



T A P A
 TENNESSEE ACADEMY OF
 PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

PA Pulse

The heartbeat of TAPA

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Mission - TAPA's mission is to promote accessible, quality healthcare, and to advance the education, profession and practice of physician assistants in Tennessee.

Vision

Protecting and empowering the practice of physician assistants in Tennessee.

From the President

As we begin 2026, TAPA has already been laying the groundwork for a busy and significant legislative session. We will be advancing several insurance reform initiatives while also supporting the governor's efforts to strengthen rural healthcare delivery across Tennessee.

Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program

You may have seen recent news coverage about the Rural Health Transformation (RHT) Program, which was created under the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act passed by Congress last summer.

The RHT Program is a \$50 billion, five-year initiative to help states improve healthcare access, quality, and outcomes in rural communities. Its goals include preventing rural hospital closures, enhancing care delivery, and achieving long-term health improvements through state-driven, data-informed strategies.

Half of the funding will be distributed equally among approved states. The remaining 50 percent will be allocated based on factors determined by CMS, with a major emphasis on workforce development—specifically encouraging states to pass laws that allow rural providers to practice at the top of their licenses.

On Dec. 29, it was announced that Tennessee was approved for \$206,888,882 for 2026. However, to get (and keep) that full amount, Tennessee must pass legislation implementing the initiatives included in its RHT application submitted in November. So what does this mean for PAs?

Tennessee's application makes two important statements:

"Expanding the scopes of practice for physician assistants, nurse practitioners, pharmacists, and dental hygienists will help alleviate critical workforce shortages and enable more timely, accessible care for rural residents."

*"Physician Assistants: The source accurately reflects Tennessee's moderate scope of practice environment. **Tennessee will introduce and pass legislation in 2026 to enable optimal scope of practice. Implementation will occur by January 1, 2027.**"*

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This is exciting news for our profession. It shows that the governor supports adopting Optimal Team Practice (OTP) for PAs in Tennessee. While we came close to passing OTP legislation in 2024, the governor's leadership significantly improves our chances of achieving full OTP in 2026.

Over the past two months, the governor's policy team has been working closely with TAPA and the AAPA to ensure that the proposed legislation aligns with the AAPA's definition of "optimal."

However, the passage of this bill isn't a sure thing. Physician groups are already mobilizing opposition, despite the fact that blocking this effort would reduce federal funding for rural communities. We anticipate a challenging legislative battle involving physicians, the governor, and House and Senate leadership. TAPA has gone on the record as strongly supporting the governor's initiative.

If you would like to learn more about the RHT Program, you can visit the CMS website here: <https://www.cms.gov/priorities/rural-health-transformation-rht-program/overview>. If you have questions, please contact me or Katherine through the TAPA main office.

Insurance Reform

TAPA will also be focusing heavily on insurance reform this session. As discussed in our last newsletter, PAs are facing increasing pressure from insurance companies:

1. Blue Cross has announced it will reimburse PAs and APRNs at only 85 percent of physician rates.
2. Cigna and other insurers have implemented automatic downcoding of visits, significantly reducing legitimate reimbursement for services provided.

In response, TAPA's lobbyists have joined a broad coalition of providers, including the Tennessee Medical Association (TMA), other physician groups, nurses, and hospitals. This coalition is working together to push back against these harmful and unfair reimbursement practices.

The TMA is drafting a comprehensive bill to address several issues, including downcoding. In parallel, TAPA is collaborating with nursing

organizations and urgent care clinics to advocate for fair and equal reimbursement for services provided by PAs.

We are anticipating a busy PA Day on the Hill as we discuss these issues with legislators, so please mark your calendars for Wednesday, February 25. Take the day off from clinical practice and join your PA colleagues in Nashville as we meet with legislators to discuss the critical issues facing our profession.

Finally, thank you to all current TAPA members. Your engagement and dues provide the resources needed to advocate effectively for PAs across Tennessee.

If you have PA colleagues who are not yet members, please encourage them to join. There is strength in numbers, and this legislative session will require every PA in our state to be engaged and informed.

Respectfully,
Johnny Presley, PA-C
TAPA President

What TAPA Means to Me

By Natalie Stafford, TAPA Director At-Large

Every December, I receive a familiar piece of mail reminding me to renew my membership with TAPA. You might wonder why I'm not on auto-renew—and honestly, I wonder the same thing. Because every December, without fail, I renew.

I could make a purely logical case for joining TAPA, especially if your employer covers the cost of membership. But even if they don't, the benefits more than justify the \$195 investment.

In addition to high-quality, affordable CME, TAPA provides access to an attorney who will review contracts and offer guidance on negotiation. That support was invaluable when I negotiated my first contract—and it ultimately led to a change in the PTO policy for our entire practice. Frankly, that alone made membership worthwhile.



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But I believe TAPA's value runs much deeper—and I hope you do too. PAs need strong advocates at the legislative level. In an era of extreme political polarization, it's tempting to take a hands-off approach and avoid politics altogether. Unfortunately, that's not a luxury our profession can afford.

Our reimbursement, scope of practice, and ability to practice as PAs in Tennessee depend on effective advocacy at the state level. TAPA's presence in Nashville matters. If you want to practice as a PA in Tennessee, membership in TAPA isn't just beneficial—it's essential.

For some of you, membership may not be enough. You may be looking for partnership. To that, I say: come on! This is the Volunteer State, after all.

Join a committee or nominate yourself for a leadership position. Bring your expertise, your ideas, and your passion. Together, we can strengthen our profession and make Tennessee an even better place to practice medicine.

TAPA Hall of Fame Welcomes New Member

At FallFest, TAPA's Hall of Fame inducted Dr. Marie Patterson, an exceptional leader, educator, and advocate.

Marie has made lasting contributions across every corner of our profession. She served for years as a clinician at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), helped launch the PA program at Lipscomb University, and now leads the MTSU PA program as its founding director — graduating its first class this year.

A longtime TAPA leader, Marie has served as TAPA's Board Secretary, Vice President, President and the current Immediate Past President. She is also the chair of the Tennessee Board of PAs. She has represented Tennessee nationally through the AAPA House of Delegates, worked on critical initiatives like licensure compact legislation, and serves as Tennessee's delegate on the national PA Compact Commission.

Beyond her professional roles, Marie is a mission-driven servant leader — participating in global medical missions, fundraising for children's health, and mentoring PA students every step of the way — all while raising eight children.

Marie's legacy is one of vision, service, and deep commitment to the PA profession, and TAPA is pleased to recognize her as the newest member of the TAPA Hall of Fame.

Celebrating Excellence: TAPA's 2025 Award Recipients

By Katherine Pesut Moffat, TAPA Executive Director

Each year, the Tennessee Academy of PAs honors individuals who exemplify excellence, leadership, and service within the PA profession. The 2025 award recipients reflect the very best of our community — from seasoned clinicians and educators to rising student leaders and dedicated preceptors. We are proud to recognize the following outstanding individuals.

PA of the Year: Natalie Stafford, PA-C

TAPA's 2025 PA of the Year, Natalie Stafford, exemplifies the highest standards of clinical excellence, integrity, and patient-centered care. Currently serving as Lead Advanced Practice Provider at Resolve Pain Solutions, and formerly a key provider at Mays & Schnapp Neurospine and Pain, Natalie has made a profound impact on patients navigating complex pain management.

Known for her compassion and attentive listening, Natalie partners closely with her patients to understand their goals and deliver personalized, evidence-based care. Her commitment to diagnostic accuracy, risk reduction, and safe opioid prescribing has led her to champion non-pharmacologic therapies and thoughtful de-prescribing strategies that promote long-term wellness.

Beyond the clinic, Natalie's leadership has influenced care across the state. In late 2024 and early 2025, she served on a statewide task force through the Tennessee Medical Association and the Opioid Abatement Committee, helping update

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continuing education for prescribers statewide. Her ability to navigate complex and sensitive topics made her a trusted and influential voice.

Natalie also serves on the TAPA Board of Directors as a Director At-large and represented Tennessee nationally as a delegate (2023) and an alternate delegate (2024) to the AAPA House of Delegates. Her dedication extends into the community, where she serves as a Team Leader at Oikos Church, organizes diaper drives, provides meals to college students, volunteers monthly with Freedom Prayer, and lectures at UTHSC, educating PA students on safe opioid prescribing.

As a mentor and advocate, Natalie supports the onboarding and professional growth of both PAs and NPs, fostering a supportive and collaborative practice environment. Widely respected by colleagues across disciplines, her leadership continues to shape the future of PA practice in Tennessee.

Student of the Year: Paxton Barnes

TAPA is proud to recognize Paxton Barnes as the 2025 Student of the Year — a rising star whose

leadership, work ethic, and heart for service embody the promise of the PA profession.

Paxton is currently a student in the Milligan University PA Program, where she began her studies in January 2024. In a short time, she has distinguished herself academically, clinically, and as a leader among her peers.

Her journey to PA school reflects discipline and determination. As an undergraduate at Milligan University, Paxton excelled academically while competing as a four-year student-athlete on the volleyball team. She served as co-captain of her team, Vice President of the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, earned consistent placement on the Dean's List, and received the Champion of Character Award her senior year.

Paxton's commitment to service is evident through her volunteer work with Kids Against Hunger, Habitat for Humanity, and her local church. This fall, she further extended that commitment on a medical mission trip to Kenya, serving alongside classmates and faculty.

An enthusiastic advocate for the PA profession, Paxton currently serves as the AAPA State

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TAPA recognized the 2025 Award recipients and Hall of Fame inductee at FallFest: (from left to right) Paxton Barnes, Natalie Stafford, Marie Patterson, TAPA President Johnny Presley, and Rachel Enigk.

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Chapter Student Representative and as a Milligan PA Program Ambassador, welcoming and mentoring prospective students. Now thriving in the clinical phase of her education, she continues to exceed expectations with her preparation, communication skills, and passion for patient care.

Educator of the Year: Rachel Enigk, PA-C

TAPA's 2025 Educator of the Year, Rachel Enigk, has made a lasting impact on PA education through innovation, advocacy, and unwavering support for students.

A 2013 graduate of the Methodist University PA Program, Rachel brings more than 11 years of experience in vascular surgery and has spent the past five years on faculty at the South College PA Program. As Course Director for Clinical Assessment and Management II, Fundamentals of Surgery, and Co-Course Director for Clinical Assessment and Management III, she brings clinical excellence to life in the classroom through engaging and creative teaching strategies.

Rachel's leadership extends across the program. She serves as Faculty Chair of the Didactic Subcommittee, advisor to the PA Student Society, and a leader on both the V.O.I.C.E.S. Committee and Simulation Committee, shaping curriculum, culture, and student wellness.

Her passion for service is equally inspiring. Rachel played a key role in raising \$50,000 for the Knoxville Dream Center through the Fairways for Dreams Golf Tournament and leads student outreach through PAEA's Project Access, introducing underserved youth to the PA profession.

As Chair of the South College Knoxville chapter of the AAPA Student Society, she supports initiatives that foster connection, wellness, and community. Through her work on the V.O.I.C.E.S. committee and her current Doctor of Medical Science research, Rachel continues to champion inclusivity, parental support, and equity in graduate medical education.

Preceptor of the Year: Bailey Jessee, PA-C

Bailey Jessee, TAPA's 2025 Preceptor of the Year, is recognized for his exceptional mentorship, service, and dedication to educating future PAs.

A PA in the Emergency Department at Greeneville Community Hospital East, Bailey's commitment to service began with four years in the United States Army and continues to define his professional life. A 2021 graduate of the Milligan University PA Program, he has precepted numerous students over the past four years, offering one of the program's most sought-after emergency medicine rotations.

Bailey's teaching style blends hands-on experience with individualized mentorship, creating a high-impact learning environment. His service extends far beyond the hospital through volunteer work with the Washington County Rescue Squad, VA Medical Center Long-Term Care Facility, Holston Habitat for Humanity, and Providence Medical Clinic.

He remains deeply connected to PA education as an OSCE evaluator, Advisory Committee member, and advocate for Milligan PA students. Most recently, he served as the keynote speaker for the 2025 White Coat Ceremony, inspiring the next generation of PAs.

Bailey's excellence has been recognized through numerous honors, including the Albert T. Kissel Veteran's Caucus Scholarship, ETSU Veteran's Health Science Internship, and the 2022 TAPA PA/Physician Team of the Year Award.

TAPA is honored to celebrate these exceptional individuals whose leadership, service, and dedication continue to elevate the PA profession across Tennessee and beyond.



TAPA congratulates Milligan University, the 2025 Student Challenge Bowl Champions!

2025 PA Foundation Report

By Frank Warren, PA Foundation Secretary/Treasurer

2025 marked the 49th annual FallFest conference in Gatlinburg during the week of Oct. 6-10 and thanks to many wonderful donors to the Tennessee PA Foundation, a total of \$8,650 was awarded to deserving students from PA programs across the state of Tennessee.

Once again, all of our scholarship recipients sent in exceptional applications describing their academic achievements, community service, financial needs, future goals and aspirations, and an essay about their decision to pursue becoming a PA. We had many more deserving students than funds, but the TAPA Board of Directors and PA Foundation Committee made the best decisions possible with the information we were given by the applicants.

The annual James Montag, Jr. Military Service Scholarship goes to deserving student applicants who have served in our military branches prior to entering PA Programs. This year, two scholarships were awarded to students of the MTSU PA Program. The first scholarship went to Whitney Smith, who served for four years as an Army Surgical Tech. The second scholarship was awarded to Jesse Scobee, who served in the Navy on the USS Arlington. Each student received a \$1,200 scholarship through the generosity of James Montag, Jr.

The J.C. Carey Memorial Scholarships is given in honor of J.C. Carey who lived a life of service as a Tennessee PA. He was a patient healthcare provider, teacher, preceptor/mentor, and TAPA Board member during his career. This year, six

scholarships were awarded to the following Tennessee PA students: Rachel Simon of Bethel University (\$500), Meaghan Robinson of South College (\$500), Whitney Smith of MTSU (\$500), Rachel Nall of Lincoln Memorial University (\$1000), Andrew Northway of Milligan University (\$1,000), and Cassandra Roberts of Bethel University (\$1500).

New this year was a memorial scholarship in honor of the life and service of Steve Clifton who served his patients well throughout his career. Steve was a regular CME speaker at conferences and dinner meetings. He was also a student preceptor/mentor, served for several terms on the TAPA Board of Directors, and was a long-time member of TAPA's CME Committee - being instrumental in organizing and overseeing the Exhibit Hall at many TAPA conferences. Always a friendly, calm and encouraging PA, his mark on our profession leaves a lasting legacy which will carry on in patients' lives, students and all who knew him. This scholarship was started and funded by Joan Gardner and Travis Lane this year.

The inaugural Steve Clifton memorial scholarships were awarded to Rachel Nall of Lincoln Memorial University (\$500) and Olivia Ann Philips of MTSU (\$750).

Thank you again to all who donated to the PA Foundation in 2025! You have given great gifts which assist PA students in pursuit of their education in order to obtain careers which we have all been blessed with, and they too will serve others, change peoples' lives, make friends for life, and find satisfaction and rewards well beyond the monetary benefits of this career.

The Tennessee PA Foundation is a 501(c) 3 charitable organization, so donations to support the Foundation may be tax deductible if you itemize deductions. Those who made donations in 2025 will receive donation letters in early January.

If you would like to support future PAs through our scholarship efforts, please [click here to donate online](#) or set up monthly contributions, or mail donations to the TAPA office c/o Tennessee PA Foundation, PO Box 150785, Nashville, TN 37215.

Have a wonderful and blessed 2026!!



PA Foundation Secretary/Treasurer Frank Warren (right) presents scholarships to Whitney Smith, Rachel Simon and Cassandra Roberts .

TAPA PAC Needs You

By Donald Black, PA-C, MPAS, DFAAPA
TAPA Political Action Committee Chair

As we go through this holiday season, we have so much to be thankful for in many areas of our lives. One of those, professionally, is to practice to the max potential of our training. Looks like we will have some help from the state in this regard in the coming year, as you can see from our president's letter in this issue.

I will take the opportunity to remind everyone that during the legislative session, which begins on Jan. 13, legislators cannot accept campaign contributions. Having said that, it may be a good time as we come to the close of another calendar year to reach out to your respective legislators and get to know them.

TAPA, at the direction of our lobbyists, is monitoring the political and legislative climate for us to give us insight, guidance and how to approach what is on the legislative horizon. With that knowledge and wisdom, we shall be directed toward our upcoming legislative agenda for 2026.

Lastly, I reached out to each of the TAPA regional directors at the board of directors meeting in Gatlinburg at FallFest to send me the names of individuals who may be interested in participating in the legislative efforts of the PAC for TAPA. If you have an interest in assisting the TAPA PAC in an effort to grow our funds and efforts, please feel free to reach out to me either by phone (931-338-1828) or email (donaldblack46@yahoo.com).

Finally, I am wishing you a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year and hope to hear from you soon.

2025 TAPA PAC Contributors

(Received Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2025)

If you haven't yet contributed to the PAC this year, please visit www.tnpa.com/political-action-committee to make either a one-time donation or sign up for monthly donations.

Bridge Members

contributing \$250+

*Donald Black
*Lezlie Burden
Suzanne Bugar
*Patrecia Eaton
*Allison Jowers
*Jennifer Light
*Joseph Lindahl
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FALLFEST

IS MOVING TO

NASHVILLE

IN 2026!



SAVE THE DATE
OCTOBER 22–OCTOBER 25

For more details, visit tnpa.com/fallfest