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School Nurse Consultants

By Michelle McComb, RN, MSN, Texas

What is the role of the school nurse consultant in state-level legislation, and how can I, a school nurse, become more involved?

The school nurse consultant in each state is employed by a state agency, whether it is the department of health or the department of education. The role of state agencies (and therefore state employees) is to serve as a resource to and for legislators as they make their decisions, and of course, to implement any legislation that falls within the agency's scope of responsibility once passed. The role also involves review and comment on proposed legislation in terms of how it would affect other agency responsibilities and obligations, while taking no position on the proposed bill itself, generally speaking. However, politics and agency roles and responsibilities certainly vary from state to state. In many states, the agencies themselves may identify the need for legislative changes and may work with elected officials and committees in order to convene and to engage stakeholders. State school nurse consultants often are asked by the agency's governmental relations department to analyze a bill. This involves answering basic questions, such as which state agency is given responsibility for implementation, if agency rules are required, which groups may be in support and which groups may be in opposition, as well as any problematic language. This process helps identify potential "red flags" for governmental relations staff, as well as for state agency executive management who may deal more closely with legislators.

Most of the time, your state school nurse consultant attends public hearings or subcommittee meetings as a neutral party, taking neither a "for" nor an "against" position; the consultant serves as a resource, should questions arise. Unless specifically invited by the agency head or a legislator, and approved through the agency's governmental relations division, it is not likely that the state school nurse consultant would testify or would give prepared remarks. This is where special interest groups, including professional organizations, come in. Most professional

organizations, including NASN, have some type of legislative agenda and employ paid staff dedicated to governmental relations in order to further that agenda.

Professional organizations at the state level have the same opportunity. Granted, many professional organizations may lack the capital or the savvy necessary to pass groundbreaking legislation, but you would be surprised at the power you already possess. Here are a few suggestions for getting involved:

- Get to know your own representative and senator and offer to help them as an expert resource (hint: Try this *before* asking them for anything in return).
- Join your state professional organization, as well as the national-level organization.
- Stay abreast of current developments in your practice specialty, as well as nursing in general.
- Form coalitions with other like-minded groups, such as the state-level Parent-Teacher Association, the state-level nursing association, medical association and/or other health professionals, as well as educator and counseling associations.
- Form alliances with groups that may at first blush appear to be on opposing sides of the table (yes, I am suggesting school administrator associations and school board associations).
- Never underestimate the power of a personal story or anecdote to put a "face" on the data.
- Oh yes, always be prepared with facts—never rely on emotion alone.
- It is always helpful for the state-level nursing association to have identified an articulate and readily available person within a reasonable vicinity of the state capitol, should testimony be needed on short notice.

Your state school nurse consultant is in an excellent position to keep stakeholders informed as issues arise that affect school health. Much like a relay race, however, he or she must pass the baton to someone else to take over the next leg. So, how about it? Runners, to your marks!