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**American Orthotic &  
Prosthetic Association**

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## **Wounded Warrior Workforce Enhancement Act: Orthotic and Prosthetic Education to Care for our Veterans (S.1467, H.R. 3696)**

*AOPA urges you to help meet the growing need for high quality prosthetic and orthotic care for Veterans in the community by cosponsoring the Wounded Warrior Workforce Enhancement Act.*

### **Background**

Over the past decade, the medical conditions faced by a growing Veteran population – including traumatic brain injury, amputation, and stroke – have become more complex. At the same time, new technologies and devices are available to treat these conditions and improve the quality of life for Veterans and civilians alike. These innovations require more sophisticated, advanced training on the part of clinicians to maximize their outcomes. Currently, orthotists and prosthetists require, at a minimum, a master's degree from an O&P-accredited institution and a residency program to gain the experience needed to fit and maintain the devices.

The National Commission on Orthotics and Prosthetics Education (NCOPE) commissioned a 2015 study of the O&P field. The study found that in 2014 there were 6,675 licensed and/or certified orthotists and prosthetists in the United States. It concluded that, by 2025, "overall supply of credentialed O&P providers would need to increase by about 60% to meet the growing demand." Subsequent information analyzed by NCOPE and the American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association (AOPA) since suggests that the current number of providers is about 20% below the study count, exacerbating the problem and accelerating the projected shortage of caregivers.

Despite this demand for trained professionals, O&P programs are not high profile enough, and do not generate sufficient revenues, for universities to build out sufficient numbers of master's programs to meet the need. Currently, there are only 13 schools in the US that offers master's degrees in O&P. Combined, they

will graduate fewer than 250 clinicians this year. With a significant percentage of our nation's trained and experienced O&P clinicians eligible to retire in the next ten years, current programs cannot graduate enough workers to maintain the current workforce, much less the number of clinicians that will be needed to care for our aging population and Veterans with increasing health needs.

### **Recommendation**

The only solution to this clinical pipeline problem is to expand the number and size of O&P graduate programs. The Wounded Warrior Workforce Enhancement Act (S. 1467, H.R. 3696) would authorize \$5 million per year for three years to provide limited, one-time competitive grants to qualified universities to create or expand accredited advanced education programs in prosthetics and orthotics. Priority will be given to programs with a partnership with Veterans' Administration or Department of Defense facilities, including opportunities for clinical training, to ensure that students become familiar with and can respond to the unique needs of service members and Veterans with limb loss or limb impairment.

This limited, cost-effective approach to assisting universities in creating or expanding accredited master's degree programs in O&P will be repaid through more effective treatment of patients in the VA, Medicare and Medicaid, resulting in fewer co-morbidities. It has also been demonstrated that proper and prompt access to O&P care can lower overall health costs.

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