

## **Health care is too important to leave up to Congress.**

### **Jennifer Stewart RN, OCN**

As nurses we advocate for our patients every single day. Advocacy is a noun defined as the act of supporting, recommending, or pleading on issues of concern. In addition to supporting our patients, recommending the highest quality of care, and pleading for the highest standards of treatment, it is also our responsibility to request these principles from Congress.

Last month, I was privileged to spend four days in Washington, D.C. on Capitol Hill learning how to become an effective health care advocate through the Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI). I was a fortunate recipient of the Alliance Registration Scholarship. The goal of this program is to prepare nurses (all levels of education) to become involved and influence policy at all levels of government. As overwhelming as it sounds at first, all attendees are truly prepared and excited about advocacy and the legislative process by the final day of the internship. NIWI provides a curriculum about the basics of Congress and the legislative process. Nurses learn about beginning and developing working relationships with congressional members and their staffers. In the end, the nurses become advocates and are excited about their new responsibilities.

As a representative of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) and the state of North Carolina, I had the opportunity to meet with the health policy staffer for Senator Richard Burr and the health policy staffer Senator Kay Hagan (who happens to be a RN herself), as well as Congressman David Price and his health policy staffer. NIWI and ONS provided me with my request or “asks”. The asks included: increase funding for the Nursing Workforce Development programs at HRSA, provide additional resources to the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR), and the “Improving Cancer Treatment Education Act of 2011”. Including your personal asks and stories were encouraged during the meetings.

The most candid of my meetings was with Congressman Price. The meeting was scheduled at 4:30pm. He joined the meeting about ten minutes late with his sleeves rolled up and ready to get down to business. From my research on Congressman Price’s voting record and history of support in his district (NC 4<sup>th</sup> District), I knew he supported most health and nursing legislation and was a member of the Nursing Caucus; I didn’t have to ask for his support. So I simply asked the Congressman what is truly going on in Washington and how is it going to affect my nursing colleagues and myself. Congressman Price explained very frankly that currently Congress is arguing over a budget for 2011 which is half over according to their fiscal year. He went on to explain that he and other members of Congress need to hear from their constituents regarding issues important to them. They want to hear the personal stories about how additional funding for Cancer Treatment Education will help me explain to my patient and their family how chemotherapy will truly effect them and how they can best care for themselves. In Washington, it’s true that the “squeaky wheel gets the oil”, especially during the current financial crisis. As I stood to shake Congressman Price’s hand at the conclusion of our meeting, I asked him to attend one of our TONS Chapter meetings so he can learn what great things oncology nurses are doing in his district. He agreed and I have the District Director’s information to ensure he makes good on his promise.

I walked away from my day on Capitol Hill feeling inspired and motivated to truly start the advocacy work which has to begin at home. I am offering myself as a resource to my local chapter of ONS in assisting them to get started with health care advocacy. I am organizing a committee to invite our Congressional Members to one of our meetings. During this meeting it is my hope to have the chapter members address our healthcare concerns and understand that advocacy is not as overwhelming we initially think. After all, we are all excellent patient advocates now we just need to let Congress know we mean business.



U.S. Congressman David Price of NC 4<sup>th</sup> District



U.S. Senator Kay Hagan of NC