



# Talking

RNs meet with MPPs in advance of Ontario's fall election to remind them





Clockwise from top left: **1)** Health Minister Deb Matthews talks to nurses about the Liberal government's plans for health care should it be re-elected for another term. **2)** Sudbury MPP and cabinet minister Rick Bartolucci (right) discusses RNAO's election priorities with President David McNeil and political action officers in his Queen's Park office. **3)** Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones (left) sets time aside to talk to RNAO members, including President-Elect Rhonda Seidman-Carlson (right). **4)** NDP Leader Andrea Horwath takes questions from nurses during her keynote address. **5)** Conservative Leader Tim Hudak and Health Critic Christine Elliott (second from right, standing) network with RNAO members before taking to the podium. **6)** Kenora-Rainy River MPP and former NDP leader Howard Hampton (second from right) poses with RNAO board member Kathleen Fitzgerald (right) and fellow members in his Queen's Park office.

# politics

of the health and nursing issues they'll inherit if elected. **BY JILL-MARIE BURKE**



With a provincial election just months away, RNAO's 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Queen's Park Day was an opportunity for nurses and nursing students to learn what party leaders plan to do to advance the policy recommendations in the association's 2011 political platform, *Creating Vibrant Communities: RNAO's Challenge to Ontario's Political Parties*. The platform was first unveiled during the association's 2010 Queen's Park Day, in plenty of time to influence the political process. And, although nurses are still waiting to see if the parties will adopt its recommendations, a strong group of 150 RNs and nursing students represented the association at this year's event focusing on some of the key priorities. These included: strengthening Ontario's social system by continuing with annual increases to the minimum wage and a \$100/month healthy food supplement; advancing green communities by focusing on renewable energy and saying no to coal and nuclear energy; strengthening Medicare by investing in publicly funded, not-for-profit community care and opening 50 additional nurse practitioner-led clinics; improving system access and effectiveness by adding 9,000 RN positions and reaching 70 per cent full-time employment for all nurses.

Minister of Health Deb Matthews, PC Leader Tim Hudak and NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, along with 57 MPPs and/or their senior staff, attended the annual event on Feb. 3. They met with nurses who demonstrated their knowledge and political savvy by posing strategic and thought-provoking questions. For the politicians – especially in an election year – it was an opportunity to gain insight from nurses, and an important stop on the pre-campaign trail.

“The evidence is clear about the relationship between low income and poor health outcomes,” Leanne Siracusa, political action officer for the Hamilton chapter, said to Hudak. “In Hamilton...we’re hearing about parents who are...trying to make ends meet, choosing between paying the rent and food... what’s your stand on the \$100/month healthy food supplement for those on social assistance?”

Hudak said his party wouldn’t commit to the supplement until a review of the system is complete. “I think there is no better social program than a good job, and the problem we’ve had in Ontario is so many jobs have disappeared,” he said. He said Ontario needs “...to get our economy moving and make sure families can pay the bills; and help break down those walls to help people move out of social assistance and into the workplace.”

Niagara public health nurse Sandra Romagnoli pressed Hudak on what he would do about the minimum wage. “Our party commitment is not to have any more increases until other provinces catch up,” he responded. “We have the highest now in Canada. The challenge I hear from small businesses is that they’re having an awful difficult time keeping people employed...I do worry that further increases in the minimum wage...in a tough economy, are going to chase even more job opportunities out of the province.” Hudak said he believes making changes to provincial income tax is a more effective way to assist those with low incomes.

For Niagara chapter president Lois Lacroix, sustainable, green communities were top of mind. She asked Hudak if he and his party would support wind-powered energy. He answered that the Conservatives support renewable energy, but stressed that “it needs to be affordable for seniors and families...and in communities where it’s welcome.” He added that when you consider new supply to our energy system, “it should be done on a competitive, transparent basis.” Hudak says he objects to contracts for wind and solar power that he says have been signed behind closed doors at Queen’s Park because of their exorbitant prices and the fact that the decisions weren’t made by elected municipal councils.

Peterborough nursing instructor Beryl Cable-Williams took to the

mic following Minister of Health Deb Matthews’ address. Her mother, she said, had cataract surgery and returned to her apartment in a small village 25 kilometres from the hospital. She needed to use eye drops following the surgery, but that service wasn’t available through home care. Since her mother wasn’t able to put the drops in herself, the results of the surgery are questionable. Cable-Williams asked Matthews if she is committed to supporting the development of home care services, particularly in situations and settings where cost efficiency may not be the most important determining factor.

“I can tell you that we are determined, and through the *Excellent Care For All Act*, committed to really measuring quality,” answered Matthews. “And if someone doesn’t get the care they need, that is not high quality care...we need to identify those gaps in the system and figure out how we’re going to fix it because we don’t want her (Cable-Williams’ mother) coming back to the hospital.”

Matthews was also challenged on *Bill 179* and the expanding role of nurse practitioners. Michelle Acorn, president of the Nurse Practitioners’ Association of Ontario, asked: “When can we expect the proclamation for *Bill 179* to enable full scope of practice for all nurses? When can we actually expect the announcement for the *Public Hospitals Act* (PHA) to enable us to admit, transfer, treat and discharge our patients?” Matthews said the government is working through the regulations for *Bill 179* and wants to proclaim it as quickly as possible. Consultations regarding the PHA have wrapped up, she added, noting she was anxious to get on with the next stage.

Oakville RN Jennifer Desmond addressed NDP leader Andrea Horwath with a pointed question after her

address to members. Desmond touched on the issue of full-time employment for 70 per cent of RNs. “I don’t have the specifics of what’s in our platform because we don’t have it yet,” Horwath responded, “but certainly we’re well aware of that issue and the need to provide stability, not only for the benefit of patient outcomes, but let’s face it, the profession deserves that kind of respect.”

Respect was a key theme throughout Queen’s Park Day 2011. It was extended from nurses to the politicians and vice versa. MPPs listened carefully and answered thoughtfully as RNs shared their expertise and raised important questions about complex issues. “As the leaders prepare for the campaign trail,” RNAO Executive Director Doris Grinspun said, “they will do well if they account for RNAO’s platform in their own, and if they heed nurses’ voices.” **RN**

JILL-MARIE BURKE IS COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER/WRITER AT RNAO.



Nurses and nursing students (above) demonstrated their knowledge and political savvy by posing thought-provoking questions to MPPs.