

# **When Did You Last Talk With Your Legislator?**

January 1, 2007 marks the beginning of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress. If you have not yet spoken with your federal legislators about nurse practitioners, now is the time to do so. As legislators begin introducing new bills for this session of Congress, it will be important for nurse practitioners to inform their legislators about problems and issues facing nurse practitioners and their patients that need to be addressed.

If you have never talked with your legislator, you will want to make an appointment the next time he or she comes home. Most legislators have offices in a centrally located town in their districts or, in the case of senators, in the capital and in the larger metropolitan areas of the states they represent. A call to "Telephone Information" in those locations should help you to locate their offices and local phone numbers. If you have difficulty finding them, the League of Women Voters or your local Republican and Democratic headquarters should have the information you need. If you have visited your legislator, let them know that you have spoken before, that you would like to talk again. If you had a previous successful interaction the legislator may remember you with pleasure and will want to meet with you again.

If possible, when visiting your congressperson, take a group of NPs with you. Be sure to let the staff know that you are a constituent. Legislators are elected to represent the people in their electoral district in government. As a result, they are particularly interested in the concerns of the population responsible for putting them in office.

## **TALKING WITH YOUR LEGISLATOR**

When you speak with your legislators, what should you talk about? First, introduce yourself and tell briefly what you do. Ask if they are familiar with NPs. If there is hesitation, or you are told, "Well my wife's sister is a nurse," then you know you need to educate. Discuss what NPs are and what they do. Describe a typical day to them. It is often useful to give them brochures such as the Nurse Practitioner to examine after you leave. Describe the patients or clients you serve and why they need you. Invite them to your practice to see you in action.

If you are discussing third-party reimbursement, you need to be frank about the medical activities NPs undertake. Conclude by discussing the specific issues needing the legislators help. Ask for assistance and advice. Follow up with a letter of thanks for taking time to speak with you. In that letter, you can restate the issues you discussed. Let the legislator know that you will be in contact with his or her office in a few weeks, in case more information or help is needed.

## **CONTENT OF DISCUSSION**

If you are discussing specific legislation, limit yourself to one or two bills. Frame your issue in the light of larger issues of concern in the area of health and health care so that your legislator will see the importance of your concern. They are especially concerned about access and the delivery of quality cost effective health care. Many are interested in health care for vulnerable populations. If your issues relate to these concerns, you will have their ear.

Tell them about the bills in which you are interested. Bill numbers are useful to help staff identify and locate the pieces of legislation you are discussing. However, don't be afraid to discuss pending legislation without bill numbers, if they are not available. If you wish specific support such as becoming a cosponsor of the bill, tell the staff and ask them to contact the legislator who introduced the bill to "sign on" as a cosponsor. Your post visit thank-you letter should reiterate your request for assistance. A follow-up call a few weeks later to see if any action has taken place is appropriate. Let the staff know that you will be doing this, so they will be prepared for your call.

It is important to realize that you don't need to be an expert to discuss the legislation with your legislators. If you don't know the answer to questions, inform them that you will try to find the answer or have someone with the answer get in touch. Call resources such as the Academy Office of Health Policy to obtain answers or assistance.

If you are unable to obtain an appointment with your legislators, visits with staff members who have the ear of your legislators are appropriate. Your approach should be the same. Find out how familiar they are with NPs and what NPs do. Educate the uninformed and offer to supply them with additional information and materials if they are

needed. Such resources are available through the Academy. Discuss your issue in the context of the larger issues with which the legislator is concerned and follow-up as previously described.

### **WRITING TO YOUR LEGISLATOR**

In addition to visiting your legislators in their home offices, writing letters, sending e-mails or faxes to their Washington offices regarding specific issues is important. Written correspondence should always clearly identify that you are a constituent.

Your correspondence does not need to be long, but it should be in your own words. Form letters are not as well received as those that are individualized. Briefly state your issue, ask for support and, if possible, address some good reasons why your legislator should support you. The statement of your issue should appear early in the letter. The action you desire your legislator to take should be clearly stated. Ask for a specific reply to your request, offer help if further information is needed, and thank them for their assistance.

Letters should be addressed as follows:

The Honorable (name of senator)  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name of senator)

(or)

The Honorable (name of representative)  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr./Ms. (name of representative)

E-mail addresses and fax numbers can be obtained through your legislator's office.

### **TELEPHONE CALLS**

Although person-to-person contact with legislators or their staff produces the best results, telephone conversations can be productive. They are particularly helpful when legislative votes are pending in committee or on the floor of the House or the Senate, or when you are paving the way for a professional representative in Washington to make contact with specific legislators or staff.

When you call, ask for the legislator's "Health LA (legislative assistant)". Sometimes there is more than one; in that case, briefly describe your issue to the receptionist. If that individual is not available, leave a message for your call to be returned and obtain the name of the person with whom you should be speaking. If your call is not returned in a reasonable length of time, call again. (Reasonable should be measured by the urgency of the issue, i.e., if you are calling to ask for support of a vote pending that day, calling back the same day is not unreasonable. However, if you are calling to discuss an issue and to educate, a few days wait is not unreasonable.) You want to be able to speak with the person when they have time to really hear what you have to say.

It is important to be professional and courteous during these calls regardless of how the legislative representative behaves on the phone. Abruptness or curtness on their part often has more to do with stresses "on the hill" than with the issue you are discussing. When initiating the conversation, again, introduce yourself and identify your issue. If your agenda is not urgent, tell them you would like to talk with them for a few minutes and offer to set another time for the call if they sound harried or abrupt. calls should be followed by a letter thanking the LA for spending time with you and reiterating the issues you discussed. File the name of the health LA in a safe place so that you will know who to contact in the future regarding NP issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

Generally, legislators and their staffs are very interested in hearing and gathering information from constituents, particularly when they provide answers to dilemmas they are facing in the legislative arena. Nurse practitioners have those answers, but they need to be communicated. So don't hesitate to make those contacts. After all, you are the expert when it comes to your patients and practice and their needs. Then, let us know how it turned out.

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