

Health Care Reform

AMSN Goes to Washington, DC!

In March, the Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses (AMSN) supported two representatives to travel to Washington, DC, to participate in the annual Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) program put on by The Nursing Organizations Alliance (The Alliance). We, Julie Kennedy and Lauren Mardirosian, were delighted at the opportunity to attend NIWI on behalf of AMSN. We were even more surprised to discover that we are both from the state of Illinois, which meant that we would be collaborating throughout the program in preparation for our "Hill visits" with our Illinois Senate and House Representatives.

Over the course of three days, close to 100 nurses, representing a diverse range of specialty nursing organizations, came together to learn more about health care policy from professional nursing advocates and to prepare for our own nursing lobby day on Capitol Hill. All specialty nursing organizations that were in attendance are members of the Nursing Community (2013), which is an umbrella network of 58 organizations that "represents over 850,000 registered nurses, advanced practice registered nurses, nurse executives, nursing students, and nursing faculty" and lobbies in support of Registered Nurses and has an overall commitment to "improving the health and health care of our nation." The Nursing Community helps to bring together diverse voices in nursing to focus on united issues, such as those issues for which the NIWI participants lobbied to our Representatives.

On the first day of the program, we each had an opportunity to introduce ourselves and express our personal interest for attending the NIWI program. A common theme among participants' comments was a sense of wanting to be provided with the skills and knowledge in order to make change in government on a local, state, or federal level. Additionally, many of the nurses in the group had an interest in using their nursing experience as a foundation to transition into health care policy. They were hopeful that NIWI would provide an opportunity to network with other likeminded nurses. This hope proved to be overwhelmingly fulfilled because, throughout the program, we heard from a wide variety of speakers and panelists, including congressional staff, consultants, and nurses involved in advocacy on a professional level. These talks were inspiring and provided a wealth of opportunities and advice for nurses in the audience who were looking to apply their nursing experience to a health policy setting.

The speakers were more than generous in their support and enthusiasm for participants to become active in lobbying. Overall, the speakers agreed that there is a great need for

nurses to have a stronger presence in Washington, DC. And to address that need, they provided some advice as to how to get started. First, most speakers agreed that getting a master's degree or having some type of foundation in public policy was an important step in becoming involved in health care policy. Second, they stressed that being politically involved on a local or state level through volunteering is important for building relations with your Representatives and gaining a stronger understanding of the political process. Third, all presenters spoke to the importance of being involved in a professional nursing organization. Depending on the nursing organization, there are a variety of ways to become involved, whether it is joining a legislative committee or getting involved in a local campaign or rally. For example, Julie is the Associate Coordinator for the AMSN Legislative Team, and Lauren is the Legislative Chair for her local AMSN Chicago Chapter #317.

On the second day, we had the option to attend either an Advocacy 101 or 201 session, depending on our past experience in public policy. We both attended the 101 session, where we were asked to think about what we want our member of Congress to do for us, their constituents: be generally aware of nursing issues, be briefed on specific issues related to your nursing experience, be encouraged to vote yes or no on a bill up for vote, or initiate the building of a relationship with your Representatives.

The last point was highly emphasized throughout the program. Our lobby day was not to be thought of as our one chance to ask our Representatives everything we want from them regarding nursing issues. Rather, it was an opportunity to start a relationship that we can continue to build upon when we returned to our home states. We were encouraged to continue building our relationship with Representatives' offices by writing follow-up emails, offering ourselves as a resource for guidance on nursing issues, and sending relevant articles with talking point to our Representatives.

At the end of the second day, we gathered with other members from our own states and prepared ourselves for our visits to Capitol Hill for the following morning. We had three meetings set up with staff members from our Senate and House of Representative's offices. At these meetings, we were to present our three "asks," what we wanted our Representatives to support on behalf of nurses. All NIWI participants presented the following three "asks," as determined by the Nursing Community:

The Nursing Community respectfully requests \$251 million for the Nursing Workforce Development programs (authorized under Title VIII of the *Public Health Service Act*)..., \$150 million for the NINR..., and \$20 million for the Nurse-Managed Health Clinics (Title III of the *Public Health Service Act*). (Miyamoto, 2013, p. 1)

After much preparation, the time came for us to apply our new knowledge. Our first meeting was with Senator Mark Kirk's aid, Mark Clurman. Unfortunately, when we arrived at the office, somehow our meeting had not been scheduled. We

If you have any questions or comments regarding the "Health Care Reform" column, or if you are interested in writing, please contact Column Editor Michele D. George at michelegeorge2002@hotmail.com.

waited and hoped that someone would be able to take a few minutes to meet with us. Leigh Owano, Senator Kirk's health policy aid, was kind enough to take the time out of her busy day to discuss our issues. We introduced our three "asks," and each of us gave background information that we rehearsed. She was very receptive but warned us with sequestration that all our requests might not be possible.

We separated after this meeting to meet with our House of Representatives. Julie's Representative, Congressman Rodney Davis, actually agreed to meet with her in person. He turned out to be very personable and supportive of nursing. In fact, his wife is a nurse educator, so he strongly supported Title VIII funding to encourage nurses to return to school. Julie expressed her excitement at having the opportunity to see our government in action, and he gave her a pass to go to the gallery to watch the Representatives discuss and vote on bills. It was such an amazing opportunity and so fascinating to view our lawmakers at work.

We reconvened with the other Illinois constituents at Senator Durbin's office to make our final visit of the day. Our meeting was scheduled with Srinu Sonti, who is Senator Durbin's health policy aid. Mr. Sonti was one of the speakers at NIWI and had provided lots of helpful information on addressing Senators and Representatives. Mr. Sonti already knew what our three "asks" were so he took the opportunity to discuss the future of health care policy with us. He discussed possible solutions to current Medicaid issues and the role of the national government in this process. He is a very dynamic and intelligent speaker. One of the nurses in our group asked about the possibility of an internship, and she may actually get to work with him this summer in Washington, DC.

We all learned a great deal from these meetings. The aides look very young, but they are highly skilled professionals who know what questions to ask. The Senators and Representatives work diligently to learn what the American people are requesting and how to make those requests happen within reason. Washington, DC, is truly a hub of intellectual growth and great personal responsibility for the welfare of all Americans. We all have the right to meet with our political leaders in Washington, and we should use that right to make our voices as nurses heard.

As a follow-up to our NIWI lobby day on the hill, the Nursing Community submitted testimony to U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies in support of our three "asks" to our Representatives, as outlined above. This action by the Nursing Community truly emphasizes the message delivered to us during our time in Washington – that it is important to speak as a unified voice and have a clear message as to what nurses are asking our government to provide for us. We learned the valuable lesson that though we came from a diverse range of states, with different struggles in our individual nursing roles, what unites us is our common goal of promoting health and providing health care to all.

NIWI has not only given us the opportunity to meet with our Congressmen and Congresswomen, but also to

make lifelong friends and connections. Michele George is the Legislative Coordinator for AMSN, and she is a former NIWI attendee. Michele states about her experience at NIWI:

It has been a year since I last attended the Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI). This experience offered me an opportunity to discover what happens and who is working behind the scenes on nursing priority legislative topics. Through this experience, I was able to meet and collaborate politically with nurses from all over the United States. Discussions surrounding several various politically divisive nursing issues, such as unionization of the nursing profession, mandatory staffing ratios, and the nursing shortage, were discussed with keynote speakers and my colleagues. Listening to different perspectives and learning from other nursing professionals was extraordinary and most rewarding. It also broadened the depth of my current knowledge base.

I learned several techniques on how to successfully interact with members of Congress, and I use them today when I write and/or call my Representatives' offices. Learning how to deliver a poignant message to congressional leaders and their staff in a very short period of time was the most significant lesson gleaned from this experience. I have a greater understanding of the budget and appropriations process, and I feel more confident in my abilities to discuss these pertinent issues in an effective and competent manner with members of Congress. Often, when I write nursing political news bits and pieces, I refer to the NIWI legislative process and policy materials for information. Currently, I am a member of several nursing organizations. Because of NIWI and what I learned, I believe that I am better able to represent these groups and articulate to legislative leaders the importance of continuing to listen to the voices of nurses.

The internship taught me a great deal. I learned the value of networking and the importance of becoming a politically active nursing professional. Finally, I would describe the overall experience as inspiring.

References

- Miyamoto, S. (2013). *Testimony of the Nursing Community regarding fiscal year (FY) 2014 appropriations for the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs, the National Institute of Nursing Research, and Nurse-Managed Health Clinics*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenursingcommunity.org/>
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