We hear the rally cry – Be seen! Be heard! Be loud! Make sure your representatives know what you think! As an introvert, I have often struggled with an internal dilemma - how can I make an impact on health policy without totally abandoning my comfort zone? Is there a way for me to be heard without being too loud?

Enter NIWI - I first heard about the NIWI program a few years ago. I had moved to North Carolina from Ohio and almost immediately became involved with the NC affiliate of the National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists (NACNS). This was a great way for me to network with other Clinical Nurse Specialists in NC and to become familiar with changes that were going to affect how CNSs practice in the state. I also became a member of the legislative/regulatory committee for the NACNS. Both the NC-NACNS and the legislative/regulatory committee expressed interest in its members attending the NIWI program. I was intrigued by the objectives: discuss how to work effectively with legislative staff to advance policy agendas, describe key steps to effect change in the legislative process, and identify techniques to advance legislative issues at the grassroots level. This sounded like a way for me to expand my knowledge base, give me the tools and skills I needed to be effective, and as a result widen my comfort zone. I made a personal commitment to attend NIWI within the next few years.

This year the time was right to attend NIWI. I had both professional and personal concerns about changes in healthcare policy occurring nationally and locally. I wanted to be able to arm myself with as many tools as possible so I could empower nurses to speak up for positive outcomes for our patients.

The NIWI program did not disappoint. One message I heard over and over again was that our representatives really do want to hear from us. They want to know what their constituents value. They want to hear stories about how policy affects the people in their districts. As nurses, we are in a unique position to provide stories from the front line of how policy directly affects the outcomes of our patients. We need to take those stories out of the break rooms and into the hands of the people who can make changes.

We also discussed strategies when visiting your representative’s office. The message here was that you do not have to go to Washington, D.C. to make an impact. You can visit them at their local district office. It is best to go with a small group so the visit isn’t overwhelming and everyone has the opportunity to ask and answer questions. You should leave them with a one page summary and contact information in case they have questions a nurse expert can answer.

During a panel discussion, one of the legislative assistants was asked if it is most beneficial for a nurse to run for an elected position in order to affect policy. The legislative assistant responded that as an introvert, she never had a desire to be out there in the public in front of people and found that her strengths are working in the background on policy. She said we definitely need nurses to run for office but we also need people in the background to help make all of that happen.

Message received – there’s a place for everyone. This is something I can do without being too loud. I’m always willing to tell patient stories and discuss how we can improve outcomes. I can make a visit to my representative with a small group and have a conversation. I’m really good at creating summaries. I’m
always willing to work in the background and be available for consultation. And, I can do all of this without coming out too far from my comfort zone.

I plan on sharing my message, Political Advocacy: There’s a Place for Everyone, with as many nurses as possible. The hospital I work in has asked me to present during nursing grand rounds. I also have the opportunity to share the message during a meeting with the local chapter of the AACN. My big plan as President-elect of the NC-NACNS is to develop a clear message on the impact of CNS practice on patient outcomes and to organize small groups across the state to deliver the message to our representatives. Our group is small but mighty, and we need to make sure we have a voice at as many tables as possible!

I appreciate the opportunity the NIWI scholarship provided. It gave me the tools and confidence needed to lead nurses in my area to make changes in policy resulting in positive patient outcomes!

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