

# Health Care Policy

## The Nurse's Crucial Role



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As the legislative liaison for the AACN Board of Directors, I recently had the privilege of attending the 2003 Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) workshop sponsored by the Nursing Organizations Alliance (NOA) and coordinated by Kathleen Smith, RN, BS, CNN.

The workshop, held in March in Alexandria, VA, provided a wide range of topics, from the basic legislative process to health care policy. The common thread was the important role of nurses in the legislative process.

To inform *Viewpoint* readers about the most pressing legislative topics of interest to nurses, the newsletter is presenting a series of articles on nurses' influence on policy making and the legislative process. This article is the first of the series, which is designed to:

- Spark nurses' interest in the legislative process.
- Demonstrate the importance of nurses' collective voice.
- Explain what nurses need to know about legislation.
- Illustrate why this knowledge is important to nurses.
- Show how (and when) nurses can get involved in the legislative process.

### The American Way

Why is the legislative process relevant to you as an ambulatory care nurse? Because legislation is responsible for shaping the health care policies in this country. And, as you are well

aware, it takes a powerful body to influence the United States health care system. It is important to keep in mind that nurses have this power – through our expertise, our positions, and our numbers (Leavitt, 2003).

And just how large are those numbers? In the United States, 1 in 44 women voters is a nurse, 1 in 100 adults is a nurse, and there are 10,000 nurses per congressional district (Leavitt, 2003). There are three nurses in Congress, Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX), Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), and Lois Capps (D-CA) (Sources: [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)).

Nurses' expertise and health care knowledge is based on our practice, training, and experience. Moreover, the public recognizes our knowledge and commitment: nurses consistently rank at the top of the annual Gallup poll for "Honesty and Ethics in Professions." With our well-earned public respect and our strength in numbers, nurses are in an excellent position to exert considerable influence on health care policy, policymakers, and Congress in general.

Because of the recent attention generated by the nursing shortage and the passage of the Nurse Reinvestment Act, nurses have gained legislators' attention. Now is the time to take advantage of that attention and use our influence in positive ways to address issues that concern all nurses across the spectrum of practice areas.



Regina Phillips (right) with NIWI workshop coordinator Kathleen Smith.

Nurses have strength in numbers and the public's trust. This puts them in an excellent position to influence health care policy.

### Taking Action

To use our power and influence effectively, we need to develop an awareness of the legislative process and hone our working knowledge of the political arena. Nurses have been somewhat reluctant to do this in the past. We have for the most part just wanted to take care of our patients with no time or interest in the politics of individual institutions and even less interest in the political activities going on around us. Nurses may feel they are ill equipped to delve into legislative activities, but who better to advocate for patients than nurses? We have been patient advocates in our interactions with doctors and administrators, why not with Congress?



# “To change health care policy, who better to advocate for patients than nurses?”

## No Glass Ceiling

The articles in this series will serve as guides to developing your political awareness. Hopefully, they will also spark your interest and awareness of the important role nurses play in shaping and influencing health care policy. We must aim high to achieve change: who knows, our next senator, representative, or United States president could be an ambulatory care nurse from AACN.

AACN is committed through our mission and strategic plan to be the “Voice of Ambulatory Care Nursing.” This is accomplished by providing members with the latest legislative news that affects ambulatory care nursing and by supporting and partnering with nursing colleagues to influence health care policy making.

Who better to speak to policy makers on behalf of nurses than nurses? Who has a better understanding of what nurses do and need than nurses? Who better to address the health care concerns of our patients than nurses? If not nurses, whom? If not now, when? AACN urges each of you to seriously consider getting politically active.

## Getting Started

First, every nurse should be a registered voter. Information on how to reg-

ister is available on-line at the Federal Election Commission Web site [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov). Click on “Elections and Voting,” scroll down to “Registering to Vote,” and print out the “National Voter Registration Form.” If you are not already registered, it is important to do so as soon as possible.

Second, it is important to understand how you are represented in Washington. Each state in the country is represented on Capitol Hill by two senators. Each state also has representatives in the House; the number of representatives is based on the state’s population.

There are several easy ways to find out the names of your elected government officials. These include:

- The Blue Pages at the front of your telephone directory
- Web sites: To find your U.S. senators go to [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov); to find your representatives go to [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). You can also call the U.S. Capitol switchboard operator at (202) 224-3121 for the Senate and (202) 225-3121 for the House.

Next, it is a good idea to enter these names and numbers in your PDA (personal digital assistant) or your day-planner for easy access.

## AACN Support

We hope you are encouraged by the ease of these important first steps. We will continue to guide you with the rest of this *Viewpoint* series. Look for the following topics in upcoming issues:

- Contacting your congressman
- Basic structure of the legislature
- The legislative process
- The impact of legislation on nurses (and the reverse: the impact of nurses on legislation)
- The ABCs of lobbying

Rest assured that there are many AACN and nursing colleagues to assist you as you explore the legislative process. The personal rewards you will experience for taking action will give you a tremendous sense of achievement.

## Reference

Leavitt, J.K. (2003). *Linking practice, policy and politics: Using nursing power to improve health*. Presentation: Arlington, VA. Nursing in Washington Internship (NIWI) Program.

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