

# ASSOCIATION OF VETERANS AFFAIRS OPHTHALMOLOGISTS

## The President's Report 2022

Dear AVAO Members,

AVAO has been busy in 2022. I offer tremendous gratitude to all the AVAO executive board members for their commitment to our monthly Zoom calls, their great ideas, and their contributions to the shared vision of our Strategic Plan. This team brings an abundance of expertise to issues of national policy and legislation relevant to our Veterans' care and to help forge connections among, and bring value to, our membership.

Many issues facing the VA this year have drawn national attention, especially the Federal Supremacy Project. I would like to offer special thanks to Rebecca Hyder and Dr. Glenn Cockerham for their efforts. Rebecca Hyder, the AAO Director of Federal Affairs, has been instrumental in communicating the importance of VA issues to the Academy, Members of Congress, and the House of Medicine. She has also kept us informed of important happenings on Capitol Hill, tirelessly advocating for our patients and our profession. Glenn, our Executive Director for Ophthalmology, has served as the voice for Ophthalmology within the VA, and has worked nonstop to ensure excellence in patient care.

Last year, Dr. April Maa continued as Vice President and Dr. Steve Blatt as Treasurer. Dr. Eric Suhler continued as our AAO Councilor and was elected to the Council Subspecialty Section Nominating Committee. Dr. Jigna Joshi was elected as Secretary. Sadly, Dr. Blatt is stepping down from the Executive Committee, so Dr. Joshi will move up to Vice President and we will be electing a new Treasurer and Secretary this year. I served as President and was elected to the Surgical Advisory Board.

Our AVAO Executive Board is actively engaged to represent the wide variety of interests of the VA Ophthalmologists and to ensure the highest quality of eye care for veterans. Our major goal is to increase the value we bring to our membership. We envision AVAO as a strong network including all practicing VA ophthalmologists and providing meaningful connections, educational opportunities, and a supportive voice for both patients and colleagues. Here are some of the steps we have taken this year to accomplish these goals:

**i) Initiatives for 2022 included:**

- a. Strategic Plan for 2021-2023: Read the [Strategic Plan](#) by clicking the link.
- b. Member website development: Our new [website](#) was launched in June 2021 to allow better member engagement and offer more resources to our members. Highlights include a member directory with interactive map and a Members' Resource page with commonly requested information and forms useful to VA Ophthalmologists. Future plans for the website include expanded resources such as job listings and toolkits on topics like leadership development.
- c. Webinar series: We are continuing to develop webinars for our members. Dr. David Chu was instrumental in coordinating a [webinar](#) on Maintenance of Certification in collaboration with ABO. We hope to continue to offer webinars and quarterly virtual meetings on topics of interest to our members.
- d. AVAO representation in AUPO: The VA historically has been an essential part of training the next generation of Ophthalmologists. The AVAO has worked to include the VA's voice in residency education by continuing to collaborate with AUPO. We have gained a standing invitation to speak to the AUPO's Program Director's Council at their Council sessions during the AAO & AUPO annual meetings. Also, I have been engaged with AUPO leadership in serving

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on the Program Directors' Working Groups for Advocacy and for Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, and was recently elected to the Program Directors Council. This collaboration with AUPO leaders is creating an improved working relationship between our organizations.

- e. **Advocacy Ambassador:** We sponsored an ophthalmologist in training, Dr. Akshay Mentreddy, to attend the virtual Mid-Year Forum in April 2022. He will attend our AAO Breakfast meeting to report back and share his experiences.
  
- ii) **Organize the AVAO Annual Business meeting.** All AVAO members are invited to attend this year's in person business meeting on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.
  
- iii) **Develop a Communication Network among VA Ophthalmologists**
  - a. Improved our organizational website. See above discussion in Initiatives section for further details.
  - b. Established Social Media accounts for AVAO including [Twitter @avao\\_ophth](#) for dissemination of important and useful information and a [Facebook group](#) providing a venue for discussion and communication among members
  - c. Piloted an internal VA Teams Channel - we will discuss implementation of a Teams channel for broader AVAO members within VA if there is interest.
  
- iv) **Advocate for increased VA salaries for VA Ophthalmologists.** In the recent past, the AVAO strongly advocated for the increases in pay table 3, which took effect in 2016. The AVAO continues to work with the leadership of the AAO to advocate for Ophthalmology to be moved from pay table 3 to pay table 4. We continue to engage the Surgical Advisory Board, Field Advisory Board, and VA national subspecialty leadership on this issue.
  
- v) **Advocate for issues affecting VA Ophthalmology.** Some of these topics include:
  - i. **Federal Supremacy Project** to create national standards of practice for healthcare providers across the VA, involves 49 occupations including ophthalmic technicians, optometrists, and physicians. I have served as AAO Secretariat for State Affairs representative for VA issues. Rebecca and I have worked to raise awareness of the project and to ensure stakeholder input into these VA standards for scope of practice to prioritize patient safety.
  - ii. **Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS)** that seeks to ensure care to veterans in rural areas.

For more detail on these and other topics, please see the AAO Councilor's Report by Dr. Eric Suhler (attached).

## Membership

The AVAO is a non-profit organization that is completely self-supported and cannot accept any commercial support. Your dues directly support our annual AAO events, management expenses, monthly Executive Board conference calls, contributions to the Surgery by Surgeons campaign, the Joint Commission on Allied Health Personnel in Ophthalmology (JCAHPO) education foundation, and support for an Advocacy Ambassador to attend the AAO Mid-Year Forum meeting. A full Treasurer's report will be reviewed at the Annual Business Meeting.

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Historically, we have been just short of 100 members. We feel that it is critical to our mission to expand our membership, and thus our network, to meet some of the demands facing VA Ophthalmology today.

**I hope you all will continue to be active members of AVAO and to recruit your colleagues to join. Exciting things are happening in our organization! We value your ideas and need your help to keep the momentum going!**

Renew or join today at <https://avao.org/>

Thank you again for your support of our group and the care you provide to our veterans. It is a true privilege to lead a group of dedicated physicians and I look forward to our continued growth.

With gratitude,

**Jennifer**

**President, AVAO**



**AVAO Executive Board**

President: Jennifer Lindsey, MD

Vice-President: April Maa, MD

Treasurer: Steve Blatt, MD

Secretary: Jigna Joshi, MD

Councilor to AAO: Eric Suhler, MD

Recent Past Presidents: David Vollman, MD, MBA Andrew Thliveris, MD, PhD, Millie Palmer, MD, Joy Dixon Strawn, MD, Linda Margulies, MD

FAB Chair: Amy Chomsky, MD

JCHAPO Representative: April Maa, MD

Vision Center of Excellence Deputy Director: David Eliason, MD

VA Executive Director for Ophthalmology: Glenn Cockerham, MD

**Other Conference Call Attendees**

AAO Director, Congressional Affairs: Rebecca Hyder

AVAO Client Services Manager: Tim Losch with AAO/AMS