

## 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.

### Why should RNs, NPs and nursing students take action?

- Nurses have a very high level of credibility with the public
- Nurses bring a unique perspective and knowledge to health policy issues
- Nurses are successful advocates! See the “Success Stories” throughout this toolkit for examples
- Nurses respond to changing health policies

(Perron, 2013)

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>
- 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>
- 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.

### Ontario nurses applaud additional funds for food in long-term care homes

2007-07-31

Jill-Marie Burke

**TORONTO, July 31, 2007** – The McGuinty government's decision to increase the daily raw food allowance in long-term care homes to \$7 per resident will ensure that Ontario residents are served meals that meet their nutritional and health requirements says the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO.) Over the past few months, registered nurses and other groups have been lobbying the government for this funding increase.

Mississauga RNs Angela Shaw and Julie Curitti believed so strongly in the need for more nutritious food for residents in long-term care that they devoted countless hours of their own time to executing a public awareness campaign. The campaign resulted in over 19,000 Ontarians signing a petition to have the daily food allowance raised. This petition, which was endorsed unanimously by voting delegates at RNAO's annual general meeting in April, was presented to the legislative assembly by Mississauga East MPP Peter Fonseca on May 16.

"RNAO would like to recognize RNs Angela and Julie for their tremendous commitment to this cause and the important role they played in influencing the government's decision. Most long-term care residents aren't in a position to lobby the government, so Angela and Julie did it for them. They were determined not to rest until the daily allowance was raised to \$7," says RNAO President Mary Ferguson-Paré.

The Dieticians of Canada deserve special mention for recognizing that it was impossible to meet the nutritional needs of residents living in long-term care for less than \$7 a day, says Ferguson-Paré. They sounded the alarm about insufficient food funding in a report entitled 'Raw Food Cost In Ontario Long Term Care Homes – Funding Review and Priority Recommendations, which was produced in November 2006.

"Long-term care facilities, their staff and the families of residents are celebrating this decision. But the real winners are the residents themselves. They will enjoy tastier, more diverse and more nutritious meals that meet ethnic, cultural and religious requirements and are designed for optimum health and quality of life. The Ontario government has sent a strong message that they listened and that residents are important members of our society who deserve high-quality care," says RNAO Executive Director Doris Grinspun.

The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO) is the professional association for registered nurses in Ontario. Since 1925, RNAO has lobbied for healthy public policy, promoted excellence in nursing practice, increased nurses' contribution to shaping the health-care system, and influenced decisions that affect nurses and the public they serve.

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For more information on this story see:

<http://RNAO.ca/about/awards/recognition-awards/2008>

<http://www.mississauga.com/community-story/3120162-nurses-who-sparked-food-fight-honoured-for-efforts/>

[http://www.thestar.com/opinion/2007/07/11/inadequate\\_increase\\_in\\_seniors\\_food\\_funding.html](http://www.thestar.com/opinion/2007/07/11/inadequate_increase_in_seniors_food_funding.html)

<http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/38-2/1175a.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 Gélinas, 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.

# OF POLITICS AN

Community led consultation gives members of the public a chance to talk about the impact of public policy on their lives, and to urge politicians to rethink strategies that aim to lift vulnerable populations out of poverty.

BY MELISSA DI COSTANZO

**E**ight years ago, Tracy Mead's physician suggested she leave her job as a manager in a security firm as the stress it caused her was too great. Mead took the advice and suddenly found herself unemployed. Shortly after she left her job, she lost her apartment. She relied on social assistance and unemployment insurance to stay afloat. Ashamed to go to a food bank, and unaware of the support services available to her, Mead says she "starved (alone) in a room."

Several years passed before she learned her municipality provides cash for a transit pass to social assistance recipients who volunteer their time. In 2008, Mead began to help out at various organizations, including Toronto's South Riverdale Community Health Centre. As a volunteer, she helped to form the centre's *Health and Strength Action Group*, which advocates for increases to social assistance rates. She sits on the steering committee for *Put Food in the Budget*, and speaks at rallies to further advocate for poverty reduction. "I'm still hungry, but now, I'm hungry for change," she says.

Mead was one of 10 speakers who shared their lived experiences during a September panel discussion in Toronto entitled *Investing in a poverty-free Ontario: A community led consultation*. She opened up about a wide range of public policies, as did Madonna Broderick.

Broderick, who is in recovery related to mental health and addiction challenges, lived in poverty for almost three decades with no identification, no income, housing or health care. When she got sick, she was left with "no choice but to wait it out." In 2000, she entered a detox facility and was connected with a family physician who provided care without barriers. In previous instances, she says she was denied care because she didn't have a health card, and was unsure how to obtain one. "My doctor takes time to treat me like a human being, not a drug addict," she says.

Broderick wants to see better health-care coverage for people who may not have regular access to providers. Free clinics and prescriptions for low income families would go a long way towards helping those living in poverty, she says, adding it would allow for consistent care that could save lives. "What happens to people out there who get sick and have no coverage? It's simple. They die," she said during the panel presentation.

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 September event in collaboration with 16 other organizations, including: Income Security Advocacy Centre; ODSP Action Coalition; Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship

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Read Full Story at: [http://RNAO.ca/sites/rnao-ca/files/11.\\_Of\\_Politics\\_and\\_Poverty.pdf](http://RNAO.ca/sites/rnao-ca/files/11._Of_Politics_and_Poverty.pdf)

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