

Action and Advocacy: The Lived Experience of Nurses Advocating for Policy Change and Social Justice

Presenters:

Cynthia P. Paidipati, PhD, APRN, PMH-NP/CNS-BC

Jennifer Sandoval, DNP, MSN, RN-BC

Dana Merk, MSN, RNC-OB, C-ONQS, C-EFM, CBC

DEPAUL
UNIVERSITY



College of Science and Health

School of Nursing

April 2026

Objectives

- To increase awareness of nurse engagement in policy and advocacy.
- To share lived experiences of nurses devoted to social change and justice.
- To inspire nurses to lead with purpose and advocate for the things they care about.



Speakers



Dr. Jennifer Sandoval



Dr. Cynthia Paidipati



Prof. Dana Merk

Background

- We are in moment of national significance when democracy is threatened, respect for human dignity is overlooked, and voices of the people are silenced.
- Nurses have the extraordinary power to garner the attention of the public and advocate for change.

“

Nursing is a
progressive art such
that to stand still is
to go backwards.

– Florence Nightingale

”

Nursing History in Activism

- Nursing – rooted in social and political activism – is upheld by a social mandate to protect the public and ethical imperatives for justice.



Nursing History in Activism

- Throughout history, nurses have been at the forefront of prominent social movements, such as civil rights, environmental issues, and public health matters.
- Specific areas include:
 - Public health and social reform
 - Women's rights and suffrage
 - Labor rights
 - Civil rights and social justice
 - Reproductive rights
 - Environmental and climate justice
 - Professional nursing education & safe practice



Nurse Advocacy Strategies

Nurse advocacy takes many forms with various activities or strategies.

- Protests, marches, or strikes
- Mobilizing nurse or labor unions
- Fundraising actions for collectives
- Holding workshops, assemblies, or community town halls
- Community engagement (e.g., health fairs, education)
- Legislative advocacy (e.g., contacting lawmakers, lobbying, testifying)
- Joining professional organizations
- Leverage research for changes in nursing practice (e.g., staffing ratios)
- Use of social media networks / platforms



Gaps in Nurse Leadership

- Nurses are well positioned to influence policy and advocate for change.
- Nurse leaders, however, often lack the knowledge or beliefs to fully participate in political activism and influence health policy.
- Possible reasons may include:
 - Perception of their own knowledge
 - Confidence in their ability to influence change
 - Comfort level in participating in political advocacy
 - Understanding of healthcare policy and the legislative or political process
- This gap in the capacity of nurse leaders to influence policy and advocacy and their confidence & competence requires attention.



The purpose of this presentation is to increase awareness of nurse engagement in policy and advocacy and inspire nurses to lead with purpose and passion for social justice.



Methods

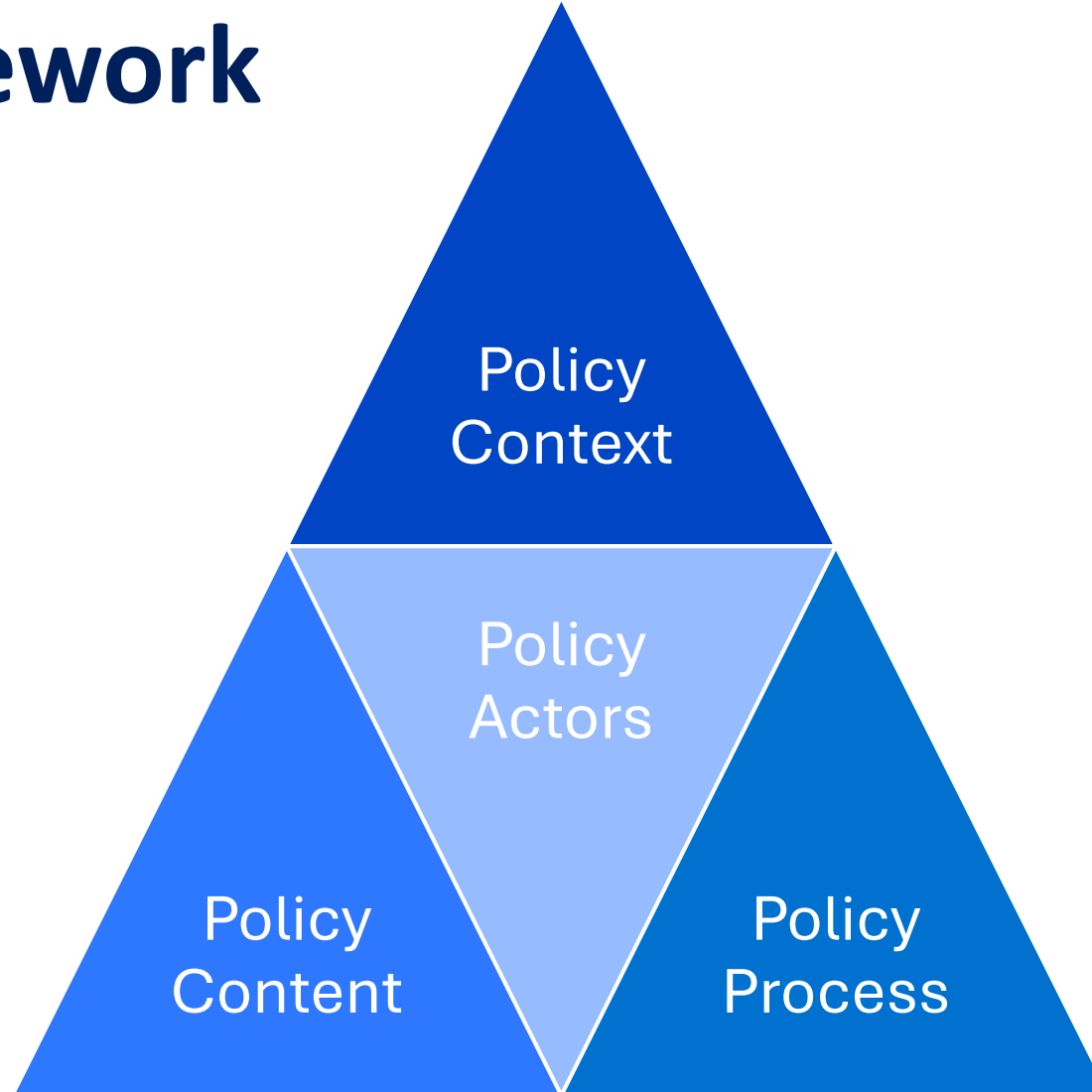
- Storytelling – a long-held tradition to deepen understanding of the human condition ...
- ... is the chosen methodology to convey our political activism and desire for change.
- Using a narrative approach, we weave together stories from nurses who influence policy change at the local, state, and national level.

Storytelling
is one of the
Most Powerful
Advocacy Tools



Theoretical Framework

- Our exploration was guided by Walt and Gilson's Health Policy Triangle Framework.
- Each story of advocacy is grounded in policy content, context, and process with key policy actors highlighted in the narrative.
- Together, we share our lived experience as nurses engaged in policy and advocacy work.



Narratives: Lived Experiences of Nurses

Key actors in this exploration focused on 3 priority areas for policy change and advocacy efforts.

- 1) Brain Health Equity and Hispanic Nurses Association
- 2) Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
- 3) Women's Health, Reproductive Rights, and Health Equity for Children



Jennifer's Story

Medical-Surgical/Oncology Nurse

- 1st job: Community Hospital with low resources as a new graduate
- First generation & first healthcare worker in the entire family

DNP/FNP Student

- DNP project on lived experiences of Latinx nurses during first wave of COVID-19
- Published in Hispanic Health Care International

Health Equity for Minority Communities

National Association of Hispanic Nurses (NAHN) Member

- Joined as a nursing student in 2015
- Brain Health Equity Fellow 2023
- Board Member of Illinois Chapter since 2023

Clinical Assistant Professor

- Teach fundamentals in the DePaul University Master's Entry to Nursing Practice Program
- Assisted students with fellowships/scholarship through different nursing organizations including NAHN-IL



National Association of Hispanic Nurses (NAHN)

- Joined as a nursing student in 2015
- **Mission:** dedicated to enriching the lives of Hispanic nurse individuals through the promotion of academic attainment, mentorship, professional development, and by actively reshaping healthcare in the Hispanic community
- Mentors have been influential in success
- NAHN-IL Board Member 2023-2027
- Community Events to help most vulnerable groups (i.e. Back to School, Health Fairs, Nutritional Education)





NAHN-IL Health Fair & First Meeting as a Student Nurse



Brain Health Equity (BHE) Fellowship

- Brain Health Equity, including Alzheimer's Disease, was elevated as a concern in Black and Latinx communities with nurse leadership from UsAgainstAlzheimer's, National Association of Hispanic Nurses, & National Black Nurses Association to advocate for change.
- Black and Latinx communities are vastly affected by Alzheimer's disease, and it is not talked about enough.
- Fellows presented to the community and peer audiences to grow awareness on Alzheimer's and how it affects our vulnerable populations
- Mentor was 1st BHE fellow for NAHN-IL in 2022. Since then, we have had a fellow each year selected from Illinois, including 2 MENP students.
- Brain Health Academy Advisory Member 2025





UsAgainstAlzheimer's

BRAIN HEALTH EQUITY WEBINAR

Thursday - August 28, 2025 7:30pm cst

ZOOM ID: 207 456 9334 P: NAHNIL



ALEXA PEREZ
speaker



MODERATOR
Jennifer Sandoval DNP
Brain Health Equity Fellow



REGISTER NOW

Advocating for Brain Equity at NAHN



Cynthia's Story

Mental Health Nurse Practitioner

- Child & adolescent suicide risk
- C-SSRS risk assessment certification

PhD Student

- Cluster of suicide deaths at prominent university
- Student Advisory Board – for mental health

Mental Health Suicide Prevention

Post-Doctoral Fellow

- Research study on moral distress, depression, & suicide risk for nursing students
- Focus on bioethics

Assistant Professor

- Suicide prevention summit
- IL suicide prevention alliance
- Black youth suicide
- Suicide prevention foundation

Advocating for Suicide Prevention

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

- Mission: dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide
- Core Strategies:
 1. Funding scientific research
 2. Educating the public about mental health and suicide prevention
 3. Advocating for public policies in mental health and suicide prevention
 4. Supporting survivors of suicide loss and those affected by suicide
- Role: Board of Director – Illinois chapter
 - Out of the Darkness community walks
 - Policy & advocacy at state and national level
 - Media – news, radio, and newspaper opportunities



**American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention**





AFSP State Advocacy Day

Volunteer Advocate – Springfield, IL – 2025

Legislative Priorities

- 1. Funding for 9-8-8 Crisis Response Services (SB2120)**
- 2. Mental Health Parity – 3 sets of bills**
 - SB1480 – health insurance coverage for BH crisis
 - SB1603 / HB1448 – remove prior authorization for BH services
 - SB55 / HB1085 – enhances network adequacy for BH care
- 3. Appropriation – IL Dept of Public Health Suicide Prevention Coordination**

Advocacy Forum



AFSP Advocacy Forum – Washington D.C. – June 2025

- Key areas of legislation
 1. **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**
 - Local 988 Response Act (H.R. 4974/S. 3444)
 - Improving Mental Health Access for Students Act (H.R. 2802/ S. 1236)
 2. **Saving our Veterans Lives Act** – firearm safety & storage (H.R.1987 / S.926)
 3. **Dr. Lorna Breen Protection Act** – mental health for healthcare professionals* (H.R.929 / S. 266)



Dana's Story

Labor and Delivery Nurse

High risk inpatient obstetrics
Staff nurse at a tertiary care center

Unit Educator

Chair of L&D Education Council, Certified
Breastfeeding Counselor, Perinatal Loss
Coordinator, and Neonatal Resuscitation
Program Instructor

Advocacy for Women and Families

Clinical Instructor

Taught OB and pediatrics clinical
courses, undergraduate women's
health course and women's health
internships

Congressional Healthcare Advisory Council

Member of Rep Lauren Underwood's 117th
Congressional Healthcare Advisory
Council



Advocacy for Women and Families

- Congresswoman Lauren Underwood's 117th Congressional Healthcare Advisory Council
 - Opportunities to advocate for women and families in the 14th District of Illinois
 - Roundtable with HHS Secretary Xavier Becerra and other leaders in women's health to discuss importance of expanding Medicaid to 12 months postpartum
 - Advocacy event for Build Back Better, to increase the Child Tax Credit, aiming to reduce child poverty and support families
 - Reproductive Rights – Event with Vice President Harris to address the maternal health crisis, in collaboration with local and state leaders in women's health



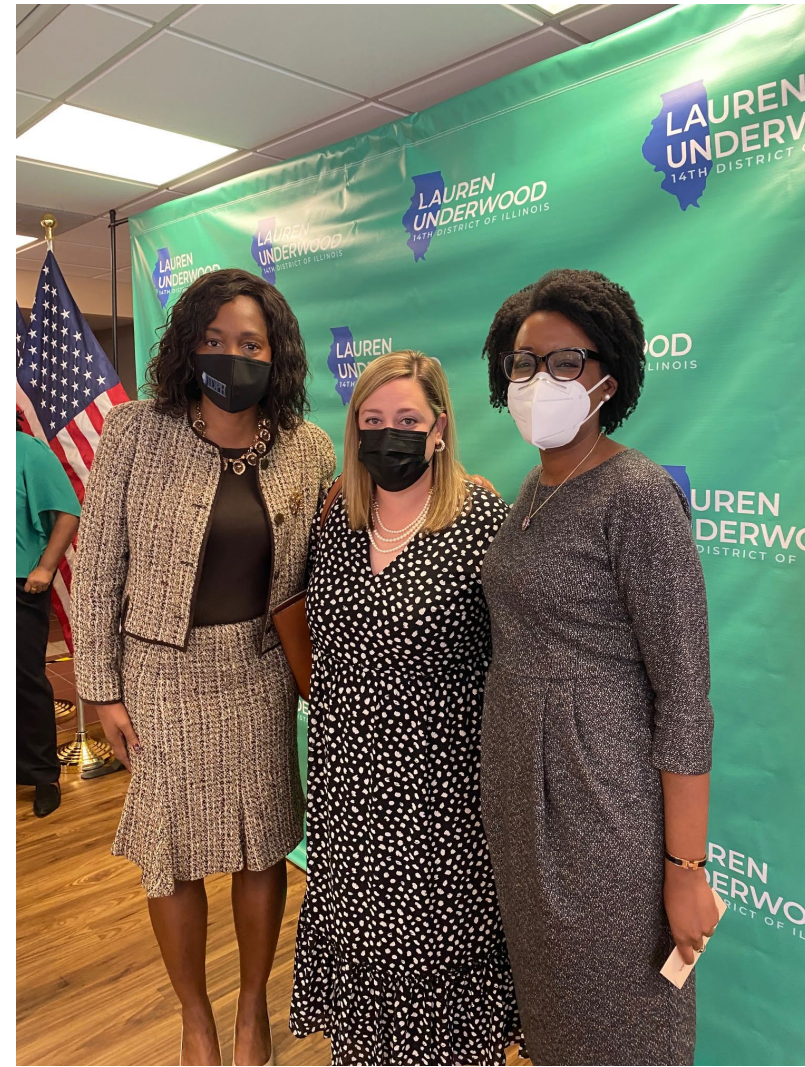
Labor and Delivery Nursing in 2020



Child Tax Credit Advocacy



Reproductive Rights Advocacy



Advocacy and Engagement – A Family Affair!



Nurse Advocacy in Leadership

- **Reflection: How can you lead with purpose and advocate for causes or issues important to you?**
- Strategies for nurse leaders to engage in policy & advocacy work
 - Know your value – nurses are advocates by nature
 - Share successful efforts
 - Educate nurse leaders in policy
 - Join professional organizations – e.g., policy positions, white papers, testimony
 - Engage nurses and students in advocacy
 - Legislative Action
 - Attending Advocacy Days
 - Developing relationships with legislators (e.g., meetings, letters, phone calls, emails)
 - Keep up-to-date on bills (e.g., supporting, opposing)
 - Serve on advisory boards or task forces
 - Run for office



How to Take Action

- Develop your policy literacy
 - [National League for Nursing \(NLN\) Public Policy Toolkit](#)
- Join a [professional nursing organization](#)
- Advocate within your own organizations
 - Shared governance, nursing councils, policy committees
- Develop communication and leadership skills
 - [AONL's leadership/education programs](#)
- Leverage research and data
 - [National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators \(NDNQI\)](#)
- Mentor and mobilize nurses in civic engagement
 - [Nurses on Boards Coalition](#)
- Use media and public platforms
 - AONL's [Social Media Toolkit for Nurse Leaders](#)
- Know your [federal public officials](#) and explore [state legislatures](#)
- Inspire & motivate nurses to run for elected office - [Healing Politics](#)



Conclusion

- Nurse leaders play a powerful role in shaping healthcare policy and advocacy.
- As the most trusted healthcare profession, nurses have the extraordinary ability to influence policy within organizations and the greater social-political sphere.
- With additional training, resources, motivation, and leadership skills, nurses are unstoppable.
- Altogether, nurse advocates and leaders are agents for social change and justice.
- We hope to inspire nurses through our lived experience and policy narratives.



Question & Answer



References

- Chiu P. (2021). Advancing nursing policy advocacy knowledge: A theoretical exploration. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 44(1), 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1097/ANS.0000000000000339>
- Chiu, P., Cummings, G. G., Thorne, S., & Schick-Makaroff, K. (2021). Policy advocacy and nursing organizations: A scoping review. *Policy, Politics & Nursing Practice*, 22(4), 271–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15271544211050611>
- Dickman, N. E., & Chicas, R. (2021). Nursing is never neutral: Political determinants of health and systemic marginalization. *Nursing Inquiry*, 28(4), e12408. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12408>
- Florell M. C. (2021). Concept analysis of nursing activism. *Nursing Forum*, 56(1), 134–140. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nuf.12502>
- McCall, B., Shallcross, L., Wilson, M., Fuller, C., & Hayward, A. (2021). Storytelling as a research tool used to explore insights and as an intervention in public health: A systematic narrative review. *International Journal of Public Health*, 66, 1604262. <https://doi.org/10.3389/ijph.2021.1604262>
- O'Hanlon Curry, J., & Fitzpatrick, J. J. (2024). The level of political astuteness in nursing leaders: A baseline assessment. *The Journal of Nursing Administration*, 54(3), 172–176. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNA.0000000000001403>
- Rabelo, A. R. M., & Silva, K. L. D. (2022). Let it not be that nursing that asks for silence: Participation in social movements and sociopolitical-emancipatory knowledge. *Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem*, 75(4), e20210630. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7167-2021-0630>



Thank You!

For question or conversation, please email:

- Cynthia: cpaidipa@depaul.edu
- Jennifer: JSANDOV6@depaul.edu
- Dana: dana.merk@depaul.edu

DEPAUL
UNIVERSITY

