September 10, 2014

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

On behalf of the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As the national voice for baccalaureate and graduate nursing education, AACN represents over 750 schools of nursing that educate more than 425,000 students and employ nearly 17,000 faculty members. Our member institutions produce approximately half of our nation’s registered nurses (RNs) and all of our advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), nurse faculty, and nurse researchers. We write to you to express our unwavering support for the Veterans Health Administration’s (VHA’s) recommendation to recognize APRNs as full practice providers in its Nursing Handbook.

APRNs (which include Nurse Practitioners (NPs), Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists (CRNAs), Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNMs) and Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNSs)), receive extensive education and clinical training as part of their degree programs and are then required to pass rigorous national certification examinations to demonstrate their knowledge and competency. Decades of empirical evidence and research show that APRNs are vital members of interprofessional healthcare teams as they help ensure access to care, provide care that is of the utmost quality, and can assist in reducing healthcare costs. Moreover, APRNs practice in a diversity of healthcare settings and are often depended upon by underserved communities as the sole advanced practice clinician. The Federal Trade Commission, the Institute of Medicine, the National Governors Association, and other policy bodies have noted the high quality of care APRNs provide and the impact it makes on not only healthcare competition, but access to services in great demand.

Currently, nearly 56,000 RNs, NPs, CRNAs, and CNSs are employed by the VA. Allowing full practice authority for APRNs within the VHA would remove unnecessary and burdensome oversight that hinders access to their services. This recommendation parallels current policies for APRN full practice authority in the Department of Defense and the Indian Health Service. When deployed, America’s military receive care from APRNs who are able to practice to their full authority. That same practice should continue when they return home as veterans. By allowing these skilled practitioners to practice to the full extent of their education and training, the VHA will maximize its potential to provide timely and efficient health care to our nation’s service men and women and their families.

With 72,000 APRNs graduating from member schools each year, these clinicians will consider the degree to which potential employers recognize them as full practice providers. Therefore,
the VHA’s proposal would position the VA as a premier option for these clinicians to consider and would further support efforts to help recruit and retain these highly-qualified clinicians. Additionally, AACN is an active member in support of the Joining Forces campaign which, as you know, is an initiative dedicated to ensuring that our military members and their families are equipped with the services and resources they need. Currently, more than 660 schools of nursing are Joining Forces partners, striving to educate nursing students on best practices to care for veterans and their families.

AACN commends the VA’s commitment to providing timely access to high-quality care for our nation’s service men and women, and believe the VHA’s recommendation to grant APRNs full practice authority is a critical component in this endeavor. We look forward to continued collaboration, and if our association can be of any assistance to you or the Department, please contact AACN’s Senior Director of Government Affairs and Health Policy, Dr. Suzanne Miyamoto, at Smiyamoto@aacn.nche.edu or 202-463-6930, ext. 247.

Sincerely,

Eileen T. Breslin, PhD, RN, FAAN
President

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