

Open Letter by Assistant Physicians to the People of Missouri

Salus populi suprema lex esto (Latin)

Let the good of the people be the supreme law.

(Official State of Missouri motto)

Missouri has long been a trailblazer. The Pony Express, Gateway Arch, California Trail, Oregon Trail, and Santa Fe Trail all have their roots in this midwestern land of metropolises in the north and rural highlands in the south. Healthcare is the current cause celebre due to the creation of a pathway for newly-licensed "Assistant Physicians" to treat Missourians.

Assistant Physicians, or "APs", are competent, skilled, and caring medical doctors (e.g., M.D., D.O.) providing supervised care to the underserved. We, the AP Network, have come from all over the United States and beyond due to the shortage of residencies needed to obtain full physician licensure. In 2017, nearly 36% or 15,469 of all applicants were unable to procure a residency through the national "Match". (Source: NRMP.) We have passed the same board examinations and graduated from accredited schools. After nearly three years since passage of AP legislation and months of seeking employment, many of us find ourselves in peril of our six-month licenses expiring if unable to obtain a Collaborative Practice Agreement with a physician. Available data on the primary care shortage in Missouri indicates that greater than 90% of the 114 counties in the state lack sufficient access to health care professionals. [Source: University of Missouri]. When combined with projections of a shortage of nearly 100,000 doctors over the next 10 years nationwide, the doctor-to-patient ratios in rural areas may reach much higher than in areas such as the independent city of St. Louis. Most importantly, the underserved will remain so.

The purpose of this letter is to call people together to work on addressing real and perceived roadblocks to obtaining employment for APs (e.g., liability and "billability" issues) and enable them to finally provide care for the medically underserved of Missouri. Essentially, we are prepared to go anywhere at any time to help anyone in the designated Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs). Government agencies, prisons, nursing homes, day cares, rural outreach centers, and myriad other private and public clinics and hospitals would benefit from the services of competent and compassionate Assistant Physicians. Local legal standards and policy barriers create roadblocks for primary care. Unfortunately, many APs who have attempted to contract with a physician in order to be licensed for at least one year have encountered reluctance and resistance due to internal legal opinions and misinformation. For example, the AP legislation expressly states that APs can be billed similarly to PAs (Physician Assistants), thereby negating the "billability" issue. Medicare, Medicaid, and malpractice insurance issues may exist, but we are confident that this can be ameliorated by the willingness and flexibility of APs. We understand that the MO Healthnet system may be working on adding APs as providers, but this may take time to complete. This is an untenable situation that calls for a more immediate solution to a problem that has persisted for more than thirty years in

the great state of Missouri.

We believe that the solution to this pervasive and profound problem begins with recognizing the need to bring preventive and primary care to the underserved communities that too often are overlooked or forgotten. Our focus is on bringing local provider access to rural areas where healthcare shortages exist. Many must travel hours to disparate and distant cities such as Saint Louis, Kansas City, and Columbia just to see their doctor. Chronic conditions such as diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and asthma require a continuity of care that assistant physicians would provide; otherwise, more serious and avoidable complications may arise. We could provide health screening to detect and treat these and myriad other diseases in order to allow the underserved to live longer, more productive, and happier lives. Medication issues including the opioid epidemic and the inability to acquire or refill prescriptions are acute areas of concern that require an increase in the availability of local access providers. Assistant Physicians, working under supervision, could help to address the healthcare needs of the underserved with an immediacy and personal touch currently not available.

We, the AP Network, propose that a summit of assistant physicians, legislators, residents, physicians, resident physicians, agencies (e.g., Missouri State Medical Association, Missouri Association of Family Practitioners, Missouri Primary Care Association), clinics, hospitals, residency programs, and any other interested parties be convened as soon as possible to show Missouri our dedication to its' people and to the state as a whole. As our recognition grows, we look forward to inviting other APs into our midst and representing their concerns. This letter also is being sent to the author of the AP legislation, Dr. Keith Frederick, D.O., to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude for allowing us to achieve our dreams of becoming doctors. Please let us know when and where we may meet to heighten awareness of APs and further the provision of opportunities for us to work in Missouri.

- AP Network