

## **2019 Federal Advocacy Forum: A Story of Saying Yes!**

By Kaitlyn Lorant, SPT

The Federal Advocacy Forum (FAF) was described to me as being an opportunity to discuss the physical therapy (PT) agenda with congressmen/women and learn from the most driven individuals in PT. My take away – the FAF is so much more than that; it's transformative. As was the case with the majority of my peers, I was unaware of the role advocacy played in my profession when I began my first year of PT school. It wasn't until I met a classmate in the previous year's cohort that I began to learn about leadership roles within the APTA and ways to apply myself outside of the classroom. I did not know it at the time, but my journey of discovering my passion for advocacy began when I was asked by this classmate to attend Day on the Hill at the MN state capital. Shortly after this event, ways to get involved as a student continued to surface, and I decided to say yes to anything that came my way. I was accepted to be on the executive board for the Minnesota Student Special Interest Group (MNSSIG) as a co-chair for the MN National Advocacy Dinner; I attended Day on the Hill for a second time; I attended national and state level conferences; and I applied for the FAF scholarship. I had little knowledge or interest in politics, but I wanted to go to the FAF to learn more about the advocacy efforts at the federal level and incorporate that knowledge into the NAD to make it a successful event. While I did not receive the scholarship, I am forever grateful for my mentor and sponsor, Erin Simunds, as well as the MNPTA for believing that students from every program in MN should be provided with some degree of financial support to attend FAF. Initially, I was unsure if spending some of my own money to attend FAF would be worth it, but I felt I would regret not going and I was absolutely right. So, I bought my plane ticket and off I went to Washington, D.C., along with eight other students and eleven PT/PTA's representing MN.

Since returning from the forum, I have felt this overwhelming sense of pride, coupled with a new perspective of the profession I love. I was able to advocate for PT as a non-pharmacological solution to combat the opioid crisis plaguing our nation instead of PT being an afterthought. I also helped educate the eight newly elected MN individuals in Congress regarding the healthcare disparities that rural communities in MN face and how improved access to PT services can decrease healthcare costs, eliminate the administrative burden my profession faces on a daily basis, and ultimately improve the lives of the constituents they serve. I was able to present these issues and deliver my message in a bipartisan manner and felt political agendas on both sides could incorporate PT as a way to solve healthcare problems in the US. FAF was a humbling experience, and I realized that by attending, I gave a voice to the patients I serve, as well as patients all over the nation.

For anyone wondering what the FAF is about, here is my new definition: The FAF is a three-day forum packed with education and inspirational stories about how PT can help combat our nation's leading healthcare problems. The FAF is made possible by individuals at the APTA, each state APTA chapter, and Federal Affairs Liaisons who work year-round to foster relationships with legislatures and to ensure all current and future legislation is PT friendly. Every student, PT, and PTA in attendance then puts this education into action when they meet with their congressman, congresswoman, and/or congressional staff to begin or strengthen a relationship that also serves as a platform to advocate for the future of PT and the patients we serve. FAF is all about building relationships with the leaders of our nation and our profession, and is an experience every student, PT, and PTA should have at least once. On top of all that,

the FAF is an environment that encourages fostering relationships with individuals in PT from all over the nation, as well as building a PT family that consistently lifts each other up and inspires future generations of advocates.

We all need to push our peers and colleagues to apply themselves one step further to accomplish tasks they never thought possible in order for our profession to truly transform society. After attending FAF, I am hooked on advocacy and continuing to fight for legislation that will allow every individual to have equal and early access to PT services. As stated previously, FAF is a transformative experience. My career aspiration had always been to treat pediatric individuals in my community, but it has now grown to include advocacy. My PT family grew by hundreds after FAF, and I am honored to have worked alongside the best advocates in my profession. For now, I will continue to build upon the relationships that were started at FAF until I travel to Washington, D.C. again in 2020. Advocacy is not a three-day event, but I learned that the work required to better the profession of PT throughout the year is absolutely worth it.