



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Under Secretary for Health
Washington DC 20420

September 6, 2022

Molly McGinty-Tauren, O.D.
National Association of VA Optometrists
PO Box 752881
Las Vegas, NV 89136

Dear Dr. McGinty-Tauren:

Thank you for your July 21, 2022, co-signed letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) addressing the concerns of recruitment and retention of optometrists with the desired postgraduate residency training and experience. I am responding on behalf of the Department.

VA remains committed to honoring our Nation's Veterans by ensuring a safe environment to deliver exceptional health care. Exceptional health care is predicated on an exceptional workforce. The Veterans Health Administration strives to be a model employer by treating the workforce with dignity and respect while providing competitive benefits and rewarding work. The VA Fiscal Years 2022-2028 Strategic Plan delineates four guiding fundamental principles – access, advocacy, outcomes, and excellence. With our efforts in engaging principles of a high reliability organization to achieve the goals established in this plan, we value your transparency and communication of concerns for potential vulnerability in the VA optometry workforce.

VA optometrists serve a vital role, providing high-quality care for approximately 70% of Veterans seen in VA eye clinics. These world-class eye care services are an integral part of our mission to provide a complete range of medical and hospital services for the extraordinary care and treatment of Veterans. They also support the VA Medical Benefits Package which encompasses preventative health care services including routine vision testing and eye-care services. The integrated, effective continuum of eye care services which include optometry, ophthalmology and blind rehabilitation specialists allow VA to be a model for excellence in eye care.

VA recognizes that how we treat our workforce has a direct impact on morale and how we care for Veterans. VA cannot increase access and improve outcomes for Veterans without investing in our people and thus, in partnership with Congress, VA announced ten major steps to make every VA job a good job, where all employees are engaged, supported, heard, and empowered to provide Veterans with timely access to world-class health care, earned benefits and the lasting resting place they deserve. For optometry, the onboarding process is being redesigned and a memorandum has recently been distributed to facility directors in support of maximizing the proper use of pay flexibilities such as recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives and utilizing

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Title 38 special salary rates. Special salary rates can be authorized to improve VA's ability to recruit and retain qualified Optometrist, to provide high quality care for our Veterans.

The National Optometry Program Office is currently pursuing critical position pay authority and is also planning to submit a legislative pay proposal requesting optometry be changed to the physician/dentist/podiatrist pay structure. The former request would be an interim adjustment to the pay capitation up to Executive Schedule Level I. The latter would solidify the Executive Schedule Level I pay capitation and would allow VA to engage a market analysis into the pay structure for the competitive recruitment and retention of optometrists with the desired experience. This would require a competitive internal selection as well as the legislative process to enact. I support the National Optometry Program Office in these efforts to invest in our optometry workforce.

We are committed to excellence in clinical care, utilizing our highly-skilled workforce and recognize the important work of optometry. We appreciate the input of our country's leadership and lawmakers in ensuring this commitment is continuously met.

A similar response has been sent to the other signatories of your letter. Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shereef Elnahal', written in a cursive style.

Shereef Elnahal, M.D., MBA