Physician Assistants in the Federal Government

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The federal government is the largest single employer of clinically active physician assistants (PAs) in the United States, with at least 5,200 in 2018 [1]. PAs are present within the Departments of Defense, State Department, Veterans Affairs, Health and Human Services, Justice, Homeland Security, and others. Embedded within these cabinet level departments are bureaus, administrations, institutes, services, corps, and other subdivisions. These decentralized government agencies are essentially the employers of PAs (Exhibit).

Most federal employing agencies have expanding needs for PAs (USAJOBS.gov accessed May 2020). Because civilian job opportunities for PAs are plentiful, the federal system competes by offering recruitment and retention enticements. Veterans, former Peace Corps Volunteers, and some others are at a hiring advantage. Their time in government service counts towards an accumulative 20-year tenure for minimum retirement requirements.

Federal interest in the PA medical workforce was recognized as early as 1967 when a graduate of the Duke PA program was employed in a Veterans Hospital. This occurred shortly after one of the first PAs from Duke University, Vic Germino, followed his pulmonologist supervising physician into the Durham, VA Medical Center (personal communication Vic Germino, PA, July 2010). Other records document that PAs were employed in the VA in the mid-1970s [4-7].

After half a century of employment only a bit more is known about the broad spectrum of PAs in federal employment. The 2018 federal PA census is an improved head count and some of the characteristics are now better known such as gender, age, and agency [1]. Beyond that what PAs do, and in what setting, and in what role is not known. As more senior PAs move into management and administrative positions, they will influence policy that is likely to affect recruitment and retention of PAs. But, understanding and promulgating those roles and responsibilities is also on them. All of the agencies, with possible exception of the VHA, have been remiss informing a tax paying society on what they get for employing PAs. This information should come from the various agencies but the AAPA and NCCPA can also play a role in this effort.

REFERENCES


