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June 20, 2014

The Honorable Jeff Miller
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States House of Representatives
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller:

We write on behalf of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the medical specialty society representing over 35,000 psychiatric physicians and their patients, to request that you favorably consider including H.R. 4234/S. 2425, the *Ensuring Veterans' Resiliency Act*, in any conference agreement that makes comprehensive reforms to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As the House and Senate begin to reconcile their differences over much-needed reforms to the VA, it is critical that the significant mental health needs of our veterans are not overlooked. Each year, an estimated 8,000 veterans complete suicide – an average of 22 each day; several studies place the rate of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan at approximately 40%; and veterans widely experience anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders.

Most veterans do not receive adequate treatment for mental illness or substance use disorders in a timely fashion at the VA – an unacceptable situation due in large part to a chronic staff shortage of psychiatric physicians. The VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) reports that the VA's "greatest challenge has been to hire and retain psychiatrists." Current policy makes it extremely difficult for the VA to compete with other Federal agencies and private entities in offering employment incentives, such as medical education loan repayment, to new hires. Of 128 permanent full-time VA positions advertised in September, 2013, only 33 (25%) were eligible for medical school loan repayment. Currently, in Florida, there are 10 vacant positions – only 4 of which are eligible for medical education loan repayment.

A new dedicated way of encouraging more psychiatrists to choose a career with the VA is needed. The bipartisan *Ensuring Veterans' Resiliency Act* seeks to mitigate the chronic shortage of psychiatrists in the VA by implementing a pilot project in which a limited number of psychiatrists are recruited into long-term employment with competitive medical school loan forgiveness incentives. It further requires the Government



Accountability Office to examine ongoing pay disparities among psychiatrists employed by the VA.

The *Ensuring Veterans' Resiliency Act* is a modest initiative that shows great promise in fostering a stable and robust psychiatric workforce in order to meet the significant mental health needs of our veterans. It aligns well with recent Congressional efforts to make comprehensive reforms to the VA, and deserves worthy consideration for inclusion in any final conference agreement.

We thank you for your leadership on ways to ensure our veterans receive the healthcare services they deserve, and for your favorable consideration of this request. Should you or your staff have any questions, please contact APA's Department of Government Relations at (703) 907-7800.

Sincerely,



Saul Levin, MD, MPA
CEO and Medical Director



Paul Summergrad, MD
President