

Grass, Keys and PTs

Lawns? Locks? What do they have in common with physical therapy? Hint: think ADVOCACY—“grassroots” and “key contacts” are essential for bringing the physical therapy profession and the patients we serve in front of the people who run our country’s legislative and regulatory bodies. Our advocacy efforts keep awareness high and the profession moving forward. In 2009 the American Physical Therapy Association of New Jersey (APTAnj) sponsored three students from our area to attend the **American Physical Therapy Association 2009 Federal Advocacy Forum**. Physical therapist students **Lee Colaianni**, **Dana Edwards**, and **Kevin O’Connor** joined five additional participants who hailed from New Jersey —**Keri Bratcher**, **Lisa Chamberlain**, **MaryAnn Riopel**, **Matt Mesibov**, and **Kathy Mairella**. The seasoned physical therapists mentored and guided the students throughout the event held in Alexandria, Virginia all the way to their appointments on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Many thanks go out to our chapter’s Federal Government Affairs Liaison, Lisa Chamberlain, for coordinating meetings between members of our delegation from New Jersey and several Congressional offices.

So, was this “grassroots” experience worth their effort and time? Here’s what our students had to say about it...

Lee Colaianni’s 2009 APTA Federal Advocacy Forum Experience –

From the moment I entered the Federal Advocacy Forum, to the day I left, I felt welcomed. Initially I was skeptical about my significance, being “only a student” at a forum filled with accomplished physical therapists and Congressmen from all over the country. My skepticism quickly diminished when a physical therapist from Kansas came over to me and told me that this was her 20th year at the forum and that she was thrilled to see students participating. She explained that when we go to Capitol Hill and meet with staff of Congressmen and U.S. Senators, or perhaps the Congressmen and Senators themselves, they will be delighted to see new faces and will want to hear from the students. This information was both exhilarating and frightening, but most importantly, sincere, and from then on I knew my volunteer service as a student physical therapist was valued.

Kevin O’Connor’s 2009 APTA Federal Advocacy Forum Experience—

The Federal Advocacy Forum was a great experience and allowed me to view the physical therapy field in a new perspective. We were sent to Congress to request that our Congressmen co-sponsor the Medicare Access to Rehabilitation Services Act, the Medicare Patient Access to Physical Therapists Act, and the Student Loan Repayment Eligibility Act.

The first bill we advocated co-sponsorship for was the Medicare Access to Rehabilitation Services Act. The current cap creates an annual financial limit on services provided by physical therapists. When this annual amount is exhausted Medicare patients have to pay 100% of the costs in order to complete rehabilitation. Removal of this cap would reduce high cost interventions and allow patients to receive proper rehabilitation.

Another bill we were requesting co-sponsorship of was the Medicare Patient Access to Physical Therapists Act. Current Medicare regulations restrict a patient’s ability to directly access physical therapists’ services without a physician’s referral. Removal of this regulation will reduce costs as a result of unnecessary doctor visits and prevent the development of a chronic condition as a result of prolonging treatment. Given a situation in which they cannot treat, physical therapists will refer the patient to a doctor.

Lastly was the Student Loan Repayment Eligibility Act. This bill authorizes physical therapists under the National Health Services Corp to be sent to underserved communities and would provide \$25,000 in loan forgiveness per year for 2 years of service. Surprisingly, 60% of the state of New Jersey is underserved.

I was able to meet with Congressman LoBiondo himself and the assistants of Senator Lautenberg (D), Senator Menendez (D), Congressman Frelinghuysen (R-11), Congressman Adler (D-3), and Congressman Rothman (D-9). It was a wonderful opportunity to personally speak with Congressman LoBiondo considering his position and the feedback that he provided on the issues discussed.

I encourage all students (and my future colleagues) to not only attend this forum in the future, but to become more aware of what is happening in Congress, so they too can see this aspect of the physical therapy field and spread the word to help encourage co-sponsorship of these bills. We, as student physical therapists, are the future of this field and the sooner we become active, the more knowledgeable we will be about current issues, and the greater an impact we will have when we are no longer students, but practicing, licensed physical therapists.

The first night of the forum I was impressed by an amazing spread of finger foods and beverages, along with a boat cruise on the Potomac River. If that doesn't entice students to attend, then how about the fact that on the last day of the forum I met with two Congressmen: Frank A. LoBiondo from the 2nd District of New Jersey and Congressman Scott Garret from the 5th District of New Jersey. When we showed up for our appointment, Congressman Scott Garret came out to greet us, and coincidentally, a photographer from the Star Ledger was there and took our picture with him. While we ended up discussing our bills with Congressman Garret's staff, I thought it was kind of him to step out of his office and welcome us to Washington D.C.

Our last meeting was with Congressman Frank A. LoBiondo and this was the highlight of my experience in Washington D.C. The Congressman showed us into his office with the window perfectly centered on the Capitol Building. I couldn't help but feel important. He sat there with intense eyes as we proposed co-sponsorship for our three bills, nodding every once in awhile to reassure us he understood and agreed. The Congressman spent twenty minutes listening and answering questions. I was in awe of his professionalism and generosity. Almost every office we went to, whether it be their staff or the Congressmen themselves, they said they agreed with our proposals. This was an incredible experience and I learned that if you want to change the future then *you have to be a part of the change.*