

Nursing Advocacy 101: Start Where You Are to Do What You Can

By NCNA Member Carol Ann King, DNP, FNP-BC

1.0 CH available for free to NCNA members!

Nurses are champions with advocacy — advocating for our patients, our families, our fellow nurses, and our communities. When nurses believe that a patient’s health and well-being is in jeopardy, we will join with that patient to advocate for the proper care, find resources to assist the patient, work to change internal system policies that need improvement, and be the voice for that patient with the interprofessional team of caregivers (Hanks, 2008).

However, for many nurses, advocacy stays in the direct patient care realm. This article is intended to give nurses some simple steps and tools for nursing advocacy in a new realm—Politics!

Many readers will probably have a variety of responses to that "P" word, but political advocacy is essential for nurses to be a strong voice as change agents in a complex healthcare system. Nurses are the largest healthcare-related professional group in the nation with a voice strong enough to influence our policy-makers at the local, state, national, and international levels (Gobbi, 2014).

Individual comfort level and skill in the political world can be developed and improved, starting with accepting the challenge to be an active advocate. Common barriers to political advocacy include the lack of confidence in one’s ability to effectively communicate with our political leaders, lack of knowledge on the political and policy-making process, fear, shyness, lack of connections to others who can help, and limited leadership development (Alpers, Brown, Jarrell, Wotringer, 2009).

All of these barriers can be overcome with some personal initiative to tap into the resources surrounding all of us as discussed in the following paragraphs.

The most important first step is to register to vote and exercise your right to vote. Voting is an honor and privilege. People do elect the policy-makers in the North Carolina General Assembly. After this essential step, nurses can begin becoming active in productive advocacy.

Join North Carolina Nurses Association (NCNA) and the American Nurses Association (ANA).

Your membership helps support nursing as a strong unified voice of all nurses. NCNA's focus is at the state level and ANA is at the federal level. By joining, nurses have a unified voice for nursing advocacy, focusing on issues such as title protection.

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NCNA and ANA both have optional political action committees (PACs) that specifically focus on supporting the political activities to promote nursing. These organizations also support lobbyists trained and skilled in navigating the political environment to promote nurses’ key concerns. Truly, there is strength in numbers. NCNA and ANA are the faces of nurses to our elected officials.

The elected officials are just that—elected by the voters!

Voters hire them and can fire them. We contribute to their salary. Elected officials are our voice in policy making, but they cannot represent us at the table if they do not hear from nurses.

Know your representatives. State and federal representatives, including those in the Congress and Senate, can easily be found starting at the North Carolina General Assembly (NCGA) website: http://www.ncga.state.nc.us. Information includes the address, phone number, and email address of the representative. Read about them, the bills they sponsor, and the committees of which they are members. Access their local websites and learn more about them personally to become more familiar with them as an individual. The information is there for a reason—so people can contact them. Remember, elected officials work for the citizens.

continued on page 13
Find a mentor.

Nurses have such a well-developed network including those with expertise and experience in the political world. If you do not know anyone, contact NCNA and one of the staff can guide you to an experienced mentor. Their staff has experts, like CEO Tina Gordon, and the staff wants you to get involved and be successful. You are not alone!

Find an issue of which you are passionate and learn about state impact of that issue.

Investigate the issue from different views, including the financial and legal implications. Consider the patient and community impact of the issue.

For example, patient access to care may be a concern for your community. As patients use the local emergency department for primary care, finite healthcare resources are consumed treating issues that should be managed in the outpatient clinic setting. Reducing emergency room visits while increasing access to primary care will positively impact all parties involved — the patient, the family, the nurses, the healthcare systems, and the county and state budgets. Become educated on successful strategies to address the issue and be prepared to begin dialogue with key decision-makers.

Prepare your elevator speech.

An elevator speech is a brief verbal presentation of the topic to be presented to your target individual or group. To maximize the brief time with the individual, be succinct and focused, keeping the initial ice-breaking speech to one minute.

Write out the issue as you see it and include your view on the issue. Every word counts! Get to the point quickly with the “bottom line up front” approach. Practice the elevator speech, alone at first and timing yourself, and then with colleagues.

Always be prepared to present the elevator speech. Unexpected opportunities occur, such as literally finding yourself on an elevator with a state senator. This initial conversation can spark the interest of the person and open the door to more in-depth dialogue.

Knowing the intended audience is essential to any successful advocacy issue. Select the right audience for the topic. For example, if the topic is the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the correct intended contact would be a US Senator, not a NC State Senator. The ACA is a federal issue and is not decided on the state level. However, the issue related to extending Medicaid in NC to increase access to care is a state issue and very appropriate for a NC Senator.

Meet your representatives.

This may sound a bit scary and intimidating, but start small and you can be successful and may find it empowering. Start with an email to just introduce yourself. Include your area of expertise and offer yourself as a resource should they need additional information related to issues in your area of expertise. Keep it short and simple. The goal is to begin a relationship and foster name recognition. A sample email may read something like this:

Greetings Honorable Gale Adcock,

Congratulations on your successful campaign and election! I am a Family Nurse Practitioner in Wayne County and have also been a nurse for 30 years. I am thrilled that you represent us as the first elected FNP in the NC House of Representatives! I specialize in nursing education and primary care, specifically with the uninsured in NC. I am also a certified Agrisafe provider, specializing in agriculture health so vital to NC. If I can be of any assistance to you as you represent our community, please feel free to contact me. Thank you again for your commitment to our community.

Sincerely,

Dr. Carol Ann King, DNP, FNP-BC

(contact information would be included here)

Volunteer to serve as Nurse of the Day at the General Assembly.

This is a unique way to not only provide a service to our legislators, but to also begin relationships with key individuals. Others will see your face and name and appreciate your being there to serve them.

As key advocacy leaders have shared many times in the past, if a representative has 10 phone messages to return, he/she is more likely to respond to the message from a person whose name they recognize. Be the name they recognize.

continued on page 14
Attend functions that promote communication with the elected officials.

These functions offer unique opportunities to further build relationships. Pair up with another nurse experienced in these types of events and tag along. Wear a jacket with pockets to keep your business cards easily accessible and your hands free. Listen more than you talk.

This gives the opportunity to meet face-to-face with key policy-makers, shake a lot of hands, give out a lot of business cards, and further develop the professional relationship started by email or phone calls.

These are typically not the settings to dive into specific political issues, but good opportunities to let key decision-makers know your areas of interest and expertise and offer your support.

Volunteer on campaigns.

Consider local involvement in your own community to start building confidence. Mayors and county commissioners appreciate all the help they can get, even putting out signs in yards. Starting simple gives you the opportunity to become familiar with elections and opportunities to practice talking to others about issues of concern.

Start local but think global. Grassroots efforts are essential to building a network of contacts and building the relationships needed to be a strong nursing advocate. Building relationships is the central tenant to successful advocacy. As many wise experts in the political world will say, “If you are not at the table, you are on the menu!” Nurses have to be at the decision-making table or others will make decisions about nurses for nurses.

Relationship-building takes time and consistency. Learn the key people associated with your issue of interest. With every conversation, phone call, or face to face meeting, you reinforce that you are knowledgeable about healthcare, your patients’ needs, and the future direction of nursing.

Understanding the political structure in NC is an important first step. The NC General Assembly is composed of the House of Representatives and the NC Senate. The House of Representatives has 120 members and the Senate has 50 members. Both groups serve two year terms.

Take time to learn the legislative process so you can understand how your ideas today can become law in the future. While this is a slow and complex process, learning the terms and process will show others that you are serious about your involvement and readiness to wade in the political arena.

Nurses are natural advocates, but this advocacy does not stop at the patient and family level. Every nurse has a voice and can lead change locally and globally.

In short, an issue can become a bill, then goes to review through the legislative committee process, and then if the bill emerges successfully from committee, the bill can be presented for voting. If the bill passes the vote through the NCGA, and is signed by the Governor, it becomes law, called a statute in NC. The senators’ and representatives’ voting records are available on the North Carolina General Assembly website. As you prepare to become politically active, this website is an excellent resource to learn about legislation in progress, how your representatives vote on issues of interest for you, and possibly find an active bill in which you might want to become active in supporting.

Nurses are natural advocates, but this advocacy does not stop at the patient and family level. Every nurse has a voice and can lead change locally and globally. Experienced mentors are available to help nurses develop confidence and skill in advocacy in the policy-making environment (Hewlett & Bleich, 2009).

Elected officials are selected as representatives and they make decisions based on the information they are given; therefore, it is critical for nurses to become one of the sources of information when the issues impact healthcare and the well-being of our population.

References
Receiving Credit

1.0 contact hours will be awarded by the North Carolina Nurses Association (NCNA) upon successful completion of this activity. A contact hour is a unit of measurement that denotes 60 minutes of an organized learning activity. This is a learner-based activity. NCNA does not require submission of your answers to the quiz. A contact hour certificate will be awarded after completing the evaluation form online. In order to obtain contact hours you must:

1. Read the article, Nursing Advocacy 101: Start Where You Are to Do What You Can. Be sure to keep track of the amount of time (number of minutes) you spend reading the article and completing the quiz.

2. Read and answer each question on the quiz. Members will need to log in to the NCNA website with their username and password and click on the Library hot link. On the Library page you will find the evaluation link. Nonmembers wishing credit will need to submit payment of $25.00 to NCNA; an evaluation link will be sent following receipt of payment. 

3. After completing all of the questions, compare your answers to those provided below. If you have incorrect answers, return to the article for further study.

This activity is valid for continuing nursing education credit until February 15, 2017. Contact RNs@ncnurses.org for more information.


The North Carolina Nurses Association is accredited as a provider of continuing nursing education by the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Commission on Accreditation.
ANA National Legislative Update

While NCNA is focusing on the North Carolina General Assembly, the ANA is keeping track of legislative issues at the US Capitol. Here are some of the bigger bills and regulatory reforms that nurses need to be aware of.

NATIONAL NURSE ACT OF 2015

The bill, introduced on January 14, would designate the same individual serving as the Chief Nurse Officer (CNO) of the Public Health Service as the National Nurse for Public Health. ANA recognizes the importance of raising visibility for nursing and the Public Health Service and applauds the intention of the legislation.

HOW MANY HOURS IN A WORK-WEEK?

The US House of Representatives has already passed the Save American Workers Act of 2015, and the Senate is considering a similar bill. If passed, the law would redefine the work-week as 40 hours per week under the Affordable Care Act, compared to the current definition of 30 hours. This could impact thousands of hospital nurses who typically work a three day, 12 hour shift.

CONGRESS CONSIDERS REQUIRING NURSES ON DUTY 24/7 AT NURSING HOMES

The "Put a Registered Nurse in the Nursing Home Act" would change the rules that a Registered Nurse only be on duty for 8 hours per day at nursing homes, regardless of the size of the facility.

HOME HEALTH CARE PLANNING AND IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2015

This bill is designed to allow APRNs to sign home health care plans and certify Medicare patients for the home health benefit. ANA says the Home Health Planning and Improvement Act, which was introduced in February, will reduce Medicare spending. Medicare has recognized the independent practice of APRNs for nearly two decades, and these health care professionals now provide the majority of skilled care to home health patients.

Nurse of the Day

NCNA is looking for volunteers to be Nurse of the Day at the North Carolina General Assembly. It's an incredible experience that many nurses sign up for year after year, but don't take our word for it!

"I am not sure why it took me so long to experience this phenomenal day, but I am so glad I finally achieved a day... What I enjoyed the most was talking to my representatives from Forsyth County, both in the House and the Senate. I think it is very worthwhile to be able to listen to the sessions and better appreciate the legislative process. It was time well spent."

Marion Braden Alexander, RN, BSN, MHA
NCNA Member

To volunteer, email Kristin Goins at kristingoins@ncnurses.org.
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