

A conversation with Rep. Lois Capps

● An inside look at what it takes to advocate for health care.

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, I've written extensively about the importance of nurses increasing their political advocacy to protect health care amid ongoing threats. To gain an insider perspective on advocacy, I recently turned to former U.S. Rep. Lois Capps to get her expert advice.

A long-time school nurse and public health advocate before seeking office, Rep. Capps spent nearly 18 years in Congress representing her California constituents and championing nurses and health care until retiring in 2016. She received the inaugural Congressional Nurse Advocate Award from the American Nurses Association (ANA) in 2013, as well as the 2015 President's Award. Here are some of the insights on advocacy she shared with me during our conversation.



ANA President Pamela Cipriano and former U.S. Rep. Lois Capps

On nurses and political advocacy: When I first ran for office, I had to overcome many hurdles. I remember reading in the newspaper, "What does she think she's doing running for Congress? She's just a nurse." As a school nurse, I knew what families cared about most—health care and education—and could speak to these issues. It got me elected, and I survived every 2 years on the basis of my background.

Nurses are valuable carriers of healthcare advocacy messages, so we need to see our jobs as not just 8 to 12 hours a day. If we don't advocate for the things we care about as a profession, nobody else will.

On successful strategies: Meeting with your House representative in person, if you can, is important. Get on the schedule at the district office to speak to your representative or to a staff member, and take other nurses with you. Invite congressional staff to your work setting to call attention to an issue or to share a triumph. Phone calls, letters, and emails also are all effective means of advocating with your representatives.

In any conversation, keep your message simple—it's really just telling your stories to elected officials as if you were teaching a patient.

On making a difference in turbulent times: When meeting with members of Congress who have an opposing viewpoint, start with something positive to break the ice—maybe mention your support for one

of their initiatives. Educating officials at every level of government who make decisions affecting our lives and our practice, such as staffing requirements or public health funding, allows us to influence critical issues.

There's no time like the present to get more involved. Nurses can start at their local schools, helping with improvements to health policies or running for the school board. State legislatures are a very effective arena for nurses, and it's not far from the statehouse to the U.S. Capitol. We have the knowledge and skill to represent constituents, and caring about people is one of the biggest assets nurses bring to the policy world. We also must support nurses running for any level of office. And the most basic right and responsibility for all is to vote.

On key healthcare issues: We need to continue to work on access to affordable, quality health care. We must make sure we have enough nurses, including nursing professors, and more funding to help those who can't afford to advance their education. Better end-of-life care is needed, as is more prevention and public health. We must advocate for greater funding and access to mental health services with a major effort to combat the opioid crisis.

Get more involved

I appreciated the time I spent with Rep. Capps, who affirmed nurses' inherent ability to successfully engage in political advocacy and the importance of stepping up our individual and collective involvement in any way we can. If you want to become more involved, go to ANA's www.RNaction.org for updates and advocacy opportunities. ★



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