

Introduction: Health Policy and Advocacy Toolkit

What is Health Policy Advocacy?

Advocacy is defined as the support or defense of a cause and the act of leading on behalf of another person. Nurses engage in advocacy every day on behalf of their patients. In nursing practice, this means that nurses promote and strive to protect the health, safety, and rights of patients.

Nurses also collaborate with other health professionals and the public to promote community, national, and international efforts to meet health needs. Furthermore, nurses advocate for the nursing profession and professional standards of practice.

Health Policy & Advocacy Committee

The HP&A Committee of NANN/NANNP (hereafter referred to collectively as NANN) acts to promote NANN as the professional voice that shapes neonatal nursing through excellence in practice, research, education and professional development. On behalf of NANN, the Committee pursues and promotes NANN's legislative agenda by monitoring and responding to legislation, governmental regulations, and administrative actions that affect neonatal nurses, neonatal nurse practitioners, and the patients and families they serve. The Committee also encourages and assists NANN members to become involved in grassroots legislative activities in pursuit of common goals. NANN is not large enough to have, like some organizations, our own legislative representative or lobbyist. Even so, there is much we can do at the grassroots level, and to increase our effectiveness, NANN and NANNP are joined in these activities.

Turning Outrage into Action

Every day, people have experiences that are frustrating, unbelievable, or so outrageous that they think, "How can this be? There ought to be a law!" Nurses often experience this frustration in their day-to-day practice- fighting with managed care, facing inadequate Medicare reimbursement, and struggling with inadequate staffing or unsafe working conditions.

Also every day, federal and state legislators are making decisions that affect neonatal nursing and our patients, often with very little knowledge or understanding of the issues and with little or no input from nurses. We can't afford to let this happen. We must contribute our authority, leadership, and unique knowledge of neonatal nursing to the legislative process, or suffer the consequences.

Health policy advocacy means channeling this sense of outrage about inadequately conceived laws, policies, and regulations or about the absence of a law when the need for one is clear.

Advocates let policymakers know what they, as citizens and constituents, believe elected officials should do.

Health policy advocacy can be easy, and it can make a difference in the outcome of our nation's policy decisions. It doesn't require any new skills, it just involves applying skills you already have, such as communication and building relationships, in a new context.

Advocacy is a Right and a Responsibility

Polls have found that Americans' knowledge of television shows such as *The Simpsons* and *American Idol* far surpasses their familiarity with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The *First Amendment* guarantees freedom of speech, the press, religion, the right to peacefully assemble, and the **right to petition the government for a redress of grievances**.

So if you are thinking, who am I to lobby Congress? I am just a nurse!

The U.S. Constitution grants us the right to tell our elected officials our concerns and to take action to address them.

Policymakers work for the citizens. Your tax dollars pay their salaries, their health insurance, retirement benefits, and travel. As their "employer," you have every right to hold them accountable for their actions, tell them what you want them to do, and give feedback on how you think they are doing at their jobs. The ultimate job review you can give your public officials is by voting – either returning them to office or ending their service.

The United States has a participatory democracy and representative government. Becoming involved is not only a right, but also a responsibility.

And finally, Congress needs the expertise of nurses. Nurses have first-hand direct bedside experience and understanding of how decisions in Washington affect constituents. Nurses understand the "big picture," relating to health issues. Nurses are trusted, tenacious, and reliable.

Advocacy and health policy have important implications for what we do every day. Unless we communicate with lawmakers about key issues, laws and regulations will be created and enacted without the benefit of our expertise and unique perspectives. Nurses are a powerful and well-respected constituency; our active involvement in health policy issues helps policymakers take action on key issues, such as the nursing shortage.

Engaging nurses in health policy advocacy is essential to ensuring that nursing and NANN's priorities are received and addressed by policymakers. We can and must become involved in health policy advocacy. The following sections of this Health Policy & Advocacy Toolkit provide the tools needed to become effective health policy advocates at the national, state, and local level.