



## Pearls

# Getting involved in policy and politics

By Fredrik Oestberg, MSN, RN

**A**s direct caregivers, nurses spend more time with patients than healthcare providers in most other disciplines. So decision makers need to hear from nurses. If we don't stand up for the issues that are important to us, those with competing interests in healthcare may be the only ones whose voices are heard.

By knowing how the system works and which strategies can effectively influence policy, any nurse can become an advocate at the local, state, or federal level. You can make phone calls to elected representatives about bills under consideration, testify before committees, become involved in practice councils or boards at the workplace, and even run for elected office.

Nursing organizations with legislative departments provide analysis on current issues in health policy and tips on how to communicate with legislators. Many also offer workshops on nursing advocacy, or legislative days at the state house, both excellent places to begin an advocacy career. You also could form a mentor relationship with an experienced nurse advocate, or seek formal education on health policy or public health. An internship with your local or state representative to work on health-related legislation helps you understand how the system works and gain networking contacts.

Here are some other tips and strategies:

- Evidence-based practice is the gold standard for what we do. Evidence is also needed for nursing advocacy. Through research, gather a good base of evidence to present to decision makers about the changes you want to see.<sup>1</sup> Be aware of limitations in studies you're presenting because other interest groups may try to find flaws in the evidence.<sup>2</sup>
- Don't underestimate the power of personal experiences. Speaking to decision makers about personal stories puts a face and a story to an issue. Politicians also want to hear how legislative issues would affect their constituents.

- Use your local and state resources or national nursing advocacy groups to gain an understanding of current issues and learn how you can become involved. Many specialty nursing organizations have policy experts available as resources to begin-nurse advocates. They can help with preparing written or oral statements for hearings and may accompany nurses to hearings at the local state house or even on Capitol Hill.

- Network with other nurses to create a unified voice. Equally important, form a good working relationship with your elected representatives and their staff by first building credibility with them.<sup>3</sup> Working with your elected representatives on smaller nursing issues related to your experience builds credibility so they'll be more likely to turn to you when they're looking for resources for larger nursing issues.

Do you really want someone who isn't a nurse (or who isn't getting input from a nurse) deciding how nurses do their jobs? Nurses need to have their voices heard! Not everyone can become a full-time nurse advocate, but with even a small time commitment, it's easy to become involved. ❖

## REFERENCES

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Fredrik Oestberg is an assistant director of nursing at Blaire House of Milford in Milford, Mass. Adapted and updated from Oestberg F. Policy and politics: why nurses should get involved. *Nursing*. 2012;42(12):46-49.

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