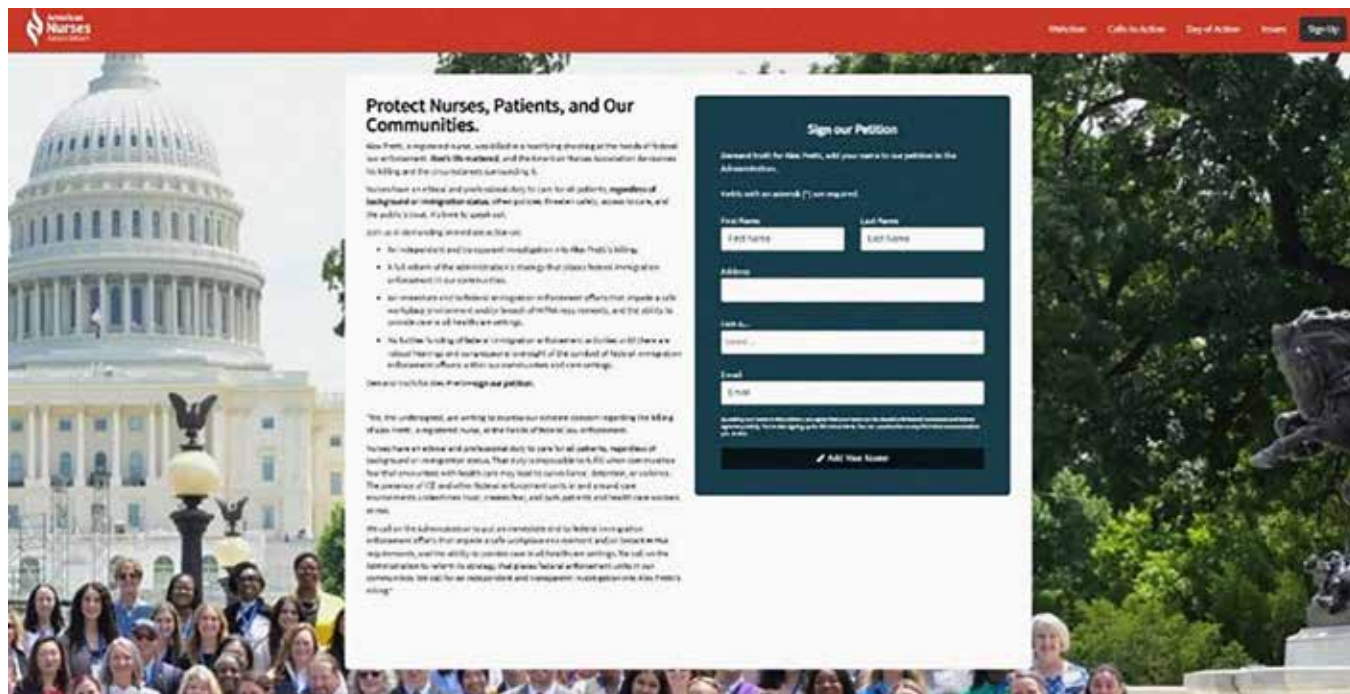


Healthcare Policy Needs Nurses

Renee Schoenbeck, BSN, BA, RN, CEN



Healthcare is changing rapidly, and nurses are carrying the weight of it every day. Yet despite our frontline expertise, nursing voices remain vastly underrepresented in legislative and policy spaces. Only a small number of nurses currently serve in Congress, and in United States history, no nurse has ever served in the Senate. Meanwhile, lawmakers make decisions every day that shape patient care, workforce safety, access to care, and healthcare operations. Often, they do this without firsthand understanding of the realities at the bedside.

That gap matters.

Nurses see the real-world impact of policy every day. We are the ones explaining to families why there are no inpatient behavioral health beds available, managing escalating violence in overcrowded emergency departments, and helping patients navigate care they cannot afford. Nurses do not just understand healthcare systems. We understand the human impact behind them.

Advocacy is not separate from nursing practice. It is an extension of it. The American Nurses Association Code of Ethics identifies policy engagement as an ethical responsibility of the profession. Nurses are uniquely positioned to influence policy because we bring something lawmakers desperately need: frontline truth, clinical expertise, and the lived realities of the communities we serve.

Why Many Nurses Do Not Engage in Advocacy

Despite the importance of legislative engagement, many nurses do not feel equipped or empowered to participate in policy work. Long hours, stress, burnout, and lack of exposure to advocacy can make legislative engagement feel intimidating or inaccessible. Many nurses also do not recognize that advocacy can begin with simple actions such as joining a professional organization, contacting elected officials, or sharing frontline experiences. Mentorship, leadership support, and professional development play an important role in helping

nurses build confidence and engage in advocacy throughout their careers.

For many nurses, the first time speaking with legislators or participating in policy discussions can feel far removed from bedside nursing. Yet many quickly realize they are already equipped for the work. Nurses communicate under pressure, advocate for safety, navigate conflict, and translate complex realities into actionable decisions every day.

What Advocacy Looks Like in Nursing

Legislative advocacy does not require running for office or becoming a policy expert overnight. Advocacy exists on a continuum, and nurses can contribute in many different ways.

Advocacy may include:

- Writing letters or emails to legislators
- Writing op-eds
- Providing testimony during committee hearings
- Utilizing social media to raise awareness

- Sharing personal clinical experiences to inform policymakers
- Serving as subject matter experts on healthcare issues

Importantly, nurses do not need to agree on every political issue to engage in advocacy. Much of nursing advocacy is fundamentally nonpartisan and rooted in patient safety, public health, workforce sustainability, and access to care.

Translating Frontline Experience Into Policy Impact

In Colorado, nurses have served as subject matter experts and stakeholder advisors on workplace violence prevention legislation, helping shape conversations around implementation realities and patient-centered approaches. Through testimony, stakeholder meetings, and collaboration with healthcare organizations and legislators, nurses have helped ensure that frontline perspectives remain central to policymaking discussions.

Colorado nurses have also played meaningful roles in advocacy efforts surrounding healthcare access, reim-

bursement structures, health inequities, and protections for vulnerable populations. These efforts matter because laws have real-world consequences. Policy decisions determine whether healthcare workers have the resources needed to safely care for patients during moments of crisis. Behind every policy discussion is a patient, a family, or a healthcare worker living the consequences of those decisions.

Nurses Are Uniquely Equipped to Lead

Nurses already possess many of the skills necessary for effective advocacy. Every day, nurses communicate under pressure, navigate conflict, critically evaluate situations, collaborate across disciplines, and advocate for safe patient care in high-stakes environments. These same skills translate naturally into legislative and policy work.

Perhaps most importantly, nurses bring credibility, humanity, and lived clinical experience to policy discussions. Nurses care for patients and families during some of the most vulnerable mo-

ments of their lives, giving them unique insight into the barriers communities face. While healthcare policy discussions often center around budgets, regulations, and systems, nurses help re-connect those conversations to people. Nurses speak from firsthand experience, and that perspective is invaluable.

A Call to the Profession

Healthcare policy will continue to shape the future of patient care, workforce safety, and health equity. If nurses are absent from those conversations, decisions will be made without the perspective of the profession closest to the patient experience. Advocacy is not reserved for executives or policymakers. It belongs to every nurse.

The future of healthcare should not be built without the voice of nursing. When nurses lead, policy becomes more grounded, more human, and more effective. Patients, healthcare workers, and communities are stronger because of it. ■

“Notes from the Field” Colorado Public Health Association – Public Health Nurse Section

Rita Beam MS, RN, Public Health Nurse Consultant, liaison CPHA PHN Section for CNA

“The ANA believes advocacy is a pillar of nursing.” PHNs joined nurses across Colorado and the nation in advocating for state health policy, health equity, and the protection of nursing practice and professional identity. They also stood with the CNA and ANA in calling for accountability and justice after the violence in Minnesota that resulted in a nurse’s death. PHNs also support legal action challenging the U.S. Department of Education’s exclusion of nursing from the definition of “professional degree” programs. To build advocacy skills,

the section hosted a presentation from the CPHA Policy Committee on policy and advocacy. PHNs served on the committee and participated in Public Health Day at the Capitol.

Currently, PHNs will submit abstracts and are planning a Skills Workshop for Public Health in the Rockies, being held September 22nd – 24th, in Keystone, CO. In addition, they are preparing and planning for the Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP), a five-year nationwide initiative administered by

CMS to strengthen access, improve outcomes, expand the workforce, accelerate innovative care models, and modernize technology-enabled services for rural and frontier residents. Colorado received \$200,105,604.17 in the first budget year. Colorado will release a \$160 million RHTP, Request for Applications in June 2026. For more information, visit hcpf.colorado.gov. ■