Power for positive change

By Janet Haebler, MSN, RN, and Monisha Smith

ONE OF THE GREATEST THREATS to nursing is not being involved in decisions about policies affecting the profession and patients. Advocacy is a cornerstone of nursing; yet a 2011 poll of 1,500 opinion leaders revealed they believe nurses should have more input and impact in planning and managing policy development.

As the largest single group of healthcare professionals (3.4 million), registered nurses (RNs) have the ability to be an incredible force to influence decision making by sheer virtue of our numbers, and policymakers rely on nurses’ expertise as well. For the fourteenth year in a row, the public has ranked nursing the most trusted profession in a Gallup poll.

So why aren’t RNs more involved? Too busy? Intimidated? Don’t know where to start? Lack of knowledge of relevant issues? Or do nurses fail to recognize the power they each have to bring about change? Despite time constraints and varying levels of political sophistication, there is a role for every nurse.

Understanding the legislative process
Having clarity about the issue or problem is the first step to becoming an effective nurse advocate. Legislation and regulation are ways to solve a problem that aim to achieve uniformity and accountability. Understanding the political process is also helpful. Congress meets for a 2-year session, and the sheer volume of bills vying for policymakers’ attention is one of the many reasons that bills take an average of 5 to 10 years to become law.

Timing is key
As with any proposed change, timing is critical to success. The philosophy and ideology of those in leadership positions in both the legislature and administration can influence how much attention your issue will garner. Competing policy priorities also affect the degree of consideration given to an issue. For example, when policymakers are grappling with a crumbling infrastructure or an opioid addiction crisis, they are less inclined to pay attention to an issue that may be more narrow in focus.

Your voice and vote matter
Establishing a relationship with elected officials is easier than you may realize. Policymakers listen to their constituents; they want your vote. Getting to know them doesn’t require a visit to Capitol Hill. Make an appointment while they are in their district office, or attend a town hall session.

This is an election year. By some estimates, 1 of every 45 potential voters is a nurse. At the very least, be sure to vote. That alone is powerful.

Individually you have great power, but the profession collectively brings much greater influence. The American Nurses Association and its state nurses associations have a solid reputation with policymakers. Let’s unite.

Visit RNaction.org and find out about key legislation currently in Congress that will affect the nursing profession. Sign up to receive alerts and take action.

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ANA’s advocacy toolkit
ANA’s advocacy toolkit makes it easy for you to stay informed and become involved. For tip sheets, talking points, and other resources, visit RNaction.org