

Nursing Advocacy Beyond Voting: Contacting and Meeting with Legislators

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Let us fantasize a moment about what it would be like if America's 3+ million nurses or Ohio's 200,000+ nurses were to emerge as a political force equal to its role in the delivery of patient care in all our healthcare delivery settings. Imagine every nurse in America in the next month contacting their United States Representatives and urging them to sign on as co-sponsors to House Bill 2663, which addresses violence in the workplace.

Picture the impact of every nurse in Ohio contacting Senators Moreno and Husted. In the next month, urging them to pass legislation to address racial disparities in healthcare. What would be the response if every nurse in Ohio thanked their state senator and state representative for listening to the concerns of nursing in crafting legislation about appropriate staffing? Additionally, consider the impact of nursing organizations consulting to nominate qualified nurses to the President of the United States or to serve as the next Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Imagine every nurse in each of Ohio's local school board districts meeting with the school board to discuss the critical role of the nurse in public schools. Alternatively, every local school board race could include a nurse candidate. What would it look like if the Governor of Ohio appointed a nurse as Director of the Ohio Department of Health?

It is correct to think these fantasies do not reflect our current affairs' state. However, nurses can make a difference by organizing, considering nursing values when voting, and actively participating in politics. Participation can be done in various ways with differing degrees of time commitment, including communicating with policymakers regarding legislative issues and personally meeting with elected officials.

Checking with the County Board of Elections can confirm who an Ohio nurse's state senator or state representative is. A nurse can then communicate with this individual regarding legislation proposed in the Ohio General Assembly. The Ohio Secretary of State County Boards of Elections Directory can be found at www.ohiosos.gov. A state senator and representative can also be identified through the Ohio General Assembly website – www.legislature.ohio.gov, under "Who Represents Me?"

In addition to helping identify your state legislators, the Ohio General Assembly website provides detailed legislation information and a contact email for each legislator. Hearing schedules and information about committees can also be located on the website. The county Board of Elections site is also a resource for finding U.S. Senators and Representatives. Additionally, the information can also be found at www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member. Information about federal legislation can be found at this location.

Legislators can be reached in various ways, including via email. When communicating via email or a letter, it is essential to remember to be concise, limit communication to under 2 pages, and be sure to express concerns responsibly. Address concerns regarding the state's practice act to a state legislator. In crafting the message, be sure to identify as a nurse and utilize a standard briefing memo, which usually includes the following:

- Summary of the issue
- Background of the issue
- Analysis of alternatives
- Your recommendation for action
- Your contact information (Mason et al., 2022)

In addition to email, personal visits with elected officials are another way to communicate. Cultivating a relationship with a legislator's staff is also a politically savvy thing to do. Due to the number of constituents and geographical factors, state lawmakers are generally more personally accessible than federal lawmakers. Most of Ohio's state lawmakers are accessible locally by appointment on weekends, Mondays, and Fridays. State lawmakers mostly do not have paid staff in their districts but do have staff in Columbus.

Federal lawmakers have an office and paid staff in Washington, D.C., and offices and staff within the state. The best strategy is to call the legislator's office and inquire about an appointment. If you cannot meet with the legislator, ask a staff member who deals with health issues to meet with you as appropriate.

Other valuable strategies in meeting with a legislator or their staff:

- Know the status of the legislation you wish to discuss.
- Keep the visit brief.
- Make your points succinct.
- Utilize personal examples if possible.
- Ask for something specific to close the meeting.
- Leave a briefing memo.
- Attend political functions. Legislators hold town halls or round tables in their area. These events are advantageous for meeting legislators and provide networking opportunities to educate others about concerning topics.

Now that the November elections are over, it is time for nurses to let their voices be heard with the new legislators. ■

Reference

Mason, D., Leavitt, J., & Chaffee, M. (2022). *Policy and politics in nursing and health care*. Saunders.