The health of individuals is not merely a private matter. Rather, it is a political concern as well (Oliver, 2006). Politics play a key role in determining how citizens and policy-makers recognize and define problems, in making decisions about accepting or rejecting certain kinds of public health interventions, and in generating a range of challenges in policy implementation. The translation of personal health conditions or issues into political concerns occurs when individuals recognize that their personal needs and desires are shared with others and demand concerted attention.

Health related policy is not necessarily about content; it primarily addresses process and power. It is the allocation of resources that reflects decisions, which mirror a particular set of values and beliefs implicitly or explicitly (Fyffe, 2009). Thus, the participation of the public is critical to the process. Well-informed, focused, organized, and persistent involvement is the goal. This goal can be facilitated by nurses who are themselves cognizant of all the dimensions of particular issues and committed to the process of making a sustained difference. The manner in which advocacy takes place depends on the issue at hand and the target audience.

Who Is the Audience?

Engaging the public is essential for shaping and influencing policy. Identifying and reaching the audience most affected by a particular issue is the first step. Prospective audiences may include individuals, specific groups, organizations, sociopolitical entities, entire communities, or a combination of these. An audience may include individuals with diverse demographic features such as age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religious orientation, sexual orientation, and audience members may reside in rural, urban, or suburban areas. Individually, constituents possess a range of beliefs, attitudes, values, skills, past experience, and histories that may shape a shared concern. Collectively, specific groups may possess a central point of view. Given this range of characteristics, efforts should be focused on establishing common ground while simultaneously acknowledging the nuances of situations and perspectives. Assessment and characterization of the target group or audience requires careful consideration.

Concerned individuals may approach nurses to solicit support for an action or concern. In turn, nurses may reach out to communities and specific groups to undergird specific policies or initiatives. Nurses may meet in groups or one on one with individuals in their homes, in community organizations (including religious and social organizations), at worksites, in health care settings, in consumer marketplaces, or through social media to comprehend, educate, and then mobilize.
What Is the Message?

A cause or concern may be generated by individuals or special interest groups or may emanate from nurses who have firsthand knowledge of a health issue or policy. Regardless of the derivation of a cause or concern, it is essential that the underlying issue be clearly defined. All related dimensions of the issue should be fully documented and articulated. Critical questions may include:

- What is the core issue or problem?
- What is the background or history of the issue?
- Who is affected by the issue?
- What are the arguments on different sides of the issue?
- What is the outcome if the issue is not resolved?
- What is the outcome if the issue is resolved?
- If the issue is resolved, how can the outcome be sustained?
- Who should be held accountable for implementing strategies to resolve the issue?
- What is the timeline for resolving the issue?
- What are the short- and long-term costs associated with the issue?
- What are the barriers to implementing strategies to resolve the issue?

Is the Message Legitimate?

Having solid and reliable evidence to substantiate the components of an issue is as important as clearly defining it. Since a number of health issues are controversial and/or may reflect partisan perspectives, only well-documented sources that reflect all sides of the issue should be used to construct an argument for or against an issue. The NLN’s public policy webpage is an excellent source. Other legitimate fact finding sources are available here.

Since members of the public often use a range of media to seek information about health policies independently, a significant component of educating citizens should include strategies to evaluate printed material, documents, and websites. From every source and on each level, concerted efforts should be made to distinguish fact from opinion.

How Should the Message Be Conveyed?

Engaging Those Affected by the Issue

Once the message is constructed, a primary goal is to engage the public or relevant interest group. It should not be assumed that the nurse will construct the entire message or argument. Rather, interested citizens can be convened to compile some of the responses to the aforementioned questions; they can continue to add their perspectives as a common standpoint is built and related materials and strategies are developed. Participatory dialogue in the process will enrich the process and empower those involved (Hemmati, 2007). The socio-demographic characteristics of each group and the particular issue will determine the specific approach. Above all, strategies to maintain civil discourse should be incorporated into the message and the manner in which it is communicated.

In developing materials to educate and empower, content should be constructed in a manner that has optimal appeal for the target audience. Consideration should be given to the readability of materials (reading level of the target audience, organization and format of content, and
Special care should be taken to develop materials that enhance the relatability of the material or the extent to which the target audience can identify with the content and the manner in which it is presented. Charts, graphs, and diagrams should be straightforward, clearly presented, and documented. Illustrations or visual materials that could be divisive or may offend should be avoided. A process to evaluate materials should be in place.

Fostering Maximum Understanding of Issue(s) and Promoting Informed Decision-Making

As individuals become involved in the process, every effort should be made to engage them in a manner that fosters maximum understanding of the issue(s). The range of learning styles and modes of engagement of interest group members should be considered and instructional approaches adapted accordingly to effectively convey the components of an issue. When this is done, participants are more likely to engage in critical thinking. Targeted individuals and groups will more readily assess assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; think fairly and open-mindedly; and enhance problem-solving and decision-making (Paul & Elder, 2008). In addition, ethical considerations related to the issue must be exposed and deliberated.

Shaping Messages of Emerging Relevance

As new issues surface and old issues change, it is essential that nurses maintain a stance of readiness. Being politically proactive implies having a means to systematically forecast, clarify, adapt, and move. Readiness has to do with connecting on multiple levels with those most affected by the issue and those who have the power to make the necessary change.

References


