

Chapter 2

What Is Health Policy Advocacy?

Advocacy is defined as the support or defense of a cause and the act of pleading on behalf of another person. Rehabilitation nurses engage in advocacy everyday on behalf of their patients.

Turning Outrage into Action

Every day, people have experiences that are frustrating, unbelievable, or so outrageous that they think, "How can this be? There ought to be a law!" Rehabilitation nurses often experience this frustration in their day-to-day practice—fighting with managed care companies, facing inadequate Medicare reimbursement, and cobbling together adequate care for uninsured patients.

- Health policy advocacy means channeling this sense of outrage about inadequately conceived laws, policies, and regulations or about the absence of a law when the need for one is clear.
- Advocates let policymakers know what they, as citizens and constituents, believe elected officials should do.

Despite its simple definition, advocacy is multifaceted, and the types of advocacy activities in which ARN and its leaders, members, and supporters engage are many and diverse. Through health policy advocacy efforts, ARN seeks to influence the outcomes of local, state, and national policies, laws, and regulations to reduce and prevent suffering for people with disabilities. Specifically, ARN seeks to:

1. Bolster and expand the nursing workforce to safeguard public health;
2. Support increased funding for rehabilitation and nursing research and education;
3. Support the funding for treatment and prevention of Traumatic Brain Injury; and
4. Promote passage of the Prosthetic and Custom Orthotic Parity Act.

The good news is that **health policy advocacy doesn't require any new skills, it just involves applying existing ones in a new context.**

Nurses are professional advocates. They regularly represent and work on behalf of patients, as well as their family members, physicians, and, sometimes, healthcare insurers. In addition, rehabilitation nurses lead busy lives, have competing responsibilities and priorities, and every day give themselves to their jobs. Understandably, ARN tries to choose activities that provide the most "bang for the buck." When short on time and resources, not engaging in activities that could be futile or will require new, additional, or specialized knowledge and understanding is a rational decision.

Recognizing this, ARN makes it easy for rehabilitation nurses to get involved in health policy advocacy. The ARN website provides template letters and e-mail messages, which can be personalized, and offers suggested talking points for phone calls to elected official's offices.

So, now that we have convinced you that advocacy can be easy and make a difference in the outcome of our nation's policy discussions, we will move forward into the nuts and bolts of the policymaking process and discuss how you, as an individual rehabilitation nurse, can get involved.

Advocacy is a Right and a Responsibility

The McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum poll found that Americans' knowledge of television shows such as "The Simpsons" and "American Idol" far surpasses their familiarity with the First Amendment.

Only one of the 1,000 adults polled in the telephone survey could name all five freedoms granted under the First Amendment. Yet more than one in five (22 percent) could identify all five major characters in Matt Groening's cartoon family.

*The First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, the press, and religion, as well as the rights to peacefully assemble and **to petition the government for a redress of grievances.***

- The Washington Post Survey

Think about it – the U.S. Constitution grants us the right to tell our elected officials our concerns and request them to take action to address them!"¹ If we took the time to think about it, we all could come up with a list of grievances we would like our public officials to address.

Remember: Policymakers work for the citizens. Your tax dollars pay their salaries and for their health insurance, retirement benefits, and travel (they even get to keep the frequent flyer miles!). After all, you are held accountable by your employers. Therefore, you have every right to hold them accountable for their actions, tell them what you want them to do, and give them feedback on how you think they are doing at their jobs. Entire systems are in place in Congress for the recording of your opinions. The ultimate job review you can give your public officials is by voting – either returning them to office or ending their service.

In the United States we have a participatory democracy and representative government. **Becoming involved is not only a right but also a responsibility.**

¹ United States Constitution, 1st Amendment, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."