

How Can We Be Prepared for the Next Healthcare Crisis?

Sharon Pearce, MSN, CRNA

Ask yourself- who is always the most prepared for an emergency in a health care setting? Is it a nurse? I am sure your answer is yes. Ask yourself- who designs policy about healthcare? Is it a nurse? I am sure your answer is no. Ask yourself- who always implements healthcare policy designed by someone else? Is it a nurse? I am sure your answer is yes.

It needs to change and change now! How do we change it? Nurses need to run for elected office!

I had the opportunity to interview [Bethany Hall-Long, RN, PhD](#), the current Lieutenant Governor of Delaware, and the first nurse in the country to serve in that office. Also, she will become the Chair of the [National Lieutenant Governors Association](#) in July. Again, the first nurse to serve in this capacity! She shared that it is vital to have the “calming voice” of nursing in the policymaking world and, most notably, in light of the current Covid-19 crisis.



As in the case of most nurses, the idea of becoming involved in politics had never entered Bethany’s mind. While taking a policy course at the Medical University of South Carolina in her graduate studies, she was late to class. As we all know, you can be volunteered quickly for a task when you are not there. To her surprise, “Policy and Politics” was written on the board with her name beside it. Her first thought was, “Oh, no! Why would nurses want to be involved in politics?” She admits, it changed her life.

Bethany learned during that experience how clinical skills that a nurse has can translate into population health. Opportunities arise by being at the table formulating policy or by serving in elected office and making decisions about health policy. It shocked her to see how few nurses were serving in elected office and how few nurses were at the table when healthcare decisions were made.

Alternatively, the few nurses that were present were making monumental differences leading huge efforts that affected many patient's lives.

“What is the No. 1 profession that people trust? Nurses. So, when I campaign, I don't introduce myself as a politician. I'm a nurse.”

-Bethany Hall-Long, Lt. Governor of Delaware

Through these experiences, Bethany decided to quit being a spectator and to join the arena. She ran for the Delaware House of Representatives unsuccessfully. Not one to accept defeat, she returned the next election cycle to win. She encourages nurses to not give up if defeated in an initial run.

She goes on to share why nurses should be making policy. Nurses need to be proactive, not reactive because, as nurses, we know the issues. Additionally, nurses are good listeners, decisionmakers, communicators, and advocates. Furthermore, the nation is relying on nurses and need our expertise. This is even more apparent today in the COVID crisis. She continues saying, “who better to determine the quality of care than nurses?”

What are the risks of nurses not being involved? It affects patients, and most everyone will be a patient at some point. Nurses are driven in large part by their hearts, but we must be driven by our heads also. American voters today are driven by the “heart, the head, and the pocketbook.” Nurses have an understanding, whereas policymakers, by and large, do not understand healthcare unless it is through their own lived experience. The lack of knowledge that policymakers and politicians have encompasses what nurses do and what they are capable of

doing. Ultimately, if nurses are not at the table, they are going to be left behind. If nurses do not speak for themselves, someone else will speak for them.

Who will speak for nurses? Physicians, hospital administrators, or federal system administrators, for example, who may or may not speak effectively on behalf of nursing. Bethany says that as nursing science evolves with advanced education, such as the Doctorate of Nursing Practice, the profession needs to be distinct from medicine and other providers. Again, nursing needs a seat at the table.

How can nurses gain a louder voice? Run for elected office. Long says nurses “need to be involved.” Nurses are excellent campaigners because they know how to connect with people and are the number one most trusted profession. To illustrate, Hall-Long shared that during door to door campaigning, she was frequently invited into homes to look at rashes, or to discuss other health issues after learning she was a nurse.

Long encourages nurses to take any frustrations they may have with healthcare or the profession and put it into action. “Be the positive change” because nurses have the skills and ability to do so. Nurses have the “perfect” skillset to listen, analyze, and prioritize, but more importantly, they will do what is right based on the data and not necessarily what is popular. Nurses can see the big picture.

Long says, “Nurses are educated for the political journey.” Will you take that journey?

If you would like to listen to Bethany Hall-Long go to:<https://beyondthemaskpodcast.com/ep-66-nursing-public-policy-why-nurses-need-to-be-involved-with-lt-governor-of-delaware/2353/>