

## My Experience at NIWI

I recently returned home from an incredible journey from Rochester, MN to Washington DC for a 5 day learning adventure that has completely changed my view of advocacy for nursing. I was very fortunate to be sponsored by the American Society for Pain Management Nursing (ASPMN) to attend the 2009 Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) Program.

NIWI's goal is to teach nurses to become effective health care advocates via a well developed curriculum, beginning with the basics of Congress, the legislative process, budgets and appropriations. We also learned about the importance of developing good working relationships with congressional "staffers" who do the majority of the legwork for the Senators and Representatives, such as research, drafting policies, handling correspondence, meeting with local constituents and giving behind the scenes tours of the capitol and galleries. And finally, the NIWI organizers inspired us, as nurses, to take the steps to actually become advocates.

Throughout the years of my membership in ASPMN I have been a part of Government Relations, Media Task Force and Advocacy Committees and am currently a member of the Communications Committee. I have always been passionate about pain management, equality of health care among all people (including psychiatric and chemical dependency care) and of nursing related issues in general. I have been so impressed with the incredible advocacy I've seen demonstrated over the years by individual members of ASPMN and of the organization as a whole. The monthly conference calls for these committees have provided me with lots of invaluable information from those who have "gone before me" as pain management, health care and nursing advocates. Several annual conferences have also provided our ASPMN members with priceless information on advocacy.

This year, I knew it was my time to step up to the plate and confront my unfounded fears. Like most nurses, I've been advocating for my patients since I was a graduate nurse, and I've done several public presentations - so I know I won't actually die from public speaking! So why was I so afraid of taking the training and advocating on Capitol Hill?

I think it is human nature to fear what we do not understand and I did not understand the legislative process. The only class I've ever had on Government was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I felt overwhelmed just watching C-Span with the lingo, the use of Parliamentary Procedure and trying to understand the various roles of each person speaking. The other source of my stress was the national focus on the economic crisis and health care reform. The combination was daunting. I kept asking myself, who am I to lobby congress? Why would anyone care about what I have to say?

After attending NIWI, I can tell you with absolute certainty that we can ALL provide important perspectives to our legislators in Washington. In fact, it is one of the most important activities we can undertake as patient advocates.

I am so glad that I took that plunge and became a NIWI scholar. Many attendees had fears, questions and doubts similar to my own and the NIWI staff expertly addressed each of these issues. Prior to the conference, they helped set up meetings with our senators and representatives. The educational material presented was detailed and informative. The initial session was entitled “Healthcare Reform in the Age of Obama.” A panel of congressional staffers provided us with “the scoop” on the inside workings of congressional offices and offered tips on how to present our requests (or “asks” in their lingo), efficient ways to follow up with the congressional members and ways to make an overall positive impact during our visits.

Additional sessions addressed basic advocacy training, including “Advocacy 101 – Overview of Public Policy Process” and “NIWI Advocacy Training: The Asks.” Another panel featured Expert Nursing Advocates sharing their personal stories of becoming health care lobbyists, and offering tips for novices.

Conference attendees were then divided into groups to form a strategy so each attendee would have time to present their requests. After role play examples of what to do and what NOT to do, we were offered individual assistance in preparation for our trip to Capitol Hill.

Finally, on the third morning, we were ready! Our group marched up through cherry blossoms to Capitol Hill for our scheduled meetings with the staff members of Senator Amy Klobuchar and Representative Tim Walz. Neither meeting was scheduled with the actual Member of Congress, but luckily, we ran into Senator Klobuchar as we were leaving and were able to have a brief hallway meeting and photo op. The 20 minutes scheduled for each meeting went very quickly. Even though we were a little nervous, the meetings were a great success and hopefully, we were able to build some rapport with the staffers so they will be persistent in bringing our requests forward. We also offered ourselves as future resources whenever they have a health care related issue and need the advice, support or expertise of a Registered Nurse.

Our “asks” of the staffers included:

1. Support \$215 million for the Nursing Workforce and Development programs at the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in fiscal year 2010 funding.
2. Provide additional resources to the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR).
3. Show support for nurses by placing statements in the Congressional Record about the importance of the nursing profession to the health care system.
4. Support for S. 660 Hatch/Dodd National Pain Care Policy Act of 2009. (Along with thanks to Representative Walz for his support of the corresponding bill HR 756).

I spent the rest of the day at the Capitol, experiencing the buzz of politics and enjoying the great diversity of people that were visiting. I had overcome my personal fears and I

gave a voice to the issues that I am passionate about. I acted on my rights as a citizen of the United States to “petition the government for a redress of grievances” and to offer my expertise as a nurse to the people we voted into office to represent the will of their constituents.

On my flight home I reflected on the events of the week and realized that while my trip to DC had come to an end, my journey of advocacy was just beginning.