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Passage of Physician Assistant Legislation Required to Protect Patient Access to Quality Health Care in Missouri

ST. LOUIS – The Missouri Academy of Physician Assistants today urged state lawmakers to pass HB 497, a bill to protect patient access to quality health care in Missouri’s underserved rural and inner-city communities by establishing new guidelines for the supervision of physician assistants.

“Without a change in law, thousands of Missourians will be forced to find a new health-care provider,” said Paul Winter, president of Missouri Academy of Physician Assistants. “Health clinics will close in rural areas of our state where there is a physician shortage. Patients will be forced to travel greater distances for medical treatment.”

Physician assistants, commonly called PAs, are highly trained professionals who provide medical care and work with physicians’ supervision. This bill establishes specific guidelines that allow physicians to supervise PAs in person or through various communication methods – including telephone, fax and Internet – to extend care to patients in rural health clinics and other areas where access to care is strained.

Current rules require a physician to be in the facility when a PA is providing patient care, except for certain follow-up visits and when PAs practice in designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). HPSAs are areas where there is a recognized shortage of primary medical care providers. More than 80 percent of Missouri’s 114 counties are designated as HPSAs.

Passage of the bill is vitally important because the Board of Healing Arts, which regulates physicians and PAs, intends to eliminate the HPSA exception unless the legislature acts during the current session.

Failure to pass this important bill will have grave consequences for Missouri patients. For example, certified PA Robert Andrews will no longer be able to see some 30 patients a day at a Willow Springs clinic in rural southwest Missouri. Mountain Grove physician Doyle Hill, D.O., supervises Andrews but cannot be present all of the time Andrews works because he must attend to patients at other locations.

“I am proud to be able to provide health care services under the supervision and direction of my supervising physician,” Andrews said. “This bill protects the physician/physician assistant model and ensures that rural health clinics will remain open to help patients maintain healthy lives.” HB 497 would not change what medical care services Missouri

PAs can provide.

More specifically, HB 497 sponsored by Rep. David Sater of Cassville, would:

- Require the supervising physician to be immediately available for consultation either in person or via telecommunication during all times the PA is providing patient care.
- Require the supervising physician to practice on-site with the PA for at least one month before supervising by telecommunication. The physician then must practice on-site with the PA at least 55 percent of the time the PA is seeing patients, with exceptions for a number of settings where physician staffing can be a challenge. In these locations, a physician would be required to provide on-site supervision at least 10 percent of the time. These settings would include rural health clinics, community health centers, hospitals, nursing homes and other locations.
- Restrict the PA to practice at locations where the supervising physician is no further than 30 miles by road to ensure effective intervention and review of services. In settings which require 10 percent on-site supervision, the physician would need to remain within 50 miles by road.
- Retain unchanged the scope of practice for PAs as currently defined by Missouri law.

Under the bill, physicians would be able to see patients in the hospital while the PA sees patients with common problems and within their current scope of practice in the physician's office. In inner-city clinics, it may mean that the medical director of the health department can more efficiently staff well-child clinics. Surgeons will be able to delegate follow-up duties to PAs in the office while the doctor is at the hospital. If the physician decides to exercise only personal, on-site supervision of the PA, that choice would always remain available.

“Missouri will be the only state to require a physician to be present in the facility at all times when a physician assistant renders care to a patient if lawmakers fail to pass this bill,” said Greg Stafford, a certified PA who works at a rural health clinic in Chillicothe, in northern Missouri. “I hope that the legislature will act quickly to pass this bill.”

Physician assistants are licensed health professionals who practice medicine as members of a team with their supervising physicians. PAs deliver a broad range of medical and surgical services to diverse populations in rural and urban settings. As part of their comprehensive responsibilities, PAs conduct physical exams, diagnose and treat illnesses, order and interpret tests, counsel on preventive health care, assist in surgery and prescribe medications.

The Missouri Academy of Physician Assistants is the state organization that represents PAs in Missouri. It is a constituent organization of the American Academy of Physician Assistants, the only national organization to represent physician assistants in all medical and surgical specialties. Founded in 1968, the Academy works to promote quality, cost

effective health care and the professional and personal growth of PAs. For more information about the Academy and the PA profession, visit the AAPA's Web site, www.aapa.org.