

Headlines from the Hill

ANA signs on to letter affirming positive change in U.S. Public Health Service

By Michelle M. Artz, MA

The ANA has joined public health organizations, nursing organizations, and concerned individuals in signing a letter of concern about the proposed creation of an Office of the National Nurse (ONN). The letter focuses on the need to create positive change, but emphasizes that “rather than creating new, parallel offices and volunteer structures...we should invest in and reinforce our existing public health infrastructure and resources.” Further, “while there is no magic-bullet solution to the challenges facing our public health system, actions such as strengthening the position of Chief Nurse Officer, bolstering the existing public health nursing network, and investing in evidence-based public health education could make a real and positive impact and move us toward our common goals.”

Excerpts from the letter are included below. However, readers are urged to view the full letter (with signers) online at <http://nursingworld.org/NationalNurseLetter/>.

Strengthen the Chief Nurse Officer

We have a national nurse in the position of Chief Nurse Officer (CNO) of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS). The CNO advises and works with the U.S. Surgeon General on policy issues related to nursing and public health, and represents the Office of the Surgeon General and the USPHS to state, national, and international groups and professional societies concerned with nursing and public health issues. The Commissioned Corps of the USPHS is one of the seven uniformed federal services, with 6,000 active-duty officers. The nurse category is the largest with just over 1,350 bachelor's-prepared RNs. The CNO also represents an additional 2,650 civil service and tribal nurses. Strengthening this office would help ensure nursing's input on important public health initiatives and serve to better coordinate existing public health nursing efforts throughout the states and territories. A stronger and more visible CNO would better highlight the roles of public health nurses, which could serve as a valuable recruitment tool.

Bolster existing public health nursing network

Across all fifty states and U.S. territories, public health nurses are the lifeblood of state and local health departments, as well as organizations working to assure the health and safety of the public. Public health nurses collaborate with the public to prevent disease and promote health. Not only do they supply critical, gap-filling, direct, safety-net services to vulnerable populations, they also provide the education and social marketing that enables communities to create environments supportive of health and well-being. Last but not least, they partner with individuals and families to adopt healthy behaviors.

It is these very nurses who are called upon to provide the surge capacity vitally needed in public health emergencies. Thus, the current shortage of public health nurses and public health nursing leadership and faculty must be addressed. Without attention to these workforce issues, the supply of public health nurses will remain inadequate, our communities will be vulnerable in the event of an emergency, and our goals for the nation's health will remain unmet.

Invest in public health education

Health education alone has not been shown to change the behaviors that lead to lasting change in lifestyle, and public health education efforts must go beyond simple health messages to be effective. Health education efforts must be interdisciplinary, and must reflect the science of population-based interventions, such as partnerships with populations and communities most at risk, and use social marketing concepts to effect community-wide changes that support healthful behaviors. Finally, health education is only a *part* of meaningful change for individuals and communities. These efforts will not be fully effective unless public health workforce issues are addressed.

ANA welcomes the added attention to the nursing profession, the current nursing shortage, and nurses' role in public health that the ONN initiative has fostered. We hope that the resulting dialogue will lead to a renewed, lasting investment in the existing nursing and public health network, and look forward to working together to address our nation's public health needs. ★

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