



## **Guide for Engagement with Legislators**

Knowledge is power. To be an effective advocate, you must know your elected officials and to understand the legislative process and influences.

Legislating is not a linear process, nor is entering the political advocacy world. The following represents considerations and actions, in no particular order, when wanting to become more involved in influencing legislation.

### **Background**

**Passing legislation** is an uphill battle. It takes an average of 5-10 years to advance a bill to law. Numerous factors impact the trajectory.

- There are many groups competing for legislators' attention along with a broad range of issues on which many different constituents are focused.
- On average, each state has at least 1- 2,000 bills introduced during a session while Congress has close to 7,000 during its' two-year session.
- The process is intentionally slow and deliberative, in an effort to mitigate unintended consequences and have a broader appeal.
- Ultimately, at the state level, 15- 20 % of processed bills become law, while about 4 % are passed at the federal level.

**Legislative Agenda** Each legislative session, legislators have an agenda which is influenced by:

- Their history with a given issue and status from the previous session
- Campaign promises
- Values / Ideology
- Timing – current environment – what's in the news .... fiscal health of the state / nation
- Majority party and leadership as well as to what extent the minority can impact the overall legislative agenda (will vary between states)

**Relationships – Reputation- Leadership matter:**

- Reputation and relationships between parties in the two chambers as well as with the executive administration, committees of jurisdiction – leadership control.

- The impact of stakeholders based on their respective resources & reputation among both lawmakers and the public.
- Leadership for committees of jurisdiction – who possess the power to stop a bill on arrival.

### **Why get involved.....**

- Nurses are the largest segment of health professionals - 4 million strong and counting.
- For the 17<sup>th</sup> year in a row, Gallup found the public considers nurses to be the most honest and ethical of the professions.
- Policy makers understand that nurses are experts. They come from all backgrounds and rely heavily on information from their constituents.
- Elected officials care because you have the power of the vote.
- Nurses have a responsibility per the Code of Ethics. *“The nurse promotes, advocates for and protects the rights, health and safety of all patients. We owe the same duty to self as others and a duty to advance the profession. “*
- If you are not communicating with your elected officials, they are listening to someone else. (remember the old adage: *if you are not at the table, you are on the menu*)

Remember that to get policymakers’ attention, it has been suggested that, it only takes 5-7 legislators to start or stop an initiative and a mere dozen calls and /or emails to the same legislator to get their attention.

### **Action**

The best path is to **build a relationship** with your elected official. First, get to know them in advance of a meeting. Visit their website to learn more about their interests, background, committee assignments, and voting record. Consider attending town hall meetings. Follow them on live stream in hearings / during floor debates and votes. Sign up for their newsletters and follow them on social media. It will give insight as to what they value / and their positions taken.

**Meet** with them. No need to go to the Capitol; meet with them while at home in their district. They will have more time for you when not distracted by meetings, lobbyist visits, committee meetings and votes. It’s best to meet the first time when you don’t have an ask, rather just have a “getting to know each other” conversation. When the policy maker is not available, don’t be disappointed if meeting with their legislative staff who are just as instrumental in crafting the bills.

When you are ready to **“make an ask”** – seeking support of an initiative / bill or oppose. Do your homework and prepare for the meeting. This will get easier once a relationship is established.

- Know your audience  
Are they already a sponsor? If so, thank them. Do they have history with the bill(s), you plan to address? If so, respond accordingly.
- Develop a key message  
What is your request? The message should be clear, concise and easy to remember.
- Words matter. Avoid jargon and acronyms whenever possible. Some issues are polarizing, and words should be selected carefully. Keep messaging patient centered whenever possible. For example, rather than barriers to practice, discuss improving access to care; securing full practice authority for APRNs versus independent practice. You want legislators to think, feel and act! Speak to their heart, head and health:

The heart - tell your personal story.

The head - what is the reason(s) for supporting (or opposing) this bill, and

The health – the impact the policy will have on his/ her constituents and community.

**Professional association membership** is the best way to keep informed and become part of a united force when there's a need to advance or stop legislation. Legislators are more willing to advance legislation when groups are unified (i.e. the nursing community).

**Donate time** by volunteering in a campaign: phone banking, stuffing envelopes, door knocking. Consider donating to your state **Political Action Committee (PAC)** and / or ANA's federal PAC. These funds are dedicated to getting individuals elected who are supportive of the issues important to the profession and patients.

And at the very least, be sure to **VOTE!**

6/2019

jmh

Copyright protected