

Federal Advocacy Forum Reflections

By Greg Rasmussen

I grew up in a household that did not bring up politics often. My parents voted because they knew it was important but we rarely discussed what they were voting on. I always believed lawmakers brought bills to the public, you voted, and then moved on. I thought the public didn't have much say beyond that and there was no way to interject yourself in the process. As a result, my past involvement in politics has been scarce because I was afraid to speak up about challenging political topics.

In February of 2019, Eva Norman came to the University of Minnesota and presented about federal advocacy. She led with the question, "How many of you are applying for the scholarship?" I remembered hearing about it but always thought to myself "How big of an impact could I really make as one person?" It was just another example of my habits kicking in, but I told myself to focus on her message. Looking back now, that decision to focus and remain open-minded may be one of the biggest and best decisions in my life because her presentation completely changed my perspective. She hooked me in and I immediately knew that I could be a voice for my fellow students, soon-to-be colleagues, and my future patients. Her statement, "It will change your life." stuck with me.

Once I got to Washington, DC, I found myself surrounded by incredible PT's, PTA's, SPT's, SPTA's, APTA staff and others from all over the country there for the same reason as me-to incite change for the field of physical therapy. I quickly learned that my doubts about the impact that I could make as one student voice were wrong, and my voice was added to 250+ other voices all relaying the same message. My single voice that I didn't think would be heard was now being used alongside the best individuals in the field of physical therapy. I experienced all of these professionals come together to deliver the message of who we are as professionals, and the impact we can have to transform society at the local and national levels.

Advice that I would like to share after participating in my first Federal Advocacy Forum includes:

1. Take the initiative to introduce yourself and ask questions! Ask questions of everyone, because they are there for the same reasons as you are. Their experiences let you see how they want to promote growth and gain access for everyone to the highest level of care and attention that physical therapists can provide. Do not be afraid to go up to others and say, "Hi I am ___ and this is my first Federal Advocacy Forum." The collaboration and advice happened immediately if you were willing to put yourself out there.
2. Learn from the leaders within the MNPTA because they will teach you the necessary skills to be confident and prepare you well to go into meetings with your legislators and their staff. They will tap into motivation you didn't know you had, and they will help you bring your personal stories to Congress. With their mentorship, I was able to present the topic of integrating physical therapy into community health centers because that is an essential setting for the delivery of health care services across the country. These centers can improve access to pain management and rehabilitation, and I was able to address the first step in working to establish a source of payment for physical therapy services within community health centers.
3. Be willing to engage and take the initiative to seek out others from different states. For example, one morning I sat at a table with students and professionals from Hawaii, Missouri, Texas, Mississippi, and Arizona. It was amazing to share my story with them and hear their

stories. Plus, you get to answer the frequently asked question of, “How cold does winter really get in Minnesota?”

4. Attend the events hosted each night. At the “welcome event” the first night and the PT-PAC event, there was additional time for professional growth through networking and fun times with so many other students and PT/PTA professionals. It was a chance to connect in a casual manner and share stories. I wouldn’t call myself a night-owl but the energy turned me into one for two nights and I didn’t want to leave the experience early!
5. One thing I recommend outside of the Federal Advocacy Forum is that you must see the city in your free time. Being my first time to DC, I made many memories and one that really sticks out is being at the spot Dr. Martin Luther King Jr gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. That moment moved me and still gives me chills thinking about it.

Ways I learned to continue what I started at the Federal Advocacy Forum is to find out when my representative and senator come back to their districts and seek out ways I can attend events they hold. I learned there are possibilities to arrange visits to have representatives or senators come sit in on our programs to give them a firsthand look at how we prepare for our careers in physical therapy. I have created a personal goal to talk with patients at a deeper level and let them tell their personal stories of how physical therapy has helped in their lives. This can help me bring patient stories to Congress and advocate how physical therapy needs to be accessible to everyone for primary care.

Eva will say the Federal Advocacy Forum is a life changing event and she is not wrong. My views of how to advocate for physical therapy, my patients, and be active in politics were completely transformed. I now have the drive and skills to make advocacy a vital part of my career. I think this change within me exemplifies exactly what she meant when she said, “It will change your life!”