

Headlines from the Hill

Joining the fight for safe staffing

Q&A with Congresswoman Ginny Brown-Waite

Interview by Michelle M. Artz, MA

LAST NOVEMBER, Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-FL) joined with Rep. Lois Capps (D-CA) to introduce H.R. 4138, the RN Safe Staffing Act. H.R. 4138 would require each hospital, in consultation with the nursing staff, to develop and implement a staffing system ensuring an appropriate number of registered nurses on each shift and in each unit to assure appropriate patient care. With its implications for patient safety and nurse retention, safe staffing legislation is a hot topic federally and in the states. Nurses appreciate members of Congress like Ginny Brown-Waite who are willing to join the fight for safe staffing.

Q: What made you decide to join Rep. Capps in introducing the RN Safe Staffing Act?

During my tenure in the Florida Senate, I frequently heard from constituents about the problems they encountered with nursing homes. One of the most common complaints was that there were never enough staff to care for patients living in the facilities. As the Chairman of the Health Committee, I introduced and passed strong state legislation that increased nursing ratios. My legislation provided increased quality of care for the nursing home residents, and improved the work environment for overworked nurses.

In Congress, I have worked on comprehensive healthcare legislation, including measures addressing nurse staffing. I was more than happy to partner with my House colleague and registered nurse, Lois Capps, to introduce the RN Safe Staffing Act.

Q: This is your third term in Congress, and before coming to Washington, you served in the state legislature. Did you always know that you wanted to be involved in public service?

You know, from an early age I felt a calling to serve others in one capacity or another. During the time when I raised my family and received my education, I thought a great way to give back to my community would be through

teaching. This was a marvelous experience, and I hope that I made a positive influence on the lives of my students.

Eventually I turned to public service as a way to help a broader segment of the population. I started work in the New York State Senate and held numerous positions there for the next 17 years. This was a truly rewarding experience, where I learned the intricacies of healthcare policy and how the government works.

In the mid-1980s I moved to Florida to care for my ailing mother, returned to teaching at the collegiate level, and got involved in healthcare consultancy. I felt that my efforts to help others were effective, but could be put to use on a larger scale. That is why I decided to run for the Florida State Senate and then the U.S. Congress. So, I would definitely say that my career has been one built around service to others.



Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite

Q: I know you have at least one nurse in your family. Has this given you any insights into the nursing profession that other members of Congress might not see?

I do have one daughter who is a critical care nurse. She has given me valuable insight into the issues we deal with here in Congress. During the debate over whether

or not to intervene in the Terri Schiavo case, I spoke to her at length about her experiences with end-of-life issues and how nurses and doctors deal with families of terminally ill patients. Knowing that I can call on her for advice is comforting and helps give me the personal experiences I cannot get from reading articles or briefing papers.

Q: Some nurses believe that reaching out to their elected officials isn't important. What advice would you have for them about the impact their involvement can have?

I highly recommend that nurses continue to visit with and contact their member of Congress, whether it is in Washington or back home. It is highly educational to hear from constituents who provide health care to our friends and neighbors. We need to know what are the biggest concerns, challenges, and threats facing the healthcare industry. So please continue to call, write, fax, and e-mail your member of Congress. If we don't hear from you, we won't know how you feel about issues that come up for votes. ★

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