

2018 Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) Scholarship Report
By Carolyn Bennett BSN, RN

As the Arizona PeriAnesthesia Nurses Association (AzPANA) Governmental Affairs representative, I felt the need to learn as much as possible about the process of making and passing laws. My job description, in part, says I need to stay informed about legislative issues regarding nursing and health care in Arizona. After getting involved at the state level, and with encouragement from my peers, I applied for one of the American Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses (ASPN) Nurse In Washington Internship (NIWI) annual scholarships. Shock is an appropriate term to describe how I felt when I received my award letter. With my award secured, I applied for NIWI and began a relationship with the sponsoring organization, The Nurse Organization Alliance (NOA).

NOA has perfected the NIWI program into a smooth, educational, and friendly operation. My learning began almost immediately as I prepared for the days in Washington DC. New terminology and formal processes that I vaguely remember from non-nursing classes were resurfacing. NOA outlined the process, and had a conference call to clarify information and answer questions. NOA provided lots of great resources for the attendees.

We researched our congressional representatives and were guided through the process of making appointments with our district legislators. To acquaint ourselves with our representatives, we looked at their voting records, committee appointments, special interests, and current standing on health matters. My district legislator was out of the office on the day I was scheduled to go to Capitol Hill, so I met with one of his many legislative staffers. I learned that a staffer can be very instrumental in getting favorable information to the representative. Due to the huge volume of bills a congressional representative must review, he/she relies on staff to get the facts and report findings. Therefore, if you can educate and stimulate a passion within the right staffer, it may well lead to a positive outcome. We learned that a brief but powerful personal story might be enough to stir the passion in the person you speak with to leverage a positive vote from the legislator. Being a constituent is also vital to the person needing your vote; never underestimate this power. Before asking for support for a bill, check to see if the legislator has sponsored or signed off on it. If so, thank him or her for the support. In addition to personal visits, outline your request in a brief letter if you want to be taken seriously. Other important homework before asking for support might include: building a relationship with the staff, offering to provide your expertise to the office and staff, and researching and knowing your data. Know where the money is coming from, find or identify mentors within the legislative community, and as always – be a team player.

Senate appointments were made by NOA so all the constituents from each state could meet as a group with the senators or office staff. I was one of three from Arizona, and we used time proved in class to develop a plan and role-play so that our actual meeting flowed efficiently and presented a united nursing front.

Goals of the visit are to solicit support for a bill and educate the legislator or staff about the importance of the bill content. A request for the legislator to support a bill is referred to as an “Ask,” or purpose for the meeting. NOA prepared three “Asks” pertinent to nursing. They all had bipartisan support and were straightforward. They included:

- H.R. 959 / S. 1109 The Title VIII Nursing Workforce Reauthorization Act
- The Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs at \$244 million in FY 2019
- H.R. 3692 / S. 2317 The Addiction Treatment Access Improvement Act

A thank you note is appropriate. Within a week or two, send a follow-up via e-mail or phone to request the status. This step is expected and a necessary step in the process. Keep in mind, successes are measured in small increments.

The class was treated to expert information from governmental affairs activists, attorneys and lobbyists. All were incredibly insightful with much experience in public policy. They all reinforced that nurses are “gold,” and well-respected across party lines, as the Gallup Poll knows: nurses are the most trusted profession.

“March Madness” is what this time of year is referred to at the Capitol. Each building had huge lines to get inside. The Capitol green was covered with thousands of small shoes, with each pair representing a schoolchild who died from gun violence. Ladies in red were everywhere representing college-educated females. Many physician residents were easily spotted by their crisp, white lab coats. Every building was packed.

By the end of the conference, there was a general feeling of satisfaction as we heard stories of the visits. We conquered our fears inside the Beltway! Now that we understand the process, we must keep in mind that much work can be done at home, as most policies are developed at the local level. I left with a greater appreciation for the legislative process, and a new vocabulary. I have new governmental affairs nurse friends, and a continuing resource in the NOA organization. I encourage other members to become involved at all levels of public policy. A huge thanks to ASPAN, and AzPANA for making it possible for me to attend this most interesting and informative weekend conference.