



State Legislative Advocacy

The “How To” Manual

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

You may have heard the statement that “all politics are local”...well it could also be said that “all practice is local.” That’s right, your nursing practice, your ability to care for patients safely, your role in delegation and supervision of unlicensed care givers, your ability to practice in an Advanced Nurse Practitioner role, are all determined by state law, the *Nurse Practice Act*. And who determines what that law should be? That’s right...your state legislators!

YOU ARE THE EXPERT

Legislators are elected officials who come from many walks of life with widely varying experience and knowledge of the health care system. You are the expert when it comes to the nursing profession and the health of your patients and communities. These policy makers care what you think. Your point of view is important to legislators as they craft the laws and regulations that affect your profession and patients.

You are in a unique position to get involved in policy making and advocacy. Nurses are always speaking on behalf of their patients’ welfare and this process is exactly what is effective in dealing with the legislature: gathering information, assessing the effects, providing a plan and speaking out to make changes.

SO, HOW DO I GET STARTED?

You will be most effective by getting to know your Senator and Representative from *your* legislative District. So, first of all, find out who they are and how to contact them. You can do this by visiting the Tennessee Nurses Association web site at www.tnaonline.org, clicking on “Government Affairs,” then “Government Affairs Links,” then “Locate Your Legislators.” Just enter your address and both your Senator and Representative will appear, complete with pictures and contact information.

This is housed on the General Assembly’s website where you can also find out what committees and subcommittees they serve on. They have much more influence over legislation within their committee jurisdictions.

HOW DO I FIND OUT WHAT BILLS ARE OUT THERE?

There are a number of ways to stay informed about legislation. The TNA website (www.tnaonline.org) houses a wealth of information. As the legislative session progresses, bills of interest and the TNA position and action will be posted. TNA members will receive regular e-mail alerts and status reports.

On the General Assembly website at capitol.tn.gov, you can visit the various links and search for individual bills, bills sponsored by a particular legislator, the status of a bill—where it is in the process, how much it is expected to cost (fiscal note) and how legislators voted on any particular bill.

You may watch the political process in real time, all committee meetings, and both the Senate and House sessions, are videotaped and available on the General Assembly website. Local news media also include regular legislative updates and reports.

If you need assistance researching a bill, contact the Tennessee Nurses Association at tna@tnaonline.org or call 615-254-0350.

NOW YOU ARE READY TO.... EFFECTIVELY LOBBY YOUR LEGISLATORS

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Just as your time is very limited, so is a legislator's. Know the bill number (SB for Senators, HB for Representatives) and the issues. Have your facts ready.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

Introduce yourself as a registered nurse (nursing student) and a voter from a specific city or county. And remember, you are speaking on behalf of yourself as a nurse, not as a lobbyist for any organization.

KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CLEAR

State your position clearly and then be available to either answer any questions the legislator might have or offer to find out the answer to any question you don't know. It is alright to say "I don't know the answer"...never fake it! Offer to get the information to them as quickly as possible and always follow up with the legislator.

KNOW THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

Understand the steps a bill must go through to become a law. (See the diagram on page 5)

BE FIRM, BUT FRIENDLY, PERSISTANT, AND NOT A PEST

Without making threats or promises, try to get your legislator's commitment to vote for or against a bill, or take a leadership position. Don't stop with just one contact. Follow up one kind of contact with another. You may want to encourage your colleagues to make contact...there is strength in numbers.

CONCENTRATE ON THE ISSUE, NOT THE PERSON

Doing your homework and preparing for your conversation with your legislator will allow you to concentrate on the issue. Even though it isn't always possible to remain in harmony with your legislator, remember that with rare exceptions, they are honest, intelligent public servants trying to represent ALL of their constituents.

BE EVEN HANDED

Take time to contact your legislator when you approve of their action, as well as when you wish to voice your opposition to a bill. Always thank your legislator for a positive action on a request; they get lots of requests, but not many thanks.

COMMUNICATE LIKE YOU RUN YOUR UNIT/FLOOR/HOSPITAL/ CLASS ROOM/BUSINESS

Be cooperative. Be realistic. Be practical. Never break your word...if you tell a legislator you will do something, *do it*. Continue to educate yourself regarding the legislative issues of concern to you. Bills change during the process. Know where your bill is and what it looks like at all times.

TIPS FOR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

LETTERS

Keep it clear and focused. A one-page letter should be enough to communicate your thoughts and express your stand on a particular issue. Remember the KISS philosophy (keep it short & simple). Write it yourself, make it personal, and don't simply send on a mass-produced letter. In the salutation, use Dear Senator (last name) or Dear Representative (last name) and not "Congressman" (that is the federal designation). Provide your contact information (address, phone number, E-mail). Ask for a response to your letter.

E-MAILS

Put the Bill number and your request in the subject line, "Subject: Please Support HB4321 the Food for All Act." Follow the same guidelines as for a letter.

How a Bill Becomes a Law in Tennessee

