



**DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**  
**Veterans Health Administration**  
**Washington DC 20420**

In Reply Refer To: 10AD2

April 3, 2017

Honorable David J. Shulkin, M.D.  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs

Dear Secretary Shulkin:

I'm writing to bring to your attention to several issues of concern raised by the National Academic Advisory Council (NAAC) that were not addressed by the January 27, 2017 VA memorandum providing exceptions to the President's Executive Order freezing federal hiring.

The first concern relates to educational support and administrative personnel, who are absolutely critical for the smooth functioning and success of educational programs, both in general and more especially in the case of special developmental programs such as VA's congressionally-mandated GME Expansion Initiative. Many of the small, often rural facilities targeted by this program have no educational staff redundancy so that even a single position can critically impact ongoing educational activities. Educational support staff hold standard administrative positions/series that were not provided a blanket exception to the hiring freeze. Although mechanisms do exist to get some individual positions exempted, this requires many layers of approval at Medical Center, VISN, VHACO and OSVA levels. Furthermore, field facility leaders may be hesitant to seek VISN- and VACO-level exemptions for relatively low ranking educational support staff when they have more senior positions that they perceive as having higher priority. With all these potential barriers in mind, the NAAC recommends that educational support and administrative positions be given blanket exemption to the federal hiring freeze.

The second concern relates to a relatively small group of trainees who may not be involved in direct patient care but who impact clinical care indirectly and importantly during their training and once their training is completed. This is true for a number of VA's Advanced Fellowship programs, which may be adversely impacted by the hiring freeze because they include occupations not covered by the blanket hiring exemption. Some examples include research related programs such as the Health Services Research Advanced Fellowship, the Big Data Scientist Training Enhancement Program (BD-STEP) and the Veterans Engineering Resource Centers (VERCs), which regularly enroll non-clinicians such as PhD research scientists, genomics and health informatics

researchers and healthcare engineers. All make unique contributions to understanding disease, patient safety and the delivery of health care. Accordingly, the NAAC recommends that this category of trainees be given blanket exemption to the federal hiring freeze just like their more clinical counterparts.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter. The Office of Academic Affiliations stands ready to provide more details about the specific occupations at risk should this be necessary.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Malcolm Cox', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Malcolm Cox, M.D.  
Chair, VA National Academic Advisory Council

cc: Under Secretary for Health