

2018 Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) Scholarship Report

By Shelly Rinfret BSN RN CPAN

What is NIWI?

The annual 2018 Nurse in Washington Internship Program (NIWI) was held in Washington, D.C., Sunday, March 11 to Tuesday, March 13. NIWI is an educational opportunity sponsored by the Nursing Organizations Alliance. This program educates nurses of any background or level of education to better understand the legislative process and to learn how to be an effective nursing advocate in local and national government. There were 80+ attendees from all around the country representing many specialty nursing organizations for which they are passionate about. It was inspiring to see so many nurses in attendance with advanced practice degrees, and that many more enrolled in programs to attain them.

The NIWI experience is unique and unlike any other educational program I have attended. Prior to attending the event, the registered attendees were given step-by-step instructions on how to set up an appointment with their respective House Representatives for Tuesday morning in Washington, D.C. during the NIWI program. Senator appointments were on that day as well and were already arranged by the program. These meetings were with Congress' respective legislative assistants. The purpose of these appointments was for the nurses to share three "asks" with the staffers, hoping for support and endorsement from the legislators. These "asks" are generic in nature, chosen by the Nursing Community Coalition (of which ASPAN is a member) and are related to issues that affect all nurses, not specific to each nurse's specialty.

This year, the "asks" were:

- 1) Continued co-sponsorship for Title VIII Nursing Workforce Reauthorization Act (H.R. 959/S. 1108) which helps bolster growth in the nursing workforce by focusing on education, practice, recruitment and retention to help offset the impending shortage
- 2) Continued support of the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs, \$244 million in fiscal year 2019
- 3) Co-sponsor the Addiction Treatment Access Improvement Act (H.R. 3692/S. 2317). This Act will help extend and make permanent the ability for advanced practice nurses to prescribe medication to treat persons with opioid-dependent disorders

The program began on Sunday afternoon with lectures on legislation and continued Monday with panel discussions featuring local "Hill" experts and networking. On Monday afternoon, there was role playing, and explicit instructions and guidance to prepare us for our individual meetings with Congress on Tuesday. Early Tuesday morning started with breakfast and a briefing, and we were on our way to the Hill!

Why Attend?

My 35 years of nursing experience has been at the bedside in a clinical background. While I consider myself a lifelong learner and strive to remain current and informed related to my practice, I certainly acknowledged I was lacking even a basic understanding of the overall

legislative arena. I didn't even know what I didn't know! I recently had committed to my state component MESPAN's (Maine Society of PeriAnesthesia Nurses) board of directors that I would resurrect the Governmental Affairs role which had been vacant for several years due to lack of interest. I knew that, in order to succeed and be effective in that role, I would need to be more informed. The NIWI opportunity could not have come at a better time. I was encouraged to apply for an award through ASPAN to attend in 2018. I followed through and was very grateful to learn that I had been chosen as one of two recipients.

What I Know Now

The visits with my Maine legislative assistants went very well on that Tuesday. I was fortunate to actually meet Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-ME1), my House Representative, and have a photo taken with her! The assistants were very receptive, interested and seemingly committed to the three "asks" that I presented to them. I had prepared in advance to share specific Maine nursing data related to our shortage of nurses, nursing programs and faculty and provided opioid-related death statistics to make the issue more personal to our state. The assistants busily took notes, and all shared they had nurses in their families. Before leaving, I thanked them graciously for their time. As instructed by my NIWI mentors, I will follow up by email with each of the people with whom I met.

My interest in governmental affairs is piqued and I am committed to continue to explore, learn, and advocate. I will make it my responsibility to be informed at the local level. My goals are to demystify the legislative process, and be able to explain and share it in a way that it is understandable and meaningful to every nurse. I would highly encourage component leaders to consider financially supporting their governmental affairs representatives to attend this valuable program. Knowledge is power, and we know with 4,000,000 nurses in this country we have a voice with which to be reckoned!