

October 7, 2011

A Letter to the VT APTA Membership

Before going into detail, I would like to acknowledge that some of you, our members, have experienced and continue to experience great personal loss and disruption from the flooding caused by Hurricane Irene last month. Each member of the Chapter Board of Directors has contributed money, goods, and/or volunteer time to help in the recovery efforts. We have been criticized for not doing more. As you continue to read, you may understand why we have not been able to launch an all-out effort by the Chapter. We, the Board, also understand that those of you so affected by the disaster may not be able to respond to this letter in the near future.

The Puerto Rico Chapter was closed by the APTA because of lack of leadership. Could it happen to Vermont? With the elections less than two weeks away and a nearly empty slate, it is something to seriously consider. The following positions are open: President-elect-no candidates, Vice-President-one candidate, three-person Nominating Committee-no current members, one candidate, Secretary-one candidate, Treasurer-no candidates, Southeast District Chair-open for several years-no candidates. Someone has also come forward to co-ordinate our social media efforts. Lee Nelson, long-time volunteer advisor to the Office of Professional Regulation and a Chapter member, will be stepping down at the end of this year. It is vital that another member step forward to fill the gap.

There is a crisis in leadership in the Vermont Chapter. The number of volunteers has been steadily declining over the last 10 years until, now, there are just ten members actively involved in the Chapter! Yes, that's right. Ten volunteers out of over 300 members are doing all of the work of the Chapter. We all work full-time, some of us manage a practice, and many of us have families and do additional volunteer work in the community. This is not to pat ourselves on the back. This is to make it clear that those who decide to volunteer have no fewer demands on their time than those who do not.

What does the Chapter do for you, its' members, that is so important?

The most important is that of liaison between the physical therapy profession and our lawmakers and administrators. Earlier this year, the Chapter succeeded in having physical therapists included as providers in the concussion bill for student athletes, when they were excluded in the original bill. Moving forward, in this time of radical change in the health care delivery model in Vermont, it is vitally important that we maintain active, open communication and serve as an advisory body to the new five-member board that will design the new single-payer system. The rules are nearly complete for mandatory continuing competence for Vermont physical therapists. The Chapter has provided input from our members to the advisors and the Office of Professional Regulation. The Chapter also maintains an excellent lobbyist who keeps us up to date daily during the legislative session and helps us to convey our position to key lawmakers.

The Chapter communicates between members and insurers and attempts to mediate disputes and be certain that the public has high quality access to physical therapy. The Chapter, in conjunction with the national APTA, several New England Chapters, and the New York Chapter, arranged a meeting with Cigna and Orthonet in an attempt to discuss and correct denials of payment for service delivered by our members. Vermont has also been invited to take part in a regional payment reform initiative sponsored by the APTA. We have continued to work to have BSBSVT's policies changed in regard to definitions and coding for physical therapy.

The Chapter's mission statement includes provision of high quality, evidenced-based, affordable education experiences to our members and other Vermont physical therapists. There are two annual Chapter meetings and the Chapter also has begun to offer audio conferences in conjunction with the other New England Chapters. District meetings are held twice a year providing free educational opportunities and a personal way to communicate district concerns to the Board.

In the last two three years, the Chapter has established a web-site and a Facebook page to enhance communication.

The mission statement also includes the promotion of physical therapy to the public and co-ordination with other similar groups to improve public perception of and access to physical therapy. The Chapter holds an annual benefit golf tournament to benefit Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports and to raise public awareness of what both groups do to improve the lives of athletes with physical impairments. We we unable to continue the FunFitness day at the Vermont Special Olympics due to lack of volunteer leadership.

This all takes a great deal of time. If you look at the web-site, you will see a list of committees and their Chairs. At this time, everyone of those Committee Chairs is the entire committee! Two and a half years ago, the Board of Directors made the difficult decision to hire an executive management firm to help the Chapter because of the lack of volunteers. We announced the decision and hoped that knowing there was back up help to get the detail work done would encourage members to volunteer. It has not turned out to be the case. Not only do we have fewer volunteers than ever before, attendance at all of the Chapter functions has declined markedly. I won't enumerate all of the things we would like to have the Chapter do, but cannot because of lack of time.

The Chapter is in a crisis that only you can resolve. The Chapter needs you to serve on the Board or in a work group. The Chapter needs key legislative contacts to communicate with lawmakers in every legislative district in the state. The Chapter needs you to seriously consider whether you would like the Vermont Chapter continue to function or close for lack of interest at a time when the role we play in Vermont health care may be decided by others if they lack input from us. The fact that you are members at all sets you apart as someone who cares about the profession. Please decide if you can give an hour a week or an hour a month and step forward. One of our Board members, who will be running for another position, put it well: "I'm pregnant and working full time. I didn't think I would run because I can't give 100%. Then I realized that 75-80% is a lot better than nothing." Think about it. Thank you.

Catherine Sells PT
President
VTAPTA