities. AAPA is working to expand access to treatment, enhance prescriber education, and encourage the balancing of treatment options and risk of addiction to combat the opioid crisis.