



National Association of VA Optometrists ♦ NAAVO

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Marjorie A. Bowman, MD, MPA
Chief Academic Affiliations Officer
The Office of Academic Affiliations (14AA)
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Dr. Bowman,

The National Association of VA Optometrists (NAVAO) would like to bring to your attention the worsening attrition of applicants to VA Optometry residency programs. The NAAVO is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1977. Our board and committee members are all VA optometrists. The objectives of the NAAVO are to encourage and promote the best possible primary eye and vision care for our nation's Veterans and to promote the education, training, professional growth, and welfare of optometric staff, research/clinical fellows, residents, and students. The NAAVO is committed to supporting VA Optometry residency programs. On optometry residency match day 2022, the unmatched rate for VA programs was 32% compared to 19% for non-VA programs. This unmatched rate was a twelve percent increase for VA programs compared to 2021 and earlier, when VA and non-VA programs stayed roughly even at 20% since 2016. The relatively stable unmatched rate for non-VA programs in 2022 clarifies that the trend for VA programs is not a result of the COVID 19 pandemic. This VA unmatched rate is no doubt concerning, and a spring-time poll of VA Optometry residency program coordinators overwhelmingly attributed the low match rate to stagnating VA Optometry residency stipends.

The stipend for VA Optometry residents is markedly low by all comparisons. Within the VA, optometry residency stipends are just above \$35,000. This is significantly lower than other VA post-graduate health professional programs: pharmacy residencies average \$41,000, podiatry residencies average \$45,000, and mid-levels professional residency programs range from \$50-75,000. Most non-VA optometry residency programs, with whom the VA competes for applicants, have stipends ranging from \$40,000-47,000. The Pennsylvania College of Optometry at Salus University has raised optometry resident stipends at a rate of 3% per year since 2011, setting the 2021-2022 stipend at \$46,650. To the contrary, VA has kept its rate of increase for optometry residency programs at 1% for decades. Indian Health Services (IHS) corrected its optometry resident recruitment crisis

by boarding residents at GS-11 step 1, making the annual stipend approximately \$91,000. Many quality residency applicants now limit their search criteria to IHS programs, entirely excluding VA programs.

Comparatively low VA Optometry residency stipends are even more foreboding when viewed against the backdrop of 9% and climbing inflation rates in the United States. Optometry residents graduate with loans that typically range from \$200,000-\$250,000 equal to that of medical school graduates. For much of non-hospital based optometry practice, residency training is optional and following this career path requires highly-qualified candidates to accept compensation at ½ of their potential annual wages in exchange for advanced clinical training. With increases in cost of living, we fear even lower residency application rates to come. Historically, VA Optometry is the largest and offers the most advanced postgraduate clinical training programs in the country. Without competitive stipends, VA does not attract top candidates, nor can VA retain these specialty trained candidates in VA careers.

The NAVAO is focused on the future of Veteran eye care. Twenty percent of VA's senior optometrists are currently eligible for retirement, and the VA is already facing national optometrist staffing shortages. Furthermore, optometry residents are a critical part of the current and future VA Optometry workforce. Nearly 90% of current VA optometrists are currently residency trained to provide exceptional care for our nation's Veterans. The 86 VA Optometry residency programs are precisely where the VA looks to recruit new hires with advanced competence in their specialty areas of optometry care.

We are asking the Office of Academic Affiliations to recognize the critical need to recruit, train, and retain highly qualified optometrists to continue to support the highest level of eye and vision care for our nation's Veterans. The NAVAO recommends the OAA act by approving a VA Optometry residency stipend increase commensurate with non-VA programs. This action will help the VA avert a recruitment and retention crisis.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,




Molly McGinty-Tauren, O.D.
President
National Association of VA Optometrists



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Vice-President
National Association of VA Optometrists



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