

Empowering Health Equity: The Crucial Role of Nurses on Boards and in Nonprofit Leadership in Iowa

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NURSES HAVE LONG been recognized as the backbone of the healthcare system, providing essential care and support to patients in various settings. Their influence, however, extends beyond the bedside. Serving on boards offers nurses an invaluable opportunity to contribute their expertise and influence broader organizational and policy decisions that shape the healthcare landscape (Smith et al., 2021). This article delves into the importance of nurses serving on boards and nonprofit leadership by highlighting the benefits this offers to healthcare organizations, the community, and the nursing profession. It also showcases the efforts of the Iowa Latinx Coalition in building community capacity and improving the health of underserved and displaced populations in Iowa.

The Institute of Medicine (IOM) emphasized the importance of nurse leadership in its 2011 report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*. This report called for nurses to take on more leadership roles, including serving on boards and leading change in healthcare (IOM, 2011). Building on this, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) in its 2021 report, *The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity*, highlighted the critical role of nurses in addressing health equity and promoting access to care for all populations (NASEM, 2021).

Nurses bring a unique perspective to boards and nonprofit organizations, grounded in their direct patient care experience. This perspective is crucial in healthcare quality and safety discussions. Nurses' insights can lead to more patient-centered and culturally sensitive decisions,

improving care delivery and outcomes. Their presence on boards and nonprofit organizations ensures that patient care considerations are prioritized in strategic planning and policy development. All too often, decisions regarding systems, structures, outcomes, and processes are made by administrators with little or no contact with patients. Nurses bring an invaluable perspective, gained through hands-on experience and direct patient contact, to the boardrooms and policy discussions informing practice. Those of us with seats at our decision-making tables, need to continue inviting nurses in. For those of us in the nursing community, it is critical to leverage our experience and insight in spaces where we have historically not had a voice.

Advocating for Patients and the Community

Nurses have a deep understanding of the social determinants of health and the challenges faced by underserved communities. Serving on boards and nonprofit organizations allows them to advocate for policies and programs that address these issues. Our advocacy can lead to the implementation of initiatives that promote health equity and access to care, particularly for vulnerable populations.

When nurses serve on boards and nonprofit organizations, they elevate the visibility and influence of the nursing profession. This leadership role can inspire other nurses to pursue similar opportunities, fostering a culture of leadership within the profession. Additionally, it helps to ensure that nursing perspectives are included in high-level decision-making processes, which can lead to more supportive poli-

cies for the nursing workforce.

Case Study: Latinx Voices of Iowa (the Coalition)

The Latinx Voices of Iowa, comprised of MyHealthIowa, Knock and Drop of Iowa, Refugee and Immigrant Voices in Action, Latinas Unidas for Un Nuevo Amanecer, and Latinx Immigrants of Iowa, is a prime example of how nurses can make a significant impact through board and nonprofit service. This Coalition works to build community capacity by collaborating with other nonprofit organizations to improve the health of underserved individuals and refugee populations in Iowa.

The Coalition has focused on building community capacity by leveraging the expertise of community leaders, public health advocates, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. By serving on the Coalition's board, nurses have been instrumental in developing and implementing health promotion strategies tailored to the needs of Latinx and refugee communities. These strategies include educational programs on preventive care and education for community health workers.

Being a member of the Coalition has facilitated partnerships with other nonprofit organizations, enhancing the reach and effectiveness of health promotion efforts. These collaborations have resulted in vaccination drives and health screenings that address the specific health needs of the community. It is anticipated that the Coalition's work will advocate for policy changes at the local and state levels to improve access to healthcare services among underserved communities.

Through board and nonprofit service, nurses may contribute to significant improvements in health outcomes for un-

derserved and refugee populations in Iowa. The initiatives led by the Coalition have increased awareness of health issues, improved access to preventive services, and fostered a sense of community empowerment. These efforts have not only benefited individuals but have also strengthened the overall health infrastructure in the region. For example, the Coalition's events in the second quarter of 2024 provided free screenings to 100 participants and vaccinations to 45 participants, significantly improving preventive care access in the community.

Fostering Innovation

Nurses are often on the front lines of healthcare delivery, encountering new challenges and developing innovative solutions. Serving on boards and nonprofit organizations allows them to share these innovations, which can be scaled and implemented across broader healthcare settings. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within healthcare organizations.

Nurses' commitment to patient care and advocacy can help to strengthen the organizational culture of boards. Their focus on empathy, collaboration, and ethical practice can influence the board's overall

approach to decision-making and governance. This can lead to a more inclusive and supportive environment for all stakeholders.

Conclusion

The inclusion of nurses on boards and nonprofit organizations is essential for enhancing healthcare quality, advocating for patients, and strengthening the nursing profession. Community-engaged efforts like the Iowa Latinx Coalition demonstrate the profound impact that nurses can have when they serve in leadership roles. By leveraging their expertise and commitment to patient care, nurses can drive positive change in healthcare policies and practices, ultimately improving health outcomes for communities.

Nurses' service on boards is not just beneficial—it is necessary. Their unique perspectives and dedication to patient-centered care make them invaluable assets in the governance and strategic planning of healthcare organizations. Encouraging and supporting nurses to take on these leadership roles will ensure that healthcare systems are more responsive, equitable, and effective in meeting the needs of all populations. ■

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Nursing is My Calling Member Highlight

Hope has served as a registered nurse for nearly 30 years. Although she is no longer at the bedside, her influence on patient care remains profound. Now working in administration, Hope ensures that nurses have the resources they need to provide exceptional care. She currently serves on INA's Nurse Practicing Committee.

Watch Hope's, Nursing is My Calling Video

Do you want to share your nursing story? Join us in INA's commitment to increasing the workforce and honoring the dedication of Iowa's nurses. Submit your story! ■

Hope Dunn
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