Nurse Day at the Capitol

Nursing 6043: Policy Power and Politics

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Texas Woman’s University
Texas Nurses’ Day at the Capitol is an annual two-day event hosted by the Texas Nursing Association (TNA). The purpose of the event is to visit legislators and voice support or opposition of key bills significant for nursing. The event empowers and enables the profession of nursing to speak as one voice. For many nurses, this is their first face-to-face encounter with senators and representatives from their district. TNA provides the attendees with background information for specific bills that affect patient care and impact the nursing profession (Texas Nurses Association [TNA], 2009).

The Events I Attended at the 2009 Nurse Day at the Capitol

On Monday, March 2, 2009 I attended the three-hour Essentials of Effective Legislative Advocacy, presented by Joe Gagen. Mr. Gagen is an attorney and a legislative grassroots trainer. He presented many helpful tips and suggestions for meeting with legislators. He advised us all on things that we should do and things that we should not do. I found that this seminar was very useful for my encounters at the Capitol the next day (TNA, 2008a).

Following Mr. Gagen’s seminar, I attended Nurse Day at the Capitol Issues and Orientation. This was a two-hour program presented by the staff of TNA. The 2009 nursing legislature agenda included the nurse practice environment, nursing shortage, nursing regulatory environment, school nurses, prescriptive authority for advance practice nurses, Board of Nursing appropriations, licensing and certification of allied health professions, and health policies. TNA provided an overview and opportunity for questions regarding each of the specific bills. Each participant received a packet outlining our schedule, maps for the capitol and a list of talking points (TNA, 2008b).
The following day, Tuesday, March 3, 2009, I observed the public hearing of Senate Bill (S.B.) 476 during the Senate Health and Human Services (HHS) committee meeting. This committee is chaired by Senator Jane Nelson, and was attended by Senators Deuell, Huffman, Nichols, Patrick, Shapleigh, Urestil, West and Zaffirini. S.B. 476 is designed to improve the environment for the hospital nurse in an effort to promote patient and nursing work environment safety. The bill specifies the provision of input from nurses on staffing decisions, prohibits mandatory overtime and waives sovereign immunity for nurses employed in public hospitals that engage in patient advocacy (Texas Legislature Online [TLO], 2009b). During this meeting, the chair opened for public testimony. Four representatives (three from TNA and one from the Texas Hospital Association) presented their reasons for their support of this bill. The four testimonies were presented in a timely, well-researched and professional manner. Each testimony provided the committee with a different perspective of the bill. Their emerging themes included strengthening the voice of nursing, maintaining nursing retention and the provision of safe care. All four testimonies clearly encouraged Senator Nelson to move forward with this bill. Senator Nelson responded favorably. She agreed that “no two hospitals are the same” and “no two hospitals have the same staffing needs” (Senator Jane Nelson, personal communication, March 3, 2009). A fourth TNA representative provided further testimony and responded to questions that the committee had regarding the percentage of nurses needed for the staffing committee proposed in the bill.

Witnesses against the bill were then given an opportunity to testify. There were two representatives from the National Nurses Organization Committee (NNOC). Their platform testified against the language used in the bill, arguing that the bill is too permissive. The
representatives did not present themselves in a professional manner, demonstrated by their physical appearance and their cell phone ringing during their testimony. In addition, the NNOC representative reprimanded the committee for talking while she was presenting her testimony. A third nurse presented her testimony. Her stance was unclear and her responses reflected limited research. Her plea was for the opportunity to offer an amendment to the bill. Senator Nelson challenged the witness with additional questions in an attempt to clarify the witness’ position.

Senator Nelson and other committee members asked both sets of witnesses multiple questions about the bill, their areas of practice and how this bill impacted their ability to practice in their respective institutions. The addition of an amendment was requested by one of the HHS committee members. A member of TNA was asked to help provide information for this amendment. Senator Nelson requested a speedy formulation of the amendment so the bill could be submitted by the committee for placement on the senate calendar.

The adoption of resolutions was then presented to the full senate. Resolutions to adopt “Cotton Day” and “Rolling Plains Day” were proposed and passed. Senator Nelson recognized Faith Christian School for their team spirit and sportsmanship on the football field. Dr. Keller, from Fairfield Texas, was recognized as “Doctor of the Day.” We were then escorted to the main stairwell for a photograph with Senator Nelson, her 19 constituents and the remaining nurses from TNA.

Prior to my arrival for TNA Nurse Day at the Capitol, I communicated several times via email and phone conversations with Senator Nelson’s Director of Scheduling, Nicole Matous. Upon my arrival at the Capitol on Tuesday morning, Nicole informed me that she had arranged for me to have a brief, personal encounter with Senator Nelson. I had the
opportunity to present Senator Nelson with an artificial fruit and vegetable basket in support of S.B. 344, which allows the provision of farmers’ market produce for WIC and food stamp recipients (TLO, 2009a). I thanked her for her support for the infants, children and adolescents of Denton County, District 12. A picture of the event is found in Appendix A.

Following my encounter with Senator Nelson, I was able to talk with Nicole about Senator Nelson’s future plans. Nicole encouraged me to visit the senator’s office in Grapevine, Texas after the legislative session ends in June. She provided various suggestions for ways that I could become actively involved in Senator Nelson’s future initiatives.

In the afternoon, my group was scheduled to meet with Texas House of Representative, Myra Crownover, House District 64. My group consisted of myself and 3 other nurses. Upon arrival, her aide, Logan, who informed us that Rep. Crownover was unable to keep our scheduled appointment, greeted us. After introducing ourselves, Logan realized that three of us were constituents from District 64. Logan immediately excused herself and went into Rep. Crownover’s office. When she returned, she apologized and stated that Rep. Crownover will always take the time to meet with her constituents when they make the effort to visit her in Austin. Logan ushered us into the office and introduced us to Rep. Crownover.

We only had a few minutes to talk with the representative. We introduced ourselves and clearly stated that we represented TNA. We each expressed our support of S.B. 476 and House Bill (H.B.) 591. Rep. Crownover immediately interjected that she knew all about the bills and that she was in full support of them. She expressed her delight in meeting “real nurses, real people from my district”, elaborating that she “is impressed” when she can talk with nurses that are from the district that she represents (Myra Crownover, personal
communication, March 3, 2009). She proceeded to tell us about her husband’s 17-month battle with leukemia. She ended the brief visit reinforcing her backing of Texas nurses and the bills that TNA supports.

How did you influence policy favorable to nurses?

During my visit to the Capitol, I had many opportunities to influence policy favorably to nursing. Chaffee (2007) reinforces that political influence occurs through verbal and non-verbal communication. Non-verbal forms of communication, such as wearing professional attire, maintaining eye contact and presenting a positive demeanor, are necessary components when meeting with legislators (Sullivan, 2004). Taking part in large-group activities, providing testimony at public hearings, interacting one-on-one, and sending emails are important components of verbal communication (Chaffee; Sullivan). By joining with TNA, I participated in a group activity that carried the same message to all of the legislators that I came in contact with. Although over 300 of us visited many different legislators, we were able to present the same message and speak as a unified voice. The TNA representatives that provided public testimony to Senator Nelson contributed to this influential process. By listening to their testimonies, as well as to the testimonies of the opposing NNOC, I was able to strategize and construct a dialogue to counter their opposing views. Leavitt, Cohen and Mason (2007) note that providing a united front through collective action provides greater political impact than approaching a legislator individually. As a constituent, I was able to further strengthen my influence by presenting Senator Nelson with her fruit and vegetable basket and my personal encounter with Rep. Crownover. The opportunity to make small talk with both aides, Nicole and Logan, provides me with relational contacts for the future. The importance of having face-to-face contact, meeting with their aides, leaving business cards
and signing their guest book provided small, but impressionable avenues for future contact (Sullivan).

What struck you the most about how laws are made in Texas?

There were two things that struck me about how laws in Texas are made. The first is the speed at which a bill is introduced, presented to an assigned committee and public hearing and then submitted to the full senate for vote. When I observed the HHS committee go through this process with S.B. 476, I was surprised at how quickly the committee determined to write their amendments and resubmit the bill by that same afternoon. Senators can introduce a bill during the first 60 days of their session (Texas House of Representatives [THR], 2009). I have never realized how many bills are handled during each regular session. The Texas legislature meets every odd-numbered year for 140 days. This does not leave the senators any time to waste. I am accustomed to working on hospital committees that require weeks, if not months, for decisions to be made. It was very impressive to see the timeliness and efficiency of Senator Nelson and the HHS committee. Nurses need to contact their representatives quickly when desiring political change. Allowing weeks and months to pass by without contacting key legislators is a barrier for nursing to exert influence (Chaffée, 2007; THR).

The second thing that I recognized during this assignment is the amount of power that the legislative aides have. Time spent with a representative’s aide is just as important, possibly more important, than spending time with the representative. Sullivan (2004) notes that nurses must know their audience if they really want to exert their influence. One must not assume that a young aide does not understand the political process or cannot influence a senator or representative. The aides have the power to influence the decisions made regarding
the passing or the rejecting of bills. Legislators are very busy and are unable to keep up with
the volume of information needed to make decisions about which bills to pass or reject. They
rely heavily upon the aides to direct them on many initiatives. The nurse must establish a
good rapport by making small talk in an effort to build a relationship with the aide. The nurse
must also recognize the importance of educating the aide on the bill you are supporting or
rejecting. Explaining it in understandable terms and inquiring whether the aid would like
further information will help nursing issues to be heard in the legislator’s office as well as on
the political floor (Leavitt et al., 2007; Sullivan).

What implication does this have for nurses?

The components of being prepared, communicating in a clear manner, having a plan of
action and asking for favors are important for nurses that are attempting political change.
Nurses must be thoroughly prepared by gathering data, examining current research and
understanding their personal views on the issues at hand. Writing and utilizing talking points
helps the nurse succinctly verbalize these important issues. The nurse must be able to assess
the power dynamics involved with the legislator, their staff and the political arena. In
addition, assessment of the nurses’ power base and ability to maneuver throughout the
political environment is necessary. Finally, knowing and understanding opposing views is
part of being thoroughly prepared. The nurse must examine the views of the opponent so that
articulation of an appropriate response is prepared in advance (Leavitt et al., 2007; Sullivan,
2004).

Legislators are bombarded with hundreds of bills every day (THR, 2009). Presenting
key talking points using non-technical language is very important. Legislators do not work in
hospital or health care settings. Many of them do not understand the terminology embedded
in many of the health care bills. The nurse must be able to translate healthcare language into an understandable, non-threatening discourse. Using their rhetoric and phrases in conjunction with strong, affirmative language yields successful political outcomes (Leavitt et al., 2007). Legislators will give you a few minutes to present your stances on issues and bills. If they don’t understand what you are trying to say, they will be attentive, but they might not really hear what you are saying (THR).

Having a plan of action is also necessary for nursing’s political success (Sullivan, 2004). TNA briefed us all prior to our legislator encounters. They provided inside tips about the senators and representatives personality types, personal experiences and past voting records. This enabled many of us to strategize for the most effective use of our five-minute time slot. Nurses that are not uniting with larger organizations must consult seasoned politically active nurses prior to their legislative encounter (Leavitt et al., 2007).

The concept of quid pro quo, or a favor for a favor, is very common in the political arena. Nurses interface with the public every day. Rep. Crownover expressed her indebtedness to nurses for caring for her ill husband. She expressed her gratitude and gladly agreed to support bills in favor of safe staffing and improving nursing education. Nurses must utilize these opportunities and ask for favors that are due to the profession (Leavitt et al., 2007; Sullivan, 2004).

What follow-up action are you planning?

Influencing political legislators does not stop after personal encounters at the Capitol. It is very important to follow each visit with a hand written thank you note and reminder of the bills that should be supported or opposed. In addition, follow-up phone calls are appropriate in the weeks following (TNA, 2008a). Two days after meeting with Senator
Nelson and Rep. Crownover, I mailed them each a hand-written thank you note (see Appendix B). The following week, I called both of their offices. I was able to speak with both Nicole and Logan. I reminded them of our visit, conversations and support of S.B. 476 and H.B. 591, as well as other bills supported by TNA. A week later, I received a signed thank-you note from Senator Nelson (see Appendix C).

Suggestions to make this experience better next year and things that I would do differently if I were running next year’s event

Overall, the experience in Austin was very positive. I have a few, very minor suggestions for improvements for next year. In an effort to make next year a better experience, I would encourage all TWU participant’s to attend the preliminary session conducted by Joe Gagen (TNA, 2008a). It was a very enjoyable, engaging and informative session. The examples that he shared were very applicable and mirrored the experiences that I encountered on my visit the next day.

If I were running the 2010 Nurses Day at the Capitol, I would do two things differently. First, I would remind every participant that they represent TNA when they are visiting the legislators. If nurses do not agree with TNA’s stance on a particular bill, nurses need to be reminded that this visit is not the time to voice personal opinions to the legislators. Opposing opinions should be reserved for another meeting that is arranged on the nurses’ own time (Chaffee, 2007). Secondly, I would arrange a brief meeting for the groups that are speaking with the House of Representatives (afternoon meetings). TNA had each of us meet with our assigned Senate groups, and it was very helpful to identify who was in your group. I think that the same concept would have been helpful for the House of Representative groups. It would have been helpful to spend a few minutes during the orientation to meet each other
and briefly discuss our strategy for the next day. Since the afternoon groups were significantly smaller, group members could coordinate their plan with regards to speaking with a legislator.

TNA Nurses Day at the Capitol was a rewarding experience. The thought of personally meeting with a legislator terrified me. TNA equipped me with excellent talking points and a review of the issues prior to my encounters. I was pleasantly surprised that the experience was easier than I had imagined. I would definitely return to Austin to speak on behalf of nurses, patients and healthcare as well as other issues that I believe would impact individuals, families and institutions in my community.
Appendix A

Picture with Senator Nelson
Appendix B

Letters to Representatives
Dear Senator Nelson,  
March 5, 2009

Thank you again for all of your support for TNA nurses. We had a great time this week at the Capitol. It was exciting to watch the public hearing on S.B. 476. I was so proud to be one of your constituents in District 12! I support S.B. 476 and H.B. 591. Thank you for all that you do for nurses, as well as the people in District 12. I will send Nicole the photo of you and I (I gave you the fruit/vegetable basket). Sincerely,
Robin Henson

Dear Representative Courseuil,
March 5, 2009

Thank you for taking the time to meet with the TNA nurses this past Tuesday afternoon. I was so happy to meet you in person, since I am one of your constituents. I support S.B. 476 and H.B. 591 regarding safe hospital environments for nurses. Thank you for your support of these rules and for the nurses in Texas.

Sincerely,
Robin Henson RN CENP 64
Appendix C

Response Letter from Senator Nelson
Dear Ms. Henson:

Thank you for your thoughtful gift and for your support of SB 344. I look forward to the passage of this important legislation and am so grateful for all that you do for children in our area!

As always, please do not hesitate to let me know any time I may be of service to you.

Very truly yours,

[Signature]

SENATOR JANE NELSON
References


