

## **PARTNERING FOR POLICY CHANGE: PUBLIC POLICY INTERNSHIP FOR NURSES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY HEALTH-CARE MEMBERS**

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### **Abstract**

Nurses care for individuals, families, communities, states, nations, and the health of the planet. While developing relationships with those for whom they care, nurses also develop relationships with and partner with other interdisciplinary team members to impact policies to improve health for all. The 4.2 million nurses across the United States are uniquely positioned to address health-care needs alongside their interdisciplinary colleagues. This article provides a template for educating about policy so that nurses and other interdisciplinary team members learn how to address health-care topics at the policy level in partnership with one another.

**Keywords:** Partnership; public policy; health-care policy; policy education; nursing

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nurses provide care for individuals, families, communities, states, nations, and the health of the planet. They ensure that care provided is unique to individual needs while also considering available resources as well as the environments and systems present. This dedication to learning about the individual and their story assists nurses in developing relationships that help support people in achieving their health and wellbeing goals.

As nurses form relationships with individuals, they also work collaboratively with other interdisciplinary team members to ensure that the best resources and care are provided in a way that people can access them. As expressed in the American Nurses Association's (ANA) *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (2015), "Nurses value the distinctive contribution of individuals or groups as they seek to achieve safe, quality patient outcomes in all settings. Additionally, they collaborate to meet the shared goals of providing compassionate, transparent, and effective health services" p. 4). The document goes on to state: "Collaboration intrinsically requires mutual trust, recognition, respect, transparency, shared decision-making and open communication among all who share concern and responsibility for health outcomes" (p. 6).

The relationships nurses build with people and communities show that they have the ability to listen deeply and identify gaps that are present in the current health-care system. Nurses are with people in their homes, in schools, in hospitals, in universities and colleges, and in research spaces generating new knowledge for the future, as well as in leadership roles implementing the latest evidence-based practice recommendations for improved health.

Working at the intersection of policy and application, nurses are especially aware of the impacts and unintended consequences policies have on patients. This vantage point makes nurses especially adept at identifying the 'Broken Clocks' within the complex systems making up health care. Broken Clocks (Gingerich, 2020) are the gaps that are often missed or overlooked by those immersed in the system. These gaps are often addressed through workarounds or by simply disregarding them, when they actually offer opportunities for improved efficient and effective care. Therefore, people immersed in the system as well as those affected by a system should be involved in changing that system.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, in their 2021 document, *The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity*, identify ways in which nurses should work with other interdisciplinary team members,

leaders, policy makers, payers, health care systems and others to align “public health, health care, social services, and public policies to eliminate health disparities and achieve health equity” (2021, p.1). The 4.2 million nurses across the US (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2021) can and should have a major role in policies that impact health care for all.

According to the American Nurses Association’s (ANA) *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice*, the scope of nursing extends beyond the bedside and direct patient care to include care coordination, administration and leadership, education, public policy, research, and consulting (ANA, 2021). Nurses impact care from the bedside to systems levels, which may include organizational impact through leadership, education, policies and procedures, and culture and environment. Nurses have the capacity, and consequently an obligation, to engage in public policy to advocate for systems-level change for the health and well-being of populations. With this perspective in mind, the Public Policy Internship (PPI) held by the Minnesota Organization of Leaders in Nursing, supports nursing students, leaders and interdisciplinary team members as interns to advocate on health topics that would benefit individuals and populations because of their unique experiences in caring for others. This article will outline the history and partnerships involved in the success of the PPI over the years. Through these partnerships, interns can play a critical role in systems-level changes for health-care improvement.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to have the systems-level change recommended in the *Future of Nursing 2020-2030* report (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021), nurses must partner effectively with colleagues and other individuals within the affected systems. This is possible within a culture that promotes partnership-based approaches. Systems based on partnership are characterized by hierarchies that are flexible, intolerant of abuse and violence, and value empathy and caring relationships in which people work together toward a common goal (Eisler & Montuori, 2001; Eisler & Potter,

2014). In addition, it is important that each individual partnering to affect health care knows and understands their unique contributions. The unique contributions of nurses within health-care settings can be difficult to articulate.

Potter developed the BASE of Nursing Model that includes four domains: Being present, Active caring, incorporating narrative-based evidence through patients' Stories, and Evidence from science (Potter, 2016). When empowered with the ability to articulate their unique contributions to health care, nurses are better positioned to be equal partners in the transformation recommended in the *Future of Nursing 2020-2030* report (2021).

In addition to a partnership-based culture, key stakeholders should be involved in identifying the Broken Clocks in any organization or system that is considering systems-level change to improve health care. By valuing the differing perspectives of these stakeholders, gaps can be identified that then can be used to propose changes to practices and policies to improve health for all.

Guided by the ANA's Code of Ethics (2015), Potter's BASE of Nursing that clearly articulates nursing's unique contribution to health care, and the dedication to health promotion and equitable access to health care, nurses have the power in numbers to partner with patients, interdisciplinary team members, government agencies, health organizations, leaders, payers, and policy makers. These essential partnerships are necessary to identify the Broken Clocks and improve health care for all. The Public Policy Internship focuses on teaching nurses how to partner effectively with others as well as how to propose impactful policy change to improve health care for all.

## **PARTNERSHIP THROUGH COALITION BUILDING**

The profession of nursing holds a long history of coalition building dating back to 1912 when Lillian Wald and her colleagues partnered to establish the National Organization of Public Health Nursing (D'Antonio et al., 2016). Driven by a vision of autonomy in their

practice, Wald and her colleagues formed partnerships and built coalitions with key stakeholders, including insurance companies, donors, schools, and governmental agencies, to establish the foundations of the modern public health nursing model (Lewenson, 2015). The key learning from Wald's success is that building coalitions with a common purpose to develop ownership of an issue can result in policy development or change, having lasting impacts on groups including and beyond nursing (D'Antonio et al., 2016).

A current example of coalition building is the Minnesota Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) Coalition's 2014 initiative to expand practice rights by legislative action for nurse practitioners in Minnesota (Minnesota APRN Coalition, n.d.). The history of this grassroots effort by nurse practitioners (NPs) to improve patient access to health care throughout the state has been a topic of keynote speeches for several years of the Public Policy Internship. Strategic partnerships were built with nursing organizations ranging from school nurses to APRN specialty organizations and nursing unions. The APRN group worked in cooperation with a variety of stakeholders, including hospitals, clinics, and rural health-care advocates, to strengthen the legislative effort. Sharing the story of the Minnesota APRN Coalition has been a long-standing tradition within the PPI, serving as an exemplar and inspiration.

## **HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC POLICY INTERNSHIP**

The Minnesota Organization of Leaders in Nursing (MOLN), was founded in 1984 with the mission to “shape the future of health care by facilitating the professional development of nurse leaders” (MOLN, n.d., para. 2). Since its inception, MOLN supported legislative efforts impacting nurses and nurse leaders in Minnesota. One such effort, related to Minnesota state licensure legislation, highlighted the gap in professional development for nurse leaders focusing on influencing public policy at the local level. Despite identifying multiple nurses that were knowledgeable about the topic and passionate about the need for legislative change, MOLN leaders could not find nurses willing to testify in legislative committees. Recognizing a need to help nurses

feel comfortable participating in legislative efforts, the organization conducted its first PPI in 2008. Initial internships were led by organization members and delivered to audiences of approximately 10 participants in hotel meeting spaces. Over time, the PPI has expanded to serve as many as 80 participants per year and include educational and experiential time at the state capitol.

## **THE CURRENT PUBLIC POLICY INTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

Recruitment of interns occurs through social media, the MOLN website, emails to MOLN members, and a network of academic and professional partners. Public policy topics for the PPI varies from year to year; basic structures and content, however, provide a consistent curriculum. Day one of this two-day event begins with a primer for policy and advocacy, providing foundational knowledge about the legislature and how a bill becomes a law. Next, an inspirational speaker shares their personal story of influencing policy, generally focused on a timely, nursing-related topic. In the afternoon, guest panelists join the interns for a round-robin presentation on key topics such as using social media to engage with elected officials, relationship building, visiting legislators at the Capitol, and working with lobbyists. The end of the day is reserved for interns to meet in small groups to develop testimony for a mock committee hearing held on day two.

Day two is held in an empty hearing room at the state capitol. Interns are assigned to a group with a nursing-related topic that has a legislative history. The groups prepare testimony in support of and/or against the passing of legislation on their assigned topic. A group of community members is recruited to act as mock legislators as the interns present their topics and answer questions posed by the mock legislators. Interns are coached on how to respond and how to pose questions, make comments, and present testimony on their assigned topic. After all testimony is completed, the interns meet for a group lunch and debrief of the event, followed by a tour of the capitol building.

## **PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES**

Annual evaluations informed common themes for PPI program improvements. One theme was the importance of coalition building, grassroots efforts, and partnerships to advance and influence policy that was often contrasted with a general discomfort expressed by interns about how to build and engage in those partnerships. After reading the student evaluations in 2017 it was clear to the conference planning committee that the internship could serve as a first step in coalition building by including interprofessional partners in the event. This recognition led to advertising the internship to local university health sciences programs, such as health-care administration, dentistry, and pharmacy. This expanded offering began in Fall of 2019. The following year, the program was presented via a virtual platform during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although some content in the internship had a nursing-specific focus, efforts were made to create an inclusive learning environment. Among interns, conversations were started about the value of working with other professions to influence policy change. This conscious shift in inclusionary efforts and emphasis on partnership created a real-world experience for interns learning and engaging with their interdisciplinary colleagues, thus forming an understanding of perspectives and influences from various professions. This internship opens doors for public policy advocacy and breaks down barriers to working with other disciplines to enhance population health.

## **PARTNERSHIP WITH INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM MEMBERS**

Through annual evaluation of the PPI, some central elements were identified that contribute to participants' appreciation of the program. Presentations by content experts from other health-care professions providing varying perspectives on health care and policy making were especially well received by the interns. In addition, finding legislative members to share their experiences has made policy efforts more accessible to PPI participants.

## **PARTNERSHIP WITH LEGISLATORS, LOBBYISTS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA PROFESSIONALS**

The PPI planning committee learned from nursing advocacy experiences over time that success in public policy rests on the ability to work together with everyone at the Capitol, including legislators and their staffs, lobbyists, and community members. The goal was to help interns understand the need to work with all the players in public policy development by bringing the perspectives of a variety of disciplines and roles to the internship. Legislative staff, lobbyists, community organizers, social media professionals and operational experts at the Capitol were invited to talk with the interns about their roles and responsibilities and how best to work together to solve problems; this was done in semi-informal round-table discussions with plenty of opportunities for questions.

### **EVALUATION SUMMARY**

Evaluations of the internship, completed through an online survey, allow interns to receive continuing education units. Feedback regarding the event format, mock testimony, and interdisciplinary approach has been very encouraging. Survey comments include feeling empowered to engage with their elected officials or to make an active effort to join a relevant professional organization or a political action committee to continue their policy and advocacy journey. These comments speak to how the learning from the internship has demystified influencing policy change at the state and federal levels. Other survey comments include:

This session grew a newfound passion in me to take action and be a part of policy development and implementation! I hope to continue to learn and hopefully make a difference with healthcare related laws!

...The internship provided me with valuable resources (including tools to communicate with my representatives using a variety of modalities) and ample

opportunities to dialogue with others regarding important policy issues that are relevant to all of us.

Look at politics from a different perspective that a beneficial policy for everyone doesn't have a party but it needs collaboration leadership.

Intern comments also provided opportunities for growth in future offerings of this event, such as allowing more time for networking and peer-to-peer learning. There was also a desire for greater diversity in presenters and perspectives as illustrated in the following comments:

I think I would have liked to know more about how to make the leap from being an individual who cares about joining with a coalition. Or even starting my own coalition. I feel like we talked about these two types of advocacy but it was a little unclear how to graduate from working alone to advocating in a group.

... I would love to hear more about how nursing works with other disciplines to advocate change, such as: Social workers, chaplains/spiritual care, Case management, etc. It cannot be just one of these professionals... but for multiple disciplines to connect and reach out with a common voice.

....It would have been nice to have a non-nurse legislator speak about his/her work with nurses and how it is beneficial in networking and explain what nurses bring to the table.

Evaluating achievement of interprofessional partnerships will be difficult to gauge without long-term follow-up with interns. This platform opens the gateways for interns to consider how interprofessional partnerships benefit advocacy efforts.

## CONCLUSION

The Public Policy Internship began with a group of 10 nursing interns and has evolved to a larger program that also includes interdisciplinary team members. The format promotes partnership approaches and tools for interns to apply in order to successfully affect policy change to improve health care. Future plans include long-term evaluation of the impact on interns' application of the content on policy change, increasing recruitment of interdisciplinary team members, and expanding collaborations with local graduate nursing programs to increase nurse leader enrollment.

The *Future of Nursing 2020-2030* report is a call to action for nurses to engage in systems-level change to address social determinants of health, drive innovative health equity initiatives, and work to reduce inequities within communities (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). The knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through the PPI are drivers for meeting these large-scale goals. Expanding professional development opportunities for a broader nursing audience focusing on policy, influence, partnership, and coalition building, as well as testifying in front of a committee, is foundational to the achievement of the recommendations put forth in the report.

Given the scope of nursing practice and the power in numbers, nursing has the duty and the capacity to impact policy in partnership with others to address health inequities and improve health care for all. Empowered by stories and tools shared in the PPI, interns are inspired and challenged to advocate for patients, communities, states, nations, and the planet, at the policy level.

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