The Nurse in Washington Internship (NIWI) was an opportunity to rediscover my passion and begin to understand how to engage in policy as a nurse. I was fortunate to receive a scholarship through the Nursing Organization Alliance (NOA) and to have NIWI kick off my nursing career. NIWI was an experience that will guide how I advocate for patients in my current and future role as a nurse.

I often think of how I made the decision to become a nurse. After completing my bachelor’s degree, I spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA working at the Loyola University Chicago School of Law’s Health Justice Project as a patient-client advocate. In my various and diverse interactions with clients, I realized that it is nearly impossible to make meaningful and effective changes to policy without understanding the experiences of vulnerable individuals and families. Through this role, working with Erie Family Health Center, a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in Chicago, I discovered that nurses are privileged to have numerous and
meaningful interactions with patients throughout their careers. Nurses have the opportunity to listen to the patient experience and advocate for a different experience. I also discovered that nursing is the largest health care profession and makes up the backbone of our health system. As the most trusted profession in the United States, nurses have a unique perspective and can make a difference beyond the bedside. Collectively, when the 3.9 million nurses in the United States unite, they have the ability to shape the future of health care. These realizations led me to become a registered nurse and later attend NIWI.

As a new graduate, consumed with searching for my first nursing job in California, prior to NIWI, I had lost sight of what called me to nursing in the first place. Now, after NIWI and two months as an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse, I have already seen and heard many different patient experiences that make me want to make a difference for future patients. I believe that simply taking a moment each day to reflect on the patient’s story can eventually have the power to change future patient experiences when these stories are applied to policy. I am still in the stage of my nursing career where I am trying to become a clinically competent nurse, however, NIWI reminded me to take note of the patient experience to make a difference in the future.

NIWI taught me, that in order to support patients, you must support the nursing workforce. My California colleagues and I had the opportunity to advocate on Capitol Hill and visit the California offices, such as the offices of, Senator Dianne Feinstein and Speaker Nancy Pelosi. We advocated for full funding of the Title VIII Nursing Workforce Development Programs. With the expanding geriatric population and shortage of health care professionals, it is imperative to support nurses. These programs are vital to growing the efficacy of nursing and the nursing work force. Through this experience, we were able to see how communicating the patient experience along with hard facts, can influence policy.
Once I become an experienced nurse, I will utilize my own and my patients’ experiences to advocate for a better health system. At this stage in my career, NIWI allowed me to understand how important patient interactions are in order to become an effective nurse now and policy advocate later. I plan to take the passion I developed in my search for a career as a nurse, my experiences with patients, along with the hard advocacy skills I acquired from NIWI, to continue to advocate for patients at the bedside and beyond.

Rachael Viale