

## 2014 Nurse in Washington Internship Reflection

The Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) was an outstanding opportunity to learn about health policy, collaborate with various nursing professionals and build lasting relationships and networks. I gained knowledge and skill about health policy, communicating effectively with legislators and office staff, and the opportunity to collaborate with other nurses to advance key issues in the nursing profession. In addition, I learned how important it is as a group to have one-voice and tackle issues related to all of the nursing community. The topics that I became familiar with included: (1) Nursing Workforce Development Programs, (2) National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), (3) Nurse Managed Health Clinics, and (4) Modernization of the Veterans Hospital Administration Nursing Handbook.

The ability to reach out and communicate with those who design the policy and legislation affecting nursing and health care delivery is an important skill to acquire. By attending NIWI I learned how to become a better advocate for the profession as well as for healthcare quality and safety. In addition, I learned the definition of politics vs. policy and how the two are interwoven. Politics is the process by which society determines who gets what, when they get it, and how they get it. In comparison, policy is made in response to some sort of problem that requires attention and is made on the “public’s” behalf. People with similar interest gather to amplify their voices in policy making. Citizen input is a prime source of ideas for legislation, thus it is important for professional organizations to build coalitions and act together to raise awareness on nursing and patient issues. It is important to empower nurses to feel that they are well positioned to form partnerships with communities to promote healthy public policies. Nurses today are better educated than ever before and well positioned to be involved in initiatives that extend the traditional boundaries of health policy to the creation of public policies that will truly support the health of communities.

Nursing is not a partisan profession. When we advocate we should not worry about party affiliations, but concentrate on the issues that affect nursing and patient care. Much of what nurses do and experience daily while caring for their patients is influenced directly by laws, regulations, and other policies. Every day Congress makes decisions that affect our professional nursing practice and the way we deliver health care. Thus, Members of Congress need to hear from nurses from all states throughout the year. Advocating in Washington DC is effective, but communicating from and at home is more effective, especially during town hall meetings, due to the fact that it’s happening within the community where we have more focused attention on the issues facing nursing. In addition, it is also very important to form relationships with policymakers and their staffers. A nurse that is well informed, passionate and can communicate effectively is a valued resource to elected officials and their staff.

At NIWI we also learned about the message we want to our congressional offices to know about nursing issues and patient safety. The topic comes up on “How do you get through the noise and get some attention to your issue?” I learned that it is important to understand who in the office covers health issues and reach out to them first. Most often the staffers are more expert on specific issues than the legislature and thus it is important to notify the staff of the topic ahead of time, so they are prepared for the meeting. It is even more important to follow-up with legislators

and their staffers after the face-to-face meeting. Sending an immediate thank you note that reiterates the key points and reminds them of agreed upon next steps is an effective way to build a long lasting relationship.

In regards to communication with members of Congress, most state legislators suggest that individual letters are noted due to the sheer volume, but the overall trend of the letters is more important than any single letter. Therefore, part of delivering a unified effective message to our representatives is to initially achieve practical consensus within the nursing organizations about the key points on which we want to work together. Identifying a common ground among stakeholders can achieve shared understanding of the advancement of the profession of nursing. It is also important to note some of the logistics for during the meeting. As a team, it is important to rehearse the informational information before showing up to the member's office. As a group we need to be clear about our priorities and hit only the highlights during the meeting. Furthermore, being sensitive of their time and listening to their response is important part of having a successful meeting.

In conclusion, I learned it is important to be focused on the issues. Sometimes staffers are under the impression that nurses can't get along; therefore we have to show our unified voices on the issues that face the profession of nursing and the patients, families and communities we serve. A good example is the Nursing Community. They are a coalition of 60 national organizations that speak with a united voice and are involved with the process of nominating nurses for federal processes. Clearly nurses do have a stake in the game. It is both empowering and fulfilling that we can make a difference in policy and politics.