

*Editorial***RNO ADVOCACY: TIPS FOR CALLING AN ELECTED OFFICIAL AT LOCAL, STATE OR FEDERAL LEVELS**

Angeline Bushy, PhD, RN, FAAN  
Editorial Board Member

Members of the Rural Nurses Organization (RN) are concerned about moving rural health care forward by advocating for our clients and relevant policies. Advocating for clients varies depending on individual needs and cultural preferences. Advocating politically at the local, state and federal level for most nurses is seemingly more complicated. When a nurse is put on the spot to respond to an issue that one knows only peripherally can be especially frightening. Without having the time to seek out the best answer one can easily be tripped up and not give the most appropriate response –especially when responding to a representative or senator at the state or federal level. Yet, these elected officials need and are seeking input from nurses, in particular those in rural practice.

Along with face-to-face meetings, nurses can interact with local officials, state legislators and congressional members by writing a letter sent by snail mail, using electronic mail (e-mail) or calling by telephone. Picking up the phone and calling an elected official is quick and relatively easy. However, for most people the idea of making a phone call is more intimidating than writing a letter or sending an e-mail to your congress person. A short focused phone conversation can have a significant and timely impact in getting the attention of a staff member in the congressional office. In turn, that staff member often recalls a constituent's verbal pitch from phone call or face-to-face conversations when reporting to the elected official. A phone call also presents an immediate opportunity for staff members to ask follow-up questions about the issue and its direct impact at the local level that is useful to policy makers.

In other words, staff members are a conduit for elected officials to directly hear about constituent' concerns. A phone call to the office of an elected official can be effective with a small investment of time for the nurse. While a letter or an e-mail may take at least 20 or more minutes to write, a phone call should take no longer than a few minutes using the following guidelines.

When calling the office of an elected official, a receptionist (low-level staff person) generally answers all phone calls. Even though the receptionist may have little, if any, direct contact with the elected official this individual serves in a gate keeper role. He or she has the ability to either quickly dismiss your call or get you connected with the appropriate individual who is interested in what you have to say about a particular issue. Be courteous and polite when speaking with the receptionist. In the midst of other tasks, a rude phone call makes it is easy for this gatekeeper to respond; "Thank you for your message. I will make sure to let the senator (representative) know your thoughts." Consequently, with the hundreds of calls that arrive each day it is highly unlikely that your message will get to the intended person. Below are additional tips for making effective advocacy phone calls to elected officials.

- When placing the call, ask the receptionist to speak with the health staff member in the office. (Do not leave a message with the receptionist.) If possible learn the name of this individual and ask for that person. Ask if it is possible to leave a

message on a voice mail of the health staff person. Leaving a phone message is routine and to be expected until you have developed a relationship with a particular staff person. Congressional staff members check their phone mail throughout the day in order to have timely input from constituents with contact information should he/she wish to follow up on a message.

- Before placing the call, carefully plan what you are going to say. It is prudent to write out the script; then, practice what you are planning to say. When focusing on legislation, specify the bill number about which you are calling. Focus on one thing and give brief information as to why the issue is important. If you belong to a particular professional organization, mention one or two of the group's talking points; or, provide anecdotal or local fact about the issue or program and how it will help or harm the community or constituency. Your message should be no longer than two minutes. Longer voice mail messages could be cut off or deleted.
- When placing the call, introduce yourself to the receptionist. Indicate the organization you are representing and, how you serve constituents in the elected official's district or state.
- Ask if it is possible to speak to or leave a message with the staff person who is assigned to health affairs. If that is an option, do so. If not, leave your message with the receptionist.
- Keep your message short and simple. (Use the script you developed prior to making the call.) If you have other supporting materials or evidence that you wish to share with the staff person indicate that this will be sent by e-mail. (Be sure to follow through on this promise!)
- Close the conversation by thanking the staff member for his or her support for rural nursing. Provide your contact information should the congressional office wish to follow up at a later time.
- After the call, it is prudent to immediately follow up with an e-mail message restating key points. If the staff person on the call promised to send you information, sending a follow-up e-mail reminder is appropriate.

It is important for RNO members to be aware of current legislative and policy issues that impact rural health care systems and providers. The National Rural Health Association (NRHA) website includes comprehensive information on current rural health legislative at the following website: <http://www.nrharural.org/go/left/policy-and-advocacy/government-affairs-news>

Another NRHA website provides contact information for your elected officials: <http://www.capwiz.com/nrha/dbq/officials/>

In sum, activism and advocacy entails contacting and working with elected officials at the local, state and federal levels. To that end, snail mail can be slow and easily misplaced while an e-mail message can be quickly deleted. Most nurses do not have the time or financial resources to travel to Washington DC to speak on every issue that impacts rural nurses or their clients. For this reason, a short but carefully planned phone call to an elected official is a low cost, efficient and effective strategy for nurses who are interested in affecting policy that can impact health care delivery and advocating on in clients' behalf.

## **REFERENCES**

Fry, T. (2008). Now do something: The do-call list. *Rural Crossroads*, 6(1), 28-29.