



## REHABILITATION SERVICES

### Walking Toward Her Dreams: Mackenzie's Inspiring Journey

Watching a child walk across the stage at their high school graduation to receive their diploma is a momentous occasion. For Mackenzie Tyler, those steps carried the weight of years of determination, medical challenges and relentless hope.

Born prematurely at 28 weeks, Mackenzie was diagnosed with diplegic cerebral palsy, a condition that causes muscle stiffness and motor difficulties, especially in the legs. She has been part of the TGH Pediatric Rehabilitation program nearly her entire life, with her first inpatient stay at age 4 following surgery to help improve her mobility. In total, Mackenzie has been an inpatient in pediatric rehabilitation four times to recover from surgeries and health setbacks.

Her most recent admission was in late 2023, following months of abdominal complications that left Mackenzie, then 16, unable to walk or manage basic self-care functions without assistance. She told her care team that her one goal was to walk across the stage at her high school graduation in 2025.

"It was an incredibly ambitious goal given where she was — but we knew Mackenzie," said Karen Hussey, the Pediatric Rehabilitation program's nurse practitioner. "We know how determined she is, and once she sets her mind to something, she's going to fight for it."

Driven by her spirited resolve and the unwavering dedication of her rehab team, Mackenzie made remarkable progress. Even after a setback following foot surgery, she remained focused, attending TGH's Family Care Network support group, rebuilding her strength and inspiring everyone around her along the way.

On May 29, Mackenzie walked across that stage to accept her diploma, cheered on by family, friends and proud members of her TGH care team.

"I was surprised and grateful to see them," Mackenzie said. "They've walked with me, seen me fall many times and get right back up. They have become like family and are a huge reason I am who I am today."

"Watching her walk across that stage after everything she had been through — I don't think there was a dry eye in the house," Karen said of her former patient, who may one day become a colleague. Mackenzie hopes to join a rehab unit as a Child Life Specialist, helping patients like herself on their rehabilitation journeys.

"Whether it was their encouraging words, small activities to ease the boredom or the joy of the therapy dogs, [my team] always found ways to bring light into a difficult time," Mackenzie said. "I want to do the same for other kids, because I know firsthand how much it means."



*As a proud new graduate, MacKenzie Tyler poses for a picture with her TGH Pediatric Rehab team, who cared for her throughout her life. See more photos on page 8.*

# Empowering Stroke Survivors Through Tampa General's Innovative Blood Pressure Club

Tampa General Rehabilitation Hospital is leading innovation with its unique Blood Pressure Club — the only known inpatient rehab-based program of its kind. Launched nearly two years ago through the TGH Neurologic Physical Therapy Residency Program, the Blood Pressure Club supports stroke survivors and other high-risk patients by empowering them with the tools and knowledge to manage their blood pressure and reduce their risks of another stroke and future health complications.

The club features two educational biweekly meetings with groups of 6 to 12 patients. The first session focuses on learning how to use a blood pressure cuff to identify elevated numbers, track trends and monitor progress. The second session covers strategies to control blood pressure through lifestyle changes, medication, exercise and mindfulness. Patients “graduate” from the club when they leave the hospital confident in their ability to use their complimentary blood pressure cuff and maintain a healthy routine at home.

Since its inception, the program has distributed approximately 125 blood pressure cuffs — including 75 so far in 2025 — with funding support provided by the Tampa General Hospital Foundation. The initiative began with a focus on stroke survivors, who are at particularly high risk for secondary strokes linked to poorly managed blood pressure, and is now exploring ways to expand to other cardiovascular patients and older adults with low blood pressure issues that also contribute to health problems.

The Blood Pressure Club provides patients with practical, evidence-based tips to promote healthy habits, such as checking blood pressure twice daily, waiting 30 minutes after waking to take readings, and avoiding caffeine, alcohol and exercise for at least 30 minutes before taking measurements.

Tampa General's Blood Pressure Club, and the Neurologic Physical Therapy Residency Program that launched it, reflect the hospital's commitment to innovative, patient-centered care and the benefits of advanced clinical training for residents specializing in neurological conditions.



*From Left to Right: Libbie Fender OTD, OTR/L; Ariana Donato COTA/L ; Johann Geheb DPT, NCS*

# Mobility Aide Program: Helping Patients on the Road to Recovery One Step at a Time



*Patient Rolando Irizarry with his mobility aide, Kayla Pride*

Tampa General Hospital's Mobility Aide Program celebrated its first anniversary in June, marking a year of empowering patients to get up, get moving and get home sooner. After an initial pilot in 2023, the program launched in June 2024 with three dedicated Mobility Aides and expanded to six staff members by early 2025. The program serves higher-level care patients who do not receive physical therapy — helping them stay active, maintain strength and avoid prolonged hospital stays.

The program and its patients are making remarkable strides. Gait distance has improved by 80%, falls have decreased by 38% (supported by other safety initiatives), and length of stay across participating units has dropped by 6%. Since May 2024, the team of Mobility Aides has collectively walked nearly 900 miles with patients — the distance from Tampa to Washington, D.C.

Mobility Aide Kayla Pride developed a special bond with Rolando Irizarry, a 47-year-old patient who spent seven months in the hospital awaiting a heart transplant. Part coach, part cheerleader, Kayla walked with Rolando daily to help him stay both physically and emotionally strong during his hospitalization. What began as short walks of 150 feet grew into daily laps totaling over 2,000 feet and even an impromptu dance party. Rolando received his new heart in May 2025 and took his first steps the day after surgery. Just one week later, Kayla and other team members cheered and clapped for him as he was discharged, and the two are still in touch.

Patients, families and physicians consistently praise the Mobility Aides for their ability to motivate, encourage and form personal connections. Plans are underway to include mobility progress and satisfaction questions in future patient surveys to further measure program success and help keep more patients like Rolando moving forward.



# Best Foot Forward Program Meets Unhoused Community Members With Heart, Soles and Dignity

Whether getting to a shelter before closing time or reaching a meal before the line ends, for people experiencing homelessness, staying mobile is critical, but also takes a serious toll. Shoes stay on, socks wear thin and untreated injuries can lead to infection or even amputation. Yet foot care remains one of the most overlooked needs among the unhoused.

That reality inspired Kirstin Kucera, DPT, to launch Best Foot Forward, a volunteer-led foot care clinic in the Tampa Bay area. The project fulfills a curriculum requirement for Kirstin's advanced training as a resident in Tampa General Hospital's accredited Neurologic Physical Therapy Residency Program, which supports community-engaged, scholarly work that benefits both residents and the broader region. Kirstin first saw the need while volunteering in a student-run clinic during PT school, where she learned how vital mobility and proper footwear are for individuals experiencing homelessness or financial hardship.

With support from the Tampa General Hospital Foundation, the first clinic launched in April at the Tampa Salvation Army. Volunteers from TGH therapy departments provided foot baths, clean socks and nearly 200 pairs of donated shoes collected through an internal drive.

"Best Foot Forward wouldn't exist without TGH's investment in the PT residency program," Kirstin said. "When hospitals like TGH value and support resident-led innovation, the impact extends far beyond the walls of the hospital."

Beyond helping people move forward with dignity, Kirstin sees how clean socks and proper footwear spark immediate joy and also provide a meaningful step toward rebuilding trust and confidence in the health care system.

"A lot of people asked if we were getting paid," Kirstin said. "When we told them no — we were there because we wanted to be — it meant something. Everyone deserves to feel like they matter. That's how trust starts, and that trust may carry forward when they seek medical care later on."

Upcoming clinics are scheduled Aug. 5 and Sept. 9. Anyone interested in helping with the collection of gently used shoes, new socks, hypoallergenic soap, foot bath liners or funding may contact Kirstin Kucera ([kkucera@tgh.org](mailto:kkucera@tgh.org)) for more information.



*TGH therapy team members, with the support of the Tampa General Hospital Foundation, volunteer to provide foot baths, clean socks and nearly 200 pairs of donated shoes to the homeless population.*



# A Sweet Celebration of Strength: Annual Pediatric Rehabilitation Program Parade Marks National Children's Day

At Muma Children's Hospital's Pediatric Rehabilitation Program at TGH, celebrating the joy of childhood and the strength of its youngest patients is more than a philosophy. It's a parade of jubilation.

On the Friday before National Children's Day in June, the department transformed the halls of Muma Children's Hospital into a vibrant, life-sized game board for a Candy Land-themed celebration. Pediatric patients moved throughout the hospital, collecting color-coded prizes and cheers from family members and TGH team members. Part therapy and all fun, the event was an opportunity for TGH's youngest rehab patients to showcase their progress and perseverance.

"Many people across the hospital don't get to see just how amazing our kids are," said team member Taylan Wolfe, PT, DPT, who has helped organize the parade since its inception three years ago. "This was born out of a desire to celebrate our kids and show the entire hospital community their spirit and resilience."

Participating departments, including those that don't typically interact with patients, chose a color and decorated their spaces with imaginative flair. Trauma services even recreated an entire Candy Land wall. Team members also distributed candy-free goodie bags filled with fidget toys, crafts and other prizes. The parade culminated in a celebration with TGH executives and family photos.

For children and adolescents recovering from serious conditions such as traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries, the parade offers a chance to reengage with the world on their own terms. A standout moment featured a young boy with a brain injury beaming with pride as he pedaled his adaptive tricycle through the halls. For those earlier in their rehab journeys or unable to join, the parade and gifts came to them.

"Being in the hospital can sometimes feel scary, but there's nothing scary about this," Wolfe said. "It's just fun."

And that's the point. It's a sweet reminder that every step of the journey to recovery is worth celebrating.









# Tampa General's Pediatric Rehab Delivers A+ Outcomes

Each year, the pediatric rehabilitation program at Muma Children's Hospital at Tampa General grades itself, not for bragging rights, but to ensure that every child receives the highest quality care and the best long-term results. The 2024 program demonstrated that both patients and clinical teams consistently earn straight A's in recovery and treatment, including a perfect satisfaction score from patients and their families.

Since 2007, the program has tracked the progress of its young patients to evaluate and maintain the highest standards of care and drive the best long-term outcomes. The program utilizes WeeFIM, the Functional Independence Measure for Children, a standardized tool that assesses functional status and progression in mobility, cognition and self-care during rehabilitation. The latest report highlights include:

- 100% of patients and families rated the care provided by therapists as “excellent” or “very good.”
- A remarkable 94% discharge-to-home rate, surpassing the national average of 86.4%.
- The average length of stay for patients is 19.4 days, nearly a week shorter than the national average.



Patients showed significant improvements in their functional abilities, with an average WeeFIM change of 22.7, better than the national average of 21.8.

These exceptional outcomes reflect the expertise of the multidisciplinary team, comprising nursing, physiatry, child psychologists, child life specialists, social work, case management, dietitians and 12 specially trained rehabilitation therapists, many of whom hold advanced certifications. Each child receives at least 15 hours of personalized therapy per week in a supportive, family-centered environment.

Serving children ages 1-18, the program provides around-the-clock medical care, a renovated gym, upgraded rooms and the loving comfort of facility therapy dogs Belle and Millie. Year after year, the team continues to make the grade where it matters most — with the children.

## TGRH Earns Reaccreditation Following Successful Joint Commission Survey

Accreditation is essential for hospitals, fostering public trust, facilitating partnerships with insurance providers, and ensuring eligibility for Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement.

This spring, Tampa General Rehabilitation Hospital (TGRH) proudly completed its first Joint Commission reaccreditation survey since opening in 2022, underscoring TGRH's commitment to delivering safe, high-quality care that aligns with the highest national standards.

The Joint Commission is a nationally recognized, independent organization that accredits and certifies health care organizations across the United States.

Surveys by the Joint Commission are unannounced, and teams must be ready for the extensive impromptu review 18 months before a hospital's three-year accreditation expiration date.

In May, Joint Commission surveyors evaluated the hospital's life safety systems, provider credentials and clinical care practices over a four-day

period. One surveyor focused on emergency management and physical safety concerns, while others reviewed physician licensure, certifications and direct patient care. Surveyors observed care delivery, reviewed documentation, interviewed patients and staff and traced patient cases through the system to evaluate TGRH's adherence to best practices in infection control, medication management, emergency preparedness and other nationally established benchmarks.

TGRH performed exceptionally well, with no findings in high-risk or disqualifying categories.

After the comprehensive assessment, the surveyors provide immediate preliminary feedback. The surveyors commended the team — comprising approximately 100 physicians, nurses, therapists, psychologists, social workers and staff — for their professionalism, preparation and dedication to ongoing improvement. The timing of the survey results coincided with TGRH's third anniversary, making the celebration even more meaningful, and affirming the strength and direction of the shared work.



# Building Lifelong Connections Through the Family Care Network

In 2021, two families — one navigating a brain tumor diagnosis, another living with cerebral palsy — found themselves across the hall from each other at Tampa General Hospital's Pediatric Rehabilitation unit. What started as hallway conversations between two mothers became a lasting bond and helped spark the creation of the Family Care Network, a growing initiative designed to support patients and their families during and after their hospital stay.

Led by physical therapist Lauren Hutcheson and nurse practitioner Karen Hussey, the network launched with its first meeting in April, with another scheduled in September. The bi-annual gatherings offer families a time to reconnect, share stories and learn about access to resources that are sometimes hard to find, especially when insurance falls short. Meetings include an invited parent or patient speaker, and child-friendly activities led by a child life specialist.

Families can opt in through a brief survey during their inpatient stay, allowing the program to build on relationships formed during rehabilitation and stay connected after discharge. Team members have helped patients and families obtain critical tools like donated adaptive tricycles, walkers and no-cost custom wheelchairs from nonprofit organizations like Wheelchairs 4 Kids. Perhaps even more powerful is the encouragement, solidarity and inspiration families find in meeting others who have been in their shoes.

"Most of our patients come to us after a life-changing event like an accident, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury or stroke, and we're often the light during a very dark time," Lauren said. "As therapists, we can create a great care plan and celebrate their wins, but there's nothing better

than having someone who's literally been in your shoes and can walk that walk with you."

The Next Family Care Network event is 10 a.m. to noon Sept. 20 and will feature a tour of the newly renovated Muma Children's Hospital at TGH, including a stop by the new therapy gym.

If you're a family member of a former patient interested in getting involved, please contact Lauren Wendel Hutcheson ([lwendel@tgh.org](mailto:lwendel@tgh.org)) or Karen Hussey ([khussey@tgh.org](mailto:khussey@tgh.org)).

## INPATIENT PEDIATRIC REHABILITATION PROGRAM

### FY 2024 OUTCOMES



# 32

**Patients**



**Ages**

**1-17 years**

Average age: 10.3



**Length of stay** (lower is better)

**TGH: 19.4 days**

National average: 26 days



**WeeFIM change** (higher is better)

**22.7**

National average: 21.8



**Length-of-stay efficiency** (higher is better)

Indicates how effective a rehab program is/how quickly a program can improve a child's functional ability

**1.45**; national average: 1.33



**Satisfaction and patient experience**

**100%** of our patients rate the care their therapists provide in the top two categories of "excellent" or "very good"

**94%** of our patients were discharged to home; national average: 86.4%

#### Conditions we treat, but are not limited to:

- Amputation
- Burns
- Debility/deconditioning
- Multiple trauma
- Neurological disorders
  - Cerebral palsy with surgery (SDR), Guillain-Barré, spina bifida, neuropathies
- Non-traumatic brain injury
  - Brain tumors, hemispherectomy, encephalitis, encephalopathy
- Non-traumatic spinal cord
  - Tumors, transverse myelitis
- Orthopaedic and musculoskeletal disorders
- Pulmonary
- Stroke
  - Hemorrhagic or ischemic stroke
  - Arteriovenous malformation (AVM)
- Traumatic brain injury
- Traumatic spinal cord injury
- And other conditions that result in functional impairment or disability



**Mackenzie Tyler** during her journey through the years at TGH.



# RehabMatters

## Rehab Matters

Rehab Matters is published by Tampa General Rehabilitation Services for its patients and other stakeholders.

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Director of TGH  
Rehabilitation Services

For more information about rehabilitation services, please visit [www.tgh.org](http://www.tgh.org), and search Rehabilitation Services.

For the Tampa General Hospital, visit [tampageneralrehabhospital.com](http://tampageneralrehabhospital.com)

## About Tampa General Hospital Rehabilitation Services

Rehabilitation Services at Tampa General Rehabilitation Hospital (TGRH – Kennedy Boulevard) is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) for the following:

- Comprehensive Integrated Inpatient Rehabilitation Program (CIIRP)
- Stroke Specialty Program (SSP)
- Brain Injury Specialty Program (BISP)

The Tampa General Pediatric Rehabilitation Program within the Muma Children's Hospital is accredited by CARF for the Pediatric Specialty Program (PSP).

Rehabilitation Services is also accredited by The Joint Commission, and TGH is proud to be a Magnet Hospital.



In addition to the above services, the continuum of care includes services provided by hospital-based rehabilitation (HBR) therapists and outpatient rehabilitation services.