

HEARTBEAT

THE BIMONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE ALASKA STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

April 2025

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

When the weather and the markets are full of turbulence, I enjoy turning to a good book. I'm currently reading Black Woods Blue Sky, by Alaskan author, Eowyn Ivey. I devoured her earlier novel, The Snow Child, which captures something timeless about the Alaskan experience of loneliness in a remote and challenging environment as it explores how the



Kristin Mitchell,

dreams of a home-steading couple merge with a fairytale legend. In her current novel, the lines between reality and myth are also blurred, and the Alaskan landscape is a starring character.

I also try to read Dr Katelynn Jetelina who writes the Your Local Epidemiologist Substack.

A recent piece likens our moment in public health to the Greek Myth of Sisyphus in which a man who tried to cheat death is punished by the gods to push the same boulder uphill for all of eternity.

In the present, I'm finding it overwhelming to try to keep up with the proposed and actual changes to the American health care system. The data shows that we have for years paid more for worse outcomes than other wealthy Western countries, and we need serious proposals to improve value in the health care space. That said, I fear the current threats to deeply cut Medicaid and Medicare and public health will hurt all of us, most especially those whose age, geography, income, disability or health conditions put them at higher risk.

As I grieve for the families in Texas suffering because of the expanding measles outbreak, I know we in Alaska narrowly averted a similar crisis earlier this year, and here on the Kenai we are seeing resurgence of Pertussis. It is a good reminder of the value of vaccination. There have been a number of changes to recommended schedules, particularly for RSV, pneumococcal and Covid vaccines, and I find myself turning to the CDC recommended vaccination schedules to be sure I am providing my patients with the most up to

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Save the Date

ASMA General Membership

Spring Meeting

Wednesday, May 7, 2025

5:30 pm

BP Energy Center and on Zoom

Agenda includes several guest speakers along with detailed legislative updates on Prior Authorization reform, insurer network adequacy, 80th percentile replacement, pay parity and much more.

Thank you

A huge thank you to all who have written letters and emails to legislators this session. If you have submitted written support, there is no need to send more written testimony. Letters/emails already submitted will travel with the bills.

Oral testimony is also extremely valuable. We recognize that this is difficult with daytime patient care responsibilities, but if you are able to testify orally, that is also appreciated.

There has been good support for the prior authorization reform bills (SB 133 / HB 144).

SB 121, replacement for the 80th percentile rule, and SB 122, setting network adequacy standards for Alaska, are both working their way through the legislative process. These two bills face stiffer opposition from insurers. We still need a stronger showing of physician support. Individual correspondence carries more weight than a sign-on letter or form letters. These letters/emails don't need to be long but are most impactful if you can cite one or two examples of how patients are harmed by low physician reimbursement, difficulty recruiting new physicians into an Alaskan practice, more challenging contract negotiations with insurers.

ASMA is also tracking and participating in other legislation and we value physician input on these as well. There will be a full update at the general membership meeting on May 7th.

Every physician deserves to be insured by a company like MIEC.

As a reciprocal exchange, MIEC is entirely owned by the policyholders we protect. Our mission to protect physicians and the practice of medicine has guided us over the past 47 years. Our Patient Safety and Risk Management team continues to provide policyholders timely resources and expert advice to improve patient safety and reduce risk. To learn more about the benefits of being an MIEC policyholder, or to apply, visit **miec.com** or call **800.227.4527**.

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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 Cjeanes@asmadocs.org, but please include the physician name and company so that we can be sure we're uploading to the proper profile.

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Published bimonthly by:

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date advice. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/imz-schedules/index.html>

ASMA advocates primarily about active legislation on the state level. In addition, this year after a unanimous vote of the ASMA Board of Trustees, I wrote a letter to our congressional delegation about supporting evidence-based decision making by cabinet nominees. As ASMA president, I have been working to keep lines of communication open with PA leadership about their concerns related to the current supervising physician regulations and scope of practice. The medical board recently updated its position on the expanded PA scope of practice bill (SB 89) to incorporate four amendments supported by ASMA. We are in the midst of the Juneau legislative session and ASMA is weighing in on a number of bills that directly affect healthcare. If you feel strongly about any of these issues, I urge you to contact your legislators to let them know how their votes will affect patient care and the practice of medicine in Alaska.

Here are the bills ASMA is advocating about this session:

SB 89 - expanding PA scope of practice. ASMA does not support independent practice, and has proposed several amendments to ensure more supervised hours and ongoing support for physician-led teams to support high quality patient care.
SB 121 - the proposed replacement for the 80th percentile rule - ASMA supports this bill that would protect out-of-network physicians and other medical providers from steep cuts to insurance reimbursement.
SB 122 - ASMA supports addressing the future challenge of narrow insurance networks.
HB 144 - Prior Authorization reform - ASMA supports this bill which has been negotiated with hospitals, insurers, and the division of insurance. It should significantly ease the burden on physician offices related to prior authorization.

Physicians remain professionals with high levels of public trust. If you feel strongly about these bills in Juneau or about health issues nationally, consider taking the time to let your elected representatives know your professionally-informed opinion.

Senate Labor and Commerce is a key committee for most of this legislation.

Senate Labor & Commerce		
Jesse Bjorkman, Chair	Senator.Jesse.Bjorkman@akleg.gov	907-465-2828
Kelly Merrick, Vice-Chair	Senator.Kelly.Merrick@akleg.gov	907-465-3777
Elvi Gray-Jackson	Senator.Elvi.Gray-Jackson@akleg.gov	907-465-4930
Forrest Dunbar	Senator.forrest.dunbar@akleg.gov	907-465-6944
Robert Yundt	Senator.robert.yundt@akleg.gov	907-465-3878

One email with copies to the other legislators works well. Your correspondence will stay with the bill as it moved through committees and chambers of the legislature.

You can find your legislator's contact info at akleg.gov, the Alaska State Legislature Website, which also has links to our Congressional Delegation contact information.

This will be my last message as your ASMA President. It has been an honor and a challenge, and I hope you will join me in welcoming my successor, Rhene Merkouris, MD, who will assume the presidency following the May 7th General Membership meeting.



Resources for Providers Navigating the TRICARE Transition to TriWest Healthcare Alliance

In January, TriWest Healthcare Alliance began administering the TRICARE program across 26 states in the western U.S. This is an awesome responsibility and privilege, and we recognize that a transition of this size and scale has resulted in unforeseen issues that demand solutions. This document provides important information as you work alongside us to care for military families.

Resource Center

- Visit the TRICARE-TriWest Website at <https://tricare.triwest.com>.
- Access the Secure Provider Portal through Availity at <https://Availity.com>.
 - New user? [Learn how to register and access a quick reference guide](https://tricare.triwest.com/en/provider/secure-portal) on <https://tricare.triwest.com/en/provider/secure-portal>.

5 Things You Need to Know

#1 Use Availity to determine whether you need an authorization.

Tip: After logging into your Availity Essentials account, select TRICARE West – TriWest under Payer Spaces. Under Applications, choose “Is A Referral/Auth Required?” and follow the steps for determining when to send requests and/or documentation.

#2 Submit all referrals and authorizations via Availity, our online referral management system.

Tip: After logging into your Availity Essentials account, navigate to the TRICARE West – TriWest under Payer Spaces. Under Applications, choose Submit Referral/Auth. Please note that a PCM referral waiver is in place. See additional details below.

#3 Reference the [Referral/Authorization Quick Reference Guide](#) as you submit your authorization or referral.

Tip: Print this document out and keep it by your computer.

#4 To streamline the claims submission process, reference the [TRICARE Claims Instructions](#).

Tip: Submitting claims electronically is mandatory for TRICARE network providers (except in Alaska) and is recommended for non-network providers.

#5 Take our online training course

To familiarize yourself with Availity, log in, navigate to the TRICARE West – TriWest Payer Space click on the TriWest Learning Center link under Applications, and enroll in a webinar.

More information can be found [here](#) at <https://tricare.triwest.com/globalassets/tricare/provider/tricare-west-region-referral-waiver-approval-letter.pdf>.

Did You Know This About Claims Payments?

- TriWest IS processing and paying claims!
- TriWest has successfully **processed and paid approximately 1,600,000 provider claims**.
- Check your claims status on Availity.

Thank you for being a part of the TriWest family and for your dedication to serving military families. You are making a difference every day in the lives of our nation’s heroes.

Founder's Forum: Paving the Way for Alaska's GME Council

Calling all Interested Parties - Join Us!

Thursday, May 15, 3:00 - 5:30 PM

BP Energy Center, Anchorage

1014 Energy Court
Anchorage, Alaska

-or-

Via Zoom

Registration is free but required:

<https://alaskagmecouncil.com/>

AGENDA

3 PM Welcome

GRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION (GME)

3:10 PM National & Alaska Perspectives

3:35 PM State of GME – Current and Rural Perspectives

GME COUNCIL

4:10 PM Charting a Path Forward: Models & Strategies

5 PM Engagement & Next Steps

Light refreshments will be provided

WHY ATTEND?

This meeting is a rare opportunity to shape the future of physician training in Alaska. We would love to see you involved.

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS WILL INCLUDE:

- **Understanding Alaska's physician shortage and what is at stake.** Physician workforce experts will summarize data about the shortage and why expanding GME is an urgent priority.
- **Gaining insights about statewide GME councils.** Medical education leaders will summarize how statewide GME councils improve state physician pipelines – including physician recruitment, training, & retention.
- **Hearing from Alaska-based training programs.** Understand the current landscape of residency and fellowship programs, their successes, and the gaps that need to be addressed to better support physician education in Alaska.
- **Exploring solutions and next steps.** The Alaska GME Working Group will present the Council's draft charter and proposed structure, providing a roadmap for how the Council will function.
- **Getting involved** to help shape the future. The future of GME in Alaska depends on broad collaboration. Attendees will learn how to mutually benefit and contribute to this effort, whether by serving on the Council, engaging communities, or supporting initiatives that expand training opportunities.



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Health

DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Rural and Community Health Systems

3601 C Street Suite 300
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

Hello,

The State of Alaska Primary Care Office facilitates data collection and reporting to improve the number of primary care providers serving Alaskans. Central to these efforts are the calculations associated with the Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) designations. These designations determine which federal programs are available to benefit primary care providers and medical practices in Alaska.

We need your assistance to ensure that Alaska's data is accurate. We are required to update provider information every year. Please help us by completing the **Alaska Primary Care, Dental and Mental Health Provider Survey** for your medical practice **before April 30, 2025**. We ask you to complete a separate survey for each provider (MD, DO, DDS, DMD, CNM) for the following primary care types: *Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, Pediatrics, OB/GYN, General Dentistry, Pediatric Dentistry, Certified Nurse Midwife and Psychiatry*. CNMs are the only non-physician provider included in this survey.



Important notes:

- ❖ The Patient Demographic Data (Medicaid, sliding fee scale, etc.) is very important. Be sure this information is a solid estimate for your clinic. **Administrative staff** might be the most appropriate staff to complete the survey for the entire practice.
- ❖ For this survey, the number of hours of **Direct Patient Care for each provider should be ONLY the time spent with the patient**. Time spent on the patient's behalf such as charting, researching, and authorizing medications is NOT considered Direct Patient Care and should be omitted. A full-time provider will work fewer than 40 hours a work in Direct Patient Care.
- ❖ A spreadsheet format can be provided if you would prefer providing the information via Excel rather than the online survey.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to the Primary Care Office (doh.dph.primarycareoffice@alaska.gov).

Please complete the survey through this link: [The Primary Care, Dental and Mental Health Provider Survey](#) before **April 30, 2025**.

Thank you in advance for your time.

New options for Medical Assistant Training

With Alaska's growing need for healthcare professionals, and medical assistants in general, the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA) is offering a streamlined path for students eager to enter the medical assisting field with a new degree offering.

A nationally accredited Occupational Endorsement Certificate (OEC) in Medical Assisting (MA) is now available at UAA. This means the MA OEC is operating at the highest level of education, training, and scope of practice while providing students access to an in-demand job, such as a Certified Medical Assistant (CMA), in less time than a two or four-year degree program. "Our program is an affordable and inclusive option for students seeking to embark on a healthcare career. Upon completing 29 credits, our OEC enables you to take the esteemed CMA (AAMA)® examination," says MA Program Director and Practicum Coordinator Lisa Nash. The application for the MA program is quite simple. Students apply to UAA and complete two online prerequisite courses to qualify. Many UAA students are considered non-traditional, so the program is designed as a hybrid model to reduce barriers. It offers a mix of online and in-person classes, along with flexible scheduling for the in-person clinical courses. Nash proudly states, "At UAA, our exam passage rate is higher than the national average, and the majority of our students receive job offers before graduation."

Students will complete 240 hours for their practicum at a local clinical site before taking the CMA (AAMA)® examination. As the Practicum Coordinator, Nash maintains strong community partnerships to ensure students are matched with clinical sites for their practicum with job placement opportunities in mind. "It's figuring out which of my students matches which of the clinics I have relationships with, and I'm constantly adding new clinics to the list. I get calls all of the time, saying 'We'd love to host one of your students,'" Nash says.

The MA program works closely and collaborates with the UAA Interprofessional Health Sciences Simulation Center and other College of Health programs, like the phlebotomy and physical therapist assistant programs, to ensure interdisciplinary education and hands-on experience. Nash explains, "I think it's important that students get exposure and feedback from more than one person on technique and the skills they're learning." The program is committed to teaching students the latest medical practices, continually integrating new techniques and focus areas to ensure exceptional patient care in the future.

Nash describes the ideal MA student as "a people person, someone who enjoys building relationships, and is naturally empathetic," stating, "CMAs get to build relationships with patients because we spend more time with them. We do the follow-up phone calls, ask them about their medications, and remind them about upcoming appointments." CMAs perform a variety of tasks, including greeting patients, taking vitals, drawing blood, preparing patients for procedures, and more. Nash likes to say, "We're the generalists. A provider can ask us to do anything that's within our scope of practice, and we can do it." No two days are ever the same for CMAs, as each day brings new challenges. They primarily work in ambulatory settings such as medical offices and clinics.

Nash's passion for medical assisting and education is unmatched. She shares, "If I'm out to dinner and the wait staff is bubbly and really attentive, I ask them, 'Have you ever thought about going beyond?'" By "beyond," she means becoming a CMA—and she's not joking. Her love for medical assisting is that strong. Nash goes the extra mile to provide her students with the tools they need to succeed while helping to fill crucial gaps in Alaska's healthcare workforce. Before becoming the MA Program Director and Practicum Coordinator, Nash earned her Master's in Adult Education at UAA and spent 18 years at Providence Hospital, primarily doing computer support, project development, and process improvement. It was there that she discovered her passion for patient care. Encouraged by Providence staff to pursue nursing, she hesitated at the thought of years in nursing school. Instead, she found UAA's MA program, enrolled part-time while working full-time, and now encourages others to do the same. Nash believes, "It's all about the pathways you open yourself up to, what comes before you and whether you choose to take the risk." The OEC in MA is an affordable, 29-credit program—less than half the credits required for most two-year degree programs. It's an ideal pathway for students eager to enter the healthcare workforce quickly. According to the UAA MA Program Annual Report Forms, alumni satisfaction has averaged 100 percent over the last five years.

At UAA, the Occupational Endorsement Certificate in Medical Assisting equips students with the clinical and communication skills needed to provide excellent patient care. With a strong job placement rate and a flexible hybrid format designed for student success, this program offers an accessible and affordable path into the healthcare field. Medical assisting is an in-demand career with growth potential. To learn more and start your journey today, visit uaa.alaska.edu/medicalassisting.

Opportunity to support WWAMI

Dear healthcare community members, WWAMI supporters and fellow Alaskans:

I'd like to tell you a story about Sharon Tobias, MD. I practiced pathology with Sharon for many years in AK. She was an incredibly dedicated physician with tremendous expertise in pathology, who also established the state's first clinical flow cytometry lab.

Sharon lived the last years of her life being treated for breast cancer and died in 2021 at 53 years old. When she could no longer actively practice pathology, she pivoted to teaching pathology, hematology and oncology to our Alaska WWAMI medical students, her alma mater. She was brilliant in the classroom sharing personal experiences to offer her class insight into the reality and humanity behind medicine. At a time when she was managing effects of chemotherapy, she was still wanting to give back and share her knowledge.

Sharon's dedication, expertise and extremely generous nature inspired me to develop an award fund to honor her legacy. Once the fund reaches endowed status, a \$25,000 goal, each AK WWAMI graduating class, in perpetuity, will select a student to receive an award in Sharon's name. They are selected by classmates as the student most emblematic of Sharon's potential and spirit and will be able to list this award on their CV and residency applications. We hope to meet the fund goal by June 2025 and award this year's class.

Class photos of all the Alaska WWAMI graduating classes can be viewed on the 3d floor of the UAA HSB lobby. It is a treat to see so many AK physicians as young medical students. Sharon's photo is there in the entering class of 1991 as well as many other familiar faces.

So here ends my story and here is my request. Please join me in supporting our young Alaskan physicians through honoring Sharon's legacy. We have now 30 students per year matriculate into our Alaska WWAMI medical school, where I have been teaching since 2013. They will be the future physicians of our community. My hope is to support these students while remembering a valuable member of our healthcare and WWAMI community. The generosity and support of our community will make this a reality. If you can support us in this endeavor, I would be tremendously grateful, as will the award recipients.

Please navigate to this [LINK](#) to donate tax-deductible to the Dr. Sharon Tobias Award. And thank you for allowing me to share this story with you.

Sincerely and gratefully,

Megan Ritter, MD

Professor of Medical Education, Alaska WWAMI, College of Health, UAA

Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Pathology, University of Washington School of Medicine

Medical Director, Blood Bank of Alaska

Email: maritter2@alaska.edu

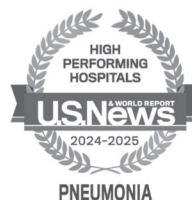
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Providence Alaska Medical Center is honored to be the only hospital in Alaska – and one of just 53 in the nation – recognized for both quality of care and equitable access by U.S. News & World Report, the global authority in hospital rankings. We also 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.

Learn more at Providence.org/PAMCawards.





TriWest Healthcare Alliance: UPDATE MARCH 7, 2025

As TriWest continues to operate as the TRICARE West Region contractor, administering the DoD's TRICARE Program in 26 western states, we are working day and night to ensure we are providing access to high-quality, community-based care for military families. **This week, we achieved several key milestones.** You can find specific information regarding referrals and authorizations, customer service, systems performance & data availability, and provider network improvements below.

TOPLINES

- Since January 1, **TriWest issued more than 351,000 referrals and authorizations for care** and facilitated 3.1 million care encounters.
- Since January 1, **TriWest processed a total of 1.6 million claims, representing \$220 million paid to providers** who have cared for service members and their families.
- Through March 1, **TriWest fulfilled more than 5.9 million prescriptions** for medications for beneficiaries.
- **TriWest individually contacted more than 6,000 Autism Care Demonstration beneficiaries** to review program information and help ensure a smooth transition of services for their acute and long term care needs.
- Within TriWest, **we've hired 37 Autism Care Delivery specialists, 59 Autism Services Navigators, and 12 Clinical Care Reviewers** to better serve this important community.

PCM REFERRAL APPROVAL WAIVER IN PLACE

A TRICARE PCM referral approval waiver is in place effective Jan. 1 – March 31, 2025. Outpatient TRICARE-covered procedures, services, and equipment ordered during the waiver period do not require separate approval from TriWest, unless an authorization is required (e.g. outpatient surgery). More information about the waiver can be found on the West Region website at <https://tricare.triwest.com>.

PROGRESS REPORT

Referrals and Authorizations: TriWest's goal is to ensure providers have access to all R/As through the portal and are provided with timely responses.

Weekly Progress:

- Increased the percentage of urgent authorizations processed within one business day to 97%, and the percentage of urgent referrals processed to 95%.
- Increased the number of trained referral management staff by more than 11%.
- Invested in OCR technology to facilitate auto entry of hard copy authorizations and referrals into TriWest's medical management system.

Customer Service: TriWest's goal is to resolve every customer service inquiry in a timely manner.

Weekly Progress:

- Average customer service call Speed to Answer decreased even further to 6 minutes.
- Hired 437 new customer service staff members over the past two weeks, which will increase capacity by 28%.
- Fully trained and cleared 203 customer service employees to help assist all customers.
- Maintained an under two-minute hold time for nearly all callers who were placed on hold.
- Reduced the customer service call abandonment rate by 25% over the last two trending weeks.
- Continued to resolve 90% of customer service issues in one call, significantly exceeding the best practice standard of 85%.

Provider Network: TriWest's goal is to ensure continuity of care for beneficiaries so they can see their preferred provider, and that providers are accurately displaying in the network directory.

Weekly Progress:

- Achieved 99% network adequacy for primary care and behavioral health providers.
- Maintaining continuity of care for T-5 West Region beneficiaries remains critically important to TriWest. We have achieved the targeted 90% match for beneficiaries undergoing care under the critical specialties of Obstetrics, Oncology, and Behavioral Health, and continue to fill needs in these critical areas.

Systems Performance & Data Availability: TriWest's goal is to expeditiously work through the backlog and volume of information to restore full systems performance and data availability.

Weekly Progress:

- Streamlined file coding efforts across teams to ensure efficiency, accuracy, and consistency in the files that are uploaded to TriWest's medical management system.
- Completed gap analysis to identify necessary improvements for the government and beneficiary portals.

CONTACT US: If you are contacted by a beneficiary or provider experiencing a challenge, please notify TriWest at 1-888-TRIWEST (874-9378).

Our Commitment

TriWest is confident in our ability to identify issues and execute solutions, given our vast experience handling large, complex health care transitions. Administering the TRICARE program across 26 states is an awesome responsibility and privilege, and we appreciate your patience and trust as we work tirelessly through these challenges together.



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Open 7 days a week / 8:00 am to 1:00 am Eastern time

(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.)

The Mission:

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.

The line is staffed by 800 volunteer psychiatrists helping our US physician colleagues and medical students navigate the many intersections