

HEARTBEAT

THE BIMONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE ALASKA STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

August 2025

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Championing Health: The Vital Role of the Alaska State Medical Association

The summer is almost over, the fish are caught, and school is beginning. It is time for ASMA to get back to business. After the isolationist mentality of COVID many associations have lost membership. This phenomenon has also plagued ASMA. The loss of membership dues continues to be the fulcrum of whether ASMA will continue into 2026. As I look into the future, here is why SUPPORTING the association AND JOINING TODAY is ESSENTIAL for a HEALTHY tomorrow.



Rhene Merkouris, MD

Alaska, with its breathtaking landscapes and unique challenges, is more than just a state—it is a tapestry of cultures, communities and individuals whose health and well-being are intricately tied to the fabric of medical leadership and advocacy. At the heart of this network stands the Alaska State Medical Association, a pillar of support for physicians, physician assistants, podiatrists, medical professionals and, most importantly, the people of Alaska. In an era marked by rapid changes in healthcare delivery, increasing demands on providers, and a growing need for equitable access, the role of ASMA has never been more crucial.

Fostering Collaboration for Excellence in Patient Care

One of the most compelling reasons to support ASMA is its unwavering dedication to fostering collaboration among medical professionals. Alaska's vast geography and sometimes isolated communities demand innovative solutions and strong communication among healthcare providers. The ASMA serves as a central hub where physicians and medical professionals—whether practicing in urban Anchorage or remote villages on the tundra—can connect, share knowledge, and work together to raise the standards of patient care. Through communication and sharing information, ASMA bridges the gap between specialties and generations of doctors. This environment of mutual learning and support not only uplifts individual practitioners but also enhances the care patients receive across the state. In a place where weather and distance can turn a routine case into a crisis, these connections are lifesaving.

Advocating for Sound Health Policy in a Unique Landscape

Alaska's healthcare challenges are distinct from the rest of the nation. From the high cost of medical

Merkouris Continued

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Save the Date

ASMA Fall General Membership Meeting

Wednesday, October 1, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

In person at BP Energy Center and on Zoom

ASMA launches new campaign

The Alaska State Medical Association with (ASMA) is proud to launch the **Your Care is At Our Core** Campaign in partnership with the American Medical Association (AMA) to strengthen the bond between patients and their physicians, the foundation of health care.

Healthcare can be an especially vulnerable space for patients, and establishing a meaningful patient-physician relationship is necessary to build trust and provide the most effective care and treatment.

Over the past few years, many factors have distracted our community from what matters most – this connection between physicians and their patients. This campaign will help to underscore that physicians are more than clinicians — they're trusted allies, compassionate listeners, and fierce advocates for their patients.

In the coming weeks, look for us on the web and on social media as our campaign is unveiled! Visit the Your Care is At Our Core webpage for more information.

See the video on our website [asmadocs.org](https://www.asmadocs.org), or on Facebook and Instagram. ASMA Members are authorized to use this video on their own practice websites as well: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3YbbNdYwDU>

Support ASMA

You can help support ASMA by using the QR code to donate to your state medical association and its valuable services. Or send a check to ASMA at 4107 Laurel Street, Anchorage, 99508. Thank you.

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ASMA Website Info:

- For those that have not logged in yet, the site did not carry over your password. You **WILL** need to reset it in order to login.
- If you don't have an address in the "personal" field you will not receive mailings. Please login to update your profile.
- Physician images were **not** imported to the new site so please be sure you log in and upload a new photo for the OMD (Online Medical Directory).
- The system currently does not support Company Admin's uploading individual physician photos. You may email photos to ASMA@asmadocs.org, but please include the physician name and company so that we can be sure we're uploading to the proper

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Merkouris continued from Page 1

supplies and transportation to the need for culturally responsive care for indigenous populations, the state's medical community must constantly navigate complex terrain. ASMA stands at the forefront of these issues, advocating for policies that recognize Alaska's uniqueness.

Whether it is fighting for increased funding for rural clinics, supporting telemedicine initiatives that bring specialists to remote communities, or providing input on state legislation, ASMA is the collective voice of Alaska's physicians. By supporting ASMA, you support a force that ensures lawmakers and regulators hear the needs of both patients and providers. This advocacy translates into real-world impact—more accessible care, better-resourced hospitals, and healthcare strategies tailored to the realities of Alaska.

Promoting Professional Development and Lifelong Learning

In medicine, learning never stops. Advances in technology, new treatment protocols, and evolving public health threats mean that practitioners must be lifelong students. ASMA champions professional development, offering resources that keep physicians at the cutting edge.

From teaching in and supporting accredited schools in Alaska of medical students, medical residents and physician assistants to accredited continuing medical education, the association equips Alaska's medical community to respond to emerging needs—whether it is retaining new practitioners, a new infectious disease or updates in trauma care. By supporting ASMA you invest in a culture where excellence is expected, and every patient benefits from the latest in medical science.

Empowering Physician Wellness and Resilience

Long hours, remote settings, and the emotional demands of caring for others can take a toll on Alaska's doctors. Burnout is a real threat, particularly in areas where medical professionals are few and the need is great. ASMA recognizes that the health of the healer is as important as the health of the patient. Through its physician wellness initiatives, ASMA provides support networks, mental health resources, and tools for coping with stress and isolation. These efforts create a sustainable workforce—one that is able to serve with compassion and commitment for years to come. Supporting ASMA is therefore an investment in the resilience of those who care for Alaska.

Championing Public Health and Community Engagement

Beyond individual patient encounters, ASMA works closely with state agencies, tribal health organizations, and local governments to mount coordinated responses to health threats.

Public engagement is central to ASMA's mission. The association educates the public about critical health issues—like opioid addiction, suicide prevention, and chronic disease management—through seminars, media outreach, and partnerships. By supporting ASMA, you amplify these efforts, helping build healthier, more informed communities across Alaska.

Responding to Crisis: A Steadfast Partner in Emergencies

Alaska's unique geography makes it susceptible to natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and wildfires. In times of crisis, ASMA mobilizes its members and resources to ensure a coordinated medical response. Whether it's providing expertise during an epidemic or organizing emergency relief, the association is a cornerstone of disaster preparedness and recovery. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, ASMA played a critical role in disseminating accurate information, advising on best practices, and supporting vaccination efforts. Its ability to coordinate among providers and communicate with public agencies saved lives and helped maintain public trust in medicine during uncertain times.

Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Medicine

Alaska's population is diverse—home to many indigenous peoples, immigrants, and communities with unique cultural perspectives. ASMA leads the charge in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the medical field, advocating for culturally competent care and addressing disparities in health outcomes.

ASMA works to recruit and retain practitioners from underrepresented backgrounds, and ensures that health services are accessible and respectful for all Alaskans. Supporting ASMA means advancing a vision where every person, regardless of origin or circumstances, receives the care and respect they deserve.

Why Your Support Matters

The future of healthcare in Alaska depends on strong leadership, committed advocacy, and a unified voice for medicine. ASMA embodies these qualities, serving as a beacon for the state's medical community and the broader public. By supporting ASMA, you empower doctors to thrive, ensure that patients receive high-quality care, and help tackle the unique challenges Alaska faces.

Whether you are a physician, PA, podiatrist or healthcare worker, patient, policymaker, or community member, your support contributes to a healthier Alaska. It enables ASMA to expand its programs, deepen its impact, and innovate in ways that benefit everyone. The association's work is not just about medicine—it's about building resilient communities, advancing justice in healthcare and securing a brighter future.

Conclusion: Investing in Health, Investing in Alaska

ASMA is much more than a professional organization; it is a lifeline connecting medical professionals, patients, and communities throughout the state. Its advocacy, programs, and partnerships foster an environment where medicine can flourish, and every resident of Alaska can enjoy the best possible health.

Supporting ASMA is an investment in the well-being of a state like no other, where every life matters and every medical challenge is met with determination and heart. Let us stand together in championing health, supporting the medical community and shaping a future where Alaska leads in healthcare innovation and compassion.

Rhene Merkouris, MD, Alaska State Medical Association President 2025

New Alaska-based MAT Guide Released: Clear, Evidence-Based Resource for Providers, Partners, and Communities

Download this digital-only resource: https://health.alaska.gov/media/jkmlmjlg/mat_guide.pdf

Medication for Addiction Treatment (MAT) is a foundation of evidence-based addiction treatment and the first-line treatment for opioid use disorder; significantly improving treatment retention, decreasing the risk of overdose and overdose death. MAT access can help close treatment gaps, which significantly impact Alaska's rural communities.

To enhance MAT across Alaska, a new [*Medications for Addiction Treatment \(MAT\) Guide, 3rd Edition*](#) is now available. The guide is designed to serve a broad professional audience including prescribers, care coordinators, social workers, peer support staff, and program administrators. It's also an accessible tool for patient education and community outreach.

The guide provides information on:

- Clinical overviews of MAT options including mechanisms, access pathways, and considerations
- Screening, assessing, and referring individuals for MAT
- Best practices for integrating MAT into primary care practices
- Common myths and messaging guidance for patient and family communication

Provider-specific FAQs and links to additional training opportunities

If you, your loved one, or your patient needs assistance with finding substance use disorder treatment, go to [Findtreatment.gov](https://findtreatment.gov).

Did you know that MAT and naloxone together can significantly reduce the risk of overdose and save lives? Make sure you're prepared—contact [Project HOPE](#) or visit iknowmine.org to get naloxone and learn more. You can also email doh.projecthope.info@alaska.gov for assistance.

Explore, Expand, Engage: Upcoming MAT Learning Opportunities

Peaks to Coast: United Opioid & Polysubstance Response Summit - September 4–5, 2025 | Virtual

Alaska MAT Conference 2025 - October 21–23, 2025 | Anchorage, AK

Project ECHO: Alaska MAT Series

August and September 2025 | Free virtual learning collaborative

Funding Support: The MAT Guide, 3rd Edition, was made possible by Opioid Response Network and Grant Number 6H79TI085749-02M004 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor does it imply endorsement by, SAMHSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government.

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Top 10 Ways to Improve Adolescent Immunization Rates

1 Immunize at every opportunity. Adolescents do make office visits, but opportunities are often missed to provide age-appropriate vaccines that are due at that time. Consider every patient encounter a potential vaccination visit, starting with well visits and annual physicals. Immunization opportunities also arise during sports and camp physicals; acute care and follow-up visits; visits for care of chronic illness; and visits for COVID-19 or annual influenza immunization.

2 Use reminder and recall systems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends these systems, which typically include computer-generated reminders to you and your staff that a patient is due for one or more vaccines. Messages can be delivered to patients and parents via telephone calls, letters, postcards, e-mail, or text messages, noting that vaccines are either due (reminder) or past due (recall).

3 Implement standing orders. Standing orders authorize nurses, pharmacists, and other appropriately trained healthcare personnel, where allowed by state law, to assess a patient's immunization status and administer vaccinations according to a protocol approved by an institution, physician, or other authorized practitioner. Standing orders work by enabling assessment and vaccination of the patient without the need for clinician examination or direct order from the attending provider at the time of the interaction.

4 Take part in an immunization registry. A population-based immunization registry provides ready access to a comprehensive immunization record for every patient, even one who has been vaccinated by a number of different providers. These Immunization Information Systems (IIS) may be state or local.

5 Review your patients' vaccination histories. Prior to visits, review your patient's immunization record (both your medical record and information available in the immunization registry) and flag the chart if your patient is due or overdue for vaccines. At all visits, review your patient's immunization status, regardless of the reason for the visit. Maintain a comprehensive immunization record in your patient's chart and update it regularly, as well as send the information to the immunization registry.

6 Follow the U.S. recommended immunization schedule. CDC recommends that adolescents receive several vaccines starting at 11 or 12 years of age, including tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis (Tdap), meningococcal ACWY (MenACWY), and the human papillomavirus (HPV) series. Depending on the age at the first dose, 2–3 doses of HPV are recommended over a 6-month period. The second dose of MenACWY is given at 16 years of age, along with a dose of meningococcal B vaccine when it is appropriate. Influenza vaccine is recommended annually. If your patient falls behind, vaccinate at the next opportunity or recall him or her for overdue vaccines. For additional resources on how to improve adolescent immunization coverage for MenACWY and other recommended vaccines, see www.give2menacwy.org. Top 10 Ways to Improve Adolescent Immunization Rates

7 Schedule vaccination-only quick visits. The National Vaccine Advisory Committee suggests vaccination-only visits, with staff members who are permitted under state law to assess the need for and provide vaccination services using standing orders. Offering such opportunities during regular office hours, or providing flexible hours in the evenings or on weekends, will help increase access to vaccines and help your practice run more efficiently.

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**ALASKA HEALTH INFORMATION
EXCHANGE SUMMIT**

AUGUST 28

8 Make vaccination education a priority, for parents as well as patients. Many parents are not aware that adolescents need a number of vaccinations. Others may question whether their children will benefit from the recommended immunizations. In addition to sharing information from trustworthy sources, providers can make themselves or designated staff members available to address individual concerns about vaccines and provide counseling and reassurance as needed.

9 Establish rapport with your adolescent patients. A nonjudgmental approach, a readiness to listen and answer questions, and an assurance of confidentiality can help adolescents feel comfortable discussing a wide range of issues, including vaccinations. In many cases, vaccinations will be part of broader conversations about common clinical and psychosocial concerns of adolescents.

10 Create a culture that values well-adolescent care. Young children are expected to have regular health assessments that include immunization. The next logical step is to create the same set of high expectations for well-adolescent care. Every member of your staff should emphasize the importance of adolescent vaccination and help assure that all doses of recommended vaccines for adolescents are administered. You also can reinforce this message by displaying posters or other appropriate educational materials in your waiting area or exam rooms.

Much more information is available at HPVCancerFreeAK.org

HPV vaccination is of special interest to me—a friend’s husband was diagnosed with throat cancer attributed to HPV infection probably acquired decades ago and completely unknown to the patient. Let’s help eliminate this type of cancer with better immunization. Pam

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Angelia Trujillo, DNP, MSN, WHNP-BC, RN

Professor, School of Nursing

Email: actrujillo@alaska.edu

Phone: 907-786-4693

Pharmacist Scope of Practice

Legislation passed in 2022 expanded the scope of practice for pharmacists to include:

- Independently prescribe and administer vaccines and opioid overdose reversal medications

- Be reimbursed for these services

- Clarified that pharmacists could still operate under collaborative practice agreements with physicians, allowing for team-based care

- Pharmacy technicians could administer vaccines under the supervision of a licensed pharmacist.

ASMA had no objections to this legislation.

Currently proposed legislation

SB 147/HB 195 was introduced because the Department of Law said the 2022 language was not clear enough. If passed, this bill would:

- Allow pharmacists to prescribe and administer drugs, including state and federally controlled substances.

- Require education in pain management and opioid use and addiction.

- Require continuing education in pain management and opioid use and at license renewal.

- Defines the “patient care services” that a pharmacist may provide to “achieve outcomes related to the cure or prevention of a disease, elimination or reduction of a patient’s symptoms, or arresting or slowing of a disease process.”

ASMA is actively working with representatives of the Alaska Pharmacy Association and the Alaska Board of Pharmacy, along with Rep. Ruffridge, to craft language agreeable to all parties.

Current statutory language:

AS 08.80.337(d) In this section, “patient care services” means medical care services given in exchange for compensation intended to achieve outcomes related to the cure or prevention of a disease, elimination or reduction of a patient’s symptoms, or arresting or slowing of a disease process.

Proposed language:

AS 08.80.337(d) In this section, “patient care services” means medical care services, **including the prescription or administration of a drug or device to a patient, that are** given in exchange for compensation **and** intended to achieve outcomes related to the cure or prevention of a disease, elimination or reduction of a patient’s symptoms, or arresting or slowing of a disease process; **“patient care services” does not include the prescription of an abortion-inducing drug to a patient.**

ASMA supports physician-led teams caring for Alaskan patients.

August is HPV Awareness and Prevention Month

Thank you for your continued focus on increasing HPV vaccination rates.

As you know, the COVID-19 pandemic led to substantial declines in HPV vaccinations among adolescents. Current projections estimate that it could take up to 10 years to rebound unless we act proactively. Therefore, we need your help.

To assist with getting back on track, the American Cancer Society's National HPV Vaccination Roundtable has developed the "Start at Age 9" toolkits that can be used in your practice. We are excited to support your efforts with some additional print resources in this clinic toolkit.

In this kit, you will find the following documents to download and print.

- **Clinic Poster:** These are patient-focused and can be displayed throughout your practice.
- **Vaccination Schedule:** These are patient-focused and can be used when engaging in conversations with patients/parents about what vaccines they have had and which ones they are still missing.
- **Cue Cards for Clinic Staff:** This card is for staff education and can be displayed in workspaces or at the front desk. Many practices have found them helpful as quick reference guides when conversing with parents about vaccinating their children.

o Special acknowledgments to the WA HPV Free Taskforce for creating this resource.

- **HPV Reminder Card & Vaccination Schedule:** These are patient-focused and can be given to a parent as reminders about what vaccine their child received and when the next appointment is scheduled.

The materials on this toolkit may be freely copied, printed and distributed so long as our Website address is included.

These and other resources are available for download and printing from the National HPV Vaccination Roundtable website at hpvrroundtable.org. If you have questions or stories of success that you would like to share, please reach out to hpv.vaccination.roundtable@cancer.org.

Thank you for your partnership in our efforts to increase HPV vaccination rates and prevent HPV-related cancers.

The National HPV Vaccination Roundtable Team

Debbie Saslow, PhD – Manager Director, HPV/GYN Cancers & Vice Chair

Gabby Darville-Sanders, PhD, MPH, CHES – Strategic Director

Christina Turpin – Director

Liddy Hora - Program Manager

A quick AI search on HPV in Alaska:

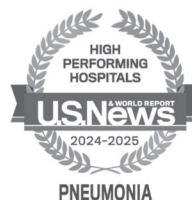
- **High HPV Cancer Rates in AI/AN Populations:** HPV-associated cancers, especially cervical cancer in women and oropharyngeal cancer in men, are notably higher in AI/AN populations compared to the overall U.S. population.
- **Disparities in Cervical Cancer:** Cervical cancer incidence rates are substantially higher in AI/AN women.
- **Disparities in Oropharyngeal Cancer:** AI/AN men also experience elevated rates of oropharyngeal cancer.
- **Need for Targeted Interventions:** These findings emphasize the need for culturally tailored interventions, including increased HPV vaccination and screening efforts within AI/AN communities.
- **HPV Vaccination Rates:** While HPV vaccination rates in Alaska are below the national average, there is evidence of regional variations in knowledge and awareness of HPV and vaccination.
- **Importance of Screening:** Cervical cancer screening rates, particularly among AI/AN women, are also lower than the national average, highlighting the need for increased screening efforts.
- **Screening and Vaccination:** The combination of HPV vaccination and cervical cancer screening is crucial in preventing HPV-related cancers, especially in high-risk populations like AI/AN individuals.



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Providence Alaska Medical Center is honored to be the only hospital in Alaska – and one of just 53 in the nation – recognized for both quality of care and equitable access by U.S. News & World Report, the global authority in hospital rankings. We also have been rated High Performing in the treatment of six conditions. These accolades reflect your impact on our community as we work together to serve every patient with clinical excellence and compassion.

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U.S. Department of Justice ★ Drug Enforcement Administration

Diversion Control Division

SCAM ALERT June 23, 2025

New Scam Letters and Calls Target Medical Practitioners

Dear Registrant,

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is warning registrants of new fraud schemes in which scammers impersonate DEA personnel and notify registrants that they are under investigation, presumably in an attempt to obtain personal information.

DEA has recently received reports of false letters and phone calls being used to contact both DEA registrants and non-registrants. It is not the DEA's practice to call registrants regarding investigative matters.

If you are contacted by a person purporting to work for DEA and stating that you are under investigation, please report the incident to the FBI at www.ic3.gov. You may also wish to submit the incident to the Federal Trade Commission, which takes reports at ReportFraud.ftc.gov and shares information with more than 3,000 law enforcement agencies. For any victims who have given personally identifiable information like a Social Security number or DEA registration number to a scammer, go to www.identitytheft.gov to learn how to protect against identity theft.

Reporting these scams will help authorities find, arrest, and stop the criminals engaged in this fraud.

As a reminder, DEA personnel will never contact registrants or members of the public to demand money or any other form of payment, will never request personal or sensitive information, and will only notify people of a legitimate investigation or legal action in person or by official letter. In fact, federal law enforcement officers are prohibited from demanding cash or gift cards from a member of the public.

The best deterrence against these bad actors is awareness and caution.

What's happening at DEA

DEA's Operation Profit Over Patients Dismantles Health Care Fraud Networks to Keep Communities Safe

The Drug Enforcement Administration is warning DEA-registered medical practitioners of new fraud schemes in which scammers impersonate DEA personnel and notify registrants that they are under investigation, presumably in an attempt to obtain personal information.

DEA has recently received reports of false letters and phone calls being used to contact both DEA registrants and non-registrants. It is not the DEA's practice to call registrants regarding investigative matters.

Report scams or fraud to:

www.ic3.gov

www.reportfraud.ftc.gov

www.identifytheft.gov

Doctors and DUIs

Just like many other diseases, doctors are not immune from drinking and driving and getting stopped for DUI violations. When that happens, it triggers a landslide of other issues and expenses:

Charges (and convictions) must be reported to the State Medical Board within 30 days. AS 08.64.326 and 12 AAC 40.967(26) (a)(b). It is advisable to contact the PHC before reporting to the Medical Board.

The Physician Health Committee of ASMA should be contacted for assistance (Medical Director Mary Ann Foland 907-903-1848 or Committee Coordinator Pam Ventgen 907-244-7266).

You may be held in custody for 72 hours and fined \$1500. Penalties increase for subsequent violations.

Your driver's license may be revoked for 90 days. (When you can't drive, you might need to pay for taxi/Uber services)

Your vehicle may be impounded. (Unknown impound fees)

You may be required to get an ignition interlock device for your vehicle. (\$350 to install, \$100 per month, then removal fee)

You will likely need an attorney. (\$10,000 retainer is not uncommon)

Alcohol Safety Action Program (ASAP) participation may be required (\$200)

Ongoing drug and alcohol screening (\$250 monthly)

Innumerable patient-contact hours lost while dealing with the legal issues and logistics of a DUI.

No one intends to drive while impaired. Sometimes these incidents happen when the physician is alone but many times the physician is with family, friends, or colleagues. If you can save yourself or someone else from driving while impaired, please do whatever you can. The Physician Health Committee has noted that the majority of recent participants have come to the program because of DUI incidents. Prevention is by far the best option here. If you are concerned about your alcohol use or a colleague, the PHC is your best option to getting help and protecting your medical license.



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(You are not establishing a doctor-patient relationship, thus this is not reportable as receiving therapy services. No need to report to your medical board.)

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To offer free and confidential peer support to American physicians and medical students by creating a safe space to discuss immediate life stressors with volunteer psychiatrist colleagues who are uniquely trained in mental wellness and also have similar shared experiences of the profession.

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