Chapter 18

ROLE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT (TACTICAL MEDICAL OFFICER)

James Jones, PA-C, PhD, MPAS

Introduction

Physician assistants (PAs) assist the White House physicians in providing comprehensive healthcare to the president, vice president, and their families. White House PAs develop, coordinate, and direct emergency action plans for medical contingencies, including both on-site and remote assessment of medical capabilities at White House travel destinations worldwide. They provide acute care to military personnel assigned to the White House and occupational health services to members of the White House staff. They also provide on-site medical response and urgent care for the president and vice president.

Supervision

White House PAs are supervised by White House physicians who are board-certified in emergency medicine, family medicine, or internal medicine. The PAs have a close working relationship with the physician to the president and the physician to the vice president.

Unit Structure

White House PAs belong to the White House Medical Unit (WHMU), part of the White House Military Office (WHMO). The WHMO provides military support for White House functions such as food service, presidential transportation, world-wide communications,
medical support and emergency medical services, and hospitality services. In addition to the WHMU, WHMO units include the White House Communications Agency, Presidential Airlift Group, Camp David, Marine Helicopter Squadron One, Presidential Food Service, and the White House Transportation Agency.1

WHMU is a joint service unit comprised of nine physicians, fifteen PAs, nine intensive care nurses, one clinical psychologist, three administrators, and eight medics, who together are responsible for the healthcare of the president, vice president, and their families. The unit also provides acute and emergency care services to over 3,000 military members assigned to presidential support, 6,000 members of the Executive Office of the President, the US Secret Service, and visitors to the White House. Together, WHMO and WHMU provide essential services to the president and help maintain the continuity of the presidency.

Roles and Duties

White House PAs ensure the continuity of the Office of the President by implementing protective medicine procedures, executive healthcare management, global medical intelligence gathering, contingency medical planning, and travel medicine support. Protective medicine procedures and travel medicine support include immunizations for endemic diseases, malaria prophylaxis, and guidance on how to protect travelers from a variety of food, water, and insect-borne disease. White House PAs gather medical intelligence through on-site surveys of medical facilities and by conducting extensive research through a variety of approved online medical databases. As part of contingency medical planning, the PAs evaluate prehospital evacuation platforms, develop plans for all potential natural and manmade medical threats, and implement mitigation strategies to prevent injury or disease. White House PAs work with the Secret Service, other WHMO elements, and other components of the Department of Defense (DoD) and local, state, national, and international governments to plan and prepare for lifesaving medical interdiction involving serious injury or illness of the president or vice president of the United States. WHMU is recognized as a world expert in protective medical support.
Required Skills and Attributes

- A minimum of 6 years’ experience as a PA.
- 6 years of active duty service, including a post-training utilization tour of at least 3 years, and a demonstrated record of sustained clinical excellence.
- Proven track record of exemplary interpersonal skills, maturity, integrity, and character.
- Graduate of an accredited PA program.
- Certification from the National Commission of Certification of Physician Assistants.
- Certification in advanced cardiac life support.
- Experience in advanced trauma life support principles.
- Operational experience is required.
- Rank of captain or junior major.
- Graduate of the Captains Career Course or Intermediate Level Education.
- Outstanding written and oral communication skills.
- Must meet Army weight and physical fitness standards, be a non-smoker, and pass a Class III flight physical.

Training

During the first year of assignment, White House PAs must complete the Flight Surgeon Course, Global Medicine Course, Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Course, Tactical Combat Medical Care Course, Emergency Action Course, Pre-Hospital Trauma Life Support, Basic Trauma Life Support, Advanced Trauma Life Support, Advanced Cardiac Life Support, Basic Life Support, Pediatric Advanced Life Support, and the Army Trauma Training Sustainment Course. Other training will be provided based on the PA’s previous experience.

Key Factors

This position is typically 3 years in length. WHMU submits a formal request for candidates from the Office of the Secretary of Defense 15 months prior to the projected vacancy. All candidates must be able to obtain a Top Secret/Yankee White clearance for presidential support duty in accordance with DoD directive 5210.55, and they must be
selected through a competitive interview process. Successful candidates will represent military medicine to the nation’s senior leaders on an international stage. This job requires extensive travel. Often the travel is of short notice, typically lasts 2 to 8 days, and occurs four to six times per month; occasional trips may last 10 to 14 days.

References
