

*Faith, grace
and grit*

A breast cancer survivor's
journey to healing

**From
fighting fires
to facing ALS**

5 ways to prevent
pediatric
sports injuries



USA Health received a \$1.5 million state grant to deploy three telehealth-equipped mobile health vans in partnership with 10 community hospitals, providing clinical and virtual care, specialty services, and outreach to underserved rural areas in southwest Alabama.

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Top: Sarah Wallace and her son, Beau, received family-centered care at the Pediatric Emergency Center.

Austin Trupp, M.D. operates the Edison histotripsy system to destroy a liver tumor.

Local Goodness supports the expansion of pediatric interventional radiology at Children's & Women's Hospital.

Children's & Women's Hospital expanded its neonatal pediatric critical care transport team, named Cub Crew.

On the cover: After a diagnosis of triple-negative breast cancer, Kristen Sayles sought treatment at the Mitchell Cancer Institute.





Dear Friends:
As I step into the role of CEO, I am humbled by the strength of this community, seen every day inside our walls and beyond them. In USA Health Magazine, the stories we share reflect the compassion and innovation that drive our talented team members in our mission of helping people lead longer, better lives. In this issue, you will read about extraordinary moments of care, the resilience of the human spirit, and scientific discoveries that define who we are as the Gulf Coast's leading academic health system for the University of South Alabama. We share the USA culture, something we like to call The USA Way, as we focus on integrity and strive for excellence in every aspect of patient care, academic research and educating the next generation of healthcare professionals.

You will meet Beau Wallace, a 9-year-old boy with autism who struggles to communicate verbally. During multiple visits to our Pediatric Emergency Center last year, Beau and his family found comfort in the calm and caring presence of our multidisciplinary team members.

You will also learn about Kristen Sayles, who faced a triple-negative breast cancer diagnosis. Thanks to the specialized care she received at the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute, Kristen has become an outspoken survivor.

This issue also highlights the story of John Heronime, a firefighter who spent much of his career serving others. Now, at 45, he is learning to live with the symptoms of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). At the Kelly Butler ALS Clinic, John is experiencing the same level of commitment and care he once so selflessly gave to his community.

You will also read about grateful patient-turned-volunteer Lynn Slaton, the expansion of our Cub Crew critical care transport team, and innovative treatments such as histotripsy that are shaping the future of medicine right here in our region.

Thank you for being part of our community. We are deeply grateful for your trust and inspired by the connection you share with our mission. We hope you enjoy this issue of USA Health magazine.

Natalie Fox, DNP, PNP-BC
Chief Executive Officer

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NEWS



To help support pediatric cancer patients, USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital was awarded an impact grant for \$100,000 from Hyundai Hope on Wheels. This contribution supports ongoing efforts to make sure childhood cancer patients have what they need throughout their treatment.

Scientist explores how Lyme disease invades the nervous system

Timothy Casselli, Ph.D., an assistant professor of microbiology and immunology at the Whid-don College of Medicine, has been awarded a two-year grant for \$385,000 from the National Institutes of Health to study how Lyme disease invades the central nervous system.

The ultimate goal of his research is to identify treatments for Lyme disease, a complex infection transmitted by ticks most often during the hottest summer months.

“Because there are no vaccines or effective vector controls against the infection, the disease is and will continue to be a significant public health concern,” Casselli said.

Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne disease, with more than 300,000 new cases diagnosed each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Caused by infection with the tick-borne pathogen *Borrelia burgdorferi*, Lyme disease can lead to inflammatory health conditions impacting the joints, heart, and nervous systems. Neurologic disease, referred to as Lyme neuroborreliosis, can include meningitis, cranial and peripheral neuritis/neuropathy, and encephalopathy.

Work conducted with grant funds on this project will provide the foundation for a

long-term research program focused on mechanisms of Lyme neuroborreliosis pathogenesis, Casselli said.

The bacterium that causes Lyme disease, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, can enter the central nervous system causing disease. This central nervous system invasion only occurs in some Lyme disease patients, although the reasons for differences in infection outcomes are unknown. To address this, the study will use a lab model of Lyme disease to identify the site of entry and host immune responses that influence bacterial entry into the central nervous system.

Understanding the mechanisms of central nervous system entry by *Borrelia burgdorferi* could lead to the identification of novel risk factors to explain or predict the different outcomes among Lyme disease patients, as well as inform the development of novel diagnostic tests and treatments for neuroborreliosis.



Timothy Casselli, Ph.D.,
assistant professor
of microbiology and
immunology, is principal
investigator of the project.





Center for Healthy Communities awarded \$1 million for gun violence prevention program

The USA Health Center for Healthy Communities has received a \$1 million grant to implement a public health initiative aimed at reducing gun violence among youth in Mobile County. The funding is part of Gov. Kay Ivey's \$4 million in statewide awards through the State Crisis Intervention Program, a national effort supported by the U.S. Department of Justice to enhance public safety and prevent gun-related tragedies.

With this grant, the center will launch a program focused on reaching court-involved and high-risk youth, utilizing a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that treats violence like a preventable disease. The initiative is rooted in prevention, mentorship, trauma response, and community outreach.

"We know that there are root causes that increase the risk of violence, just like with chronic diseases such as diabetes or hypertension," said USA Health trauma surgeon Ashley Williams Hogue, M.D., who also serves as director of the Center for Healthy Communities. "But with early intervention and prevention, we can change outcomes. This program is focused on stopping violence before it starts."

"But with early intervention and prevention, we can change outcomes. This program is focused on stopping violence before it starts."

Ashley Williams Hogue, M.D.
Director, Center for Healthy Communities



USA Health is collaborating with other community organizations to ensure the program is successful, including Strickland Youth Center and Lifelines Counseling.

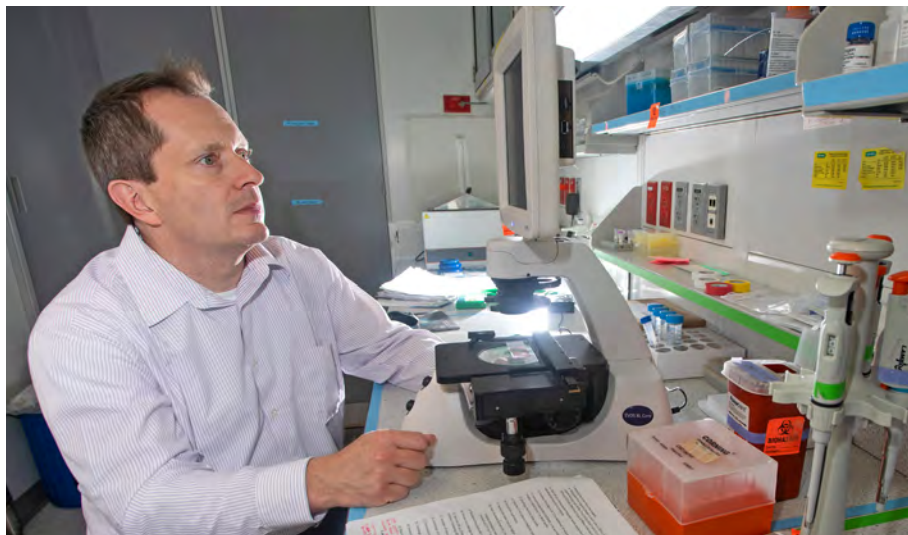
The program includes a hospital-based violence intervention component led by Joshua Jones, director of the initiative. Specialists will provide bedside support to gun violence victims, assess risks of retaliation, and connect individuals with vital services and mentorship. Street outreach teams will also play a critical role, engaging youth in conflict resolution strategies, trauma recovery, and building social capital.

“We want to address these kids from a comprehensive standpoint, building social capital, ensuring that they are connected to caring adults or individuals and involved in programs that promote pro-social activity, pro-social connection,” Jones said.

The USA Health initiative is one of 11 projects across Alabama receiving funding through the State Crisis Intervention Program. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs is administering the grant funds.



Learn more about USA Health Center for Healthy Communities.



Glen Borchert, Ph.D., professor of pharmacology, is leading the pioneering research.

Borchert lab research challenges longstanding view of gene regulation

A groundbreaking study from researchers at the Whiddon College of Medicine could redefine how scientists understand the role of DNA in regulating genes. Published in the prestigious peer-reviewed journal *Nucleic Acids Research*, the study introduces a revolutionary concept — that DNA itself plays a direct and active role in the regulation of gene expression, challenging traditional views that proteins are the sole mediators of this process.

Led by Glen Borchert, Ph.D., a professor of pharmacology, this pioneering research focuses on a specific DNA structure known as Long G4 stretches (LG4s). The Borchert lab first described LG4s in the human genome in 2020, identifying approximately 300 such regions. These stretches, which do not follow the typical double-helix structure, instead form complex, knot-like structures called G4-kissing structures.

That research was published in the lab's first *Nucleic Acids Research* paper in 2020.

In the new study, Borchert and his team show that these unique DNA structures can directly interact with genomic promoters — the parts of the genome responsible for regulating gene activity.

For the first time, researchers

demonstrated that genes and their enhancers can connect through direct DNA binding, without the involvement of proteins. This discovery directly challenges the longstanding theory that proteins are necessary for genomic looping, a process by which genes and their enhancers come into close proximity to regulate gene expression.

“Our paper is the first to show genomic enhancers associate with the genes they regulate by the DNAs directly binding (not bound proteins),” he said, “and, more fundamentally, our paper directly challenges the notion that DNA is strictly informational. Our work shows DNA is an active participant in gene expression.” This discovery opens the door to new possibilities for understanding gene regulation, which could have far-reaching implications for human health, including insights into genetic diseases and potential therapeutic approaches.

Borchert's lab, which has received funding from the National Science Foundation, is continuing to explore the role of LG4s in gene regulation. The team has requested additional funding to further investigate how these DNA structures could be harnessed for therapeutic applications and to better understand their potential impact on diseases linked to gene expression.



USA Health is the first health system in Alabama to provide this treatment.

Surgical oncologist Natalie Bath, M.D., led the first histotripsy procedure at University Hospital on Aug. 20.

Edison system treats liver tumors with noninvasive technology

USA Health acquired the Edison histotripsy system this summer, becoming the first health system in Alabama and one of fewer than 100 nationwide, to offer the groundbreaking, noninvasive treatment for liver tumors.

Histotripsy is a transformative therapy that uses focused ultrasound energy to destroy liver tumors without incisions, needles or long recovery times. The Edison system, developed by HistoSonics, delivers image-guided, personalized treatments using proprietary sonic beam therapy that targets tumors with millimeter precision in a single outpatient procedure.

“This is more than just a medical breakthrough; it’s a paradigm shift,” said Josh Snow, MSHA, CEO of University Hospital, where the new system will be housed. “The Edison system gives us a new path to care — noninvasive, image-guided therapy with minimal recovery time. For patients with limited treatment options, this can make a life-changing difference.”

Histotripsy works by creating high-amplitude, short-duration ultrasound pulses that form a “bubble cloud” within a tumor.

These bubbles mechanically break apart targeted tissue without damaging surrounding healthy tissue. Because it avoids radiation and heat, and does not involve surgery, histotripsy significantly reduces the risk of complications.

“From a surgical standpoint, this is revolutionary,” said William O. Richards, M.D., chair of surgery at USA Health. “We now have a noninvasive way to treat tumors that were previously considered inoperable. Patients can continue other therapies like chemotherapy and anticoagulation medication without interruption, and we reduce complications like infection, bleeding, damage to surrounding tissues, and long recovery times.”

Suzy Figarola, M.D., chair of radiology, said the system’s real-time imaging and precision are among its most promising features. “Our teams will be able to use ultrasound imaging to guide and monitor treatment in real time, ensuring complete and accurate tumor destruction,” she said. “For many patients, this offers a safer, more hopeful treatment path.”



The Edison histotripsy system uses brief high-intensity ultrasound pulses to destroy liver tumors without incisions, needles or long recovery times.

Providence Wound Care & Hyperbarics recognized for national excellence

Providence Wound Care & Hyperbarics at USA Health Providence Hospital has received two prestigious national awards from Healogics, a national provider of advanced wound care services: the Center of Distinction Award and the Robert A. Warriner III, M.D., Clinical Excellence Award.

“These achievements truly illustrate the focus on quality care and outcomes that all of our care teams strive for every day,” said Rick Metzger, MMHC, BSN, CEO of Providence Hospital, “but even more important than the awards are the exceptional outcomes this represents for each individual we have been honored to serve.”

These honors reflect the center’s outstanding commitment to clinical excellence, compassionate care, and superior patient outcomes. Over the past 12 months, the center achieved a patient satisfaction rate of more than 92% and ranked in the top 10% of eligible Healogics Wound Care Centers nationwide for clinical excellence — measured by comprehensive healing rates, among other factors.

These recognitions are a direct result of evidence-based care models and a deeply committed, multidisciplinary team. Clinicians interact with most patients weekly, utilizing advanced wound care techniques and adjusting treatment plans in real-time with a target of healing all patients within 14 weeks.

A member of the Healogics network of more than 600 Wound Care Centers, Providence Wound Care & Hyperbarics offers highly specialized treatment for chronic wounds such as diabetic foot ulcers, pressure ulcers, and infections. Advanced therapies include negative-pressure wound therapy, total-contact casting, bioengineered tissue applications, biosynthetic dressings, growth-factor treatments, and hyperbaric oxygen therapy.



Natalie Fox named CEO of USA Health



Natalie Fox, DNP, has been named chief executive officer for USA Health.

“Natalie is one of the best examples I know of a true servant leader who has a head and a heart for continuously seeking to improve the quality of care our patients receive and the business operations that make compassionate healthcare possible,” said USA President Jo Bonner. “She will

guide an exceptional academic healthcare team whose dedication to research, education and world-class medical care will continue improving lives in our community, the region and beyond.”

Beginning with patient care in 2011, Fox held various roles across USA Health, including spearheading quality projects focused on improving population health outreach and reducing barriers to patient access. She also led team-based care initiatives for physician practices and served as manager of clinical operations for its pediatric division.

She was promoted in 2023 to chief physician enterprise officer where she was responsible for overall strategy, performance, and operational effectiveness of the physician enterprise, which comprises more than 700 physicians, advanced practice providers, residents and fellows who care for patients in dozens of faculty and

community physician practices.

As the COVID-19 pandemic reached the Alabama Gulf Coast in 2020, Fox led USA Health’s efforts to provide timely and convenient COVID testing and, later, vaccine administration through a partnership with the City of Mobile. She was presented with a Mobile Community Health Leadership Award for her efforts in May 2022.

“The University of South Alabama has shaped me, challenged me, and given me a mission larger than myself,” Fox said. “I am deeply honored to serve as USA Health’s CEO for the opportunity to give back to the place that has given me so much. My commitment is to lead with purpose and a clear sense of responsibility to our employees, our patients, and our region.”

She earned her doctoral degree in nursing from USA in 2017. She also earned her master’s and bachelor’s degrees in nursing from USA.



Providence-Saad partnership offers comfort at the end of life

USA Health Providence Hospital and Saad Healthcare opened a new hospice unit on the hospital’s 11th floor at a ribbon-cutting ceremony in August. Saad’s first in-hospital hospice unit now offers another option for end-of-life care to patients and their families in the community.

By incorporating an interdisciplinary team of hospice professionals — nurses, social workers, chaplains and physicians

— patients benefit from specialized symptom management and emotional support, all while receiving care in a familiar hospital setting.

This addition reflects a growing national emphasis on integrating hospice services into hospital environments to enhance patient care, reduce costs, and improve quality of life during critical times.

University Hospital first in state to treat brain aneurysms with new device

USA Health University Hospital became the first hospital in Alabama to use a Surpass Elite flow diversion device to treat cerebral aneurysms — marking a significant advancement in minimally invasive neurosurgical care for patients in the region.

The Surpass Elite from Stryker, a leader in medical technologies, is the latest generation of flow diversion technology designed to treat complex intracranial aneurysms, including wide-necked, large, or hard-to-reach aneurysms that were previously difficult to treat with traditional methods.

Aneurysms, bulging or dilations in a blood vessel wall, most often occur in the aorta or brain. If an aneurysm ruptures, it can cause life-threatening bleeding, leading to hemorrhagic stroke in the brain or severe blood loss in the aorta. Treatment depends on size, location, and rupture risk, ranging from medication to surgery to repair or reinforce the vessel.

The flexible, braided stent-like Surpass Elite is placed inside what's known as a parent artery to redirect blood flow away from the aneurysm, promoting natural vessel healing while minimizing the risk of rupture during the procedure.

M. Adeel Saleemi, M.D., an interventional and vascular neurologist at USA Health and assistant professor of neurology and neurosurgery at the Whiddon College of Medicine, performed the milestone procedure on a patient with multiple intracranial brain aneurysms.



Illustration depicts a brain aneurysm, a weak, bulging area on a blood vessel in the brain.



Kevin Lee, Ph.D., assistant professor of research for gynecologic oncology, is corresponding author of the study.

MCI discovers new target in ovarian cancer cells

Scientists at the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute (MCI) have identified a vulnerability in ovarian cancer cells that could pave the way for new treatments. The research, published in *Scientific Reports*, uncovers the role of a little-known ion channel — called ASIC2 — in driving the growth of ovarian tumors.

The findings suggest that turning off this channel could help stop cancer cells from multiplying.

“This is an exciting step forward in understanding how ovarian cancer cells thrive in the acidic environments that tumors create,” said Kevin Lee, Ph.D., assistant professor of research for gynecologic oncology at MCI, and corresponding author of the study. “By targeting ASIC2, we may be able to disrupt a critical pathway that these cancer cells depend on to grow.”

Ovarian cancer is one of the most fatal cancers affecting women, often diagnosed at advanced stages.

5 ways to prevent pediatric sports injuries



Sarah McMullin, M.D., a sports medicine physician and pediatrician at USA Health, shares some tips for young athletes to avoid injury.

Avoid early sport specialization

Kids should play different sports throughout the year and avoid focusing on one sport until well into high school. This keeps things fun, reduces pressure and burnout, and encourages long-term participation. Ideally, kids should play in different seasons using different muscles and skills. This helps them become more well-rounded athletes and avoid overuse injuries.



Use appropriate equipment

Youth athletes should make sure they have the appropriate equipment for their sport and age/size. Equipment that is too big or heavy for them can lead to injuries, and protective equipment not designed for them may be ineffective.

Learn fundamentals first

Make sure you choose a program with a coach who emphasizes learning the basic skills of the sport before advancing them to more complex skills, especially contact skills. It is also OK for kids to participate in strength training activities with proper supervision. This helps them be strong enough to withstand the stresses of longer practices and games as well as contact/tackling.



Get enough rest

To heal and build muscle, the body needs a certain amount of rest; and young people with growing bodies and fragile growth plates need more rest from organized sports than adults do. The maximum number of hours per week a child should spend practicing and competing in an organized sport should be no greater than the child's age. For example, an 8-year-old child should spend a maximum of eight hours per week in organized sports. All athletes should also take at least one full day off per week and at least six weeks off per year.



Be aware of the heat

Think about choosing cooler times of day to practice and play in the summer to help avoid cramps and heat stroke, which can be deadly. Early mornings and evenings work well. On hot days, make sure your kids are taking more breaks, drinking more cold water, and wearing less equipment to practice in, if possible.

Sweater Weather Energy Bites



Katie L. Williams, D.O., a pediatric gastroenterologist and director of the USA Health Pediatric Healthy Life Center, shares a recipe for energy bites that kids will love to help make and snack on this fall.

Ingredients:

1 cup oatmeal	1 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 cup of any nut butter	1/4 cup dried cherries or cranberries
1/4 cup honey	
1/4 tsp cinnamon	

Instructions:

1. In a large bowl, combine all ingredients. If the mixture seems too dry, add extra honey. If it seems too wet, add a bit more oatmeal, about 1 tablespoon at a time.
2. Place the bowl in the fridge for 30 minutes. This will help the bites stick together when you roll them.
3. Scoop out 1-tablespoon chunks and roll into the shape of a 1-inch ball. Repeat until batter is gone. Batter should make about 15 snack bites.

1 bite = 105 Calories





Beau Wallace, who is nonverbal and on the autism spectrum, enjoys jumping on the trampoline in his backyard.

A weight lifted

Emergency care team provides

calm and comfort during crisis

BY LINDSAY HUGHES

Doctor appointments, dental cleanings and emergency visits can be scary for 9-year-old Beau Wallace. Nonverbal and on the autism spectrum, Beau is a happy, loving boy who experiences the world differently.

“I call him my gentle giant,” his mother, Sarah Wallace, said. “He’s big for his age. He’s a really special kid who is very sweet and brings a lot of love to the world. He just can’t verbalize it. He has to show it. He will smother you to death with hugs and kisses.”

With a head full of curly brown hair, hazel-green eyes, and a sweet smile, Beau communicates using a tablet and some sign language.

At his home in midtown Mobile, he enjoys jumping on the trampoline, playing with slime, and all things Mickey Mouse. In place of traditional school, Beau attends The CORE Project, which provides year-round education and therapy services.

FAMILY-CENTERED CARE

Over the past year, Beau has visited the Pediatric Emergency Center at USA Health Children’s & Women’s Hospital three times — once for a broken ankle, once for severe abdominal discomfort, and most recently for a painful ear infection that wasn’t responding to antibiotics.

Each visit came with its own set of challenges. For Beau, medical settings can be overwhelming — from the bright lights and crowded waiting rooms to unfamiliar faces and long wait times.

“Sometimes we have to walk outside to help him calm back down,” Wallace said.

Pediatric emergency physician Reshvinder Dhillon, M.D., said the team in the emergency department is united in its goal of meeting each child where they are. The best way to avoid unnecessary stress or escalation, he noted, is by practicing patience and staying flexible.

“It’s always a priority for us in the ED to make sure children like Beau feel as comfortable and safe as possible, especially in what can be an overwhelming environment,” Dhillon said. “With kids who are neurodivergent, I always start by asking parents how their child prefers to be approached — whether they like to be touched or need extra space, how they communicate best, and what helps soothe them. Parents know their children better than anyone, and their guidance makes all the difference.”

When Beau broke his ankle, he needed X-rays, but staying still was difficult. “He didn’t understand what was going on,” Wallace recalled, “and he got really combative.”

Lauryn Jemison, a radiology technician in the pediatric emergency department, was part of the care team that day.

“For patients like Beau,” Jemison said, “we always try to create a calm and predictable environment. We try to slow things down and explain what’s going to happen in a way they can understand. That might look like dimming the lights, speaking in a quieter tone, or keeping surroundings as calm as possible. Our main goal is always to make sure they feel seen, supported, and not alone.”

That kind of compassion and attentiveness made each visit a little easier, even when the circumstances were uncertain. For example, during a visit for abdominal pain, Beau couldn’t explain what hurt.

“When something’s wrong, we see it in his behaviors — more anxiety, sometimes more aggression,” his mom said. “We were worried it might be an impaction. He was really uncomfortable.”

As the family sat in the waiting room, the usual tension began to rise.

Jennifer Bisaga from the hospital's Mapp Child and Family Life Program approached with a simple question: "What can we do to make you more comfortable?"

Bisaga, a Certified Child Life Specialist and Certified Advanced Autism Specialist, first met Beau during triage and helped the team take initial vital signs in a way that worked best for him. That meant using a finger clip pulse oximeter instead of an adhesive one, and taking his temperature with a forehead thermometer — the type with which he was most familiar.

"I try to meet families in the early stages of their emergency visit to establish trust, make the environment sensory-friendly, explain next steps, and assist with consistent care plans to support their specific needs," Bisaga said. "Beau is most comfortable in our chairs versus the hospital bed. We let him choose his comfortable spot in the room and make sure he has things he likes during his visits. I bring in sensory furniture from our sensory room to help him feel supported and safe when any procedures occur."

During Beau's third emergency visit — this time for severe ear pain — the care team knew exactly what he needed.

"One of my favorite moments during Beau's visits with us was being able to provide him with a large stuffed Mickey Mouse to have as a comfort item," Bisaga said. "Beau is one of Mickey's biggest fans, and he held onto him throughout that entire visit."

In a Facebook post dated Sept. 26, 2024, Wallace recounted the experience: "I can't say enough good things about our pediatrician's office and USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital emergency room staff. We have been there way more often lately than I would like, and they are always so kind and accommodating. The ER staff remembered us from last time and got all the things just the way it makes him comfortable. Today they threw in an iPad with all his favorite Mickey episodes and a stuffed Mickey for snuggles. When your child is sensitive to certain surroundings, it means everything."



Beau Wallace's care team offered him a tablet to watch his favorite cartoons and a stuffed Mickey Mouse for comfort.

FEELING SEEN AND SUPPORTED

At the Pediatric Emergency Center, board-certified pediatric emergency medicine specialists and pediatric nursing staff work together to provide the highest level of care for patients and their families.

"Beau's story is a wonderful testament to the importance of combining medical care with other supportive services," Bisaga said. "Child Life is an extra layer of support that can help children have an experience that is truly aligned with their developmental, social, emotional, and sensory needs."

Jemison added, "It truly makes my heart happy to hear when our sweet patients and families have a great experience. I try to cherish each interaction with my patients and take pride in making it the best I possibly can."

As a parent navigating autism in Mobile, Wallace knows how difficult it can be to find resources, especially in a crisis. "There are resources here, but there are a lot of wait lists, and sometimes you just don't know what's available," she said. "There's no manual when you get that diagnosis. You're just trying to figure everything out."

For Wallace, having access to a hospital equipped with staff specially trained to meet Beau's needs makes all the difference.

"It's already a stressor having to bring your child to a place where, in your mind, you already know it is going to be a fight," she said. "But to walk into a place where they say, 'Hey, we see you. We want to make your baby feel comfortable' — that is a weight lifted."



Beau has a magical moment with Mickey Mouse.

“

I call him my gentle giant. He's big for his age.

He's a really special kid who is very sweet

and brings a lot of love to the world.

”

— Sarah Wallace, Beau's mom





Kristen Sayles is a survivor of triple-negative breast cancer, one of the most aggressive forms of the disease.

Faith, grace & grit



A breast cancer survivor's journey to healing

By Jessica Jones

When Kristen Sayles, a 44-year-old elementary school counselor, discovered a lump during a self-exam in late 2023, she acted quickly — her family's history of breast cancer left no room for hesitation. Within weeks, Kristen received a diagnosis that would change her life: triple-negative breast cancer, one of the most aggressive forms of the disease.

"I was driving when I got the call," she said. "I cried the entire time. But in that moment, because of my faith, God just told me to do nothing. I wanted to call my husband, call my mom, and just everyone on my way home, and he said, 'no, talk to me.'"

Sayles was referred to USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute (MCI) for treatment, the same facility that treated her grandmother during her own breast cancer battle.

Her care team, including Ayesha Munir, M.D., medical oncologist; Spencer Liles, M.D., surgical oncologist; Wilma Baliem, ACNP-BC, nurse practitioner; and Wendy Laport, RN, BSN, breast nurse navigator, walked with her through 16 rounds of chemotherapy and a double mastectomy. The treatment pushed her body to its limits, but Sayles' spirit always remained positive.

"There was a period of time when I couldn't be around anyone because of my immune system being compromised. That was hard," she shared. "And, losing my hair and breasts was emotional. I didn't feel like myself. But I reminded myself, this was a step toward healing."

Sayles credits her recovery not only to her medical team and treatments but also to the support services available at MCI. From meeting other cancer patients and participating in art therapy during her chemo sessions, to a resource room stocked with wigs, bras, lashes, and everything a patient could need when going through treatment, MCI helped meet both her physical and emotional needs.

"The Mitchell Cancer Institute helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel," she said. "They led me in the direction that I needed to go to fight this fight with cancer. If it had not been for MCI and their team, I don't know if I could've made it."

Her husband, Ron Sayles, recalls the hardest part of their journey: watching his wife's body decline during treatment. "Even when she was weak, she encouraged the rest of us," he said. "She gave us courage when she was the one who needed it most. She turned breast cancer, something that is so detrimental, into

something that seemed small because of her unwavering strength."

Their teenage daughter, Darrian Tyler, was just 14 when Sayles was diagnosed. As her mother battled cancer, Darrian faced a wave of change — starting high school and navigating it all internally. "I didn't tell my friends. I didn't want them to treat me differently," she said. "But I'll never forget my 8th-grade graduation. My mom couldn't be around crowds, but she still found a way to be there for me."

The family leaned on faith and laughter to carry them through. "Even when we shaved Kristen's head, we made it a moment we could laugh through," her husband said. "We kept humor in our home. That helped more than we realized."

Today, Sayles is cancer-free and proudly calls herself a survivor. She rang the bell to mark the end of her treatment on Aug. 27, 2024. When asked what survivorship means to her, she said "I made it. That's what it means to me."

To other women, Sayles offers a simple but powerful message: "Take care of yourself first. Don't skip your screenings. Don't wait."

And to anyone going through cancer: "Lean on God and people. Everyone has a different story and experience, but no one should walk this road alone."

Sayles is a survivor, a mother, a counselor — and a testament that with faith, family, and community, even the toughest battles can be won.



Watch Kristen and her family speak about her fight against cancer.





Research and treatment come together under one roof at the Mitchell Cancer Institute.

Addressing disparities, advancing research

By Lindsay Hughes

Kristen Sayles' story highlights the urgent need for more research on breast cancer, especially in populations that face higher risks. Black women, like Sayles, are more likely to be diagnosed at younger ages and with more aggressive forms of the disease, including triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), which grows and spreads quickly and is more likely to resist treatment.

Researchers at the USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute and the Whiddon College of Medicine are working to better understand breast cancer and improve outcomes for all patients.

Targeting tissue stiffness to improve treatment

Debanjan Chakroborty, Ph.D., is researching how the stiffness of breast cancer tissue — caused by a buildup of noncellular material called the extracellular matrix (ECM) — affects tumor growth and treatment response. His focus is on a protein called WNK1, found in fibroblasts that contribute to ECM buildup. By understanding WNK1's role, his team hopes to develop therapies that make tumors more responsive to treatment.

Predicting recurrence through blood tests

Santanu Dasgupta, Ph.D., is exploring how changes in mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) could help predict whether breast cancer will return or progress. His team is developing a blood-based test to detect these mutations early, with the goal of improving outcomes for patients with TNBC. A patent application has been submitted for this detection method.

Targeting chemotherapy-resistant cells

Luis del Pozo-Yauner, M.D., Ph.D., is examining a group of cancer cells called polyploid giant cancer cells, often found in advanced or treated cancers. These cells can overproduce a protein called PERK, which may contribute to chemotherapy resistance. His research focuses on understanding this resistance, particularly in Black women with TNBC, and finding ways to counteract it.

Understanding nerve-cancer interactions

Simon Grelet, Ph.D., is studying how certain nerves interact with TNBC tumors. These interactions may influence how the cancer grows, spreads, or resists treatment. By identifying the genes involved in this nerve-cancer connection, his team hopes to develop targeted therapies to stop the cancer's progression.

Blocking cancer's spread through the lymphatic system

Chandrani Sarkar, Ph.D., is investigating how breast cancer might use the body's lymphatic system to spread. Her research focuses on lymphangiogenesis — the growth of new lymphatic vessels — and how this process could help cancer cells travel. The goal is to develop therapies that block this pathway and prevent the disease from advancing.



John Heronime lives with his two Great Danes, a breed he has rescued and fostered for the past 20 years.

From fighting fires to facing ALS

After decades of serving others, retired firefighter adapts to life with ALS

By Michelle Ryan-Day

At age 18, John Heronime discovered he had a gift for serving others. Now 45, the Fairhope resident reminisces over a lifetime spent volunteering at the Fish River Marlow Volunteer Fire Department, working as an EMT, then as a firefighter at a chemical plant before landing at Gulf Shores Fire Rescue, where he served the public for 16 years before an ALS diagnosis forced him to retire.

ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, is a rare and progressive neurodegenerative condition that damages motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord. Over time, the damaged neurons no longer send signals to muscles, leading to muscle weakness, paralysis, and eventually difficulties with speech, swallowing, and breathing. There is no cure.

Heronime stumbled upon a career in firefighting following high school. He rose through the ranks, becoming a lieutenant, led fire prevention education at Gulf Shores Elementary School, taught classes in the fire science program at Gulf Shores High School, and, on holidays, prepared German and Polish meals for fellow firefighters and anyone in the community in need.

"The camaraderie was the best part," he said. "You live with those people a third of your life; and helping people too, that part was nice. Now everybody has to help me, so it's kind of a weird position."

Despite ongoing research, the cause of ALS remains unclear. Approximately 10% of cases are inherited, but most are sporadic, with studies suggesting links to environmental toxins, occupational exposures, and military service. Firefighters like Heronime face a higher risk, with several studies associating exposure to combustion byproducts and other environmental hazards with increased ALS incidence.

"It's thought to be a combination of some environmental factors that we get exposed to and some other underlying genetic process that we don't fully understand," said Robert Kobelja, M.D., a USA Health neurologist and medical director of the Kelly Butler ALS Center, where Heronime was referred after diagnosis.

Diagnosis can be complex because early symptoms mimic other conditions, such as orthopedic or nerve compression disorders. Neurologists typically use a combination of physical exams, electromyography, imaging and bloodwork to rule out other causes. On average, the time from first symptom to diagnosis tends to be 18 months to two years,



Heronime receives his red officer helmet from Gulf Shores Fire and Rescue.

Kobelja said.

Heronime first became concerned about his symptoms in late 2022 while struggling to write a fire report and put on gloves. During a job task review in March 2023, he realized how weak his right hand had become when attempting a rope pull exercise.

Doctors initially diagnosed him with thoracic outlet syndrome, a condition that occurs when the nerves or blood vessels in the space between the collarbone and the first rib are compressed, which can lead to pain, numbness, tingling and weakness. He underwent surgery on his collarbone in April 2023, which was followed by rehab and a return to work in June 2023.

"Post-surgery, it seemed like it got better, but it didn't," Heronime said. "I had to do a physical agility test at work, and I wasn't able to."

Despite months of effort to regain strength, by October 2023 he could no longer perform critical firefighter drills, as his right hand locked and weakened to the point he could not wear his gloves. He was placed on light duty.

After six months of inconclusive medical evaluations and no diagnosis, the city could no longer hold his firefighting

“I’ve always had a positive outlook; this hasn’t changed that. It just changes how I do things.”

– John Heronime

position. In April 2024, he medically retired; yet the long, frustrating search for answers continued.

Over a two-year span, Heronime went through an extensive diagnostic journey that involved consultations with an orthopaedic physician, two orthopaedic surgeons, three neurologists, and a neurology specialist. He underwent three MRI scans, four nerve studies, multiple X-rays, blood tests, and a major surgery that brought no improvement, until finally his condition had a name.

“On Nov. 11, 2024, I received the news that I had ALS,” he said. “That evening, I shared the news with my parents and niece, and the following day I informed my two closest friends. I was not ready to share with everyone else just yet.”

Despite the lengthy search for answers, Heronime’s case is considered in the early stage, when individuals can usually walk, drive, and manage daily activities, though they may notice muscle weakness, cramping or fatigue.

The middle stage is marked by the loss of driving ability and increasing weakness that may require mobility aids, though individuals are not yet fully dependent on a wheelchair or bed. Speech, swallowing, and breathing changes often become more noticeable.

In the late stage, most people require a wheelchair or become bedbound, with severe weakness affecting movement, speech, swallowing and breathing, often necessitating ventilatory and full-time caregiving support, while cognitive function typically remains intact.

“Thankfully, I am still in the early stage, though I am closer to the middle stage than I want to admit,” he said. “Ziploc bags are a struggle for me, along with twist-off drink tops. Walking unassisted more than 20 feet is no longer a reality. I carry a cane everywhere I go. I still live independently with my two Great Danes, but the list of things I can no longer do grows longer each passing day.”

Heronime credits the support of his parents for his ability to still live independently with his beloved Great Danes, two foster failures from his 20 years of rescuing and fostering the breed. His mother cooks, cleans, washes dishes, does the laundry; and his father mows the lawn, changes the oil in his

car, along with other home projects. He’s working on installing an automatic gate to his home.

“Without their love and support, I would not be able to be on my own,” he said. “The helplessness I feel having to watch them do the things I can no longer do is something I cannot explain, but I am forever grateful for them.”

ALS is rare, affecting about five in every 100,000 people, according to the National ALS Registry. While there is no cure, treatment strategies have advanced. FDA-approved medications such as riluzole and edaravone can slow disease progression in some patients. The multidisciplinary approach of the Kelly Butler ALS Clinic works to track disease progression and significantly improve quality of life.

“We have a physical therapist to look at movement or walking ability and decide if they need equipment to help get around safely,” Kobelja said, “or things like electric wheelchairs or transfer devices to help conserve energy. Our occupational therapists look at devices for their hands to help with dressing or eating.”

For Heronime, that support has been invaluable. “The clinic’s been amazing,” he said. “I don’t have to bounce between appointments or make sure one doctor talks to another. Everything is in one place, and the team is on the ball.”

The clinic has connected him with resources for mobility, daily living, and even organizations like the Gleason Foundation, which provided an electric wheelchair to help him maintain his independence.

Still, life is different now for Heronime. It’s not the first time he has faced changes, but he still counts his blessings.

He lost his girlfriend, Chelsea Garvin, a volunteer with the Fish River Marlow Fire Department, in the line of duty following an accident after the Fish River Christmas Boat Parade in 2005.

“I have lived a good life in my almost 46 years on earth,” he said. “I have traveled to Germany with my father, Poland with my mother, Iceland solo and with my oldest niece. I have cruised with friends and family. I have watched national championships live. I found my soulmate and lost her. I worked a job I truly loved. I have had a full life already. I am blessed.”





‘He gave me my life back’

Lifesaving spine surgery inspires patient to volunteer

By Casandra Andrews

Two years ago, Lynn Slaton was rushing to leave her house one morning when her running shoe stuck to the wood floor. As she yanked her leg, her foot came out of the shoe and the motion sent her plunging forward — head down — into a door jamb.

The force of the impact was so intense she fell to the floor, stunned.

A few moments later, she picked herself up and headed out to keep the appointment she was hurrying to before the accident. Her husband took one look at her and decided she was in no shape to travel alone.

In less than an hour, Slaton’s condition was growing worse. Her husband took her to a doctor to get checked out. She was told nothing was wrong. When the pain persisted, she went back two days later for more X-rays. Those images revealed the true extent of the damage that happened when her head hit the wood.

“She, unfortunately, had a significant high cervical spine fracture that created excruciating neck pain,” said neurosurgeon Richard Menger, M.D., MPH, chief of complex spine surgery at the USA Health Spine Institute. “It can be a technically challenging problem, and it really hurts.”

Translation: Slaton broke her neck. And while that diagnosis was bad enough, the position of the jagged fracture was dangerously close to her spinal cord.

“My whole life changed,” she said. “I got very depressed.”

Friends and family rallied around her. Their support, along with her faith in God, helped her regain peace.

Slaton first saw an orthopaedic specialist outside the USA Health system who reviewed her case and decided the best course of action was for her to wear a neck brace for a few months. The hope was that the fracture should be able to heal on its own without surgery, which is the case with some cervical fractures.

So, the woman who typically walked 5 miles a day, who loved to tend to her flowers and plants outdoors, was told she could no longer do those things — at least for four months. With a strong

desire to heal quickly, Slaton accepted the news and followed the doctor’s orders. No driving, no exercise, no fun.

When the four months were finally up, Slaton eagerly returned to the physician’s office. She prayed her neck would be healed and she could resume her active life, which included hopping in the car to travel to Birmingham or Charlotte, North Carolina, to see her grandchildren, or taking a brisk walk the moment she felt like it.

Unfortunately, new images revealed that her fracture had not healed. In fact, the break was worse than before, which sent the otherwise calm grandmother into a panic. “I had no control over my emotions,” she said. “As I was coming out of his office, I was screaming. I was having an out-of-body experience. That was my worst day.”

As the news washed over her, Slaton considered seeking treatment in a bigger city outside of the Gulf Coast. That’s when her doctor told her about Menger, a neurosurgeon focusing on complex spine surgery practicing in Mobile.

Slaton remembers arriving before 8 a.m. on the day of her first appointment with Menger, her oldest daughter by her side. After examining her and studying the images, Menger talked with her about her options.

“When the bone is fractured and it’s not in line, there’s a risk that every time she moved, it could move or slide into the spinal cord,” Menger said. While he and his surgical team successfully perform these complex surgeries often, they aren’t without serious risks, including paralysis and, due to the position of the blood vessels near the fracture anatomy, a stroke in the back part of the brain.

Because of the extent of her injuries, Menger didn’t think Slaton would get better without aggressive surgical intervention. So, the operation was scheduled, and the team was able to meticulously mend what was broken.

Three days later, Slaton said she was back to feeling the way she did before the accident. And after a week of taking it easy, Slaton returned to USA Health to check in. This time, the news was excellent. She was well on the road to recovery.

“He’s a great doctor,” she said. “He gave me my life back.”

Lynn Slaton is grateful to spend time with her four grandchildren.



Photograph by Cassie Davis



Lynn Slaton gives back to USA Health by volunteering in the Treehouse, the pediatric playroom at Children's & Women's Hospital.

“

**I just absolutely love
volunteering. I feel
like it's my calling
to give back**

- Lynn Slaton

”

Patient-turned-volunteer

Slaton said she was so grateful for Menger and the neurosurgery team, that she was inspired to do something in return. She decided to become a volunteer at USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital, something she had always wanted to do but never really had time for. After contacting Rebekah Blanchard, who leads volunteer services, she worked through the process and then settled on spending one morning a week in the hospital's pediatric playroom known as the Treehouse. While Slaton's shift is officially from 8 a.m. to noon, Blanchard said she's always there bright and early at 7 a.m., sanitizing toys, ready to cheerfully greet the patients and caregivers who visit.

“Children are resilient,” Slaton said. “You see kids come in here with IV poles. They just want to get out of their rooms and just be a kid again. The parents want to talk to you about what they are going through. I absolutely love it. I feel like it's my calling to give back.”

In the months after her surgery, she arrived at a follow-up appointment with Menger wearing her teal blue USA Health volunteer uniform. His face lit up when she told him what she was doing.

“It's always fulfilling when we see that we are able to help a patient get better,” Menger said. “And it's truly inspiring to see that she became a volunteer here. It speaks volumes about her as a person and the entire USA Health community.”



*Learn more
about
Lynn's story*



Project SEARCH intern Gary Clark works with Vicky McNeil in the kitchen at USA Health Providence Hospital.

Finding their place

*Project SEARCH at Providence Hospital
builds futures through hands-on training*

by Michelle Ryan-Day



Care and compassion have been the cornerstone of USA Health Providence Hospital for more than 170 years of serving Mobile and the Gulf Coast community. So, it seems only fitting that Project SEARCH is part of its legacy.

The program challenges expectations and empowers young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through immersive internships and hands-on training, often their first chance at competitive employment.

Mark Singleton, assigned to the Beth M. Rouse Rehabilitation and Wellness Center, approaches his job cleaning equipment with detail and enthusiasm. “I’m ready to go to work,” he told his trainer and mentor, Christine Wells, a special education teacher with Mobile County Public Schools.

Singleton is part of a new class of interns who arrived at the hospital this summer, the program having been on hiatus during the pandemic. Providence is one of two Mobile job sites, along with PCH Hotels & Resorts.

“I have never felt more fulfilled as a special education teacher than to watch the interns gain skills for employment,” Wells said. “They’re learning confidence, teamwork, communication, adaptability and problem-solving.”

Supported by Mobile County Public Schools, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, Vocational Services, and Volunteers of America, interns are placed in departments across the hospital, includ-

ing food and nutrition, patient transport, rehab services, housekeeping, sterile processing, nursing support and maintenance.

“When the interns first come to us, some of them are shy,” said Tonja White, USA Health workforce development director. “By the end of the first semester, they’re confident, they’ve made friends, and they know what they’re doing. That’s what’s so rewarding.”

Since 2011, Project SEARCH Mobile has been changing lives. The internationally recognized program, launched in 1996, operates in 48 states and eight countries. Students and families apply to participate. At Providence, interns learn professional development skills and hospital policies in the classroom, then practice them on-site with support from Wells and job coaches Nikita Vidic and Milton Todd.

“What Project SEARCH does is give the interns the skills needed to gain employment inside our organization or in the community,” White said. “Those skills can help them gain independence at home as well.”

The program’s impact is backed by research. A 2015 study in the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* found participants were more likely to secure competitive jobs than peers in traditional programs. A 2018 study reported employment rates as high as 70% for graduates — well above national averages. Locally, many alumni work in grocery stores, hotels, schools, and retail outlets. Some have even returned to

Providence as employees, a testament to the program’s success there.

“The program helps the interns to communicate more effectively and gain the confidence they need to help them to be successful in the workplace. Of course, we want to help them to develop all the skills they will need to do their jobs, wherever they land,” White said. “It’s such rewarding work.”

The program year ends with a graduation ceremony attended by families, staff mentors, and community leaders, including state and local representatives and school system administrators, who come to celebrate the interns and their accomplishments.

“Parents want what we all want — for our children to grow up, work, have some independence, and find their purpose in life,” Wells said. “Each time one of our Project SEARCH interns achieves this goal, I truly feel blessed that our team was a small part of the dream.”

The return of the program allows Providence to serve others once again by helping the interns develop life-changing skills they can take anywhere.

For White, that has special meaning. Having a sister with special needs and working at the Albert P. Brewer Developmental Center, a former local facility for individuals with developmental disabilities, she knows the impact Project SEARCH can have on the interns and their families.

“We want them to see there is so much more they can achieve,” she said.

Leaders recognized in Becker's Hospital lists



Becky Pomrenke, MSN, RN, director of patient safety, was named to Becker's Hospital Review's 2025 list of 132 Patient Safety Experts to Know. Since joining USA Health in 2020, she has led systemwide safety initiatives, including the Safety Starts with Me program, which trained more than 7,700 staff, boosted safety reporting by 400%, and reduced serious safety events by 73%, earning national recognition from Press Ganey in 2024.

Deborah Browning, RN, MSN, CEO of Children's & Women's Hospital, was named to Becker's 2025 list of Women Hospital and Health System Presidents and CEOs to Know. Since joining USA Health in 2021, she has overseen a \$20 million expansion of the region's only pediatric emergency center, led efforts to reduce maternal health disparities through a national postpartum equity initiative, and introduced innovative programs such as at-home blood pressure monitoring and medical alert bracelets for at-risk mothers.

Keel selected as Young Urologist of the Year

Christopher Keel, D.O., FACS, chair of urology at USA Health, is one of nine urologists to be selected as a 2025 Young Urologist of the Year by the American Urological Association (AUA).



Established by the 2012-2013 AUA Young Urologists Committee Chair Michael C. Ost, M.D., the Young Urologist of the Year Award is presented annually to select early-career AUA members in recognition of their efforts and commitment to advancing the career development of fellow young urologists.

Williams Hogue earns spot in Women Who Shape the State class

Each year, Alabama celebrates the extraordinary women who are making a lasting impact across the state. One USA Health provider, leader and advocate earned a well-deserved place among the 2025 honorees of This is Alabama's Women Who Shape the State.



Ashley Williams Hogue, M.D., a trauma, acute care, and burn surgeon at USA Health University Hospital and assistant professor of surgery at the Whiddon College of Medicine, was recognized for her tireless dedication to her patients, her community, and public health advocacy.

Menger named among top 5% of neurosurgery and spine researchers in the U.S.

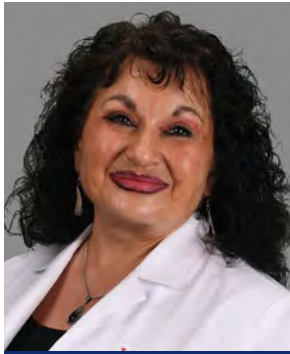
Richard Menger, M.D., MPA, chief of complex spine surgery, associate professor and vice chair of neurosurgery, has been named a 2025 Healthcare Research All-Star by Avant-garde Health — placing him among the top 5% of neurosurgeons and spine specialists nationwide for published research.



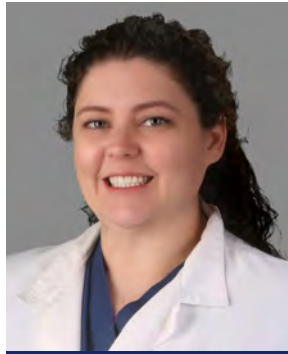
This recognition celebrates the quality and quantity of Menger's peer-reviewed research published during 2021 and 2022, affirming his role as a leading academic voice in neurosurgery, complex spine care, and health-care policy.



Chang



Moreno-Walton



Seaman



Polite



Ridgeway



Bailey retires as CEO from USA Health

USA Health names Chang chief physician executive

Michael Chang, M.D., was promoted to the new post of chief physician executive at USA Health in addition to his current role as system chief medical officer. In the new position, he serves as the senior-most physician leader within USA Health, responsible for clinical strategy, physician practice performance, safety, and quality across the health system.

Moreno-Walton joins USA Health as vice chair of emergency medicine

An internationally respected physician, researcher and educator, Lisa Moreno-Walton, M.D., M.S., MSCR, was appointed vice chair of emergency medicine at USA Health and the Whiddon College of Medicine. As vice chair, her primary responsibilities are overseeing faculty development and establishing a research program within the department.

University Hospital names chief medical and surgical officers

Rachel Seaman, M.D., an internal medicine physician and a chief quality officer

for USA Health, was named chief medical officer for University Hospital. In the new role, Seaman partners with University Hospital CEO Josh Snow, MSHA, to provide clinical leadership and oversight, establish evidence-based practices, and collaborate with clinical chairs, service line leaders, nursing leadership and operational leaders to ensure high-quality, patient-centered care.

Nathan Polite, D.O., a trauma emergency general surgeon and a chief quality officer for USA Health, was named chief surgical officer for University Hospital. In the new role, Polite partners with Snow to coordinate surgical services and ensure optimal outcomes for patients.

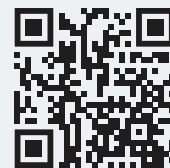
Ridgeway appointed associate dean of student affairs at Whiddon COM

In a move that underscores his leadership and commitment to student success, Laventrice Ridgeway, Ed.D., was named associate dean for student affairs at the Whiddon College of Medicine. For the previous two years, Ridgeway served as assistant dean for student affairs.

Owen Bailey, MSHA, FACHE, officially retired as chief executive officer of USA Health on Aug. 1, following almost 38 years in health-care administration.

A nationally recognized health-care leader, Bailey served as CEO of USA Health since 2016 and held a dual appointment as senior associate vice president for the University of South Alabama. He previously served as the administrator of USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital for five years.

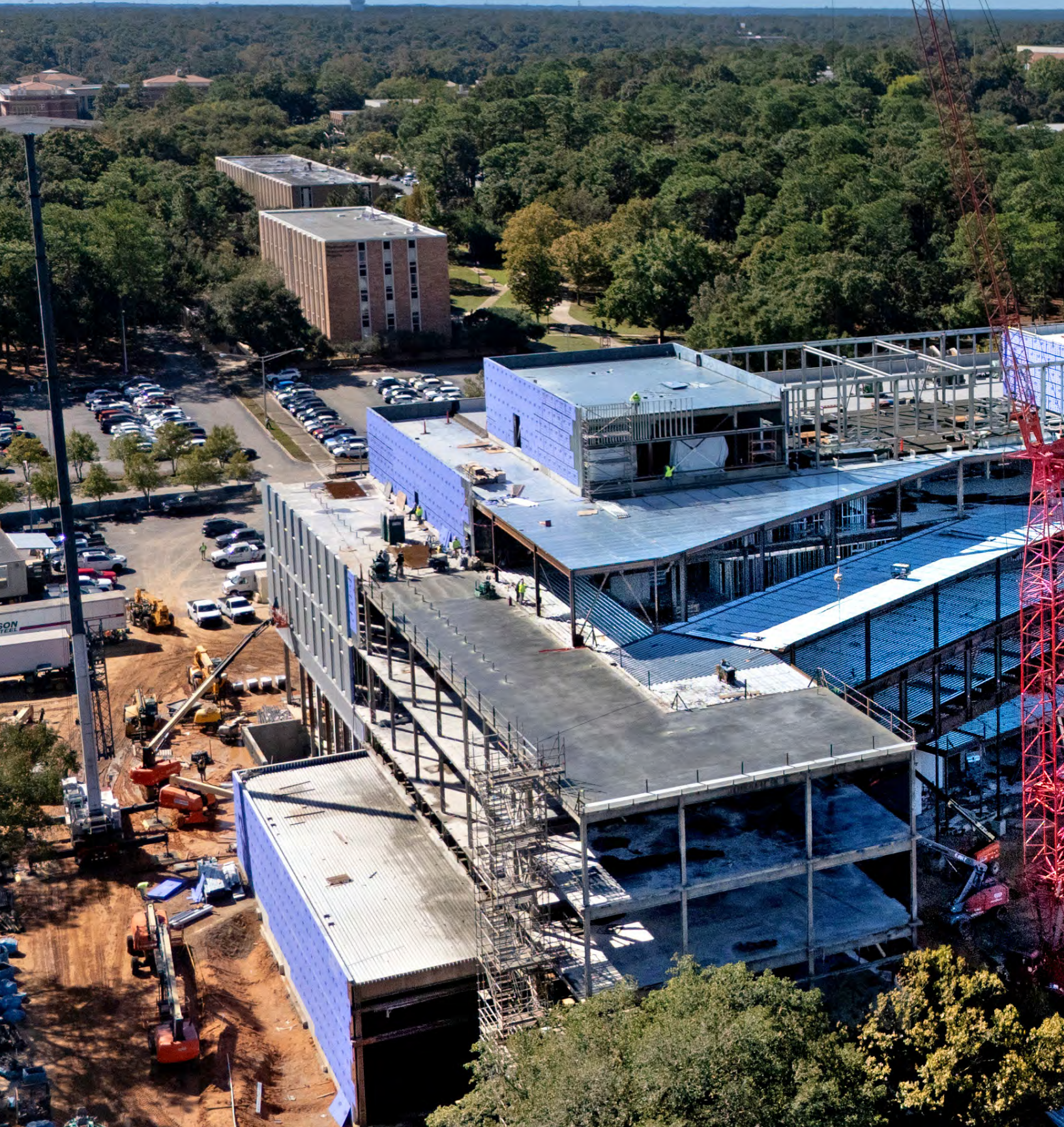
"Owen's contributions to USA Health over the past 14 years have been invaluable, helping make our academic health system one of the very best in the nation," said USA President Jo Bonner. "We are truly grateful for all he has done for our patients and our community."



Stay up to date with leadership changes on usahealthsystem.com/news.

WATCH US GROW

Construction of the new Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine building continues to advance steadily. Completion is expected in December 2026, with classes starting in the new facility in January 2027.



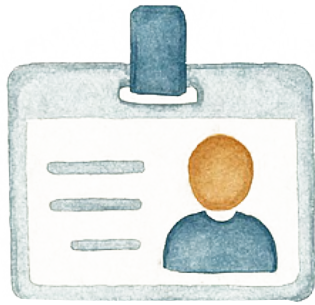


Medical students from the Class of 2028 participate in a beam-signing ceremony on Sept. 4. They will be the first graduating class to learn and train in the new building.

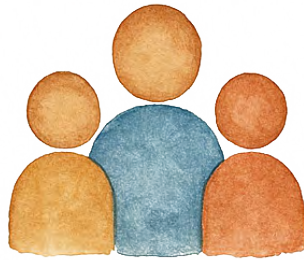


Spiritual Health and Counseling at USA Health

At USA Health, our goal is to provide holistic care to our patients. Our clinically trained chaplains are grounded in a variety of faith traditions and trained to be respectful of those of all faiths. If someone is experiencing sadness, loneliness, helplessness, anxiety, grief, fear, or has cause for celebration, chaplains are here to offer support.



3,500+
employees supported
per year



10,000+
patients and families
supported per year



2,000
hands blessed per year

40+

classes for education
and coping



2
employee
wellness rooms

3
interfaith chapels

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This inspiring event is more than an opportunity to refresh your home — it's also a fundraiser dedicated to supporting the ECMO program at USA Health Providence Hospital. ECMO serves as a lifesaving bridge for high-risk patients battling respiratory or cardiac failure by taking over the function of the heart and lungs. Every ticket purchased and sponsorship secured helps bring this program to our region.

Visit homeandgardenshow.info for more information.

Providence Foundation

Local Goodness



Hundreds attended this year's Local Goodness, a farm-to-table experience that celebrated the best of local cuisine and music on May 4 at Magnolia Manor. The event supports the expansion of pediatric interventional radiology at USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital, allowing children to stay in our community for the procedures they need, experiencing less pain and enhanced recovery time in a child-friendly environment.

Save the date: May 3, 2026

Par 3 Golf Tournament



The USA Health Mitchell Cancer Institute hosted its Par 3 Golf Tournament on June 12 at Magnolia Grove Golf Course. Proceeds from the tournament benefit the MCI Excellence Fund, supporting the purchase of critical medical equipment and innovative software that directly enhance patient outcomes and treatment efficiency.

Charity Golf Classic



The Providence Foundation's 26th Annual Charity Golf Classic brought together golfers, sponsors, and community partners to support enhancing patient care at USA Health Providence Hospital. Held at the Lakewood Golf Club in Point Clear, the tournament welcomed 76 players across 20 teams for a day of friendly competition.



USA Happenings



South enrollment continues to grow

More students are choosing South — again. The University of South Alabama welcomed a record number of freshman students in the fall with the entering first-year class totaling 2,137. Overall enrollment is 14,285, up from 14,003 in fall 2024. Applications are now open for 2026 semesters. Visit SouthAlabama.edu to apply or schedule a visit.

USA named a Best Global University

U.S. News & World Report included South in its annual listing of Best Global Universities in a ranking released in June — one of only 280 out of nearly 4,000 U.S. universities. Five graduate programs from the Pat Capps Covey College of Allied Health Professions — audiology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, physician assistant and speech-language pathology — were included in a separate ranking. South's highest ranking of ninth was for Frederick P. Whiddon College of Medicine graduates practicing in health professional shortage areas.

Flagship Leaders Program welcomes first class of students

The new Flagship Leaders Program welcomed its inaugural class of 120 student leaders this fall. Designed for students who served in leadership roles in and out of the classroom, the program invites applications from high school students with a GPA of at least 3.0. Those who qualify receive renewable annual scholarships of \$1,000 to \$2,000 for four years, plus mentorship and leadership development opportunities. Contact the Office of Scholarship Services at 251-461-1958 or scholarships@southalabama.edu for more information.



Classroom on the bay

Students at the Stokes School of Marine and Environmental Sciences, the fastest-growing such program in the U.S., will soon study at an outdoor classroom over a beautiful bay, stepping into the water to carry out class assignments. The Outdoor Living Lab — connected to a beach by a pier — is planned at Aloe Bay on Dauphin Island, 40 minutes south of the University campus.



Airbus announces campus move

A new partnership between the University of South Alabama and one of the world's largest aerospace companies is expected to lead to an Airbus presence at USA's Research and Technology Park to develop the next generation of industry professionals.

"We want to harness the power of partnership with the University of South Alabama to conduct industry benchmarking, support curriculum development and research efforts and create internships to give students critical working experience while providing Airbus amazing talent for us to hire from over time," said Robin Hayes, chairman and CEO of Airbus in North America.

Airbus plans to relocate to campus its Mobile-based U.S. Engineering Center, providing the company proximity to USA faculty and student talent and its employees with nearby access to exceptional medical and recreational facilities.



**Destroying liver cancer
with sound precision.
No incision.**

USA HEALTH
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usahealthsystem.com/liver

Upcoming Events

Doc Rock benefiting
USA Health
Jan. 29, 2026

Home & Garden
Show benefiting the
Providence Foundation
March 19–22, 2026

Local Goodness
benefiting Children's
& Women's Hospital
May 3, 2026

TO HELP PREMATURE INFANTS and ill or injured children get the care they need when every second counts, USA Health Children's & Women's Hospital expanded its neonatal pediatric critical care transport team. The specialized air and ground service, named Cub Crew, is designed to safely bring young patients by helicopter or transport vehicle to the hospital from locations across the Gulf Coast.

