Politics: A Natural Next Step for Nurses

Even if you’ve never considered a career in politics, you may be perfect for the job.

To most nurses, the idea of running for political office may sound like something that other people do. The process may strike them as potentially complicated, decidedly confusing, and possibly boring. The very idea of campaigning conjures images of dank little offices, fluorescent lights, and desks piled high with manila folders. It’s likely that nurses envision days of phone calls and constant shouting, endless fund-raising, and (to be frank) a candidate who is male.

And why wouldn’t they? A scant 15% to 17% of the U.S. Congress is female, depending on the chamber, and only 24% of state legislators are women. A slight boost to these percentages occurred in the early 1990s, but they soon began to level off.

Nursing Skills: Just What Politics Needs

In response to this situation, women in general and nurses in particular are being called upon to parlay their expertise and experience into careers in politics—and with great effect.

“Nurses possess a level of insight into health care issues and policymaking that makes their role invaluable,” said Mary V. Hughes, founder and director of the 2012 Project, a nonpartisan campaign affiliated with the Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics that’s encouraging and supporting women without a background in politics to become more active and run for office. “And it’s no secret that health care is a huge priority in Washington. Policy and delivery systems, both those in place and those being proposed, must be assessed, tested, and refined,” said Hughes in a telephone interview with AJN.

The fact is, nurses who pursue politics offer something that candidates without their experience simply cannot: a firsthand and accurate accounting of what happens on site in medical institutions, in private practice, and in home health care environments.

Wisconsin state senator Leah Vukmir, a pediatric NP, addresses colleagues during a state senate session in Madison. Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin state senate.

Nurses in political office are also likely to do exactly what they’ve been doing in health care settings for years: adjust and adapt to ever-changing situations; listen carefully; gather facts; and discern, decide, and deal thoughtfully with unexpected outcomes and turns of events.
“Think about it,” said Hughes. “By the time these nurses are entering office, they have typically raised families; excelled in their careers; possibly assisted with their parents’ aging processes; and been involved in their communities, either formally or informally, for years.” Rather than view their careers in health care as separate from politics, she added, nurses should see politics as a natural next step.

**TIMING IS EVERYTHING**

As it turns out, this could be the perfect time to take such a step. Concerns about the effectiveness of career politicians are widespread from coast to coast. Public support of nontraditional candidates has blossomed. And now reapportionment, which occurs only after a census year, is about to take place. This means that state and congressional districts will be redrawn, typically resulting in more seats (new and newly open) as a way of accounting for newly revealed shifts in populations. In short, nurses who have no political experience but choose to run for election in 2012 may have a better chance of winning than they would in other years.

“Already, physicians are responding,” said Hughes. “Nurses need to, too. There are tremendous resources available to anyone who is willing to step forward and express an intention to learn how to get involved.” The 2012 Project has partnered with more than 70 organizations willing to teach, train, and support nurses who are interested in pursuing politics. And in case you’re wondering whether nurses ever really do this sort of thing, the answer is yes. Almost 100 state legislators and administrative leaders are nurses.

Looking back, though, many of these nurses-turned-politicians say that they didn’t see their career changes coming.

“Honestly, if anyone had told me 20 years ago that I would be an elected official one day, I’d have said they were crazy,” said Republican state senator Leah Vukmir of Wisconsin, a pediatric NP, reflecting on her own journey to office. “But what landed me was the very same thing that informed me as a nurse: asking a question and then researching the answer.” In Vukmir’s case, it was a question about her daughter’s kindergarten education that grew into increasing involvement at the community level.

“Soon people began to suggest that I run for office. At first I hesitated, but then I thought, ‘I never want to look back and wonder why I hadn’t tried.’” So in 2002 she went for it. “I really do see my role now as a continuation of the serving and problem solving that I did as a nurse. The specifics that I’m asked to address may not be medical, but they affect people’s lives.” And as in nursing, she’s often forced to balance her drive to effect change with the realities of the political hoops she has to jump through.

**The challenge is worth it.** As the United States faces a nursing shortage and new questions arise about how to address prescription costs, an aging population, patients’ rights, and more, there are sure to be more “hoops” in the future. But this is also a time when nurses in politics can serve best. Although the hours may be long and the learning curve steep, the rewards of fighting for change and speaking for a large segment of the population are great. Nurses as a group constitute a large voting bloc in the United States. A nurse who is elected to office can speak out on behalf of this large group and win support for policies that are important to those who work in America’s health care system. And this matters.

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The rub is that for many nurses, the prospect of leaving their nursing careers is daunting. It needn’t be. Many nurses continue to practice part-time or in alternate health care settings. Kathleen Keenan, a Democratic state representative in Vermont, kept her ED nursing job until just five years ago. “Legislature is Monday through Friday. I’d come home on Friday and [start nursing] at 5 pm. I’d work through Saturday and Sunday in the ED. For me, one role informed the other. When you work in a field, you have a different attitude about things. You’re not sheltered. You really understand. Even after years and years in the legislature, I always felt like a nurse.”

“Now more than ever,” said Hughes, “women in their mid-40s to mid-50s are shaping careers that reflect their expertise in ways that benefit their communities overall.” To learn more about creating a personal road map to a career in politics and finding guidance along the way, visit the 2012 Project site at [www.cawp.rutgers.edu](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu). —Bethany Lyttle ▼