



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

January 26, 2017

Robert Snyder
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Snyder:

We are writing to you on behalf of the American Psychological Association (APA) to express our concern about the impact of the January 23, 2017 Presidential Memorandum Regarding the Hiring Freeze on our nation's Veterans. We also want to thank you for your statement on January 25th announcing the Department of Veterans Affairs' intention to, "exempt anyone it deems necessary for public safety, including frontline caregivers." Clear and explicit guidance is needed immediately from the VA exempting health professions and health professions training programs. Otherwise, nearly 1,000 doctoral candidates in health service psychology who are currently in the process of applying to complete their clinical training at the VA through the annual national internship match may be unable to serve at an estimated 600 internship positions across the VA. This would ultimately further restrict access to much-needed mental health care services to our current and future Veterans.

As the Presidential Memorandum stated, "The head of any executive department or agency may exempt from the hiring freeze any positions that it deems necessary to meet national security or public safety responsibilities." I encourage you and the VA to exempt all those who provide health care, including doctoral psychology interns providing mental health care, as frontline caregivers to millions of Veterans across this country.

APA is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States. APA's membership includes 115,700 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students.

We recognize and value the critical role of the VA and its staff in administering the Nation's largest integrated health care system and its early recognition of the mental health needs of our nation's Veterans. APA appreciates the VA's historical and expanded investments in the training of our future psychology workforce. Psychology graduate students are currently engaged in applying for the 600 pre-doctoral psychology internship positions within the VA, to place full time students in year-long internship positions at VA medical centers across the country. Internships are the capstone training requirement for licensure for doctoral candidates in health service psychology. Without clear and

750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4242
(202) 336-5500
(202) 336-6123 TDD



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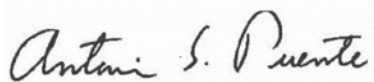
explicit guidance from the VA on the exemption status of health care professions training programs from the VA, these positions and the students' careers may be derailed.

Critical shortages of psychologists and other health professionals are impacting the health care of Veterans and restricting access to care at a time when demand for services far exceeds the ability of the VA to meet the health care needs of our Veterans. The VA internship programs provide critical training opportunities in integrated care and develop the future workforce that is needed to deliver evidence-based treatments for trauma, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders.

Training opportunities at the VA are more important than ever. A 2013 report of mental health care for OEF and OIF Veterans found that the mental health workforce had insufficient capacity to address the needs of service members returning home. In addition, the study found that the existing workforce lacked sufficient training in evidence-based practices, and there were inadequate organizational systems and tools to support mental health quality improvements. Veterans from rural communities are at a particular disadvantage as they face challenges such as limited options for assessment and treatment, and community providers' lack of awareness of military culture.

As the selection process for the next round of internships begins on February 1st, we urge you to make clear that these critical mental health profession training programs and vacancies are exempt from the hiring freeze as soon as possible. Please contact Karen Studwell, Associate Executive Director for Education Government Relations, at kstudwell@apa.org or 202.336.5585 if you have further questions. We look forward to hearing from you and thank you for your continued efforts to improve care for our Veterans.

Sincerely,



Antonio E. Puente, PhD
APA President



Cynthia D. Belar, PhD, ABPP
Interim Chief Executive Officer

cc: David J. Shulkin, MD
Under Secretary for Health
United States Department of Veterans Affairs