

## **The Federal Advocacy Forum: An Unexpected Journey**

Daniel Porter

When I started PTA school in September, I had no idea the doors it would open and the path it would take me down. I didn't know that there was a professional organization within my state and nationwide, I didn't know that there were conference opportunities year-round, and I definitely did not know that politics and meeting legislators would be part of my future career in healthcare. I think for me to share my thoughts on the Federal Advocacy Forum (FAF) I need to share how I arrived there in the first place.

One of my professors would always tell our class that we need to be involved in our profession and advocate for ourselves. "If you don't advocate for yourself no one else will." Although I heard her say this many times, I still had no idea what it meant until an email from the MNPTA SSIG Involvement Chair was forwarded to the class. This Involvement Chair was looking for a member of my program that would be a liaison between the MNPTA SSIG, the MN Core Ambassadors, and my class. I ended up becoming the liaison and was soon emailing my classmates opportunities that were previously unknown to me. For a few weeks I was passing on information about the student conclave and networking events to my class, but I was still a little confused by the role of the APTA. Were they just a group that sent out neat research and blogs? It wasn't until my program had the pleasure of hosting Rachel Winthrop in early February that I finally realized all the APTA does. In 2018 the APTA was responsible for; eliminating the Medicare therapy cap, advocating for PTs to authorize disability parking certificates, adding PTAs to TRICARE and TRIWEST programs, and many more accomplishments. All these issues have a direct impact on our patients and improving their quality of care and access to service. After hearing from Rachel, I was hooked on learning more about the APTA and the many ways that we advocate for our patients and profession. I applied for the MNPTA FAF Scholarship and was honored to become the first SPTA to be awarded this opportunity.

Now that we know how I came to attend the Federal Advocacy Forum I can tell you about my time there. The 2019 Federal Advocacy Forum truly was the opportunity of a lifetime. I met many passionate therapists from within my state and across the nation. Some of the attendees have been going to the FAF for over 16 years and treated advocating as a second job. Others were newcomers that have never attended a national conference before. One thing that we had in common was that we all wanted to make a difference for our patients and profession. In addition to the great people I was able to meet, I had the opportunity to attend several breakout sessions to become an effective advocator. I learned how to effectively interact with my member of Congress and became well versed in the issues our profession and patients are currently facing.

Although there are many obstacles we currently face, I believe the opioid crisis is the most pressing and widespread. The problem with opioids is that they do not discriminate between rich or poor, young or old, rural or urban. They can infiltrate any community and are highly addictive with the potential to impact anyone who uses them. While preparing for FAF I was doing some research on opioids in Minnesota and learned that although prescribing practices are improving, the total opioid overdose deaths are getting worse. Overdose deaths have doubled in the last 10 years and they continue to increase. While tackling this problem seems daunting, PTs and PTAs are in a position that allows us to be part of the solution and help cut back on the prescribing of opioids. We have a multitude of modalities and techniques at our disposal to help our patients take control of their pain. The CDC recognizes our worth to patients and says, “many non-pharmacologic therapies, including physical therapy... can ameliorate chronic pain.” Therapy can help patients manage their pain, but it will take a multi-team approach of clinicians and therapists to effectively combat the opioid epidemic.

In a way similar to how therapists will need to work with clinicians from outside their subject matter, legislators and therapists might need to occasionally cross political party lines to do what benefits the constituents and patients. Along with getting support from policymakers on both sides of the political aisle, we need to be sure that they are well informed in our clinical abilities and the needs of the patients. On the last day of the forum I was able to meet with the offices of both Democrat and Republican legislators that were happy to listen to the Minnesota delegation. As therapist and students, we were able to share our stories and experiences to make a connection between our issues and the constituents we were representing. We shared stories that led to discussions on the lack of PTs in rural areas, clinical assessment, and the opioid crisis. We had a voice and at the end of the day it felt like we made an actual difference.

Attending the Federal Advocacy Forum was a completely unexpected path from the one I envisioned for myself seven months ago when I first started school. FAF is the height of my advocacy career so far but it has come from the culmination of several small instances leading to this point. While this is a reflection on my time at FAF, I hope that it might also lead to students pursuing opportunities they might have ignored in the past. Apply for leadership positions, go to optional guest speakers, and actively search out information and ways to be involved, because you never know where it might lead in your future. I am honored to have the chance to attend the Federal Advocacy Forum. It was an amazing learning experience and I am excited to continue my advocacy journey and involvement in our profession.

**Daniel Porter, SPTA**  
Anoka-Ramsey Community College