

Voices of Oncology Nursing Society Members Matter in Advocacy and Decisions Related to U.S. Health Policy

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The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS), a member of the Nursing Organizations Alliance, invests in advocating for health and public policy decisions by sending members to the Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) program annually. NIWI provides a forum to educate nurses on the legislative process, giving attendees a better understanding of political, legislative, and regulatory issues facing nurses. The 2014 ONS delegation participated in training and lobbying focused on federal funding issues, nursing education, workforce oversight, and funding for nursing research. The three-day program ended with a Capitol Hill visit where nurses met with their respective legislators or their staff, using skills learned at NIWI briefings to influence policy for nurses and the patients they serve. Critical health and public policy decisions affecting nurses, their practice, and their patients require participation in and understanding of the legislative process. This article provides a glimpse into the three-day experience of the delegates attending the 2014 NIWI.

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Advocacy requires action; nurses, by profession and personality, are natural advocates. Nurses assist patients in problem solving and educate caregivers and family members. Nurses are also needed to advocate for their profession when patient safety and quality of care is threatened. For example, expanding prescriptive authority for advanced nurse practitioners can be achieved only through the legislative process. If nurses do not provide input to legislatures on the benefits of expanding prescriptive authority, negative consequences in patient care may occur. In spite of nursing being one of the most trusted professions in

the United States (Gallup, 2013), nurses often believe their voices are lost in the crowded field of advocacy. Because nursing is such a trusted and valued profession, people listen when nurses speak.

The Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) continues to be an active partner in the public policy arena, providing expertise on the nursing workforce and quality cancer care. With responses to health-care implementation guidelines for federal agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid) and interaction with state legislators on specific issues (e.g., scope of practice,

prescribing authority, increasing tobacco taxes) that shape the provision of health care, ONS has become a go-to organization for decision makers interested in learning about nursing and cancer issues. By offering policy positions that echo the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011) report on the future of nursing, ONS vigorously promotes the equal role of the nurse in health care. As a member of many health-care coalitions, ONS is known for its vocal support of federal grants in education, research, and workplace safety. From evidence-based research to the importance of understanding the implications of the national nursing shortage, ONS members are educating elected officials on the ever-evolving direction of patient-centered care and nursing practice.

In an effort to develop and support nurse advocates, ONS has sent members to the Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) annually since 2000. Those nurse advocates join about 100 nurses from across the United States to learn advocacy on behalf of nurses and nursing issues. NIWI is organized by the Nursing Organization Alliance, whose membership consists of about 60 nursing organizations. Its aim is to provide a forum for identification, education, and collaboration and to build on issues to advance the nursing profession. NIWI provides attending nurses the opportunity to learn to influence health care through legislative and regulatory processes (Nursing Organization Alliance, 2014).

This event includes members of the ONS leadership who are selected through a rigorous nomination and selection process. The NIWI program hones advocacy skills to motivate and mobilize nurses. Eight ONS board members and chapter leaders attended NIWI in April and focused on federal funding issues for nursing programs.