Voice of the President

Nurse leaders use their background, knowledge and expertise to improve health and health care outside and inside their organizations. Because it is such a priority that nurses share their expertise, AONE helped found the Nurses on Boards Coalition, a group of national nursing organizations working together to increase nurses’ presence on corporate and non-profit health-related boards of directors throughout the country. The goal is to put 10,000 nurses on boards by the year 2020. The effort is a direct response to the Institute of Medicine’s report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, which recommends that nurses play more pivotal roles on boards and commissions in improving the health of all Americans.

Two of the leaders featured in this issue of Voice have influenced organizations through their participation in governance. Nurses can build on their communication skills forged during interactions with patients from diverse backgrounds. These skills can be used to engage members of a governing body, notes Linda Everett, in her article on communication with boards. Learning how to speak with people who don’t look like you or serve in the same discipline is an important leadership skill. Everett is an experienced leader who continuously built on her institutional leadership practice as she worked with board members at three academic medical centers. Stephanie Woods, interviewed for this issue, began her governance journey by first serving on the board of a professional nursing association, the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses. She

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continues to advance her ability to lead and achieve results by working as a board member at Parkland Health & Hospital System in Dallas.

Many nurse leaders that hold board positions began their leadership journeys as members of nursing organizational boards. Michelle Janney, past president of AONE, assumed her role as an American Hospital Association trustee in 2014. She had served on AHA committees and task forces, demonstrating her ability as a leader to work with a diverse constituency to get results. Alicia Georges is a past president of the National Black Nurses Association and since 2010 has been a board member of AARP, the largest consumer group in the United States. The knowledge and experience gained as a nurse member of the Bronx borough board and chair of the Lehman College of Nursing prepared her to be successful at AARP. Sheila Burke, chairperson of the Strategic Advisory Committee for the Future of Nursing: Campaign for Action, began her leadership career as president of the California Student Nurses Association. Her career has included governance roles in various organizations and congressional committees.

Nursing experiences themselves can create a valuable foundation for leadership roles. For instance, Rep. Lois Capps, D-Calif., used her knowledge and community activism as a school nurse to win a seat in the House of Representatives in a special election after her husband’s death. She retires later this year after a successful career and serving as a founding member of the Congressional Nursing Caucus. Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Texas, began her career as a psychiatric nurse before becoming the first African-American woman to be elected to the Texas State House of Representatives in the 1970s. Since 1993, Johnson has served in the U.S. House, using her knowledge and experience as a nurse. In one example, she worked with the Veterans Administration to sponsor bills to improve community assistance for persons with mental illness. Rep. Diane Black, R-Tenn., has been a registered nurse for more than 40 years and is a member of the House Committee on Ways and Means. These leaders have used their positions and skills to advance the provision of health services in our nation.

Many of the nurse leaders described began their leadership journeys outside the organizations in which they were employed. They assumed roles in professional associations, civic groups and advocacy organizations that provided opportunities to learn how to lead. Leading at the bedside, in health care organizations and as a citizen can provide you with confidence and knowledge to assume governance positions. It takes practice and knowledge about the ways institutions and governing bodies accomplish their work. You must be willing to first assume an entry level role, within or outside your organization. At work, seek out opportunities to participate in cross-disciplinary activities to address a performance improvement issue. Volunteer to assist with projects assigned to a board member, which will provide you with experiential knowledge. Another way to gain experience is to work outside your organization with local civic groups on projects to improve the community. Volunteer to assist others running for local, state or national political offices. The point is to make yourself known as a nurse with knowledge, skills and a will to participate in efforts to improve the health and welfare of your community.

Every nurse has a professional responsibility to use his or her knowledge and ability to improve health, within care settings and in the larger community. We need more nurses in boardrooms, committees, and state and national political houses where decisions are made about the allocation of resources. It is our duty and commitment to the public to be present and engaged in the transformative work required to assure the availability of adequate housing, access to affordable education, safe, quality health and social services, clean air and water, and protection from factors that lead to illness and injury. We must earn the trust the public has for the profession by participating as leaders at the bedside, community and boardrooms. Florence Nightingale’s efforts started a noble profession committed to the health and welfare of the public. She understood the power of engaging governance in her efforts. AONE is part of a national effort to increase the number of nurses who hold board positions across the United States. We hope you will join us.

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