

This text was originally posted on the AMSUN Website in 2010.

Bringing Health Care to Capitol Hill: The Nurse In Washington Internship Experience

"We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate."

– Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826

This year, 105 nurses from the United States and British Columbia met in Washington, DC, to become active participants in government during the Nurse In Washington Internship (NIWI) program presented by the Nursing Organizations Alliance (the Alliance). The 3-day workshop brought keynote speaker Paul Seltman, Director of Public Policy at Becton Dickinson and Company; a panel of expert nurse advocates including Geraldine Bednash, PhD, RN, FAAN; Mary Chaffee, PhD; Georgia Decker, APRN, ANP-BC; and Judith Leavitt, MEd, RN, FAAN; as well as Representative Frank LoBiondo (R, NJ), a member of the Nurse Caucus, to speak to the nurses present regarding the importance of political activism and the ways nurses can become involved.

Nurses have always been involved in politics. Florence Nightingale used her contacts with powerful men in government to obtain supplies and the personnel she needed to care for the wounded soldiers in the Crimea. Hannah Ropes was able to fight incompetence and obtain decent care for wounded Civil War soldiers because she understood who the influential people in Washington were and who would be receptive to her efforts on the soldiers' behalf.

What is important is that these nurses took a stand and let their Senators and Congressmen know what was needed in order for them to perform their jobs adequately. Another wonderful thing is that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution grants you the right to "petition the government for redress of grievances." The profession of nursing stands on a firm foundation of patient advocacy. Health policy advocacy is taking this one step further. If nurses don't weigh in on proposed policies involving health care or the nursing profession, the Members can't make truly informed decisions. Very few Members of Congress have any sort of medical background; there are currently 20 individuals with medical degrees and 3 nurses. As a whole, the Members rely on others to glean information and base their decisions and votes on this information. In short, it is not only our right, but our responsibility as nurses, patient advocates, parents, children,

neighbors, and as U.S. citizens to become and remain active in the political processes that govern our country.

The NIWI Conference offered wonderful background information, a review of civics and excellent tips on lobbying Congress. Consensus statements developed by the Alliance, a cooperative of various nursing organizations, were reviewed and we took these with us on our visit to Capitol Hill. We spent a day visiting with Senators and Representatives in presenting the issues, having the opportunity to talk about health care reform, and making some excellent contacts. Members of the Conference were also given "homework" in which they were asked to follow up on their visits by emailing those they visited to remind them again of how important the issues pertaining to nursing are.

The issues presented this year asked for support of legislation granting \$215 million to the Nursing Workforce Development program to support recruitment, education, and retention of nurses; provision of additional funding to the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), which supports basic and clinical research with an eye toward expanding the base of evidence-based practice currently in place; and finally to show support for the nursing profession as a whole by placing a statement in the Congressional Record about the importance of nursing to the health care system.

It is not necessary to journey to Capitol Hill to present issues to your Senators and Congressmen. Media advocacy is an ideal method of bringing issues into the forefront, not just to Members of the House and Senate, but to the general public as well. One of the methods politicians in Washington use to remain informed on local issues in their districts is through the local news, such as the town newspaper. Staff of the Member follow the local issues carefully and are particularly cognizant of any article or editorial that mentions the Member's name.

This is where many Americans can have the largest impact, using the media as an opportunity to provide relevant information that presents nursing or health care issues. This can be accomplished through Letters to the Editor. This section of local papers provides a forum for many individuals to express concerns regarding a particular issue, to provide information to a wide audience, and to praise or criticize Members on recent votes or other actions. If you choose to utilize this media outlet, be sure to keep information fact-based and concise, using language the general public will understand.

The use of media advocacy has the benefit of a ripple effect. Not only does it inform the Member of local issues, but it also serves to inform the general public as well. These individuals may then contact the Member or write further Letters to the Editor. Before long, what was once a "nursing issue" will have become a public issue that gains much more attention.

I learned a great deal during the Internship. It was an honor to represent the Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses in Washington, DC, as the chairperson of the

Legislative Policies and Issues Committee. Having the opportunity to spend 4 days with nursing and legislative professionals was an eye-opening and exhilarating experience. We were able to learn the ins and outs of advocacy and lobbying. Although the Alliance members forewarned us that it is not unusual to have meetings, not with the actual Member of Congress but one of their staff members, and meetings are often taken in hallways, this was not the case. All the staff members and Members of Congress we visited with saw us in either conference rooms or their office. Many of them spent quite a lot of time speaking with us about nursing and issues of health care. Some of the Members of Congress were interested in nurses' opinions on more than what we actually went in to lobby for and sought our opinions on health care reform – how it should be approached and the role of the nursing profession in the reform process. The ability to network with a wide variety of nurses in various specialties was certainly an added benefit. Meeting the authors of *Policy and Politics in Nursing and Healthcare*, Judith Leavitt and Mary Chaffee, was another highlight.

AMSN's collaboration with the Alliance will prove to be very beneficial for all of its members, as they are very supportive and represent such a diverse group of nursing professionals with multiple specialties. The Alliance allows nurses a collective voice in Washington, DC, and nurtures the neophyte advocate, giving us confidence and a strong voice with which to speak to the Members of Congress.

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