

# From the Executive Director

## Reflecting on the History of Polio—and Looking Ahead Together

Nebraska has a rich and important history connected to polio. Many of you know that the Nebraska Polio Survivors Association was the first support organization of its kind in the nation.

What you may not know is that Nebraska experienced some of the nation's worst polio outbreaks, and Omaha's local media played a pivotal role—first by bringing attention to the urgent need for a vaccine and later by encouraging the public to get vaccinated. In April, I had the opportunity to speak to the Omaha QUAD organization, a group of mostly retired advertising, public relations, media and business professionals. As a newcomer to NPSA, considerable time researching for my presentation titled: "Polio in Nebraska: The Story That Grown Up in Missouri and Being Very Young During the 1950s and 1960s, I had no idea outbreaks had been such significant national news.

If you ask most people about polio today, they'll probably say, "There was a crisis, then a vaccine, and the problem was solved."

But that isn't the whole story.

According to History Nebraska, during the devastating 1952 outbreak, Nebraska recorded the highest incidence of polio in the nation, with 163.9 cases per 100,000 people. Entire communities were affected. Local newspapers and broadcasters walked a careful line between warning the public and offering reassurance. They encouraged families to avoid public gathering places, explained emerging medical guidance, and later helped build public confidence in vaccination efforts. During that same era, the widespread use of the iron lung also spurred innovations that continue to influence respiratory care today.

### Campaign for Vaccination

The development of the Salk vaccine marked a turning point. Nebraska's media celebrated this scientific breakthrough, promoted mass vaccination campaigns and helped restore hope. Yet for many children who survived polio, life was permanently changed. Many became the literal "poster children" for the disease.

By the early 1960s, mass vaccination campaigns had dramatically reduced cases, and by the 1970s, naturally occurring polio had been eliminated in the United States. Quietly, however, another chapter was beginning. During the 1980s, many survivors began experiencing new symptoms that would become known as post-polio syndrome.

In the summer of 1984, Nancy Baldwin Carter was searching for answers to her own symptoms. That same year, the Nebraska Polio Survivors Association was born.

In *The Polio Paradox: What You Need to Know*, Richard L. Bruno, H.D., Ph.D. explains that post-polio syndrome (PPS) is often misunderstood. PPS is diagnosed only after other neuromuscular conditions have been ruled out, and symptoms can be triggered by stress, trauma, illness or overuse of polio-impacted muscles.

### The Paradoxes

He describes several "paradoxes" experienced by polio survivors. The overuse paradox recognizes that many survivors have spent decades relying on already overworked motor neurons, accelerating fatigue, weakness and pain. The hidden damage paradox reminds us that the original virus damaged more neurons than was once understood, and after years of compensation, the body's reserves become depleted. The independence paradox reflects how many survivors learned to ignore pain and fatigue to remain independent, often contributing to further overuse. Finally, the medical recognition paradox highlights a continuing challenge: because many healthcare providers have little training in PPS, survivors' symptoms are sometimes overlooked or misdiagnosed.

### Educating the Community

Since becoming your Executive Director, I have learned so much. Every conversation with survivors and healthcare professionals reinforces one important truth: we need greater awareness.

Recently, I spoke with a medical professional who admitted that PPS was never discussed during her education. She knew virtually nothing about it but was grateful to learn more. Another nurse recently reminded me that it is up to survivors and advocates to continue educating both the public and the medical community.

That is our challenge—and our opportunity.

Let's continue engaging with the community. Let's build relationships with healthcare professionals. Let's keep telling our stories so that PPS is better understood by future generations.

Our 2026 theme is Looking Ahead Together. **How can you help?**

- Reach out to survivors you know and invite them to become part of the NPSA community.
- Join us regularly, on Zoom or in person.
- Invite a healthcare professional to attend an NPSA event.
- Suggest a speaker or topic or share your own story.
- Write an article for "Gleanings"

NPSA is committed to serving your needs by providing information, resources and meaningful connections. We want to hear from you. And we're not done looking ahead—together.



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