

Getting Involved in Health Policy & Advocacy

If you can send a fax, send an e-mail, or leave a brief phone message – just as you do for your patients, friends, or family – you can "do" health policy advocacy. It's that easy. When you need something for a patient, or for your work setting, you ask for it. You explain why it is needed, what it will accomplish, and what will happen if you don't get it. These are the basic elements of advocacy.

Being involved in advocacy is important – if elected officials do not hear from neonatal nurses – they and their staff don't realize we exist, and won't be aware of our issues and concerns. With a brief phone call, fax, or e-mail message, neonatal nurses and nurse practitioners can educate Congress about the issues that affect the nursing community and neonatal patients and families.

The first step is to familiarize yourself with NANN/NANNP's Health Policy [Agenda](#) and the activities of the organization's Health Policy & Advocacy [Committee](#), representing both NANN and NANNP. These websites will link you to the latest health policy information, action alerts, and resources to find out the names and contact information for your Congressional representatives.

Finding Your Elected Officials

Easy ways to find out the names of your Congressional representatives are to visit [Congress.org](#) or [Project Vote Smart](#). These web sites will also tell you your legislator's recent voting record, what committees they serve on, what legislation they have introduced, and other information. It is a good idea to review this information to get an idea of the issues that are important to your elected officials.

How to Communicate with Members of Congress

First, it helps to know some inside information about the U. S. Congress.

1. Congress is run by 20 and 30 year olds. These young staffers have power, influence, and "the boss's" ear, but most don't have any knowledge or experience of health care issues. That is what they need from you. Most will never have experienced the health care system in any significant way, have little understanding of what nurses really do, and don't even know what a nurse practitioner is.

2. There are roughly 20,000 lobbyists working on Capitol Hill, all trying to get legislators to listen and respond to their concerns. Professional lobbyists play an important role, but as a constituent, you are also an important lobbyist.

3. Members need to "hear from home." Constituents do have an impact with their representatives, you are the one who put them in office and the one who can remove them. Whenever possible, focus your attention on your own home state and district elected officials. So you are not "only a nurse", you are also a constituent and lobbyist.

4. Congress legislates by anecdote. Compelling stories from "the trenches" can prompt action. Stories are memorable, repeatable, and convey an emotional element that doesn't come across with facts and figures.

5. Timing is everything! It's important that your input is given at the time the issue is still hot. You are much more likely to be listened to if you contact legislators at key times, when they may be able to act on your requests, such as:

- When proposed legislation has been introduced
- When a piece of legislation travels through committee
- When the bill is being debated
- When a new issue arises that may inspire a new law

Knowing when the time is right for contacting your legislator requires a bit of research and monitoring of what's going on in Congress. If you receive a legislative alert from NANN, try to act on it within 24 hours. If your issue is extremely urgent, call instead of writing.

Methods to Communicate

There are many ways to communicate with policymakers - letters, postcards, e-mail, phone calls, faxes, and face-to-face meetings. Advocates often wonder which method is most effective and whether all are counted equally. Each Congressional office has its own system for handling and counting different communications. Each policymaker gets a regular report from staffers regarding how many letters, postcards, e-mails, phone calls, and faxes have been received on various issues and what positions constituents are advocating. No matter what method you use, the most important thing is to ensure your voice is heard. Note, however, that letters can experience a significant delay reaching any office in Washington D.C. because of security precautions.

Because all offices handle constituent communication differently, you might want to call your senator or member's office and inquire on their preferred method of constituent input.

Who's Who: Congressional Staff

Health Legislative Assistant – the staffer responsible for healthcare issues; typically the one you will talk to or meet with.

Legislative Correspondent/Staff Assistant – more junior staffer responsible for answering constituent correspondence in some offices.

Legislative Director – the 2nd most senior staffer in the office, responsible for overseeing all the legislative work in the office.

Chief of Staff – the most senior staffer in the office.

Proper Forms of Address for Members of Congress

Members of the House of Representatives

The Honorable [First Name Last Name of Member of Congress]
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative [Last Name of Member]:

United States Senators

The Honorable [First Name Last Name of Senator]
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [Last Name of Member]

You can also reach your Members of Congress in the following ways:

- Phone through the U.S. Capitol Switchboard, at 202-224-3121
- E-mail your U.S. Representative or [Senator](#)
- Visit the web site of your Representative or Senators for contact information

Tips For Writing a Letter, Fax, or Email

Writing to Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for neonatal nurses and nurse practitioners to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Written correspondence, if done correctly, can garner support for NANN/NANNP's health policy priorities.

When writing to policymakers, be sure to use your own personal stationery or your personal email account. Your employer might not share your views on the topic. For all forms of communication, include your full name, return (home) mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number. If you are a federal or state employee, you must use personal e-mail and your personal computer.

Be sure to keep a hard copy of what you send, as sometimes faxes, e-mails or letters are lost and you may need to send a 2nd copy to ensure a response.

Ten Tips

- 1. Always be polite.** When addressing correspondence to any government official, be sure to use the proper forms of address. Even if you are angry, frustrated, or disappointed, be sure to adopt a polite tone and use appropriate language; never be threatening, confrontational, or rude. The most effective way to communicate is the way you communicate with your colleagues, family, and friends – clearly, concisely, and with respect and honesty.
- 2. Be clear about who you are and why you are writing.** In the opening sentence, make your request clear and identify yourself as a registered voter, constituent, and nurse. If you know the member or staff aide, say so at the beginning of your message; this may alert the staffer to give your message special attention. If you are in a leadership position and have clearance to write in that capacity, be sure to use your title and indicate how many people you represent. Always put your nursing credentials after your name.
- 3. Be concise and informed.** If possible, try to keep your letter to a single page and address only ONE issue per letter or email. You do not need to be an expert on the issue, but you should be familiar with the basic facts (e.g. name of legislation and associated bill number, and why it should be supported or opposed). If you are requesting that a policymaker cosponsor a particular measure or are writing to express disappointment regarding a particular vote, check the list of cosponsors and the vote record first at [THOMAS](#) to ensure that your information is up-to-date and accurate. Phrase your input as factual information with supporting data, rather than opinion.

4. Personalize your message. Remember, you are an expert in what neonatal care is all about, and you may have many experiences to share. Tell your own story, and explain the relevance to the issue at hand. Although form letters and postcards are "counted," they often do not elicit a response from a Congressional office. Personal stories and illustration of local impact are more easily remembered by policymakers and their staff than statistics and generic examples. If you use a prewritten template for letters or email concerning a particular issue, be sure to use it only as a guide, and personalize your input regarding the issue.

5. Be honest, accurate, and clear. If you are including statistics or other scientific information, be sure to verify your sources and have them handy in case the Congressional offices follow up and request more information. Also, be sure not to exaggerate the situation you are discussing, do not oversell the policy solution you are advocating, or overstate the consequences if the policymaker does not do what you request. Make sure you don't use lingo or jargon (e.g. acronyms like HRSA unless you write out what it means).

6. Be modest in your request. Although you may wish to address multiple issues, be sure not to "kitchen-sink" your requests. It is best to focus on only one or two issues that are of top priority to you. Your communication will be clearer, and policymakers or staffers will be more receptive, because you have not bombarded them with too many requests.

7. Be of assistance and serve as a resource. Policymakers and their staffers are overworked and overwhelmed, so offer them your assistance; they will appreciate your input and help. If you have an article of interest or relevance, be sure to include it with your correspondence or refer to it and indicate that you would be happy to provide it, should they be interested.

8. Express appreciation. Too many times we forget to say thank you. If in response to earlier correspondence you receive a letter informing you that the member shares your views or took the action you requested, write back expressing your thanks for the response and support. Or, if you learn that the policymaker recently cosponsored a bill you support, or voted the way you hoped, send a letter expressing your pleasure at his or her action. At the close of your correspondence, be sure to acknowledge and thank the member for his or her attention to your concern.

9. Ask for a response. Because policymakers and their staffers work for you, you have every right to (politely) ask for a response, and hold them accountable if your communication goes unanswered. In fact, entire systems, processes and staff exist in Congressional offices to respond to constituent input. It is important to note, however, that because of the volume of

constituent input, it could be weeks or months before you receive a response. Make clear at the close of your correspondence that you are requesting a written response regarding the policymaker's views on the issue or legislation you addressed.

10. Be sure to follow up. If you do not receive a response in a timely fashion (in excess of one month for most offices, a little bit longer for senators from large states like California or Texas) be sure to follow up. Contact the office by phone or with another letter (fax is best) with your original attached, and indicate you have not received a response, and you are requesting one. If you receive an unsatisfactory response to your correspondence, you should write or call again to express appreciation for the response and politely, yet firmly, communicate that the response was not what you anticipated or requested. Reiterate your concerns and address any points the policymaker has made on the issue in the correspondence.

Other Tips on How to Correspond With Members of Congress

Keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on nursing and neonatal care issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to "agree to disagree" but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

Snail Mail

As a result of anthrax attacks in the fall of 2001, U.S. Postal Service mail is handled differently by Congress. Most incoming mail is irradiated to ensure it is safe for handling. This process takes quite a while and often damages the contents. Therefore, for time-sensitive communication, sending written correspondence by fax or email is advised – or make a quick phone call. Also, enclosing items such as photographs, original documents or other materials is not recommended; it is best to save these items for hand delivery when you have a meeting in the local or Washington D.C. office.

E-mail

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how e-mail from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have a public e-mail address. To find it, visit the Member's web page. Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgement that your e-mail has been received but will follow-up with either a specific e-mail response to your issue or a letter via regular U.S. mail. A handful of offices still do not respond

individually to e-mail but count the input and inform the policymaker how many people have written about the particular topic and what position they are advocating. Some Congressional offices have instituted computer-based algorithms to ensure that e-mail messages they receive are from legitimate constituents and to weed out computer-generated or spam messages.

Telephone

Calling the offices of Members of Congress is one of the easiest and fastest ways for nurses to communicate with policymakers. When calling, be sure to do so on your own time and with your own phone, as your employer might not share your views. While calling the local offices does not involve a long-distance call, it is better to call the Washington D.C. office as it is better equipped to handle a greater volume of constituent calls.

To reach the offices of your two senators and your representative, call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard (202-224-3121) and ask to be transferred to the appropriate office. If you are not sure who represents you, visit the [Senate](#) or the [House](#) websites to find your policymakers' names.

Be sure to keep a record of the date and time of your call and the person with whom you speak or for whom you leave a message. Sometimes phone logs are lost and you may need to follow-up to ensure a response.

Calling Tips

- 1. Once connected to your elected official's office, identify yourself as a constituent to the receptionist.** Clearly state your first and last name, your hometown, and why you are calling. If you know the health legislative assistant (HLA), be sure to ask for that staffer by name. If not, ask for the HLA's name and request to be transferred. Sometimes, the receptionist will indicate that you need to leave your comments with him/her. If that is the case, you should still get the name of the HLA so that you have it for the future.
- 2. If transferred to the HLA personally,** or if you are put through to the staffer's voicemail, reintroduce yourself and immediately identify the topic you are calling to discuss. Continue with the message you wish to deliver or ask for a call-back.
- 3. Make a few brief points** about why the issue is of concern to you, your community, and the nation, and why the Member should take action. You may want to use written notes to help you stay on topic and remain clear, while articulating your case.

4. **Be clear as to what you are asking the Member to do.** (e.g. cosponsor a particular bill, vote for or against a specific measure, or sign a "Dear Colleague" letter).
5. **Be polite in tone and language.** The staffer on the other end of the phone is overworked and underpaid. They receive dozens if not hundreds of calls a day. In some offices, you may be speaking with a junior staffer or college intern, so be sure to be patient and forgiving. Also, be sure not to assume they understand lingo or jargon, or that they are familiar with the issue you are discussing.
6. **Keep it brief.** Limit your call to no more than 5 minutes, unless the staffer asks you questions and seems engaged in the discussion. Offer to send additional information, and request their preferred mode of communication (e.g. e-mail, fax).
7. **Request a written response** from the office, on the Member's position or action on the issue you addressed.
8. **Provide your full name,** home mailing address, e-mail address, and home telephone number.
9. **Thank the staffer** for his or her time, and indicate that you appreciate his or her willingness to listen and record your comments. Be sure to write down the name of the staffer and the date and time you spoke.
10. **If you do not receive a response within a reasonable time,** (approximately one month), either call or write to follow-up and request a response. Reference your phone call and mention with whom you spoke and the topic to facilitate a meaningful reply.

Other Tips for Calling

If you receive the voicemail for the office or a staffer, be sure to leave a brief clear message providing your full name, contact information, nature of your call, and specific request. Be clear that you would like a return call and/or letter from the Member on the topic about which you are calling.

Face-to-Face Meetings With Your Members of Congress

Meetings with Members of Congress and their staff are terrific ways for nurses to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest, get to know

your elected officials, establish a relationship, and offer to serve as a resource. This personal relationship can prove mutually beneficial over time – and it is best to build a relationship before you need it.

Prior to arriving at the Member's office, either in Washington D.C. or your local district, be sure to schedule a meeting with the staffer or through the appointment scheduler for a visit with the Member of Congress. You must have an appointment to meet with a staffer or Member. Be clear about who will be attending and what issue(s) will be discussed. The day before, confirm the appointment because Congressional schedules can change at the last minute, and such changes are often beyond the staff's control.

In advance of the meeting, be sure to put together some “leave behind” materials that you will provide to the Member or staffer at the end of your meeting. NANN/NANNP advocacy materials can be downloaded [here](http://www.nann.org/about_us/advocacy/index.html) (http://www.nann.org/about_us/advocacy/index.html). Spend some time reviewing NANN/NANNP's health policy agenda for the current year. Contact the [Health Policy & Advocacy Committee](http://www.nann.org/about_us/advocacy/agenda.html) (http://www.nann.org/about_us/advocacy/agenda.html) for assistance if needed.

It is also a good idea to get a sense of what issues currently are pending before Congress and on which committee(s) your Member sits.

If you have arranged for a Member of Congress to attend your chapter meeting or conference, inform your colleagues and make all the appropriate logistical arrangements. Be sure to have someone present who can take photos and give copies to the Member and staff, as well as to NANN for posting on our website.

Meeting Tips

1. Prepare and be on time. Members of Congress and their staff are very busy. Be respectful of their time. Give yourself plenty of time to go through security, find your way to the office, and announce yourself to the receptionist. If you will be with a group, discuss in advance what you will be covering in the meeting. Select a primary spokesperson and determine who will raise which points and requests.

Open the meeting by thanking the Member/staff member for his or her time. Be sure that everyone in the group identifies him or herself by first and last name and as a member of NANN/NANNP, and remember to mention where you live and work in the district or state so they are clear that you are a constituent. If the policymaker or staffer has been helpful in the past or has

taken action that you appreciate, be sure to say thank you and acknowledge this up front.

" I am Florence Ames from Burke, Virginia, and I work as a nurse at Inova Fairfax Hospital. We very much appreciate your time today and want to thank you for your past support of nursing education funding."

2. Be brief and clear, as you typically have only 10-25 minutes for the entire meeting. Cover only a few (one to three) topics. Prepare your talking points beforehand to make sure you stay on message. Anticipate the kinds of questions you may be asked, from both supporters and opponents and be prepared to answer these questions. If you don't know the answer, acknowledge this, and indicate that since you are not certain of the answer you will follow-up with them later. Do not assume that the Member/staffer is very knowledgeable about the issue you are discussing – be sure to provide them with some background. If you are not discussing a specific piece of legislation, explain that you want to provide background information or provide your perspective on an issue of importance to you and your community.

3. Tell a personal story or provide a real-life illustration of the problem, as personal stories are more easily remembered and more compelling than statistics. As necessary, briefly cite evidence or statistics to support your position, particularly any local, regional or state data. However, be sure not to overwhelm the Member or staffer with too many statistics or references to study (this kind of information can be included in the materials you will leave behind or can be sent later with your thank you note). Discuss how the policy change (e.g. increased funding for the Nurse Reinvestment Act) will have an impact on your community. Be concise and honest about the issue(s) and the solution(s) and make clear the relevance of the issue(s) to their constituents.

4. Be polite and listen carefully to the Member or staffer's views and comments. Even if you disagree, it is important to be courteous. Be flexible and consider the opposing view. Do not be argumentative or threatening. You may agree to disagree on an issue today and find that you can agree and work together on another matter tomorrow. Much of health policy advocacy is about building and maintaining relationships.

5. Make sure to get a response - in a nice way. Ask directly, and politely, for the policymaker's views and positions on the issue. Do not let the Member or staffer distract you with other issues (gently steer the conversation back to your issue), avoid responding, or dismiss your concerns with a broad statement such as, "Of course I support nurses." Stay on message and the

topic as politely as possible. It is your Constitutional right to "petition Congress for redress of grievances" so take the opportunity to do what you can to get a commitment from the Member to take action on your request(s). However, if the Member truly is undecided or the staff is not familiar with the Member's position on the issue, do not force a response. Reiterate your interest in knowing the Member's position, offer to answer any additional questions/provide additional information, and request a follow-up letter once a decision has been made on your request.

6. Bring a concise set of materials with you to leave behind. However, do not hand over materials until the end of the meeting, or the Member or staffer may choose to start reading the material and only listen to you with one ear. Early in the meeting indicate that you have materials to leave with them. Be sure to follow-up and follow through on any promises of additional information.

7. Leave your contact information. Nearly every staffer that you meet with will ask you for a business card, so it is advised to bring one. If you leave a business card, make it clear that you are visiting on your own time and not representing your employer unless you have received such clearance. Be sure to get a business card from the Member or staffer so that you know how to reach them (and remember their name). Be sure to ask for their preferred mode of communication.

8. Summarize your requests of the Member or staffer and any responses the Member/staffer have given to ensure you are clear on where they stand on the issues. Summarize the Member/staffer's requests to you and indicate how you plan to respond. Express appreciation for their time, interest, and courtesy. Ask politely for a good day in the next week to 10 days for you to follow up on your request.

9. Report back to the NANN Health Policy & Advocacy committee so that others can reinforce the message you delivered.

10. Follow-up with a thank you note to the Member or staffer referencing the date of your meeting, who was in attendance, and the issues discussed. Your follow-up letter should express appreciation for the time and consideration extended to you during your meeting, reiterate your request(s) and ask for a written response. Be sure to follow-up with answers or information the Member or staffer requested. Keep in touch with the Member or staffer to maintain and strengthen the relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on nursing or neonatal issues. Great ways to keep in touch are sending an article of interest from the local paper or inviting the Member or staffer to attend a NANN Chapter meeting.

Other Tips

When visiting Capitol Hill or a federal building in which your Member of Congress maintains an office, you could encounter long lines to get through security, X-ray, and metal detectors. Make sure you allow plenty of time.

If your initial meeting is in Washington DC, try to schedule a similar meeting with the staff in the district or state office and check in with your policymaker when he or she is at home visiting to reinforce the relationship and follow up on your issues of priority.

The Congressional schedule is very fluid; Members and staffers are often pulled away for various events and activities that are not known in advance (last minute press conferences, meetings with committees, etc) and as such, your meeting could be delayed or bumped (the Member may not be available and you instead meet with staff – this is quite common so don't be surprised). Also, space on Capitol Hill is at a premium so your meeting could occur in the reception office, in the hallway, or in the coffee shop. Do not take any last minute meeting changes personally and make sure you are always gracious and flexible.

Town Hall Meetings

One of the most effective, and underutilized ways to communicate with policymakers is to attend their town hall meetings. Almost all policymakers hold these meetings during the periods of time that they are at home in their districts. The purpose of a town hall meeting is to elicit input from constituents on their concerns and priorities, and to inform constituents what the Member is doing on their behalf.

Town hall meetings are hosted in a variety of locations, such as community centers, local schools, or churches. Participating in a town hall meeting allows you to voice nursing or NANN concerns in a public forum. Members of Congress will listen carefully to constituents who make the effort to show up and participate in a town hall meeting. Attendees represent concerned voters. In addition, members of the media may be in attendance, providing another opportunity to spread your message. Successful grassroots organizations effectively use town hall meetings.

Some town hall meetings are focused on a specific issue; however, many are free-form and offer an opportunity for general comments or questions. The more often you attend and ask questions or praise the Member for something

he or she has done, the stronger your relationship with the Member will become.

To find out about town hall meetings, you can usually sign up for an alert message for your Member's meetings. Meetings are announced via emails and sometimes through the media. Offices may directly contact constituents who have expressed an interest in attending town hall meetings.

A few tips for attending and participating in town hall meetings:

- When you arrive at the location for the meeting, take note of any established procedures for the meeting, such as a place to sign in, or a sign up sheet for constituents who would like to ask questions.
- Prepare your question or talking point(s) in advance.
- Identify yourself when speaking, and your affiliation with NANN/NANNP. Avoid long, drawn-out questions, and don't use jargon or acronyms. If you bring "leave behind" materials, give them to the staffer who accompanies the Member to the meeting.
- If you don't get a response to your question, plan to follow-up with a letter later on. Don't embarrass the Member by pressing for a response that he or she may not be able to give at that time.
- Use your judgment and consider the dynamics of the meeting. If the attendees seem primarily interested in a non-nursing issue, it may be better to save your issue for another time.
- If you have the opportunity, say hello and introduce yourself to the Member and staffer before or after the meeting.
- Follow up with a fax or email, remind the Member you were at the meeting, and reiterate the issue you discussed. This is the time to ask for a formal response if none was given during the town hall meeting.