

Nurse in Washington Internship 2013.

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Washington D.C., the capitol of our United States, home of the world's most powerful and respected government, a majestic city that emulates beauty, ceremony, history, and influence. The Nurse in Washington Internship Program generated a tremendous feeling of excitement not felt during previous visits as a tourist.

Since finding my application letter was accepted, I felt I was on a mission to represent ANNA, the Nursing Alliance and the entire nursing profession to the Senators and Congressman from Texas and my district. Preparation included visiting their websites and setting up an appointment with the local office of my Representative. In addition, input was solicited from the Texas Kidney Foundation and the ESRD Network of Texas to gather as much information as possible.

Being prepped by Jim Twaddell and his staff, I arrived with an open mind and willing spirit to take Washington by storm. Armed with the background information on my Congressmen and the two day NIWI experience gave me confidence to bring my little world to the Capitol. The NIWI speakers were informative and very inspiring to me and those at my session table. The speakers actually inspired many of us to think about all that can be done from the grassroots in our districts. I recall walking away thinking, "Why didn't I do this 10 years ago?"

The purpose of NIWI was very clearly presented to the attendees. The Nursing Alliance had composed three messages, "asks", for us to send up to "The Hill". The congress hearing a unified voice reinforces the ideas for nursing. The message of the need for continuing support of nursing education, nursing research and nurse practitioner lead clinics was clear. Jim Twaddell had also shared with me the message from ANNA and Kidney Partners; Congress must avoid any additional cuts to the Medicare End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) program during the fiscal negotiations. Of course, we now realize that the payment system may be rebased using the drug utilization data from 2012.

On Capitol Hill the first meetings were with Texas Senators Cornyn and Cruz. There were 3 nurses at the program from Texas. We got ample time to meet and get to know each other. Together we provided our three "asks" to the Senators' staff members. Both offices responded with several questions and shared with us that many nurses have been coming to "the hill" to discuss these same issues. They agreed that with the changes in healthcare legislation that nursing issues are a major concern (due to nursing shortage).

The meeting with San Antonio Representative, Congressman Lamar Smith, was the best by far. Shannon Morrow who is Congressman Smith's Healthcare Assistant is my contact at his office.

During that meeting with her I was able to advance the three Nursing Alliance messages and to also discuss the ANNA topic. She spent at least 25 minutes with me and had multiple questions about dialysis and renal care. She met the week before with a group from Kidney Care Partners. I went away feeling like I definitely connected with Shannon and Congressman Lamar Smith's office.

Senator Ted Cruz held a brief photo opportunity "coffee" on Tuesday morning allowing my Texas colleagues and me to pose for a picture with him. What a thrill to be pictured with our newest Senator! And to top off my day "on The Hill", I got to introduce myself to another San Antonio representative, Congressman Joaquin Castro from District 20 at a chance meeting in the halls congress.

Since returning from the NIWI program I have sent my follow up "thank you" to the office staff that we met during the Capitol Hill visits. These messages reviewed the topics that we had introduced during our initial meetings and reminded them that I am a CNN involved in the care of CKD patients and am willing to share my expertise and be a resource for them.

My future plans include:

- Sending continuing email including a new points or issues as they develop regarding healthcare, nursing, and treating CKD patients.
- Meeting with the local staff of our Congressmen and attending their town hall meetings.
- Inviting local staff members to Kidney Disease Awareness and Education (KDAE) Day.
- Escorting a patient or patients to meet with the congressman.
- Continuing to support ESRD funding (no additional cuts).
- Supporting extending the length of transplant medication for patients (to prevent transplant failure and loss).
- Supporting ESRD payments for dialysis along with hospice care for those who require both services.

The NIWI experience has been enormously valuable to me and I hope to make it valuable to ANNA. The program has inspired me, motivated me, and trained me for the process of getting my voice heard. I will no longer hesitate to deliver the message to those who represent us and make public policy. One of my close friends tells me that she calls her congressmen at least once a month. She laughs and says: "I think they say...oh, that crazy redhead is on the phone again..." I say, "Whatever it takes!"