Why communicate with legislators?

Our scope of practice as a as a Registered Nurse is based on three major factors: competence, employment and laws.

Laws

Our day-to-day practice as an RN, regardless of what we do or where we practice, is based on laws and regulations. We need to ask ourselves: Who creates these laws? Why is this important to our scope of practice? If you remember back to civics class, legislators create the laws. In Wisconsin, it’s 99 Representatives in the Assembly and 33 Senators in the Senate. But out of 132 legislators, how many have a healthcare background? How many are RNs? Not many. (Currently, Wisconsin has two RNs in the legislature. Democrat Sandy Pasch in the Assembly and Republican Leah Vukmir in the Senate.) Yet we see decisions being made about health care delivery, funding, and workforce with little input from RNs.

This should be worrisome to nurses. Those who influence policy decisions do not always have the same agenda as we do. We need to amplify nursing’s voice so policies related to health care delivery, quality, and effectiveness can be improved.

We are the heartbeat of the health care system and the most trusted profession in America. With over 77,000 RNs in Wisconsin and over 3.1 million RNs nationwide, nurses have the power to get things done. This is the time to empower our collective voice, one step at a time. But that requires a shift in behavior – from indifference and complacency to active involvement through grassroots lobbying.

Grassroots Lobbying

Grassroots lobbying is a "call to action" urging the public (you) to contact your elected official(s) for or against specific legislation. It focuses on raising awareness for a particular cause at the local level with the intention to influence the legislative process. Instead of professional lobbyists who are licensed and registered with the state, grassroots lobbying emphasizes action from the public.

Influencing Decision Making on Proposed Legislation

One of the easiest and most effective ways of influencing legislation is through timely and purposeful communication with your legislators. At the state level, you have one Assemblyperson and one Senator.

When a healthcare related legislative bill impacting nursing practice or patient care is brought to your attention, you need to contact your legislator. Often times you will learn about these issues through your professional nursing association that has the authority to lobby the legislature. (WNA is proud to be the only lobbyist for RNs in the state of Wisconsin. Our national affiliate, ANA, represents you at the US Capitol.) You will learn about the issue through an “Action Alert” that is delivered via email, text or tweet. The alert message will provide information on what action is needed, background information and talking points, and a timeframe for contacting.
Legislator Communication

Email

The most effective method for communicating to your legislator is via email. You want to let your elected official know that you are a constituent and an RN.

- **Email writing tips**
  - *Always use your personal email to send your message. Work emails may cause problems for you and your organization due to lobbying laws.*
  - Subject Line: Identify the legislative bill number and the title of the legislation.
  - Body of the message: Begin with a salutation <Dear Senator/Representative>
    - Begin with your name, state you are an RN, and that you are a constituent.
    - Describe the purpose of your letter <regarding legislative bill AB/SB and the title of the bill>.
    - Describe what action you want him/her to take <support or oppose> and the reasons why <use any talking points that you have available>.
    - If you can, provide a personal story regarding the issue.
    - Ask that they contact you with their decision.
    - Offer to be available if there are any questions.
  - Closing Line: Use “Sincerely,”
  - Include your name and address.

Letter Writing

Letter writing can be effective if you have a two-week window or more. Letters can go through a screening process for hazardous chemicals which can delay the delivery of your message on time. The content of the letter can be the same as an email.

- **Letter writing tips**
  - Include your return address on top portion of the letter.
  - Include the date
  - List the elected official’s office address
  - Use the correct salutation (Representative, Senator, etc.)
  - The body of the message can be the same as an email.
  - Provide your signature
  - Include any talking additional fact sheets if desired.

Phone Calls

Phone calling can be effective when there is a request for an all-out push for action. When calling the elected official’s office ask to speak to him/her. You will most likely speak with a staffer or an intern, but do not let that deter you. State your request and let them know you are a constituent, an RN, and let them know why you are calling. If the legislator is not available, ask that he/she return your call. Lastly, thank him/her for their time.
Meeting with elected officials

In person meetings with your elected official is an effective way of getting to know your legislator. By connecting in this way you have established a relationship which will hopefully be useful in future legislation and policy issues. You may only have 15 minutes or less to establish a rapport, deliver your message, convey a story and ask that he/she vote the way you want. As the meeting ends thank him/her for their time and look forward to hearing from them on how he/she voted.

- **Tips on meeting with your elected official**
  - Meeting preparation:
    - Schedule your appointment ahead of time.
    - Know the issue.
    - Know your legislator, research their website or other sources.
    - Know what you are going to say.
    - Having talking points/fact sheets that you can leave behind.
    - Know where the office is located. The State Capitol can be confusing.
    - Arrive about 5 minutes early.
    - You do not have to knock before entering the office.
  - Meeting time
    - Be friendly, courteous and professional.
    - Listen.
    - Do not interrupt.
    - Provide fact sheets.
    - Be concise with your presentation, you may have time to discuss only three points and avoid nursing jargon – talk as if you were explaining a procedure to your patient.
    - Describe a personal story.
    - Answer any questions you can and if you don’t know the answer be honest and let him/her know that you will get the answer.
    - Summarize your points.
    - Ask if him/her how they think they will vote on the issue.
    - Thank him/her for their time
  - After the meeting
    - Provide a summary of the meeting to the association asking you to meet on the issue.
    - Send a written thank you note, emphasizing your ask.
    - Follow-up on any information gathering that you committed to do.
    - Monitor vote.

Meeting with legislative aide/staffer

There are times when you arrive for your scheduled appointment and your elected official is not available. In the event that this happens, you should be afforded time to meet with the legislative aide/staff person. Take advantage of this meeting opportunity. The role of the legislative aide is to conduct research on the legislative bills, monitor the requests of the other constituents on the bill and will have more knowledge about the bill specifics.
Meeting tips

- Meeting with the legislative aide/staffer should be no different than meeting with the elected official. Therefore the tips listed previously apply.
  - Do get the name of the person you are meeting with (get a business card).
  - Try to find out the legislator’s position on the bill.

Playing the Part of a Grassroots Lobbyist

As you prepare for the meeting, you want to make sure that you will be as professional as possible. First impressions are important. You will not just be representing yourself, but the nursing profession. Therefore you need to be prepared, timely and dressed appropriately.

Testifying at legislative hearings – communicating to more than one legislator

All proposed legislative bills must have formal public input. The legislative bill is given a number and assigned to a specific standing committee. Nursing and/or health related bills will most likely go to the Health Committees. In order for the legislature to act/vote on the bill it must go through a formal public input process called a hearing. The chairperson of the committee schedules the public hearing with notice. This is the time when the public, registered lobbyists, and other legislators can testify. There is preparation that needs to take place prior to the public hearing and knowledge of the process of the actual hearing is important.

Preparing to testify

- Know the issue and why you want to testify.
- Prepare your remarks.
  - If you are testifying with other individuals, you should coordinate the message and what points you will focus on to make sure that all of the talking points are addressed.
  - Include the bill number and title.
  - Describe who you are, an RN, and why you are testifying (state position of pro, con or information only).
  - List the reasons for statement of position.
  - Provide a personal story of how you see the impact on your patients and nursing practice.
- Make copies of your testimony so that each member of the committee will receive a copy
- You may want to double space your testimony or remarks for easier reference
- If you are a constituent of one of the committee members you may want to contact his/her office and let them know that you will be coming to testify and you look forward to seeing him/her.

Day of the Public Hearing

- Dress in business attire.
- Know the location of the hearing room.
- Review the public hearing meeting agenda to see when the legislative bill is placed on the agenda.
- Be aware that the public hearing may last a long time so be prepared.
- Seating space may be limited given the number of bills on the agenda and the contentiousness of the bills.
• Fill out the public hearing form located at the entrance of the hearing room. You will need to indicate the legislative bill number and/or name, if you plan to testify in favor, against, or information only, or if you are not planning on testifying but registering in favor or against. Print your name and address legibly.
• Give your hearing form to the hearing committee page/aide and include copies of your testimony.

Waiting to Testify

• Make sure all of your electronic devices are in silent mode.
• Listen to the debate, noting any of the same talking points that you have.
• The committee chair will usually arrange for the testimony to alternate between pro and con.
• If there are other colleagues present at the hearing, you may want to confer on talking points, or if you need to address a topic that needs further explanation.

Providing testimony

• Approach the designated seating area where testimony is given.
• Sit down and make sure the microphone is on.
• Greet the committee chair and committee members.
• Let them know that you have submitted written testimony.
• Thank them for the sponsoring the hearing.
• Tell them who you are, that you are an RN, what you do and why you are testifying.
• Your remarks should be five minutes or less.
• Summarize your key points and ask the committee to consider voting the way you want.
• Thank them.

Answering committee member questions

• The committee chair will thank you for testifying
• The chair may ask you questions and allow for the other committee members to do the same.
• Remain calm, listen to the question, and take a few moments to think about your answer.
• There are times when the questions seem less than professional and at times personal. Remain polite and refer to your position and any related talking point of personal experience.
• When there are no further questions, you will be excused.

After your testimony

• Your legislator may try to find you and talk with you about your issue.
• Try to debrief with your colleagues.
• Give yourself time for self-reflection, reviewing your strengths and any improvements for next time.
Keeping informed on the issues

WNA members want their Practice Act protected and promoted, and they desire the ability to practice to the fullest extent of their license. As your lobbying organization who is the voice of professional nursing in Wisconsin, we take our job seriously. We are the ones who are visible at the State Capitol and to various governmental agencies and boards.

WNA’s membership is comprised of RNs like you. When we launch a “Call to Action” grassroots lobbying campaign, you can be sure that it is an important policy issue that impacts our practice and patient care.

WNA will notify members of the need to contact their legislators via email and will provide detailed information using our networking site PULSE. This is where the tools for contacting your legislator will be located.

PULSE is also where members can discuss legislation and where we will formally register our positions on legislative proposals. WNA’s website will also have information related to our legislative activity and call to action campaigns, but with less specificity.

This is the time for nurse engagement in our political process. Lawmakers need to hear from us. We need to be the voice of reason and advocates for accessible, effective and quality care for the people of Wisconsin.

“I think one’s feelings waste themselves in words; they ought all to be distilled into actions which bring results.”

Florence Nightingale