

NOVA

©

HEALTH POLICY HANDBOOK



NOVA
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HISTORY

The Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs was formed in 1980 by nurses at Hines Illinois in response to **PL 96-330** giving VA doctors a large pay increase without any change in nurses salaries or any nursing input. In 1982, NOVA spoke at an oversight hearing and this was **the first time a VA Registered Nurse gave testimony to Congress**. Also in 1982 NOVA testified before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs. Since it's inception NOVA has become our voice in Congress with an emphasis on legislative affairs that speaks for our veterans and the nurses employed by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In July of 1987 NOVA focused on healthcare programs for women veterans, wellness and disease prevention. Also, in 1987 **Saturday Premium Pay** was passed and NOVA's annual meeting was changed to the spring when Congress is in session. The Nurse Pay Act of 1990, **PL 101-366** was passed and in 1991 NOVA spent time trying to amend the law due to problems implementing the locality pay system (LPS).

In 1993 NOVA again focused on healthcare programs for women veterans, wellness and disease prevention. In 1996 NOVA developed a mission statement "Shaping and influencing professional nursing practice within the Department of Veterans Affairs." **HR 3118** was signed by President Clinton which included the provision allowing VA Registered Nurses to work outside the VA for pay. In 1997 NOVA launched "Legislatively Speaking," a new communication tool for NOVA members.

Many of you are still probably asking **why nurses should be politically active**. If you are like many of your peers, you might think that one vote will not make a difference or that the outcome of any one election will not affect you or your practice. You might think that someone else will take care of it. If you do not think that elected officials make decisions about your practice, think again and ask yourself these questions:

- * *Will I be replaced by a technician who will perform nursing procedures and do patient teaching?*
- * *If you are an APN (Advanced Practice Nurse) and move to another state will you be able to prescribe medications or will you be reimbursed for your services?*

Statutes and laws are passed to meet present circumstances and future responsibilities. In Congress approximately 10,000 bills are introduced during the two year session with an average of only about 600 becoming laws.

The first step in influencing local, state or federal policy is to learn about the structure and function of the units of government. It

- of how it will affect your patients, your practice.
- ◆ Keep it short, no more than a single page.
- ◆ Remember to address it correctly:
- ⇒ **For US Representatives:** The Honorable (First & Last Name)
US House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
- ⇒ **For US Senators:** The Honorable (First & Last Name)
US Senate
Washington, DC 20510
- ◆ Carefully check spelling and grammar; your professional image is important.
- ◆ Other types of media that we can utilize include: newspapers and magazines; radio talk shows; and television.



When meeting with a Politician:

Do: Work with them one to one, be a good listener, respect their right to disagree, ask if you can help with another issue.

Don't: Be pushy, sarcastic or critical, and don't visit twice on the same issue.

Don't extend your appointment past a reasonable amount of time.

Don't tell them how to vote on an issue

Resources

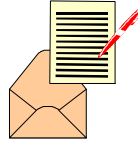
For those with computer and internet access, here are some items of interest:

- ◇ **www.ana.org** : after reaching the ANA site, you can reach the NOVA site by clicking on affiliate organizations then NOLF Organizations, then Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs.
- ◇ **www.whitehouse.gov** : has many links to whatever is currently happening in Washington.
- ◇ **www.va.gov** : to reach the Department of Veterans Affairs web page
- ◇ **www.congress.gov** or **www.thomas.loc.gov** : items of interest at both of these sites are:
Bill numbers, Floor action, Public laws by number, home pages, Committees and schedules, Telephone directories and House directories for the Congress.

For Congressional Directories from the ANA call: **1-800-637-0232**

For U.S. Congress Handbooks call: **1-800-659-8708**

When Making Contacts:



- **Don't** be abusive or threatening.
- **Don't** show anger or resentment.
- **Don't** send a form letter.
- **Don't** begin with "As a citizen and taxpayer."
- **Don't** apologize for writing.
- **Don't** send the same letter to a senator and representative or vice versa.
- **Do** write and say thank you when they do something you approve of and **don't** postpone writing.
- **Do** identify yourself as a Registered Nurse and voter from *specific city/county/state*.
- **Do** speak as a nurse, not a lobbyist for any organization.
- **Do** be specific: Clearly state the following:
 - What action you want them to take, the facts about the issue, the **information** he or she needs: your name and address, the fact that you are a constituent and a nurse, the reason for your call, your position on the issue and the bill number.
- **Do** ask for a commitment.
- **Do** be persistent; follow-up on the contact.
- You can reach the Capitol switchboard at: **202-224-312**.
 - Ask for the Congress person by **name**.
- Remember that calls are answered by staff assistants. **Ask for the assistant who handles health care legislation or governmental affairs.**
- Leave a message with whoever you can.
- Letters to the editor are always a good tool and should be less than 350 words. You should state in the first sentence what you are responding to and identify yourself as a registered nurse. As healthcare continues to change, nurses will become even more important in preventive care. We must continue to be advocates for sound healthcare policy for our patients, families and the nursing profession.
- ◆ Former Speaker of the House Jim Wright once said in his book You and Your Congressman: "If you are wondering whether or not it is really worthwhile to communicate with your senator or representative in Congress, consider this fact...others who disagree with you are doing so constantly."
- ◆ Letters say more than a phone call.
- ◆ Have a key statement. Talk about one issue. Give examples

is impossible to act effectively without this knowledge. More and more citizens are becoming involved in the political process. Elected officials are sensitive to the views of their constituents. **We can influence the system** and serve as advocates for our patients, families and the nursing profession.

Remember:

- ◆ 1 of every 100 adults is a nurse
- ◆ 1 of every 44 registered female voters is a nurse
- ◆ Politicians make decisions affecting employment, work benefits, insurance coverage, health care, etc. on a daily basis
- ◆ Legislators want to hear from their constituents on proposed legislation and how they feel about it, keeping abreast of votes for and against the issue

Nurses are the largest group of healthcare providers in the nation, some 2.2 million strong. Our voices can and do make a difference.

Key strategies for us as citizens and as nurses include:

VOTE

Stay informed about issues.
 Know your Legislators.
 Keep in touch by letters, phone calls, faxes, visits or e-mail.
 Volunteer to help in campaigns.

The 3 C's of political influence include:

COMMUNICATION

Letters, phone calls, faxes, personal visits, e-mail

COLLABORATION

Nursing groups, consumer groups, senior citizen groups and other professional groups with common interests must band together.

COLLEGIALITY

Mutual respect, shared convictions and values, caring for each other to make changes, and caring about issues important to nurses.

How Laws are Made

Just to review:

Our Government makes laws in 3 ways:

- √ Legislation in Congress
- √ Executive Branch rulemaking
- √ Federal Court Decisions



Citizens can participate by voting and communicating with their legislators on the local, state and federal levels. In Congress a bill (proposed legislation) is introduced in one or both houses of Congress (House and Senate). You will see House of Representatives (HB) or Senate (SB) in front of a number. These letters refer to either the House or Senate version of the bill. After a bill is introduced it is referred to one or more committees and their subcommittees. Many bills die in Committee.

Before a bill comes out of committee, changes or amendments are made in an editing session. If the bill is reported favorably, the bill comes out of committee to be considered by the full House. If passed it is sent to the other body. If the 2 Houses pass bills that differ, they are sent to conference committees to be negotiated so that the language is identical.

Agreements on language of the bill by both the House and Senate must be made for a final vote. If the same bill is passed by both Houses it is sent to the President for signature. The President may veto the bill but Congress may override the veto by a 2/3 vote of each house of Congress. When the President signs the bill it becomes **law**.

Citizens can **impact** the process from beginning to end. Many laws start as ideas by citizens in reference to problems that they are experiencing in their areas or may be submitted by various special interest groups such as NOVA, AARP, Disabled American Veterans, and others.

The more constituents who contact their representatives with their support or opposition, the more we can **influence legislation that affects our patients, families and colleagues**. Nurses should be part of the process, and **numbers mean influence**.

Sample Letter

Date

The Honorable (*Name of Senator*)
 United States Senate
 Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (*Last name of Senator*)

OR

The Honorable (*Name of Representative*)
 United States House of Representatives
 Washington, DC 20505

Dear Representative (*Last name of Representative*)

I am a staff nurse at the Providence VAMC and also serve as President of the Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA). Several members of the chapter's Legislative Committee would like to meet with you the next time you are in the District. We would like to discuss quality of care issues that are confronting us during this time of a straight line budget. As you know, nurses are at the bedside of veterans seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and it is very important to us that our Nation's veterans receive the best care possible.

Additionally, we would like to invite you to address our chapter later this year, when you are home just prior to the election. The chapter meeting is scheduled for Thursday, October 29 and will begin at 4:00 pm. We will also invite other health care professionals to this meeting.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe, RN

