



The Importance of Getting Involved: Policy and Governmental Relations at NCSBN

By Kristin Hellquist and Nancy Spector

Because nurses make up the largest category of healthcare professionals in the world, their united voice can shape local, state, national and international policy, legislation, and regulation. When nurses know the issues in the health care environment, they can advocate for initiatives that will positively impact their patients and colleagues. Student nurses are at a perfect place in their career development to become aware of professional issues related to policy and government relations.

Many nursing and health care organizations take part in policymaking. In its role in advocating for public protection and safety in health care, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) works to maintain and build relationships with stakeholders of all kinds, including educators, governmental officials, policymakers, and the public. NCSBN also informs its member boards about the latest news from the healthcare environment, including information on the NCSBN policy agenda, government relations, and education issues.

NCSBN's mission is to provide leadership to advance regulatory excellence for public protection; its vision is to build regulatory expertise worldwide. Student nurses are acutely aware that NCSBN's main business is the development and administration of the NCLEX® licensure examination for assessing competence and safe entry into nursing for Registered Nurses (RNs) and Licensed Practical/Vocational Nurses (LPN/VNs). Additionally, NCSBN provides an organization through which the boards of nursing can act and counsel together on matters of

common interest and concern affecting the public health, safety and welfare.

The Nurse Practice Act

The boards of nursing in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories are governmental agencies that are responsible for protecting the public by regulating nursing practice. The state's or territory's legislature enacts the Nurse Practice Act (laws), which creates boards of nursing, granting them specific authority over the regulation and licensing of individual nurses. All jurisdictions are different, so each Nurse Practice Act and administrative rules and regulations vary, but most of them address the following:

- Interpretation of the Nursing Practice Act
- Nursing education program approval (in all but two states) for professional and practical nursing programs within the jurisdiction
- Articulation of minimum requirements for nursing practice

- Determination of applicant eligibility to practice (review of credentials) for licensure
- Renewal of practice privilege (dependent on continuing competence activities in some jurisdictions)
- Administration of the disciplinary process
- Investigation of complaints
- Imposition of disciplinary action as authorized
- Policy Development

Once a license is issued to the nurse, the board's job continues by monitoring licensees' compliance to state laws and taking action against the licenses of those nurses who have exhibited unsafe nursing practice.

To regulate and influence

NCSBN's activities include: conducting research on nursing practice, education, and regulation; maintaining the Nursys® database that coordinates national, publicly available, nurse licensure information;

publishing analyses, updates, and papers that contribute to the body of regulatory and health care knowledge; and hosting conferences that support the patient safety agenda and that promote excellence in nursing regulation. It is important that policymakers know the various roles of NCSBN so that they will understand why NCSBN's public policy matters in today's health care and regulatory environment.

NCSBN and its member boards of nursing are valued partners in international, federal, state and local issues involving the regulation of nursing and related health care issues. In 2004, the NCSBN Board of Directors adopted its first *Public Policy Agenda*, which will

be updated in late 2007. The public policy positions espoused in the agenda are to:

- Promote safe and effective nursing by advanced practice, RN, LPN, nursing assistants and other regulated health care workers through state and territorial regulation.
- Affirm NCLEX® as a psychometrically sound and legally defensible licensure examination for entry into state and territorial nursing practice.
- Ensure that nurses meet the same expectations for safe and competent U.S. nursing practice regardless of where nursing education occurred.

- Earn recognition as the source for excellence in nursing regulation information, data, and research; this includes the use of Nursys®, the only coordinated source of nurse licensure data.
- Support appropriate federal and state funding of nurse education, practice, research and regulation.
- Promote research-based regulation for use in making optimal policy decisions on the local, state, national, and international levels.
- Uphold the belief that patient safety is optimally achieved through shared accountability between the health care environment and the professional.
- Support two models of nurse licensure: single state and mutual recognition, known as the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC).

The key functions for NCSBN government relations and policy are to:

- Help build and participate in coalitions to strengthen the voice of nursing regulation to promote the mission and vision of NCSBN.
- Assist with grassroots activities of member boards of nursing, when appropriate, so boards of nursing can influence relevant federal and state issues related to nursing regulation. Recently, the NCSBN Board President sent a letter regarding Congressional HR 5688, Healthcare Truth and Transparency Act of 2006, to Representative Sullivan (R-OK) explaining the regulatory opposition to this legislation, noting that regulation is a state mandate and encouraging him and his committee members to ask their state boards of nursing for more information. NCSBN informed its members about this federal legislation, encouraging them to get involved.
- Assist federal and state policymakers by submitting legislative and regulatory comments when appropriate.
- Share information related to noteworthy governmental and policy issues with member boards of nursing, NCSBN staff, and the NCSBN Board of Directors.
- Facilitate opportunities for member boards of nursing to dialogue with key government or external group officials on issues of mutual concern.
- Develop and distribute resources related to NCSBN's current and historical policy positions and advocate for these positions as appropriate.
- Continue NCSBN's participation with already established nursing coalitions. Examples of these coalitions include the nursing network; the Nursing Organization Alliance (NOA); Coalition for Patients Rights (CPR), which is addressing the American Medical Association's Scope of Practice Partnership campaign; and the Americans for Nursing Shortage Relief (ANSR) alliance.

Importance of Coalition Work

Although NCSBN seeks to maintain a valuable place at the policymaking tables, coalition work is paramount in government relations and policy. The ability to cultivate partnerships to help advance an advocacy agenda is key to accomplishing goals across all levels of government. Spotlighting one coalition of particular importance is NCSBN's and NSNA's participation in the Americans for Nursing Shortage Relief (ANSR) Alliance. NCSBN and NSNA are two of the 53 organizations that to belong to ANSR.

ANSR was united in 2001 to identify and promote creative strategies to address the growing nursing and nurse faculty shortages. ANSR members helped pass the Nurse Reinvestment Act of 2002, which is credited with being an important first step in addressing the nurse shortage. It signed on to joint letters to key Congressional members, educating Congressional staff and making visits to members offices when needed. ANSR has maintained that focus to look toward increased funding

levels in order to maintain the nursing profession, through effective education, practice and regulation. ANSR has been successful in bringing together a diverse group of nursing and related organizations, of varying sizes and interest levels, to harness the maximum support and consensus for the important issues facing nurses. Annually ANSR sponsors a Congressional briefing or reception on Capitol Hill that spotlights an issue of importance to nursing and brings information and accolades to members of Congress and their hard working staff. The event has been well received, and everyone involved looks forward to working together to plan and implement this widely supported event. Additionally, ANSR members have made Capitol Hill visits to key members of Congress and their staff on important issues in a collegial and cooperative way to represent all the members of the

alliance. When asked to be a resource on important nursing issues, ANSR has provided Congressional testimony. Further, this coalition has been a catalyst for encouraging the writing and dissemination of consensus letters on key federal legislation, allowing members of the Alliance the ability to pick and choose which letters their organizations wish to support. This example highlights the value of coalitions because we can achieve more when we collaborate with others.

There are many ways for nurses to influence policy decisions. Getting involved is more important today than ever before because there are many complex issues that nurses and other health care workers face. Since nurses are affected by the health care decisions that are made, they should be present to provide their valuable insights and perspectives. Individually nurses can voice

their concerns and ideas by joining committees at their workplace, by writing articulate letters to their newspapers and state or federal legislators, and by becoming active in their professional organizations. Getting involved and working together are key concepts for today's nurse. ©

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