



# IMPACT OF ADVOCACY INITIATIVES ON NURSES' MOTIVATION TO SUSTAIN MOMENTUM IN PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

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The purpose of this study is to elicit insight from the public policy leaders of 2 regional professional nursing organizations on key qualities of their current advocacy initiatives that motivate nurses to sustain momentum in public policy advocacy beyond a single episode. The goal is to inform quality improvement in the development of future advocacy initiatives to increase sustained engagement of nurses. Social cognitive theory was used as the rationale for this qualitative, descriptive study. A purposive convenience sample of executive leadership and board committee members from 2 regional professional nursing organizations were recruited to complete an initial Web-based electronic survey, followed by separate semistructured interview focus groups. One organization was composed primarily of advanced practice registered nurses, and the other group composed of diverse, multispecialty nursing members with varied educational levels. Nine themes emerged, categorized as facilitators or challenges to the positive impact of advocacy initiatives on nurses' motivation. Highlighting and marketing facilitators to the positive impact of advocacy initiatives on nurses' motivation to sustain momentum in public policy advocacy, while designing and testing new initiatives that address the challenges, may increase the number of nurses who sustain engagement in the policy advocacy process. (Index words: Public policy; Advocacy; Political activism) *J Prof Nurs* 32:235–245, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**M**ANY EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, learning tools, and advocacy strategies exist for nurses through professional nursing organizations, undergraduate and graduate nursing programs, yet a significant number of nurses remain disengaged from the process of public policy advocacy (Reutter & Duncan, 2002). There are approximately 3.1 million registered nurses in the United States, composing the largest group of health care providers (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2014). Working collectively, nurses could exert enough political power to reform the nation's health system (Abood, 2007).

Public policy advocacy initiatives developed by professional nursing organizations are designed to educate,

engage, and strengthen nurses' impact in this challenging, yet fulfilling, aspect of their professional role. With an abundance of advocacy initiatives and opportunities available, many nurses desire to learn more about the process of public policy advocacy but may only engage for a very limited period of time, if at all. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study is to obtain from executive leadership of professional nursing organizations a greater understanding of the qualities of advocacy initiatives that deter abandonment and support sustained engagement in the process.

Political participation by nurses includes casting electoral votes (Vandenhouten, Malakar, Kubsch, Block, & Gallagher-Lepak, 2011), but this study examines sustained involvement in public policy advocacy where nurses move beyond heightened awareness of political issues and the importance of becoming politically active and, indeed, engage in various methods of political activism accordingly (Cohen et al., 1996). I think sustained participation in policy is also needed to impact the development and implementation of policy (Cohen et al., 1996).

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## Literature Review

Public policy advocacy by nurses involves utilizing a variety of methods to communicate with legislators and policy makers to influence policy development anticipated to improve the broader determinants of public health (Reutter & Williamson, 2000). Ultimately, nurses would influence reductions in health inequities and socioenvironmental risk conditions detrimental to health, such as impaired access to high-quality care by qualified health providers, poverty, poor housing, poor education, and unhealthy, unsafe work and environmental conditions (Reutter & Williamson, 2000; World Health Organization, 2014). According to Boswell, Cannon, and Miller (2005), nursing apathy toward participation in the political process is pandemic. Critical elements of nursing's code of ethics (ANA, 2011) and professional social contract with society as set forth by the ANA's Nursing's Social Policy Statement highlight the importance of political advocacy by nurses. The contract affirms that public policy and the health care delivery system influence the health and well-being of society and professional nursing; thus, individual responsibility and interprofessional involvement are essential (ANA, 2010).

Nursing's involvement with public policy is crucial to promote social justice and health for individuals, communities, and populations (ANA, 2010). Despite this role expectation as an intrinsic part of nursing practice, many clinical and administrative work environments may not fully support nurses' engagement in public policy advocacy work, creating role conflict (Deschaine & Schaffer, 2003; Williamson, 2001). Conflict between personal and professional ethics, opposing loyalties, and negative images of politics create ethical tensions for nurses (Des Jardin, 2001b). There may be times of inconsistency between goals of physicians and health care institutions with goals of the nursing profession (Des Jardin, 2001b).

Learning to effectively and consistently engage in policy advocacy is deemed an essential component of the nursing role at the associate, baccalaureate, master's, and doctoral levels of education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2008; AACN, 2011; AACN, 2006; National Organization of Associate Degree Nursing, 2006; Reutter & Duncan, 2002). Reutter and Williamson (2000) assert that in order to play a meaningful role in policy advocacy, baccalaureate students need extensive encouragement, along with didactic and practicum experiences, enabling them to better understand broad determinants of health. Students need to think in terms of policy throughout their educational programs (Reutter & Williamson, 2000). Mund (2012) goes further stating that the foundations for understanding policymaking should be grounded in formal nursing education and synthesized with practice and work environments.

Role modeling to instill political confidence in nursing students and strengthen the profession's political influence remains a challenge for educators. Rains and

Barton-Kriese (2001) compared the political competence of senior baccalaureate nursing students with senior political science students. Nursing students viewed politics and policy making as something other people do and a barrier rather than a liberating mechanism for change and empowerment. The nursing students' opinions were shaped by the clients they served; they were less inclined to question authority and more inclined toward "application and service (walk the walk)." (p. 222). Nursing students did not effectively integrate personal citizenship, professional responsibility, and political activism. In contrast, the political science students enriched their knowledge from a variety of sources to develop personal opinions and perspectives adding to who they were as persons and citizens. Political science students could "talk the talk," (p. 222) yet had less community involvement than nursing students and had not integrated political science theory with an understanding of practical application. In her dissertation on civic engagement of baccalaureate nursing students, Brown (2011) surveyed 256 students in the final semester of senior year and found them twice as likely to engage in civic activity (e.g., church/community volunteerism) over political activities.

To effectively lead change, the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011) affirms that nurses must view health and public policy as being within their scope to shape and develop. Nurses must "speak the language of policy and engage in the political process effectively, and work cohesively as a profession" (IOM, 2011, p. 5-1). Incorporating policymaking into the practice and work environment attests to its role as part of the infrastructure of nursing culture. At issue is the fact that without sufficient nursing perspective in the public policymaking arena, decisions are made by individuals who do not understand nursing and the negative impact, although unintended, that their decisions may have on nursing and patients (Willman, 2012).

Participation of nurses in the legislative process is almost always through professional nursing associations. Nurses not only want to participate in the advocacy process but also they want to be successful in positively impacting public policy (Willman, 2012). Professional nursing organizations play a crucial role in the enculturation of political advocacy. Yet, Boswell, Cannon, and Miller (2005) found that a major barrier in nursing's political activism is a historical lack of involvement with professional nursing organizations. Vandenhouten et al. (2011) performed an on-line survey of 468 registered nurses in the midwest and found a low proportion (30%) reported membership in nursing organizations that take positions on political issues. The study also found that nurses with master's or higher levels of education were more politically active than those with lower levels of education. Kung and Lugo (2014) examined factors aligned with advocacy among advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs). They found that APRNs more likely to be politically active were those who perceived barriers to their practice authority and belonged to a

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