Introduction to Political Action

This section provides a general overview for RNs, NPs and nursing students on how and why they should become politically involved. While the term political action may seem daunting, it involves various types of activities – both large and small. It can be as simple as joining RNAO, wearing a ribbon in support of an awareness campaign or responding to an action alert. If you are extremely invested in an issue your activities could grow to meeting with MPPs, organizing a debate at election time, joining a coalition, or running for office.
As professionals who practice at the intersection of public policy and private lives, nurses are ideally situated and morally obligated to include political advocacy and efforts to influence healthy public policy in their practice.

(Adeline Falk-Rafael, 2005)

Every day, RNs, NPs and nursing students (collectively called nurses) witness the impact of health and social policies on the lives of Ontarians. As health-care providers, we must address our patients’ immediate health concerns, but we also have a responsibility to speak out on the broader social, economic, and political issues that influence and shape health outcomes (O’Connor, 2014). By speaking out on health-care and nursing issues, we speak out for our patients, for our colleagues – and for ourselves.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is a combination of individual and social actions designed to gain political and community support for a particular goal. Action may be taken by, or on behalf of, individuals and groups to create living conditions which promote health (WHO, 2005).

Some people see advocacy as organizing protests and marches. Others may define advocacy as writing a letter to the editor, or talking to your colleague about issues that arise in your practice. Advocacy encompasses all of these approaches.

RNAO further adds to the World Health Organization’s definition that taking action WITH individuals who have lived experiences of the consequences of the issue is an important element to balance power inequalities and ensure individuals most impacted by the consequences have a voice.

Many of the skills you have developed as a nurse are directly transferable into the political arena. Nurses are highly skilled in interpersonal communication, assessment and planning. The challenge, then, is learning how to apply these skills in a political context. Advocating for patients is a fundamental nursing skill that can be extended more widely.
Models of advocacy align well with the professional and ethical practices of nursing. Some models with a moral lens frame advocacy as a respect for others, which extends protecting individuals’ interests to protecting human rights (Spenceley, Reutter & Allen, 2006). Similarly, models of advocacy based on social justice (particularly relevant to public health nursing) describe advocacy as asserting the needs of the marginalized, insisting on changing, and addressing health inequalities and disparities (Spenceley et al., 2006).

While nursing is sometimes perceived only in terms of care to individuals and families, nurses are also constantly looking at the bigger picture. They take control of environments that could endanger their clients, grapple with systemic issues, and empower their clients to minimize paternalistic medical care (Falk-Rafael, 2005). Considering the multitude of challenges facing health-care organizations and systems, nursing as a profession will add a strong moral and ethical voice to these issues (Falk-Rafael, 2005). The nursing workforce makes up the largest group of health care professionals (Phillips, 2012) and the public consistently rates nursing as one of the most trusted professions. Moreover, nurses have intimate knowledge of how high-level decisions affect individual clients; and therefore have a responsibility to take action when necessary; whether it is at the individual, organizational or systems level. Be confident in your nursing and health expertise; remember that many politicians are not tremendously experienced in health-care issues (Graham, 2010). Nurses are experts on nursing issues and have a responsibility to advocate for themselves as well as for access to quality care for the clients they serve (Kaplan, 2013). Being an RN, NP or nursing student puts you in a good position to be vocal on health issues.

I do all the things you think of that nurses do. But I also work upstream. I can treat homeless kids for anemia, but I also participate in the province wide “raise the rates” campaign which seeks to increase social assistance rates so that poor children don’t become anemic in the first place.

(Kathy Hardil, Street Nurse, 2005)
How can RNs, NPs and nursing students become involved?

• Join and maintain membership within RNAO to become aware of current issues and participate in the association’s political action events
• Talk to your neighbours and co-workers about a health policy issue
• Join an organizational committee, council or quality improvement initiative (Tomajan, 2012)
• Speak out at an organizational town hall meeting or forum
• Respond to an RNAO Action Alert: [http://rnao.ca/policy/action-alerts](http://rnao.ca/policy/action-alerts)
• Write to your MPP or MP about a health policy issue that is important to you
• Lend your expertise and voice as a RN, NP or nursing student to a community issue through various forums
• Review RNAO’s vision for ideas: [http://rnao.ca/vision](http://rnao.ca/vision)
• Submit a resolution to RNAO or other relevant associations about an issue you are passionate about
• Run for office
Success Story: Successful Resolution for Nutritious Food in Long Term Care Homes

Angela Shaw and Julie Curitti were passionate about improving the quality of food in long term care homes. They began a petition, visited Queen’s Park, and in the end changed provincial policy.

For more information on this story see:
http://RNAO.ca/about/awards/recognition-awards/2008
http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/38-2/l175a.htm
Where to Start?

Becoming politically active can often seem overwhelming – there are so many issues that need to be addressed! Deciding on one area that you want to target is not always easy. Choosing an issue that has currency with politicians and the public will provide you with more opportunities to act, and increase the likelihood that your message will be heard.

What issues should I become involved with?

- One that is important to your colleagues, neighbours, family, or community.
- One that is important to your clients.
- One that is important to YOU.

Nurses are busy people – constantly juggling work, family, and community responsibilities. Adding “political action” to our daily to-do lists may seem difficult when faced with an already full schedule but it doesn’t have to be overwhelming.

Remember – you don’t have to go it alone. Work together with family, friends, and colleagues. Contact the RNAO Policy department and ask for assistance. The more people involved in a project, the easier it is to accomplish.
Example: Action Alert

Action alerts are a political advocacy strategy used by RNAO to engage members. RNAO’s policy department will write a letter to all relevant political parties outlining RNAO’s position on timely issues. This letter is then disseminated to all members through email and they are asked to sign their name to the letter and forward it to the relevant politicians through a pre-filled form located on RNAO’s website. Non-members can also respond to action alerts. You can find more information online here: http://RNAO.ca/policy/action-alerts

Here’s a sample of a recent Action Alert:

Minister Matthews: Let's Invest in a Healthier Ontario by Addressing Poverty

Submitted by admin on Thu, 2015-04-02 09:14
Thanks to our members and friends who responded to our action alert in January asking the provincial government to choose public investments over an artificial deadline to balance the budget. As the 2015 Ontario budget draws near, let’s continue to raise our voices with those of other civil society groups and community members to urge action to improve the lives of the 1.57 million Ontarians still living in poverty.

You can read the response of Minister Matthews to RNAO’s letter below. On February 9, 2015 Minister Matthews launched the Program Review, Renewal and Transformation (PRRT) as a line-by-line review of all government programs and services to ensure value for money. Ontario already has the lowest per capita program spending in Canada. While RNAO continues to support transparency and accountability in government spending, we also want to ensure that the most vulnerable Ontarians are protected as cost-savings are sought.

Choosing public investments over austerity will improve health and decrease health inequities. That’s why RNAO wants the government to increase fiscal capacity so it can pay for public investments that will decrease poverty and generate jobs. That includes investing more in affordable housing, repairing the social housing stock, increasing social assistance rates to reflect the actual cost of living and increasing the minimum wage to $14/hr.

What Can YOU Do?

Sign the action alert below addressed to

- Deb Matthews, Minister Responsible for the Poverty Reduction Strategy and President of the Treasury Board;
- Premier Kathleen Wynne;
- Eric Hoskins, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care;
- Jim Wilson, Interim Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario;
- Jim McDonnell, PC Critic – Poverty Reduction Strategy;
- Christine Elliott, PC Critic – Health and Long-Term Care;
- Andrea Horwath, Leader of the New Democratic Party of Ontario;
- France Gelinas, NDP Critic – Health and Long-Term Care and Catherine Fife, NDP Critic – Treasury Board

Share this action alert with your family, friends, neighbours, and networks
Success Story: Working with ‘Working for Change’

Working for Change, an organization that highlights the importance of work in the lives of those who have been marginalized by poverty and mental health issues, partnered with RNAO to co-chair the an event in collaboration with 16 other organizations, seeking changes in social assistance to support people out of poverty resulting in improvements in government funding.

References - Framework for Political Action


Hardil, Kathy (June 16, 2005). *Presentation to RNAO Board of Directors Policy Summit*.


