



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Kansas Academy of Family Physicians Awards Celebrate Exemplary Physicians and Future Leaders**

The Kansas Academy of Family Physicians (KAFP) is proud to announce the recipients of the 2025 KAFP Awards. These distinguished honorees represent the heart of family medicine in Kansas, exemplifying clinical excellence, compassionate service, and leadership in their communities throughout the state.

#### **President's Award**

Presented at the discretion of the KAFP president, this award honors exemplary dedication to the improvement of health care through the advancement of the objectives and purposes of the KAFP and/or extraordinary support and assistance to the KAFP president. This is not an annual award, but rather a recognition given on a case-by-case basis for the most outstanding individuals who have advanced the health of Kansans through family medicine.

#### **Belinda Vail, MD, FAAFP**

Dr. Belinda Vail has served as a dedicated educator and family physician for nearly 40 years. Vail provides comprehensive primary care to the families she serves and has followed many of her current patients for over 20 years. Vail's unwavering commitment to developing future leaders in family medicine and advancing community health is evident. While mentoring medical students and guiding residents and faculty, Vail prioritizes nurturing talent and removing barriers, said Jennifer Woodward, MD, MPH, Associate Professor and Vice Chair of Clinical Services at the University of Kansas Medical Center's Family Medicine & Community Health.

"This dedication extends beyond her faculty colleagues to our family medicine residency programs, which train physicians to improve the health of Kansans for generations to come," Woodward said.

#### **Rick Kellerman, MD, FAAFP**

Whether practicing rural medicine, training future family physicians, or influencing healthcare policy, Dr. Rick Kellerman has remained steadfast in his commitment to the health and well-being of patients, their families, and the broader community for more than 40 years. He currently oversees the KUSM-Wichita sponsored family medicine residency programs at

Ascension Via Christi, Smoky Hill-Salina, and Wesley Medical Center and postgraduate activities.

Kellerman is a past president of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and KAFP. An outspoken advocate for addressing physician shortages, Kellerman has been a prolific contributor to medical literature, serving as an editor for seventeen editions of *Conn's Current Therapy* and four other medical books. In 1991, Kellerman co-authored the KAFP White Paper "Where Have the Doctors Gone? When Will They Return?" a pivotal report on Kansas' physician shortage that helped shape medical education to better serve underserved communities.

In an interview for the Fall 2024 issue of *Kansas Family Physician*, Chair of the KUSM-Wichita Department of Family and Community Medicine Gretchen Irwin, MD, MBDA, FAAFP, said Kellerman's mentorship has shaped the careers of countless physicians, many of whom now practice in underserved areas of Kansas.

"Whether supporting preceptors or being a listening ear when physicians are struggling in their practice, he is right there to lend a hand if he can," Irwin said. "And that has led to a huge number of doctors coming to Kansas and continuing to practice family medicine in Kansas."

#### **Kansas Family Physician of the Year: Belinda Vail, MD, FAAFP**

Dr. Belinda Vail is a highly-respected clinician, educator and advocate, who has spent more than 38 years serving Kansas communities and shaping future generations of family physicians. Her career is defined by a deep commitment to medical education and the delivery of comprehensive care, including obstetrics, inpatient medicine and outpatient services.

Vail joined the University of Kansas Medical Center in 1990 as an assistant professor and has since held several leadership roles within the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, including vice chair and residency program director. Dr. Vail currently serves as department chair, a position she has held since 2018, and associate dean for gender equity since 2020.

Beyond academic medicine, Dr. Vail has contributed to public health through work with the Kansas Department of Corrections, the Wyandotte County Health Department, and nonprofit organizations in the Kansas City area. Colleagues describe Vail as a cornerstone of the family medicine community. Mark C. Meyer, MD, senior associate dean for student affairs, called her a "physician's physician," while Kelsie Kelly, MD, MPH, residency program director, said Vail's mentorship has shaped the careers of countless physicians.

"She has impacted more past, present, and future family medicine physicians than is fathomable," Kelly said.

In addition to her leadership in Kansas, Vail has presented nationally and internationally through the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and the American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM).

“What all my experiences have taught me is how important the practice of family medicine is to our patients, to our learners, to our communities and to our global community,” Vail said.

**Exemplary Teaching Award (Full-Time): Laurel Witt, MD**

Dr. Laurel Witt, associate professor at the University of Kansas Medical Center, is recognized for her leadership, innovation, and impact on medical education in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. Witt joined the department in 2016 and currently serves as associate professor and director of the undergraduate medical education division.

Colleagues and students alike credit her with transforming the department’s approach to teaching and curriculum design.

“Dr. Witt is a thoughtful, skilled, and empathic physician who is extremely passionate about medical student education,” said Jenna Ball, MD, a third-year family medicine resident. “Her enthusiasm to go above and beyond made my clerkship experience remarkable and ultimately influenced my decision to pursue a career in family medicine.”

Joseph LeMaster, MD, MPH, commended Witt’s responsiveness to educational needs and her success in transitioning the department’s didactic program from traditional lectures to adult learning-based methods, including case-based labs and clinical simulations.

LeMaster also highlighted Witt’s initiative in addressing curriculum gaps. After identifying a need for education on opioid use and misuse, she helped develop the Family Medicine Opioid Stewardship and Recovery Curriculum, which uses experiential learning and a flipped classroom format. The program received national recognition from the Association of American Medical Colleges.

“Under her leadership, the family medicine third-year clerkship has been transformed into one of the most highly rated in our university — and in the country,” LeMaster said.

**Rising Star Award: Roger Klein, MD**

Dr. Roger Klein exemplifies the energy and commitment of the next generation of family physicians. Klein practices in Lyons, where he serves as director of trauma at Rice County Hospital and health officer for Rice County. In addition to his clinical roles, he is an active mentor to medical students and residents, offering hands-on training and insight into the rewards and challenges of rural practice. Klein also regularly volunteers at mass sporting events, mentored medical students at the University of Kansas Medical Center and youth through Big Brothers Big Sisters and Boy Scouts of America.

“I have personally seen his positive influence on residents, encouraging them to embrace rural medicine and providing them with real-world experiences that enhance their training,” said Joseph Saffold, MD. “He serves as a credible and inspiring role model, both professionally and personally, and his impact reaches far beyond the walls of his clinic or hospital.”

Gretchen Irwin, MD, MBA, FAAFP, chair of the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Kansas School of Medicine–Wichita, praised Klein’s dedication to providing full-scope care in a rural setting and noted his ongoing commitment to community service.

“His service to others is motivated by a simple desire to make the world a better place and make the individuals within that world happier and healthier,” Irwin said.

### **About the Kansas Academy of Family Physicians**

The KAFP represents nearly 2,000 physicians and medical students statewide. It is the only medical society in Kansas devoted solely to primary care and is the largest medical specialty organization in Kansas. A family physician takes care of the whole family, all ages and sexes, each organ system and every disease entity. Research has proven that people with access to primary care have better health outcomes than those who do not. In Kansas, approximately one half of family physicians practice in non-metropolitan areas. Over 25 percent treat uninsured patients, especially children and families receiving public assistance. The mission of the KAFP is to empower and cultivate Kansas family physicians to advocate and collaborate for the health of all Kansans. For more information visit [www.kafponline.org](http://www.kafponline.org).