

Dear Honorable Members of the Senate HSS Committee,

As a physician assistant (PA) with experience in psychiatry and substance use treatment and serving as the Medical Director at Orion Behavioral Health Network, I am in strong support for SB115. This bill recognizes the need for experienced PAs to practice to their full capabilities, promoting trained autonomy within a collaborative framework. This change is pivotal for improving healthcare delivery in underserved areas like behavioral health and substance use treatment.

The challenges we face in hiring PAs at Orion Behavioral Health Network are unlike those for any other professionals in our team. The rigorous and distinct regulations for PAs, particularly collaborative agreements, often lead to extended hiring timelines. These protracted processes, exacerbated by the scarcity of physicians and administrative complexities of current regulation, do not align with the hiring procedures of any other members of the healthcare team.

At Banyan Alaska Substance Use Treatment Center, another place I work, we have repeatedly faced delays in patient care due to the current requirement for a 2nd collaborating physician. For instance, a significant issue we encounter is the delay in licensing physician collaborators, which has directly impacted our ability to provide timely care. This led to veterans facing delays in the facility opening, that considering the opioid crisis in our state likely had a real scenario detrimental effect.

At both Orion and Banyan, the implications of these delays are profound. Patients face prolonged wait times for critical care, and in some cases, the consequences can be life-altering for delays in access to qualified medical practitioners. This is not reflective of a lack of qualified PAs but of a system that unnecessarily restricts their integration into healthcare settings where they are desperately needed.

From my own experience as a patient in Alaska; I have personally witnessed the limitations of an overburdened healthcare system. In my own health journey, I was seen by over ten physicians, whose burnout and workload contributed to a missed diagnosis of a rare condition, which I eventually diagnosed myself. This personal experience, which is not uncommon for many patients in our state, underscores the need for a more flexible and responsive healthcare workforce.

SB115 offers a solution that maintains the integrity of patient care while enabling PAs to contribute more effectively to healthcare delivery. It is not a step towards isolated practice, but a stride towards a more efficient utilization of our healthcare workforce, especially during these times of unprecedented strain on our healthcare system.

Your support for SB115 will not only aid our healthcare system in addressing current challenges but will also safeguard the timely and effective delivery of care to our

patients. I am ready to engage in further discussions to provide a deeper understanding of the positive changes that SB115 will bring to healthcare in our state.

Thank you for your attention to this significant issue.

Sincerely,

Christopher D. Dietrich, PA-C, DSc, CAQ-Psych
Medical Director
Orion Behavioral Health Network