

# With involvement



Michelle Stockwell, flanked by supporters and then Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff (centre), campaigns during the spring federal election.

# comes influence

Nurses urge fellow nurses to get involved in the electoral process.

BY JILL-MARIE BURKE

**Michelle Stockwell has been a nurse for 30 years.** In the spring of 2010, she decided to run for the Liberal Party in the riding of Hamilton East-Stoney Creek. The first-time candidate, who works in mental health with the Hamilton Family Health Team, placed third in May's federal election. She received 6,500 votes. During her campaign, RNAO's Hamilton chapter invited her to speak at one of the group's meetings. Nursing colleagues sent her notes of support. Stockwell says she was grateful for the encouragement, but is now urging nurses to work more closely together to help colleagues get elected provincially and federally. She says nurses underestimate how powerful they can be as a group.

"The more nurses we are able to elect and have as part of the government's overall strategy and policy-making, the better," she says. "Nurses are in touch with Canadians. They know what's happening in people's lives and in their families and their health and with the economy."

With a provincial election less than two months away, how can nurses harness that influence and get involved? Voting on Oct. 6 is the very least you can do, but there are many other ways to engage in the political process. Stockwell has a few suggestions: join the local riding association; pick a candidate (it doesn't have to be one in your riding) and offer to hand out flyers, help with fundraising, volunteer at election headquarters, or assist on election day; attend a fundraising event; write a candidate a note of support; or visit the government's election website ([www.elections.on.ca](http://www.elections.on.ca)) to volunteer in an Elections Ontario office or polling station.

"If we don't step forward, knowing as much as we know about what Canada (or the province) needs, we'll miss a huge opportunity," Stockwell says, adding that the earlier nurses sign on and offer support, the more powerful their voices.

RNAO has been preparing for the provincial election since January 2010. That's when the association released *Creating Vibrant Communities: RNAO's Challenge to Ontario's Political Parties* ([www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca)). The association hopes nurses will continue to use this as a resource, and will continue to give out the election bookmarks RNAO unveiled in February. These highlight the key policy recommendations RNAO is urging the parties to adopt. Among the recommendations: strengthen Ontario's social system by continuing with annual increases to the minimum wage and with a \$100/month healthy food supplement; advance

## Support is just a phone call, email away

For RNAO's Health and Nursing Policy department, the lead-up to the provincial election is a busy and exciting time. In addition to helping members organize all-candidates meetings in their communities and prepare for one-on-one meetings with politicians, staff will maintain the association's new election website [www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca). They will update the site with resources to help nurses compare the ideas of the parties and candidates. As always, members of the department will answer questions from members about *Creating Vibrant Communities: RNAO's Challenge to Ontario's Political Parties*, or any other aspects of the election. Remember, they are just a phone call or email away, and are happy to assist.

### All-candidates meetings

- RNAO's regions 6 and 7, in partnership with home office, will host an all-candidates meeting on Thursday, Sept. 22 at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. The meeting, which will run from 6:30–8:30 p.m., will be moderated by *Toronto Star* columnist Carol Goar, with RNAO Executive Director Doris Grinspun acting as master of ceremonies.
- The Hamilton chapter will host an all-candidates meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 14 at the *Hamilton Spectator Auditorium*. The meeting, which will run from 6:00–9:00 p.m., will be moderated by social planner Deidra Pike.

### Questions for candidates

To help nurses find out where politicians stand on key issues, the policy department has prepared a list of questions. Here are a few examples...

- What would you and your party do to address the needs of Ontarians who are going hungry each day?
- Will you commit to sustainable green communities by closing dirty coal plants by 2012?
- Will your party commit to investing in home-care services?
- Not having enough nurses erodes patient safety in many health-care settings. Will you commit to improving access to nursing services by supporting the hiring of an additional 9,000 RNs by 2015?

For a more complete list of questions, visit [www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.creatingvibrantcommunities.ca). And while you're there, find out more about:

- **The Liberal party report card:** Which promises did the Liberals keep?
- **RNAO's comparison of party platforms:** Where do the parties stand on the policy recommendations in *Creating Vibrant Communities*?
- **What people are saying:** Follow lively political discussions on Twitter and Facebook.

PHOTO: (OPPOSITE) ROBERT WELLS STUDIO OF PHOTOGRAPHY.



MPP candidate Cathy Crowe, second from left, speaks to Toronto media with NDP leader Andrea Horwarth (left).

# How to get involved

RNAO has produced a guide, *Taking Action*, for members who would like to get involved in the provincial election, but not as candidates. You can download the document at [www.creating-vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.creating-vibrantcommunities.ca). Here are a few suggestions:

- Meet with your chapter, region, interest group or student group to identify which RNAO priority issues are most relevant to your community
- Distribute questions for members to ask when candidates knock on the door
- Invite candidates to a panel discussion or forum on health-related issues at a chapter or interest group meeting
- Arrange to have members of your chapter attend all-candidates' meetings in your riding
- Organize your own all-candidates' meeting on health issues
- Contact candidates to discuss issues in the context of stories covered in the media or newly released research findings
- Write a letter to the editor or op-ed about the issue(s) in your community. RNAO's online media relations guide ([www.rnao.org/mediarelationsguide](http://www.rnao.org/mediarelationsguide)) provides writing tips.

For nurses interested in running for public office in the future, RNAO has a kit for potential candidates. Visit [www.creating-vibrantcommunities.ca](http://www.creating-vibrantcommunities.ca) for suggestions on getting started.

green communities by focusing on renewable energy and saying no to coal and nuclear energy; strengthen Medicare by investing in publicly-funded, not-for-profit home care and opening 50 additional nurse practitioner-led clinics; improve system access and effectiveness by adding 9,000 RN positions by 2015 and reaching 70 per cent full-time employment for all nurses.

"For the past year, RNAO members have been using our platform as a springboard to strategic and productive discussions with politicians of all parties," says Rob Milling, Director of Health and Nursing Policy at RNAO. "We are encouraging members to organize more meetings with their candidates over the next few months."

Unlike Stockwell, street nurse Cathy Crowe has considerable experience in the political arena. She says she has always been pleased with the support she receives from nurses. Crowe ran for the NDP in a provincial by-election in the riding of Toronto Centre in February 2010. She didn't win, but is running again as the NDP candidate for Toronto Centre in this October's election. York University nursing students were encouraged by their professors to participate in her February campaign "not in a partisan way, but just to see firsthand what it's like," remembers Crowe. "I had nurses and nursing students work in all aspects of the campaign," she remembers. One day, a large group of volunteer nurses hit the streets with Crowe to highlight health-related issues at peoples' front doors. "I tell (them) to just walk into a campaign office, say who you are, where you're from and what you'd like to do. There is always work...Nurses don't have a history of donating to political parties, but once they do, they realize what it allows a candidate to do. Plus, I remind them they get a huge percentage rebate on their donation."

Also running for a seat in this fall's provincial election is Pickering-Scarborough East RN Caril Phang, an acute care nurse who is currently on maternity leave with her two children. Phang is an Independent candidate\*, and as such her campaign is significantly different from that of a candidate affiliated with one of the larger parties. She refers to it as "totally online, totally no funds." Large political parties require a minimum amount of fundraising money to run a campaign. As an independent, Phang isn't required to fundraise. She hasn't placed advertisements in local newspapers, erected lawn signs or created bumper stickers. But she's passionate about health-care issues and is raising her profile by going door-to-door, blogging and tweeting regularly.

While she would love to win, Phang is realistic about her odds. There are currently no independent MPPs in the legislative assembly. For this mother of two, contributing to a dialogue about health-care issues is what's most important. She believes if more nurses were in politics they would be able to play a key role in reducing the inefficient use of financial resources in the health-care sector, and would advocate more forcefully for healthy public policy.

"I would love to see more nurses at all levels of government," says Phang. "However, the collective voice of nursing is difficult to establish since we have not yet assembled our numbers into any meaningful political influence." A challenge, perhaps, but not impossible believe Stockwell, Crowe and Phang. They hope their involvement in politics will inspire other nurses to consider similar paths. **RN**

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\* At press time, Caril Phang announced her decision to withdraw from the race and formally endorse Pickering-Scarborough East Conservative candidate Kevin Gaudet.



**Pickering-Scarborough East Independent MPP candidate Caril Phang campaigns with one of her biggest supporters, nine-month-old son Walter.**