**Collaboration, Compassion, and Community: Establishing an APTA State Chapter-Affiliated Pro Bono Clinic**

[**Perspective**](https://www.apta.org/article?articlesubtypeid=8841)

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The influence our profession has on the lives of our patients is vast, and our efforts to transform society are far-reaching. Optimizing patient access to physical therapy care is often on the forefront of our minds, both as engaged APTA members and as attentive rehabilitation providers who contribute to the larger U.S. health care system.

Even with these endeavors, there remains a substantial subset of patients who are at a disadvantage in experiencing the meaningful impact of physical therapy. They're the individuals in our society who are underinsured and uninsured; the members of our communities who, for a variety of reasons, are deprived of the peace of mind of health care access.

**Access to Physical Therapy in the Last Frontier**

Access to health care services is not equal throughout the U.S., and the polarity in access may be most pronounced in the state of Alaska. With a land mass spanning 586,000 square miles (one-fifth the size of the continental United States), there are numerous geographical barriers to access to care. Furthermore, as it relates to physical therapy, the lack of an in-person doctor of physical therapy program in the state substantiates health care access limitations. The more traditional university-based and student-led pro bono care model is not available.

Recognizing these obstacles and our ethical obligations as APTA members, APTA Alaska and its constituents responded by devising a plan to create a chapter-affiliated pro bono physical therapy clinic.

The initiative was approved at chapter meetings in winter 2021, and a board of directors was established for the entity in spring 2022. Following the creation of articles of incorporation and bylaws and formal recognition as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, the APTA Alaska Physical Therapy Community Clinic was formed.

Its mission is simple and purposeful: to provide quality physical therapist services to all individuals in Alaska, regardless of financial limitations, to improve the health and wellness of our Alaska community.

At its flagship location in Anchorage, patients are seen weekly on Saturday mornings by volunteer licensed physical therapists. A local private practice outpatient clinic generously serves as the space for these visits. Patients are initially screened and welcomed for evaluation by administrative staff, which include caring community members, engaged health care professionals, and local students (to name a few). The breadth of background among volunteers is immense, from early-career professionals to recent retirees. As word spreads, referrals have come by way of local outpatient medical clinics, community health centers, hospitals, and long-term care facilities.

Since this entity's creation in Anchorage, momentum has continued in an "all-Alaska" effort. Locations in other regions of the state, such as the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and Fairbanks, are in various stages of development, with more locations planned.

**Reflections**

As operations have been carried out for our clinic for 18 months now, we have had a number of reflections on our experience. First, we believe this clinic is one of the most outward and direct extensions of a state chapter's effort in the community to push APTA's overarching vision: Transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience.

Additionally, the collaboration among a variety of professionals involved with the clinic is one of the purest forms of the idiom "many hands make light work." This has taken the form of last-second coverage by volunteer providers on a given Saturday, coordinating care for a patient with an appropriate specialist clinician, and encouraging the sharing of knowledge among volunteers and membership.

Finally, there is a remarkable spirit that comes with pro bono care in our clinic that is unlike anything else experienced in a standard clinical setting. By being ingrained in the local community's health care system already, volunteer clinicians have natural empathy for patients with a variety of unique struggles that have led them to seek out necessary pro bono services. And the patients possess a level of gratitude and appreciation that is unmatched. While not always outwardly acknowledged, there is a synergistic relationship between the volunteer and the patient to share the availability of this opportunity with other members of society.

**Lessons Learned**

It was important to us to share our experience with the rest of APTA's membership, not only because it is a great success story but also because these efforts are replicable. At its core, establishing an APTA chapter-affiliated pro bono clinic requires chapter leadership to recognize a disparity in a region or regions of their state that would benefit from such an entity and prepare to connect with their members and surrounding communities to make it happen.

As a how-to guide, we encourage the following formal steps to establishing your chapter's own pro bono clinic:

1. **Submission of a formal proposal with your respective APTA state chapter’s leadership.**This can be in the form of a formal agenda item at an appropriate upcoming chapter meeting(s).
2. **Formation of a board of a board of directors.** Board members could include any variety of already established leadership from your state chapter or its engaged membership. Recommended roles include president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary.
3. **Creation of official documents, identity, and budget.**Necessary official documents include articles of incorporation and bylaws. Publicly disseminated mission and vision statements will help solidify the pro bono clinic’s identity in the community. The creation and implementation of a budget, discussed and approved by the entity's board of directors, is also an important step in its initial development.
4. **Application as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation with the IRS.**The IRS offers guidance on its website at [IRS.gov](https://www.irs.gov/); consulting with someone who has legal expertise in the area is also recommended.
5. **Purchase of liability insurance as a unique entity.**This protection, specific to the clinic, is essential.
6. **Development of ancillary leadership roles.**Recommended roles include: a clinic director who oversees clinic; a community outreach director who raises awareness of the clinic’s presence in the surrounding area(s); a volunteer coordinator who schedules volunteer clinicians and administrative; and a weekly patient scheduler who fields patient referrals and inquiries for scheduling.
7. **Establishment of a host clinic site and clinic operations.**Identifying an initial geographic region(s) in your state that would most benefit from pro bono physical therapist services is key. From there, discuss with a local private practice clinic or other health care facility that would be willing to donate their space. Clinic operation details to be planned prior to opening include the frequency of clinic availability, such as on weekends or monthly, and the length of patient appointments. Finally, select an appropriate documentation method that ensures the confidentiality of protected health information, such as paper charting with a secure location or documentation
8. **Fielding a roster of both clinician and administrative volunteers.**We recommend personal malpractice insurance for clinician volunteers, with a primary option by way of [APTA's Insurance Program, powered by HPSO](https://www.apta.org/apta-and-you/explore-apta-membership/membership-benefits/apta-insurance-program-powered-by-hpso). It is also recommended to field a variety of clinical specialists, including those board certified [by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties](https://www.apta.org/your-career/career-advancement/specialist-certification). A roster of administrative volunteers is helpful to ensure coverage during clinic care hours. These individuals could include public community members, students, or anybody interested in volunteering in a non-clinical role.
9. **Planning for sustainability and growth.**This is best achieved through strategic planning among the clinic's board of directors and chapter membership throughout the calendar year. Areas to cover in meetings include a budget strategy for fundraisers, monetary donations, and the donation of clinic supplies; and publicizing the clinic, beginning with a presence on your APTA chapter website with a section that includes information about the clinic and scheduling guidance for patients and providers.

The impact of a chapter-affiliated pro bono physical therapy clinic is pronounced, and we encourage you to investigate if an entity like this would be feasible for your state. If you have questions or are seeking further guidance on what this process entails, please contact [communityclinic@alaskapt.org,](mailto:communityclinic@alaskapt.org) or visit the [APTA Alaska website](http://www.aptaalaska.org/community-clinic/).

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