

Roger Lovelace: Passage of Collaboration and Rural Expansion of Services Act crucial to address COVID-19 Surge

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COVID-19 levels are climbing in Wisconsin and around the country, and this surge is expected to worsen after the Thanksgiving holiday. Recently, the Department of Health and Services reported a record-high seven-day average of 6,563 new cases.

Before the next public crisis hits, Wisconsin state lawmakers have an opportunity and a responsibility to make changes to laws that can deliver long-lasting benefits to the healthcare system and the patients we serve.

As a practicing PA, or physician assistant, I understand the value that PAs provide to both the system and their patients. We're capable of doing much more to help in crises like these - but only if lawmakers remove more of the barriers standing in our way.

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This past February, the state Assembly passed the CARES Act - a bill that will cut unnecessary red tape for PAs, allowing us to expand access to care. The state Senate was poised to pass the bill, too, but the public health crisis cut the legislative session short.

There's no opposition to this bipartisan bill. I urge the state Senate to meet, pass this bill, and get it to Governor Evers before the end of the year.

PAs are a crucial asset in the response to COVID-19. In fact, according to recent data from the American Academy of PAs, 3 in 5 PAs have tested, treated, or diagnosed COVID-19 patients. Thanks to their ability to switch specialties, PAs have also redeployed to where they are needed most. In the first 10 weeks of the pandemic, about 6% of PAs reported changing their specialty, and about 10% reported changing their work setting.

PAs are medical professionals who diagnose illness, develop and manage treatment plans, prescribe medications, and often serve as a patient's principal healthcare provider. With thousands of hours of medical training, PAs practice in every state, and in every setting and specialty.

Governor Evers has temporarily waived some practice requirements for PA in response to COVID-19, allowing hospitals and healthcare systems to better deploy the PAs they have on staff. But it is clear that we need permanent change to our laws to provide more flexibility on how PAs practice and to free healthcare teams from unnecessary, outdated administrative constraints. We needed these changes before the pandemic, we certainly need them now, and we'll still need them when this public health crisis passes.

No one knows what is next for our healthcare system. Even once COVID-19 is no longer a daily threat, there will be millions of survivors, many of whom may have lifelong health complications. There may be an influx of patients dealing with non-COVID-19 health problems that went untreated during the pandemic, or patients who postponed preventative care to avoid possible exposure.

In this time of uncertainty, we need help from every possible provider so that we are ready for whatever comes next.

PAs have proven themselves to be a necessary asset to our healthcare system. Of course, they will continue treating patients and practicing to the top of their education and training, regardless of the laws and regulations in place. But when we remove more of the barriers standing in their way, as we have seen this year, they can do so much more.

— *Roger Lovelace, PA-C, is president of the Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants.*