



## 30th class completes Weapon Intern Program



**TOP NOTCH** — 2025 Weapon Intern Program graduate Preston Johnson receives a gift from his mother, Stella Johnson, with assistance from his 5-year-old daughter, following a graduation ceremony on Aug. 21. Preston was one of 23 graduates in the Class of 2025. **Photo by David Lienemann**

*Graduates reflect on their experience*

By **Kenny Vigil**

**A**fter a year of rigorous coursework, team projects and visits to DOE and DOD sites, 23 participants have completed the 30th class of the Weapon Intern Program.

Family, friends and coworkers gathered in Steve Schiff Auditorium at Sandia New Mexico to celebrate the Class of 2025 during a graduation ceremony Aug. 21.

“Now it is time to put what you learned into practice,” John Hogan, co-founder of the Weapon Intern Program told graduates. “You must be as skilled as a spinal surgeon. You cannot make a mistake.”

John launched the first Weapon Intern Program class in October 1998 and served as the program’s lead instructor. He held senior roles at both Sandia and Los Alamos national laboratories, as well as in the U.S. Army. He continues to serve as a senior mentor for the program and was the keynote speaker at this year’s ceremony.

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## Sandia Ironwoman forever chasing a challenge

*From fusion energy research to Ironman racing*

By **Magdalena Krajewski**

**M**ost people might try to run a full marathon or attempt a century ride before signing up to do both on the same day after swimming 2.4 miles, but Mary Alice “Mac” Cusentino is not most people.

In her work at Sandia, Mac’s research focuses on how materials could be used to one day create fusion energy. “I’m trying to take the sun and put it into a box made of materials that we find on Earth,” she said.

In other words, Mac enjoys a challenge, and that drive to push herself started early.

In 2008, Mac was a freshman at the

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**THE SWIM** — Sandia materials scientist Mary Alice Cusentino went from being a casual runner her freshman year of college to completing 17 triathlons in just as many years. **Photo by Craig Fritz**

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Please send your comments and suggestions for stories or for improving the paper. If you have a column (500-800 words) or an idea to submit, contact the Lab News editor at [labnews@sandia.gov](mailto:labnews@sandia.gov).

# Open Enrollment for 2026 benefits begins

*Employees to review and select benefits by Nov. 3*

By **Karyn Scott**

**O**pen Enrollment began Oct. 13 and closes Nov. 3. It is employees' annual opportunity to review and select the benefits that will best suit their needs for the upcoming year.

"For 2026, we will continue to offer a comprehensive range of benefits, and you'll have more time to make your selections," Executive Director and Chief Human Resources Officer Brian Carter said. "In response to employee feedback, we've extended the Open Enrollment period to three weeks, up from two weeks



**HEALTH EDUCATOR** — Nurse Nina Garde shares information about Sandia Medical with attendees during Employee Health and Well-Being Day at Hardin Field on Oct. 1. Between Oct. 13 and Nov. 3, employees can review and select health benefits for 2026.

**Photo by Craig Fritz**

last year, to give you the time you need to choose wisely.

“Additionally, we want to address the broader industry trend of rising health-care costs, which Sandia is not immune to. We understand that fluctuations in health-care expenses can be concerning, and we want to be transparent about the premium increases that will take effect next year.

### What's new

Sandia will continue to offer two medical plans: the Health Savings Plan and the Total Health PPO Plan, as well as continue to offer three dental plans and three vision plans from which to choose. Additionally, employees will see the following changes.

Premiums for the Health Savings Plan, Total Health PPO Plan and Vision Plan will increase. Dental Plan premiums will stay the same. View the [monthly premiums for 2026](#).

Both the Health Savings Plan and the Total Health PPO Plan will provide enhanced coverage for first diagnostic mammograms and colonoscopies. In addition to preventive health care benefits that are covered at 100%, the Health Savings Plan will now cover the first diagnostic colonoscopy and the first diagnostic mammogram or ultrasound at 100% after the deductible is met. The Total Health PPO Plan will cover these same services at 100%.

Employees who enroll in the Health Savings Plan will be able to contribute more to their Health Savings Account: up to \$4,400 if they have individual coverage and \$8,750 if they cover dependents.

Optum Rx will serve as the new provider for prescription drug coverage for Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Mexico and UnitedHealthcare. Additionally, specialty brand drugs will be categorized into a distinct coverage tier.

Employees who enroll in the Dependent Care Flexible Savings Account will see an increase in the contribution limit, allowing them to contribute up to \$7,500.

As a one-time offer during 2026 Open Enrollment, employees can apply for or increase their MetLife voluntary life insurance coverage for themselves and their dependents by answering five health questions instead of providing Evidence of Insurability on the [Sandia Extras site](#).



**READY, SET, SELECT** — Eric Hamilton, left, attends a workout led by Sandia Medical dietician Emily Skeberdis during Employee Health and Well-Being Day. Employees can select benefits that support their and their families' health during Open Enrollment, which closes Nov. 3. **Photo by Craig Fritz**

### How to enroll

To enroll from a Sandia computer or mobile device, employees should visit HR Self Service and navigate to Benefits and Retirement, then Benefit Detail, then Benefit Enrollment. After making selections, click “submit” to finalize choices. The elections employees make during Open Enrollment are effective from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31, 2026.

### Voluntary benefits

Sandia offers a variety of voluntary benefits that make life easier and can save employees money. Some of these extras are available year-round; others such as hospital indemnity insurance, accident insurance, critical illness insurance, short-term disability insurance and legal services can be elected only during Open Enrollment. Visit [Sandia Extras](#) to learn more about the voluntary benefits and enroll.

### Post-Employment Benefits Open Enrollment

The Open Enrollment period for Pre-Medicare and Medicare retirees, surviving spouses and long-term disability termines is Oct. 15 to Dec. 7.

Businessolver will partner with Sandia

to provide enrollment services for those eligible for post-employment benefits.

There are some important changes to the post-employment benefit plans and rates for next year. Details can be found in the 2026 Post-Employment Enrollment Guide available in the [Post-Employment Benefits Portal](#).

Call 833-SANDIA1 (833-726-3421) for questions. [📞](#)

### Resources to help employees choose

The [2026 Sandia Benefits Guide](#) provides a comprehensive summary of benefit options.

The interactive [Medical Plan Comparison Tool](#) asks questions to help determine which medical plan is the right fit.

Medical, dental and vision plan comparison charts detail the coverage available under each plan option.

A table of [monthly premiums for 2026](#) shows monthly rates for medical, dental and vision options.

Additional information about benefit options can be found on the [Open Enrollment Benefits website](#).

View the [Optum Rx network pharmacy locator](#) and the [prescription drug list](#), both of which will be updated for 2026 later this month.

## WIP

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“I love this program, and I love this class every year,” he said. John reflected on the challenges of starting the program, which originally spanned two years. Remarkably, the classes are still held in the same space as when the program began 27 years ago.

John noted that many people don’t understand the vital role deterrence plays in national security.

“We all pay for fire insurance, and we hope we never use it,” he said. “Think of yourselves as insurance policy makers for the ultimate security of the United States. When the unthinkable happens, people will be grateful we have this insurance policy in our pocket — a powerful negotiating tool.”

### Key connections

Brad Boswell also addressed this year’s graduates in his role as director of Sandia’s nuclear deterrence modernization programs. He said participants leave the program with more than technical knowledge.

“The contacts you make across NNSA and the DOD during the Weapon Intern Program are critically important,” said Brad, who is now associate Laboratories director for nuclear deterrence modernization and stockpile systems.

Brad praised this year’s class projects as particularly strong and relevant to current challenges faced by the nation.

“What you applied was top notch,” he said.

Brad also acknowledged the sacrifices of the participants’ families who supported their loved ones during this yearlong commitment. Many temporarily relocate or travel extensively to participate in the program.

### Leadership recognition

U.S. Air Force Maj. Megan Olson received the 2025 Weapon Intern Program Leadership Award and was selected by her classmates to speak on their behalf at the ceremony.

Be bold. Break the mold of the past 34 years. Do not accept the status quo and remember, it is not about you. It is about protecting your family, protecting the communities we live in and protecting our country,” she said. “No matter what uniform you wear when you come to work each day,

give your best. Our warfighters deserve it and our country needs it.

Madison McGrann, from Sandia California, was named the Class of 2025’s Distinguished Graduate.

### Graduate reflections

In the final days of the program, two participants reflected on their experiences, bookending a journey that began with a [class visit to the historic Trinity Site](#) near Alamogordo.

Abby Kerber, a mechanical engineer at the Kansas City National Security Campus, temporarily relocated to Albuquerque for the program. She said gaining a DOD perspective was especially valuable.

“As a production agency, we don’t often interact with the final customers, let alone the servicewomen and men who are responsible for these systems every day,” Abby said. “Understanding what’s important to them and how their systems work through nuclear certification, fielding and mission planning has been very insightful.”

She added that she’s seen personal growth in her classmates and colleagues as they’ve operated outside their comfort zones.

“The group really supports each other and cheers on everyone’s wins,” she said. “It’s been great to see people achieve their goals.”

Zeke Villarreal, who works in nuclear safety at Sandia, said he created new connections through the program and deepened his understanding of the broader nuclear enterprise.

“I’ve gained a much fuller picture of the nuclear enterprise, past and present,” Zeke said. “I particularly enjoyed getting to understand the culture at each site and seeing what the mission means to our partners in the DOD. I see the larger picture of what we do and why.”

### Program milestones

With this graduating class, more than 600 participants have completed the Weapon Intern Program




**WIP SEND-OFF** — John Hogan, keynote speaker, and Nevan Shearer, Weapon Intern Program director, during the 2025 graduation ceremony. More than 20 participants completed the yearlong program.

Photo by David Lienemann

since its inception. The 2025 class included participants from Sandia, the Kansas City National Security Campus, Y-12, NNSA, the Savannah River Site, Pantex, the U.S. Air Force, Navy Strategic Systems Programs and the Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center. All graduates have now returned to their home sites.

Labs Director Laura McGill closed the ceremony with words of encouragement.

“You get to serve the nation in ways many will never know, but we will,” she said. “Go off and do the critical work that will help to secure our nation.” 

 A graphic for Human Resources Open Enrollment. The background is a blue sky with a network of white dots and lines. The text is in white and light blue. The Human Resources logo is in the top right corner.
 

Human Resources  
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**Open Enrollment is here.**

**Active Employees**  
Open Enrollment Dates  
Oct. 13 - Nov. 3

**Post Employment**  
Open Enrollment Dates  
Pre-Medicare and Medicare:  
Oct. 15 - Dec. 7

## Ironwoman

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University of Wisconsin when she decided she wanted to do an Ironman. At the time, she was just getting into running but wasn't much of a swimmer or cyclist.

"I like to push myself to the limits and see what I'm capable of," she said. "Competing in an Ironman seemed like the most extreme kind of race, so I decided that's what I wanted to do."

### 140.6-mile north star

Mac didn't go full Ironman right away; instead, she set that as her north star and started with an Olympic distance triathlon.

A full Ironman is a long-distance triathlon that covers a total of 140.6 miles. It starts with a 2.4-mile swim, followed by a 112-mile bike ride and concludes with a 26.2-mile run, also known as a full marathon. An Olympic distance triathlon, also known as a standard distance triathlon, consists of just under a mile swim, a 24.85-mile bike ride, and finally, a 6.2-mile run.

"I signed up for the Olympic distance race as kind of a teaser, just to try it out," she said. "Come race day, a bunch of things went wrong."

"I was a terrible swimmer and was super nervous about the swim. We were in Lake Zurich in the Chicago area, and the water was really dark and cold. In the first ten minutes, I got lost on the course, and kayakers had to steer me back to where I was supposed to be swimming," she said. "I was one of the last people out of the lake, and there were barely any bikes left. I got on mine and felt pretty good, but then I was going downhill and got a flat tire. Luckily, someone stopped to help me, but it was definitely not going great."

But then came the run, and Mac said she found her stride.

"I saw my family at the finish line and just got this rush of pride like, 'Wow, I just did that,'" she said. "I was pretty amped up to do it again, push myself and see if I could do better."

The next year, Mac competed in her first full Ironman, and since then, she's completed eight full and seven half Ironman competitions. That's 1,779.48 miles covered — and that's just on race days.

### The hardest race

Competing has taken Mac all over the country and into all kinds of temperatures and terrains, from sweltering heat and humidity in Tennessee and Florida to drier lands in Arizona and Colorado.

"My hardest race was in St. George, Utah, in 2022," she said. "The course was super challenging with over 7,000 feet of elevation gain on the bike and 1,200 feet on the run. On top of that, the conditions that day were awful. It was unseasonably warm, and the winds were intense."

"Around mile 90 on the bike, you have this 1,000-foot climb. I remember coming down on the other side and having never seen so many people sitting on the side of the road, waiting to get picked up."

Mac said this race had a 20% Did Not Finish, or DNF, rate. The average DNF rate for a full Ironman race is 10–15%.

"After I got off the bike, I sat down and thought, 'How am I going to run?'" she said, referring to the marathon up next. "I finished; it took me 16 hours, but I finished, and that felt pretty great."

### Small wins add up

Not all races are as challenging as St. George, but Mac said every Ironman is a challenge.

Like her work in fusion energy, Mac sees each race as a series of incremental wins.

"The joke is we're always 20 years away from creating a viable source of fusion energy, but we've been saying that for more than 20 years," she said. "Without an actual finish line in sight, it's the incremental improvements we've made that bring me a sense of accomplishment."

"And I use that mindset when I get ready for a race. 140.6 miles is intimidating to think about as one block, so I break it up, each chunk being its own little accomplishment that brings me closer to the finish line," she said. "When I'm swimming, I focus on getting to where the buoys change color, which means the swim is halfway



**PUSHING HERSELF** — Mac swims at the Highland Pool in Albuquerque. The swimming portion of the race has always been Mac's least favorite part, but she's learned to embrace the challenge.

Photo by Craig Fritz

done, and I'm that much closer to my favorite part, the bike. That's where I get to enjoy the scenery, let my mind wander, and sing whatever song I have stuck in my head. By the time I get to the run, I'm tired, so I divide 26.2 miles into smaller races: a half marathon, a 10K, a 5K. It's basically a collection of small wins I can celebrate along the way."


### Doing hard things

Mac's Ironman journey has run parallel to her educational and professional one — from undergraduate school to earning her doctorate, starting at Sandia as a postdoc in 2018, and now being a principal member of the technical staff. Both paths have been undeniably challenging, but doing one hard thing alongside, yet separate from, the other has helped her with both.

"Knowing that I can do something really hard, like complete an Ironman, has given me the confidence and perseverance I've needed to push through other challenges in school and in my work pursuing fusion energy," she said.

Mac went from being a casual runner to having 17 triathlons under her belt.

"I skipped ahead," she said. "So now when I think about what's next, most races feel like less than I'm capable of."

Today Mac has her sights set on a new north star, a 50-mile ultramarathon, and something tells us this won't be her last. 

# Sandians pick 3,600 pounds of apples



**LITTLE HELPER** — Emilia Cano, 6, takes advantage of the opportunity while helping her mom, Carmela Andrade, pick apples with Seed2Need on Sept. 20. **Photo by Craig Fritz**



**HIGH YIELD** — Data scientist Emily Kemp and her partner Giovanni Brusca pick apples with Seed2Need in Corrales, New Mexico. More than 100 Sandians, family members and friends attended the volunteer event. **Photo by Craig Fritz**

## Mileposts



Sheila Pounds 30



Bernadette Bazen 25



Ryan Halle 25



Kelly Thoesen 25



Michael Black 20



Lon Dawson 20



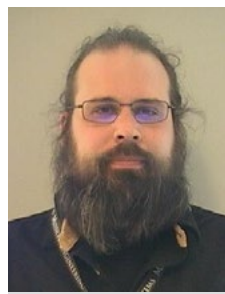
Nathan Glenn 20



Mark Learn 20



Jacob Martinez 20



Brad Childs 15



Aaron Cordova 15



Jason Fulmer 15