Overview

Our nation’s veterans deserve the highest quality of care in a timely manner. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which operates more than 1,700 sites and provides care to 8.76 million veterans annually, relies on the expertise of the entire healthcare team to ensure the wellness of our nation’s service men and women. Within the VA, Registered Nurses (RNs) and Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs) including nurse practitioners (NPs), certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs), and clinical nurse specialists (CNSs), are essential members of the VHA provider teams. As the largest national employer of nurses, over 88,000 RNs, NPs, CRNAs, and CNSs serve in the VA.

The aging of our nation’s veterans coupled with troops returning from active duty highlights the growing need for safe, reliable, and cost-effective VHA services. Between FY 2002 and FY 2013 alone, the number of enrollees utilizing VHA services rose from 6.8 million to 8.9 million. Recently, Congress has called upon the VA to address the rising demand for a greater number of providers.

In these federal health systems, veterans can already use their VHA health benefits as a result of the Veterans Access Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-146). Allowing APRNs to practice to the full scope of their education and training in VHA facilities so that these VA health providers are utilized to their optimal potential, is yet another viable solution.

APRNs: Committed to Serving Those Who Have Served

Numerous studies and extensive empirical evidence show that the care provided by APRNs is safe, of high quality, and can help alleviate provider shortages. National entities such as the Federal Trade Commission, the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the National Governors Association, and other policy bodies have noted the high quality of care APRNs provide, and the positive impact it has in ensuring access to services in high demand. Policies that require unnecessary and burdensome oversight of APRNs present barriers that potentially delay the diagnosis and treatment of illness. APRNs receive extensive education and clinical training in their specific field of practice. They are required to pass rigorous national certification board exams to demonstrate their expertise, knowledge, and competency.
Many APRN students also receive clinical training in VHA facilities where they become acclimated to the VHA system and its patients. Additionally, the nursing profession takes an active lead in preparing its students to care for veteran populations. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) is a proud partner of the VA’s Joining Forces initiative, and 660 schools of nursing have pledged to enrich nursing education to ensure that future RNs and APRNs are trained in the best practices associated with caring for military service members, veterans, and their families. This illustrates nursing’s commitment to raising the quality of care available to our nation’s military personnel by preparing future generations of nurses.

Maximize APRNs’ Ability to Provide Care in the VHA by Granting Them Full Practice Authority

Given the benefits APRNs bring to the VHA healthcare system, and understanding the growing demand for clinicians, the VHA is proposing to recognize APRNs as full practice providers within VHA facilities. More specifically, under this proposal, APRNs would be allowed to practice to the full extent of their education and training. This would also enhance APRNs’ role as members of the healthcare team. The VHA’s recommendation directly aligns with the IOM’s landmark report The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health, which calls for the removal of barriers that prevent APRNs from practicing to their full scope, and states that nurses should be partners with physicians and other health professionals to improve and redesign healthcare in the United States. Additionally, the VHA’s proposal would promote parity around the care our nation’s service men and women receive.

Currently, APRNs have full-practice authority when deployed in active duty from any three branches of the U.S. Armed Services Nurse Corps, the Department of Defense, as well as within the Indian Health Service. When in theater, America’s military receive care from APRNs who are able to practice to their full authority. That same practice should be carried over when they return home as veterans. The VHA’s recommendation and H.R. 1247 introduced Representatives Sam Graves (R-MO) and Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), aims to maximize the full range of evidence-based services APRNs provide, as well as ensure access to care in a safe and effective patient-centered model. Moreover, permitting full practice authority within the VHA could help recruit and retain a greater number of APRNs to care for veterans. As APRN students near graduation, many opt for employment in environments that uphold their professional standards as full practice providers.

Supporters of Allowing APRNs Full Practice Authority in VHA Facilities

AARP

The Nursing Community Coalition