

# ADVOCACY IN ACTION—HOW ONE AONE CHAPTER IS INFLUENCING PUBLIC POLICY

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Advocacy is the pursuit of influencing outcomes—including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic and social systems, and institutions that directly affect people's lives (Cohen, et al, 2001). How effective are nurses in assuring that our voice is not only heard, but understood, when the need arises for us to provide information and advocate for change that will affect public policy? Whether policy is in the form of legislation or regulation, it is vital that nurses take the time to understand the issues and to make sure information is transmitted to those empowered (or elected) to make decisions.

Whether individually or as part of a local, state or national nursing association, nurse leaders need to be aware of the issues important to the nursing community and know how to advocate for their profession. From mastering the nuances of issues to knowing who to contact and how to network to best get their point across, nurse leaders need to understand the tools and techniques used in advocacy. Knowing that government impacts our everyday lives, nurse leaders should be aware of what they can do to make sure that legislators, who may only have superficial knowledge of nursing issues, do not take actions that adversely affect the profession and the patients for whom we care.

## **MONE and staffing legislation in Massachusetts**

The Massachusetts Organization of Nurse Executives (MONE), a chapter of the American Organization of Nurse Executives (AONE), represents over 675 nursing leaders from diverse practices

## **The Art of Advocacy**

Any time you advocate for a particular issue you must first have a thorough understanding of the issue. This includes looking at the issue from all sides and obtaining all the relevant facts. Factual data is important as it provides evidence about the issue at hand. Equally important are stories or illustrations that convey a real-life image about the message you are advocating. Be prepared to present examples from your professional practice that paint a picture of the results or consequences of decisions. Talk with other professionals and construct an arsenal of information for presentation.

Part of the strategy of changing policy is knowing who does or does not share your point of view. Build coalitions with groups that share your perspective. This is a powerful and effective method you can use to influence the outcome of your advocacy efforts.

Legislators are inundated with requests, suggestions and complaints on a daily basis. Although they have a limited amount of time for meetings, legislators are usually very receptive to hearing from constituents—both voters and organizations within their district. Effective advocacy efforts on your part should include face-to-face meetings at their state offices or within their district, and—especially important—inviting them to your hospital or health care facility to speak with frontline care givers, as well as hospital leaders. This gives the politician the opportunity for face time with constituents and provides them a positive public relations opportunity. In addition to personal visits, providing them with information via email, telephone or written communication can also be effective. If the legislator is not available, speaking with their legislative aide may be an alternate way of communicating your position.

across Massachusetts. MONE members employ, manage and influence more than 40,000 nurses and health care workers and administer operating budgets of over \$1 billion annually. Much like other AONE chapters and state nursing organizations, MONE provides direction and leadership for the advancement of professional nursing and patient care and for the achievement of excellence in nursing management practice. This support for nurse leaders, of course, includes advocacy.

One of the most protracted and contentious issues in Massachusetts began in 1995 when the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA) introduced state staffing legislation. They asserted that the proposed bill was about sufficient staffing rather than staffing ratios.

As MONE concentrated on opposing this legislation, which included offering testimony opposing the legislation and citing numerous deleterious effects of mandating strict ratios, the organization also developed a working relationship with the Massachusetts Hospital Association (MHA). On this particular issue, the two organizations exhibited a synergy and commitment to prevent enactment of a bill—that due to its rigidity—would have had a negative impact on patient care. Together, as coalition partners, MONE and MHA argued that lack of consideration of the needs of the individual patient, the skills and abilities of the nurses, or the wide variation in terms of hospital type and size, made the original MNA bill baseless.

While some legislators were receptive to information the coalition provided, the recurring question became: "I understand what you oppose, but what are you for?" That critical question led to the development of *Patients First*, a first-in-the-nation voluntary initiative that provided transparency by posting staffing plans and nurse-sensitive outcome measures on a public website. Developed in conjunction with a knowledgeable and committed state senator who worked with our coalition, this information provided a framework for alternative proposed legislation. This has become the platform for Massachusetts nurse leaders' current advocacy efforts.

### **The Importance of Teamwork and Coalition Building**

Over the years, MONE has worked to build our advocacy team and have more tools available to advance our state advocacy efforts. Under the direction and oversight of the MONE board of directors, the MONE government affairs committee frames the advocacy efforts of the organization and its members. In 1995, the MONE Board of Directors had the foresight to engage a lobbyist whom over the years has proven to be a necessary resource in helping the organization understand the complexities of the legislative process. A lobbyist bridges the gap between legislators and organization members and maintains the organization's connection to legislators by providing a consistent presence at the state House.

One effective strategy that is utilized by MONE and other state organizations is to build coalitions to strengthen a position. For example, in the case of legislated ratios other organizations signed on to lend their support in not only opposing staffing legislation but supporting an alternative bill that would require each individual hospital to develop a plan that was relevant to the kinds of patients they cared for. These partners included the Home Health Association, the Behavioral Health Association as well as hospitals and health care systems across the state.

Searching for coalition partners can be beneficial for virtually any topic and many specialty organizations have advocacy committees or groups that develop positions on issues of concern. In addition to the resources available through AONE, some other groups include the Association of periOperative Nurses (AORN), the American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) and other specialty organizations that represent nurse midwives, school nurses and other groups. When multiple perspectives can be presented on a given topic, the ability to influence policy makers increases. Consider state leadership organizations and consult with other states' AONE chapters who are willing to share effective advocacy strategies. Collaboration is an effective method to enhance and share information and best practices related to advocacy.

Another effective strategy utilized by MONE and other state organizations is to engage their membership by laying the groundwork for advocacy. These efforts might include developing position papers and talking points concerning specific topics, as in the staffing case scenario presented earlier, MONE developed information regarding staffing ratios and mandatory overtime. Written tools such as these assist our members in framing their conversations and, at the same time, ensure a consistent message. Supplying our members with this information when an organized advocacy effort is required is imperative. Members are encouraged to meet with their own legislators one-on-one and present themselves as knowledgeable resources in helping the legislator understand the issue.

Political boot camps—educational sessions that provide a forum for members to learn the intricacies of the legislative process—are another useful tool often available within your state. MONE regularly conducts a boot camp to educate members about:

- the process of a bill becoming law in Massachusetts
- the role of a lobbyist

has not allowed the passage of mandated staffing legislation in Massachusetts. In its last session, the state House and Senate passed different versions of staffing legislation, one supported by the nurses' union and the other supported by MONE. Consensus was not reached prior to the end of the legislative session. As the latest session began, the same two bills have been filed and MONE will engage once again in the debate using the tools outlined in this article adding more to our arsenal as the debate evolves.

**Seize the moment: get involved**

In a 2008 Gallup survey, Americans once again chose nurses as the most honest and ethical profession for the seventh straight year (Gallup, 2008). Nurses are highly respected and viewed as credible to the public as well as to legislators. This example of public trust is a clear advantage when approaching a policy maker. Trust and public admiration are qualities that any legislator can respect. When given the opportunity to work with a group with such qualities, politicians are likely to listen and be open to your side of an issue.

Nurse leaders who want to take an active role in advocacy issues should take the first step and join nursing organizations at the local, state or national level. Once you become a member, become active in the organization by joining a committee, task force or coalition and give feedback when the organization surveys members or asks for contributors to special projects. AONE, for example, asks yearly for members to play an active role by joining a committee or task force. The simple process of filling out a Willing-to-Serve application, available on the AONE website ([www.aone.org](http://www.aone.org)) is the first step to seeking a greater voice in the organization's future. Information about the 2010 AONE committee and task force opportunities is available on pages 8-9 of this issue.

Those with firsthand knowledge about health care issues, such as nurse leaders, are powerful in influence and are most critical in creating important policy change. As a participant in this critical role you must keep abreast of the important issues for nurses and health care workers in your state and local community. Don't be afraid to contact your local legislator with information or questions and be sure to become

active in your state's AONE affiliate as well as other local nursing organizations. Advocacy requires purposeful action, a targeted strategy and diligence. Lack of advocacy allows the views of a few to impact the lives of many.

**References**

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