

## **Nurse In Washington Internship 2015**

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Politics? Yuck! Too busy to be bothered with that? Republican? Democrat? Disgusted with the whole lot? The changes happening in health care are too confusing? There are many reasons not to want to get involved, but I will suggest that there are as many reasons to jump right in.

Like it or not, the Affordable Care Act is changing the national conversation about health care, and nurses provide the bulk of that health care. We have to be in the conversation. We can unite on issues of nursing education, full practice authority (practicing to the extent of our education and training), and access-to-care issues. We can advocate to our Boards of Nursing, and to our state and federal legislatures. What do nurses bring to the table? First, the nursing profession maintains a unique knowledge, wisdom, and expertise. Studies show that quality nursing care saves patients' lives. Second, nurses represent a large constituency. There are over 3.1 million nurses in the US. Third, nurses have the trust of the nation (confirmed by every Gallup poll since 2002), and broad-based bipartisan support. What we lack are top leadership roles in policy-making positions.

One great way to get started is to join your professional organization. ASPAN establishes guidelines for practice standards to elevate and protect our nursing practice, and provides leadership opportunities to affect policy decisions. The ANA lobbies the legislature on our behalf. And the Nursing Organizations Alliance (NOA) is a coalition of nursing organizations that creates strength in numbers, and offers the annual NIWI to help nurses develop advocacy skills.

Every nurse is familiar with advocacy. The American Nurses Association (ANA) Code of Ethics states that "the nurse promotes, **advocates** for, and protects the rights, health and safety of the patient". In politics, advocacy is support for, or recommendation of, a particular cause or policy. The Nurse In Washington Internship (NIWI) provides nurses the opportunity to learn how to influence health care through legislative and regulatory processes.

I was privileged to attend the 2015 session in Washington, DC, with the help of a scholarship from ASPAN. I was able to learn from health policy experts and government officials, network with other nurses representing different states and specialties, and visit members of Congress. I met with legislative aides for Representative George Holding and Senators Richard Burr and Thom Tillis of North Carolina. We had made appointments several weeks in advance, and the aides that advise the legislators on health care issues were

interested in speaking with nurses. We discussed Title VIII funding for advancing nursing education, funding nursing research through the National Institutes of Health, and improving veterans' access to quality healthcare. Between meetings, my delegation of North Carolina nurses enjoyed lunch in the Senate dining room.

Thomas Jefferson described the political process in the United States this way: "We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate." The Nurse In Washington Internship prepares us to participate.