

A Historic Membership Assembly: South Carolina Nurses Were in the Room



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The 2026 American Nurses Association (ANA) Membership Assembly in Washington, DC, was historic in many ways. As ANA celebrated its 130th anniversary, we had the honor of representing South Carolina nurses during several days that reminded us why it matters for nurses to show up, speak up, and help shape the future of our profession.

Membership Assembly is always a busy and meaningful experience. Nurses from across the country come together to discuss the most pressing issues facing our profession, advocate on Capitol Hill, and make decisions that help determine the direction of nursing. This year, however, felt different. There was a sense that we were not simply attending another annual meeting but witnessing history.

We began our first morning with a fireside chat between President Jennifer Mensik Kennedy and U.S. Representative Lauren Underwood of Illinois, a registered nurse serving in Congress. She spoke about the importance of nurses advocating for our profession and using our experiences to influence policy. Hearing from a nurse who has taken her voice from the bedside to the halls of Congress was a powerful reminder that nurses belong in every room where healthcare decisions are made. This year was also a milestone for South Carolina. We brought one of our largest groups to participate in Hill Day: SCNA Legislative Commission Chair Marissa Bartmess; APRN Chapter Vice Chair Nakisha Lee; Kim Tuemler and Tese Stephens from the Medical University of South Carolina; SCNA President-Elect Nakita Barnes; and SCNA President Jada Quinn. Together, we met with members of South Carolina's congressional delegation

to advocate for issues affecting nurses, the nursing workforce, and the patients and communities we serve.

Seeing such a strong South Carolina presence on Capitol Hill was meaningful to both of us. As President and President-Elect, we believe that advocacy is not separate from nursing; it is part of nursing. Decisions made in Washington affect our ability to educate future nurses, maintain a strong workforce, practice to the full extent of our education and training, and provide safe, high-quality care to the communities we serve. Our profession must be present when those decisions are made.

The most historic moment of the 2026 Membership Assembly came with the vote to expand ANA membership eligibility to include Licensed Practical Nurses and Licensed Vocational Nurses (LPNs/LVNs). To be in the room as delegates during this vote was an experience we will not soon forget. The decision came after thoughtful discussion, differing perspectives, and respectful debate among nurses from across the country. We witnessed firsthand what professional governance looks like as nurses bring diverse experiences to the table while remaining committed to the profession's future. The vote opened the door for thousands of LPNs and LVNs to participate more fully in professional advocacy, leadership, and policy development through ANA.

For us, this moment was especially significant because it reflected a broader vision of nursing. LPNs and LVNs have always been an important part of the nursing workforce and the care of patients and communities. This historic decision recognizes the value of their contribu-

tions and creates new opportunities for nurses across educational pathways to strengthen our collective voice. As we sat in the room for this historic vote, we were reminded that change does not happen simply by hoping for it. Change happens because nurses are willing to show up, engage in difficult conversations, listen to different perspectives, and make decisions about the future of our profession. That is the responsibility and the privilege of professional nursing leadership.

The 2026 Membership Assembly was more than another annual meeting. It marked a defining moment in ANA's 130-year history and a new chapter for the nursing profession. We returned to South Carolina proud of the nurses who stood beside us on Capitol Hill, honored to have represented SCNA during this historic vote, and even more committed to ensuring that South Carolina nurses have a strong voice in the conversations shaping healthcare. The horizon for change is before us. As nurses, we cannot wait for others to determine the future of our profession. We must be willing to act, advocate, and lead. South Carolina nurses were in the room, at the table, and on Capitol Hill, and we intend to keep showing up. ■