

Advocacy, an important component of nursing professional practice, is pivotal to ensuring that nurses' experience and insight influence public policy. Understanding how to become engaged and receive training to inform that process can support nurses' professional development. Such engagement ensures that nurses' unique insights inform the policies that affect patient care and professional practice in oncology and beyond.

#### AT A GLANCE

- Advocacy is a pillar of the nursing profession and ensures that the invaluable perspective of nurses is included in policy decision making.
- Oncology nurses' advocacy is fundamental to advancing issues that affect the safe and effective delivery of care to patients with cancer.
- With a foundation in advocacy and involvement, oncology nurses can contribute to local, state, and national healthcare policy initiatives.

#### KEYWORDS

advocacy; oncology; legislative issues; nursing; policy decision making

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# Advocacy

## The pivotal role of oncology nurses

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Advocacy is highlighted as a pillar of nursing practice by the American Nurses Association ([ANA], 2019a). At the core of nursing practice is a primary commitment to the patient (individual, family, and community) and a dedication to the idea that nurses promote, advocate, and protect the rights, health, and safety of their patients (ANA, 2019a). Although nurses are often adept at advocating for patients in the clinical setting, advocacy in the public policy sector can be daunting; however, it is no less important to patient outcomes. Nursing is consistently ranked as the most trusted profession (Brenan, 2018). This trustworthiness, coupled with nurses' clinical knowledge and expertise in the science, practice, and patient experience in oncology, uniquely positions nurses to engage in advocacy at the local, state, or national level (Saria et al., 2014). However, nurses often feel hesitant to become involved in advocacy work because of perceived lack of knowledge on the process, limited formal education about healthcare policy, or uncertainty about how to start (Brokaw, 2016). This article provides an overview of advocacy, reasons why the involvement of oncology nurses is so pivotal, and exemplars of how to get involved.

#### Overview

Advocacy is multifaceted and fundamentally involves identifying a cause or issue, building support for this cause, and influencing decision-making bodies, such as state or national legislatures, to take action

toward a desired outcome (Webb, 2016). The cause or issue is often identified by professional organizations, including ANA (2019a), but may also evolve organically from affected individuals or communities. Once identified, the issue is then promoted to individuals with decision-making capacity, specifically legislators. Influence is asserted through a range of activities, including calls, petitions, in-person meetings with legislators, and funding to support outcomes through political action committees (ANA, 2019b). It is important to understand that, although advocacy inherently involves activities in the political arena, it is not dependent on political party affiliation. Many healthcare policy issues are broadly supported by members of differing parties, such as the Cancer Care Planning and Communications Act (Stone, 2019a).

The roots of nursing advocacy are evident in the work of Florence Nightingale, who addressed issues of social injustice and served as a shadow author for government documents on health care, the foreshadowing of what we now define as public policy (Selanders & Crane, 2012). This was embodied by pioneering nurses in the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Lillian D. Wald, who advocated to improve public health, including the provision of care to immigrant workers (Christopher, Hawkey, & Jared, 2016). Similarly, Deborah Mayer, PhD, RN, AOCN®, FAAN, interim director of the National Cancer Institute's (NCI's) Office of Cancer Survivorship, is an oncology nurse who has been influential in shaping oncology healthcare policy