

INS Guide to Public Policy

For Infusion Nurses



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Why You Need the INS Public Policy Guide

Since its inception more than thirty-five years ago, the Infusion Nurses Society (INS) has been helping infusion professionals advocate for their patients and their specialty practice at the organizational level by offering resource networking and education. But as the world of healthcare has grown, it has become increasingly bureaucratic and many nurses find that their interests are not represented in the legislation that affects their work. In particular, infusion nurses often express concern over issues such as drug cost reimbursement, long-term care, mandatory overtime, and other barriers that drive good nurses away from the profession.

Nurses are in a unique position to get involved in public policy advocacy. Whether you realize it or not, you have probably already performed some advocacy work in your professional life on behalf of your patient. Many infusion nurses advocate for a change in their organization's policies in order to improve patient outcomes. This act of speaking on behalf of your patients, yourself, and your colleagues translates well into the public policy arena because it involves the same process: becoming informed about an issue, understanding its effects, gathering support, and speaking out to change things. As you read through this public policy guide, you will see that you are already familiar with this process—we're going to help you take it to the next level.

Many nursing organizations have established legislative action committees or formal lobbying arms to confront public policy issues. INS feels that it is just as important to empower its members to take grassroots action, and to speak for themselves in the locations where they live and work. For this, we provide a succinct and user-friendly guide to public policy advocacy for infusion nurses. We hope that this guide will serve as a template that our local chapters and individual infusion professionals can use to voice their concerns and present their unique point of view to lawmakers who represent them. Included in this guide you will find:

- An overview of the legislative process
- A list of easy-to-use resources to help you stay abreast of infusion-related legislation at the federal and local level
- Sample letters, e-mails, and other media to help you to correspond with your elected officials.

Overview

WHY YOUR OPINION COUNTS

Believe it or not, policymakers care what you think. As nurses—especially as nurses within a specialty—your point of view is important to legislators who craft the laws and regulations that affect you and your patients. There is no one better than you to communicate directly with policymakers on infusion nursing policy because you see the most urgent issues in everyday practice: patient’s rights, workplace safety, competency validation, and adequate staffing. With over 90% of hospitalized patients receiving some form of infusion care, infusion nurses are uniquely positioned to participate in the legislative process because the specialty affects so many patients. This means you can articulate specifically why a new law or regulation is needed.

NURSING ADVOCACY GETS RESULTS

Many nurses make the mistake of thinking that policymakers already have a thorough understanding of the nursing profession and its pressing problems. While this may be true to a certain extent, policymakers nonetheless need input from experts. Many policymakers do have experts on staff to deal with health-care issues, but that does not mean that your perspective is not needed, particularly if you represent a specialty in the healthcare system that is largely unseen or unheard. It is sometimes the grassroots approach to policy advocacy that will affect how legislation is written and whether or not it is ultimately passed. This is where you, the infusion nurse, come in.

In the remainder of this guide, INS will give you the basic tools to begin your advocacy efforts at the grassroots level. We encourage you to send us your thoughts on issues affecting infusion nurses, and we hope you will share your experiences with your fellow infusion professionals so that they may benefit from your knowledge.

Getting Started

Before you contact your elected officials and give them your side of the story, you need to get a handle on what the issues are and what legislation addresses them (or if no legislation exists, but should). If you read local and national news on a regular basis, or any updates featured in nursing journals and magazines, chances are you have a good idea of what types of regulations are being discussed on Capitol Hill or in your state legislature. But in order to get a more specific view of what exactly is contained in a piece of legislation, you will sometimes need to go directly to the source.

Luckily, getting access to legislation has been made easier by the internet. This is by far the simplest and most efficient way to stay on top of legislative issues, so if you do not have a computer at home (or regular access to one at your workplace) we suggest you log on at your local public library or university.

HOW TO RESEARCH RECENT LEGISLATION

The *Congressional Record* is the official document that contains all proceedings in Congress. By logging on to www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/ you can search for topics that pertain to your practice, searching either by keyword or by bill number. A bill that is introduced into the Senate will begin with “S” (example: S. 1935, which was introduced in 2003 to amend the Public Health Service Act); and a bill introduced into the House of Representatives will begin with “HR” (see our example below for HR 2750, the Medicare Home Infusion Therapy Act). While the legislation itself is often filled with legalese and can be quite technical, abstracts and summaries are also available.

MEMBERS OF CONGRESS WEB SITES

If you don't have the time to read the *Congressional Record*, you can always read the position of the officials who proposed a bill by visiting his or her Web site. By visiting either www.house.gov or www.senate.gov, you can easily jump to your local representative's personal Web page and read his or her testimonial on the issue.

Back to Basics—How a Bill Becomes a Law

Most of us learned in grammar school the process by which a proposed bill becomes a law. But in order to help you become involved in the process, we will briefly review, using the federal process as a guide. (Most state legislatures mirror the national model, so the process will be similar when dealing with public policy at the state level.)

THE LEGISLATION IS DRAFTED

Federal legislation begins with a sponsoring member or members of Congress. In addition, the President, a citizen, organization, or another association representing a group may request that legislation be drafted to address a particular issue.

LEGISLATION IS INTRODUCED IN CONGRESS

As an example, let's look at the Medicare Home Infusion Therapy Coverage Act of 2009, which was introduced concurrently in the Senate (S.254) and House (H.R. 574) by two senators and two representatives. The bills included language that defined what types of infusion medications would be reimbursable through Medicare.

Infusion nurses know that passing this legislation will improve their jobs and the quality of care that is delivered. At this stage, they can begin contacting their senators and representatives to let them know that the legislation is vital to the future of their practice and the lives of those for whom they care. It is an optimal time to write, e-mail, or schedule a visit with your representatives in Congress. Better yet, assembling a group of colleagues to visit will make an even stronger statement.

After this bill was introduced, some infusion nurses sensed an opportunity. As experts in their fields, they knew that passing the Home Infusion Therapy Act would improve their jobs and the quality of the care they delivered. Many infusion nurses began to contact their Congressional representatives to let them know that this bill was vital to the future of their practice and the lives of those for whom they cared. This stage of the process--after the bill has initially been proposed--is an optimal time to write, e-mail, or even schedule a visit with your local representative. Better yet, if you can assemble a group of colleagues to support you, this makes an even stronger statement (see *Tips for Dealing with Policymakers*).

LEGISLATION GOES TO COMMITTEE AND SUBCOMMITTEE

Once a bill has been introduced, it is evaluated by special committees and the subcommittees within Congress. The Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House will assign the bill to the committee that focuses on specific policy matters. For example, if a bill was introduced to increase subsidies to American farmers for wheat production, the bill would be passed to the House Committee on Agriculture which would hold hearings on it. The bill would then likely be passed to its Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management.

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARINGS AND MARK-UPS

This part of the process is just what it sounds like. Subcommittees hold hearings on a bill in order to evaluate it. The hearing process often includes testimony from public and private witnesses, some of whom may be professionals, experts, or representatives of organizations. Individuals or organizations can also have their views noted in the hearing by submitting written testimony, which then becomes part of the official record. After the hearing, subcommittee members often meet to suggest changes to the bill, including textual and substantive amendments. The members must then vote on the bill to decide whether it should go back to the full committee. If the bill does not receive a favorable vote, it dies and must be reintroduced.

FULL COMMITTEE HEARING AND MARK-UPS

Once the subcommittee has returned a bill to the full committee (or if the subcommittee chooses to defer to the full committee) the bill will go through another series of hearings and mark-ups. This again gives individuals, experts, and other witnesses the chance to testify on the legislation. If the full committee then votes in favor of the bill, it is reported to either the Senate or House for consideration. The bill will be accompanied by a report issued by the committee that details its origin, purpose, content, impact, and approximate cost.

THE BILL GOES TO THE FLOOR

Once the bill has gone through the committees, it is debated on the House or Senate floor. Prior to the debate, senior members of Congress stipulate certain guidelines or parameters for debate (such as the number of amendments that will be offered). At this stage, the bill is subject to review by the entire chamber (either the Senate or House), and may be voted up or down, sent back to the original committee, or “tabled” (set aside). If the bill is voted up, it will continue its journey through Congress. A bill must receive a majority vote to pass.

THE BILL IS CONSIDERED IN BOTH CONGRESSIONAL CHAMBERS

Once the bill passes in one of the houses of Congress, it will move on to the other chamber for consideration and debate using the same parameters laid out at its introduction.

THE BILL GOES TO A CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

If the bill has passed through both chambers of Congress in the same form (that is, with the same amendments or changes), it will move on to the Executive branch (ie, the President). If the bill is tabled or sent back to the referring committee before this point, it will usually die. If there are discrepancies between the bill that passed the Senate vs. that in the House, a conference committee will be appointed by the President of the Senate and Speaker of the House. This committee will be charged with resolving the discrepancies. If the committee is unable to resolve the issues, the bill will die.

UNIFORM MEASURE GOES TO THE HOUSE AND SENATE

If all has gone well and the bill is “uniform” (that is, the discrepancies have been resolved), the bill will move back to the House and Senate for final vote. If a majority vote is reached in favor of the bill, it will move on to the President.

THE BILL REACHES THE PRESIDENT

Once the bill reaches the President, he can sign the bill, thus turning it into law *or* do nothing for 10 days while Congress is in session, which will have the same effect. The President can also veto the bill outright or do nothing after Congress adjourns at the end of its second session (this is called a pocket veto). If the latter happens, a new bill will have to be drafted and introduced into the next Congress. You will remember that Congress can override the President’s veto by getting a 2/3 majority vote (in each house) in favor of the bill.

This sounds like a long process, and it is. Most pieces of legislation stand little chance of passing, unless there is a strong public outcry for them. Bills that are being talked about in the media are hard to ignore. Lawmakers who receive frequent and strong communication from their constituents on a particular bill may be more likely to push for it. We hope that by explaining the legislative process you will see opportunities to get involved in drafting legislation, offering your feedback as an expert resource, or simply by writing to your representatives.

Tips for Dealing with Policymakers

As nurses, you are already adept communicators. But when it comes to dealing with legislators, it's easy to be intimidated. Worse, it can be tempting to “vent” your feelings about a particular issue in a way that is unclear or nonconstructive. Whether you choose to communicate by mail, fax, e-mail, postcard, or by phone, there are some general ground rules that will help ensure that your thoughts will be taken into consideration. It is always a good idea to retain a copy of any correspondence for your reference.

GET INFORMED BEFORE YOU WRITE. If you have not yet researched the issue about which you are writing, you may not be ready to correspond with policymakers. It is not important that you have read every word of the bill at hand, but you should know the name of the bill and its number, and what its implications are for you, your profession, and/or your patients.

It is also a good idea to personalize your letter if you can. Without going into lengthy detail, use a few sentences or a paragraph to cite an example from your own experience that shows why this new legislation is needed. (*A word of caution: do not use patient names or other identifying information.*)

If you choose to include clinical or other researched information in your letter, be sure it is correct. As a healthcare professional, your words can carry considerable weight, but if you use statistics or other information to influence policy, be sure it is accurate. Better yet, cite your sources in order to help your representative make the case for the bill.

USE PERSONAL STATIONERY that includes your full name, credentials, mailing address, e-mail, and phone number. If you are writing to your representatives on behalf of your place of employment, use its official stationery (one word of caution: be sure to obtain management's approval before doing this—your views may not be those of your employer). If you are e-mailing your representatives and are not writing on behalf of your place of employment, use a personal e-mail address. Most employers have rules about using company e-mail accounts for political correspondence.

USE A POLITE AND DIRECT TONE. While this generally goes without saying, it is a good idea to read through your correspondence before sending it to make sure it is respectful and to ensure that you make your point quickly and clearly. Angry statements will hold little weight unless they are couched in a respectful and logical argument. For instance, start your letter or e-mail with a sentence that makes your wishes known up front:

“Dear Congressman XYZ: I am an infusion nurse and constituent in your district, and I would like to urge you to support the Medicare Home Infusion Therapy Act (HR 2750).”

From here, you can go on to discuss your reasons for seeking your congressperson’s support, and why you, as a constituent who lives and votes in his district, have a unique and important perspective on the issue. If you have been in touch with a member of your congressperson’s staff, be sure to reference it in the letter.

KEEP IT SHORT. A one-page letter should be enough space for you to express your thoughts and let your representative know where you stand on a particular issue. Anything more than this can be superfluous. Resist the temptation to include lots of anecdotal information and repetitive requests. It is also important to address one issue at a time. If you were writing to ask your representative to support a bill on nurse staffing levels for instance, it would be inappropriate to launch into a separate discussion on state income tax laws.

VOLUNTEER TO ACT AS A RESOURCE. As we mentioned earlier, legislators often enlist the help of experts to help draft new bills. Offering your time as a resource may help your legislator to craft a bill that reflects the specific issues that affect you and your patients.

SAY THANK YOU. In your closing statement, be sure to thank your representative for his or her time and attention to your concerns. If he or she responds to your letter, or sponsors a new piece of legislation based on your requests, send a thank-you to show that you are paying attention and that you appreciate their work on your behalf.

FOLLOW UP. It can take policymakers some time to respond to your request. If you have specifically asked for feedback (and in cases where you are asking a legislator to sponsor a new bill, you should ask for his or her thoughts on the matter), it is reasonable to expect a response within four to eight weeks, depending on the state in which you live. If your representative’s response indicates that he or she does not share your views, send a follow-up letter expressing an appreciation for the response, then let him or her know that it was not what you were hoping for. Reiterate your position politely, and include any new facts or specifics that illustrate why you believe the matter deserves further consideration. As before, it is a good idea to follow up your letter with a phone call and let the office know that you are available to discuss the issue.

Sample Letters

You may still be thinking “What difference can one nurse make?” The answer is “Plenty.” Legislators tally the number of letters, faxes, and e-mails they receive in order to judge what their constituents want from them, *so it is important that you exercise your right to advocate for or against a piece of legislation that affects your and your patients.*

In general, sending a formal letter via the US Postal Service is the best way to make first contact with your legislators. Here, you will have the space to explain your objectives and ask for support. Faxes, e-mails, and in-person meetings are better for follow-up communication, once you have established contact (and perhaps have asked for a response). While e-mails and faxes have made communicating with legislators easier than ever before, it is best to visit your legislator’s web site (on either **www.senate.gov** or **www.house.gov**) to determine what is best. He or she may encourage e-mails and offer a fax number on the site. If not, make first contact by mail, and wait about six to eight weeks for a response. If you do not receive a response within two months, follow up with a polite letter requesting a response to your concerns. When writing an e-mail or fax, keep the content brief and to the point. Longer personal stories are best written in a letter.

In order to help you communicate effectively with your legislators, we have included here a sample letter, fax, and e-mail.

SAMPLE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE LETTER

**The Honorable [Legislator’s Full Name]
United States Senate [or House of Representatives]
Washington, DC**

Dear Senator/Representative [Last Name]:

I am writing to ask you to support [Bill number and Name]. As you may know, this legislation seeks to [explain here what the bill does—or does not do—and why it is important to you and your patients. If you are writing to ask your legislator to amend the bill, state exactly what needs to be changed and why].

I urge you to support [or amend] the [Bill number and Name] so that home infusion patients can receive the care they need while maintaining reasonable costs. Infusion nurses are dedicated to providing the best care possible for the patients we serve. I hope that you will support us in providing quality care.

As your constituent, I am eager to hear your thoughts on this matter and would greatly appreciate a response. Thank you for your time in considering this matter.

**Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Address, Phone Number, and E-mail]**

SAMPLE FAX

**To: The Honorable [Legislator's Full Name]
United States Senate [or House of Representatives]**

From: [Your Name, State or district]

RE: Please support the Home Infusion Therapy Act

Dear Senator/Representative [Last Name]:

I am writing to ask you to support [Bill number and Name]. As you may know, this legislation seeks to [explain here what the bill does—or does not do—and why it is important to you and your patients. If you are writing to ask your legislator to amend the bill, state exactly what needs to be changed and why].

I urge you to support [or amend] the [Bill number and Name] so that home infusion patients can receive the care they need while maintaining reasonable costs. Infusion nurses are dedicated to providing the best care possible for the patients we serve. I hope that you will support us in providing quality care.

As your constituent, I am eager to hear your thoughts on this matter and would greatly appreciate a response. Thank you for your time in considering this matter.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Address, Phone and Fax Number, and E-mail]

SAMPLE E-MAIL

Subject: Please Support HR 2750, the Home Infusion Therapy Act

Dear Senator/Representative[Last Name],

I am writing to ask you to support [Bill number and Name]. [If you are sending this as a follow-up to an earlier letter, reference it here and include the date on the letter.] As you may know, this legislation seeks to [explain here what the bill does—or does not do—and why it is important to you and your patients. If you are writing to ask your legislator to amend the bill, state exactly what needs to be changed and why].

I urge you to support [or amend] the [Bill number and Name] so that home infusion patients can receive the care they need while maintaining reasonable costs. Infusion nurses are dedicated to providing the best care possible for the patients we serve. I hope that you will support us in providing quality care.

As your constituent, I am eager to hear your thoughts on this matter and would greatly appreciate a response. Thank you for your time in considering this matter.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Your Address, Phone Number, and E-mail]

Government Resources

House of Representatives

www.house.gov

Senate

www.senate.gov

White House

www.whitehouse.gov

Congressional Record

www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/

Federal Register

<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/>

Library of Congress

www.thomas.gov

State Legislature Web Sites

www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm

About the Infusion Nurses Society

INS is a national, not-for-profit membership organization that exists to promote excellence in infusion nursing through standards, education, advocacy, and outcomes research. The commitment of INS is to support access to the highest-quality, cost-effective infusion care for all individuals. INS achieves its mission by providing opportunities for advanced knowledge and expertise through professional development and resource networking.



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