

# Advocacy in Action: How Nurses Can Advocate for Change and Protect Their Profession

**HAPPY 2025!!!!** So hard to believe that we are here and thanks for subscribing. This month, we're flipping the script and I am not going to discuss a case but discuss how you can get involved and Advocate for yourself and even our profession. I get asked all the time, "How can I become an Advocate?" Well let's talk about it. I have invited Citizen Nurse to assist me and I hope you enjoy the podcast. I think it's so important to focus on how we nurses can take proactive steps to advocate for ourselves, our patients, and our profession as a whole. Advocacy is more than a buzzword—it's the cornerstone of creating a sustainable and safe healthcare environment. Whether it's fighting for safe staffing ratios, supporting legislative changes, or protecting your license, being an active participant in shaping healthcare policy is an essential part of being a nurse.

And let's be real, we all know as nurses, we and our families are potential patients. The healthcare landscape is evolving rapidly, and decisions made in legislative chambers directly impact our ability to both provide safe, ethical care and to receive it. This review will highlight practical ways to get involved, from grassroots efforts to lobbying for change at the state and federal levels. Let's dive into the tools, strategies, and mindset shifts needed to embrace **advocacy in 2025**.

## Defining Key Concepts

1. **Legislative Advocacy:** The process of influencing laws and regulations to benefit healthcare workers and patients. Examples include safe staffing laws, workplace violence prevention, and whistleblower protections.
2. **Grassroots Advocacy:** Local-level efforts to raise awareness and mobilize others around healthcare issues.
3. **Professional Advocacy:** Actions taken to ensure nurses are treated fairly, such as union organizing, negotiating contracts, or supporting peer assistance programs.
4. **Proactive Engagement:** Staying informed about legislation, attending advocacy events, and building relationships with policymakers.

## Relevant Facts

1. **The Issue:** Nurses across the country are facing unsafe working conditions, inadequate staffing, and increasing rates of burnout. Legislative changes are needed to address these systemic issues.
2. **The Stakes:** Policies like safe staffing ratios directly impact patient outcomes and nurse retention. Without active advocacy, these changes are unlikely to happen.
3. **The Opportunity:** 2025 is an inaugural year, with new legislators and agendas. Nurses have a unique chance to influence the direction of healthcare policy.

## Legislative Advocacy

This is the process of influencing laws and regulations to improve healthcare. Think of it as convincing the “rule makers” to create better rules. Here are some examples that directly impact nursing:

- **Safe Staffing Ratios:** Laws that limit the number of patients each nurse can safely care for. These ratios reduce mistakes, improve patient outcomes, and prevent burnout.
- **Pay Equity:** Advocating for fair wages that reflect nurses’ expertise, education, and contributions to patient care.
- **CPT Codes:** Nurses need their own billing codes under **Current Procedural Terminology (CPT)** to ensure proper reimbursement for services they provide, like care coordination, patient education, and chronic disease management.
- **Homeland Security Recognition:** Nurses should be categorized as part of the **STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math)** workforce under Homeland Security. This change would secure funding, boost research opportunities, and recognize nursing as a critical field in national security and disaster preparedness.

## **Grassroots Advocacy: Building Power Through Collective Action**

Grassroots advocacy is about people at the local level uniting to create change. For nurses, it's a way to tackle pressing healthcare issues, like safe staffing ratios, nurse reimbursement, or workplace safety, by amplifying their voices collectively.

Here's how nurses are successfully leading grassroots movements today, along with actionable ways you can join in:

- 1. Host Community Events-** Bringing people together in your area is one of the most effective ways to raise awareness and spark action.

**Real-World Example:** The **California Nurses Association (CNA)** organizes town halls across the state to discuss the impact of unsafe staffing ratios on patient outcomes. These events often lead to public support for legislation, like California's landmark law establishing minimum nurse-to-patient staffing ratios.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Partner with local hospitals, schools, or nursing organizations to host an event.
- Focus on educating the public about issues like the shortage of nurses or the benefits of safe staffing laws.

- 2. Use Social Media for Advocacy-** Social media is a critical tool for reaching broad audiences and mobilizing action.

**Real-World Example:** Nurse influencers like **@nurse.gillian** use platforms like Instagram to share personal stories about unsafe staffing and its effects. Her posts often include links to petitions or events like Advocacy Days, making it easy for her followers to get involved.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Share your experiences as a nurse on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, or LinkedIn.
- Highlight how current issues like pay disparities or workplace safety impact you and your patients.

- Use hashtags like #SafeStaffing or #NursesUnite to connect with other advocates.

**3. Start or Support a Petition-** Petitions are a tangible way to demonstrate widespread support for a cause.

**Real-World Example:** In 2021, **NursesTakeDC**, a grassroots movement, created a petition demanding federal safe staffing ratio legislation. This petition gathered tens of thousands of signatures and helped bring national attention to the issue, fueling lobbying efforts in Washington, D.C.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Create a petition on platforms like Change.org or Care2.
- Circulate it among your colleagues and online nursing communities to gain traction.
- Submit the petition to your local or state representatives to amplify its impact.

**4. Call or Email Legislators Directly-** Direct communication with legislators is one of the most effective advocacy tools.

**Real-World Example:** In 2019, during the push for the Workplace Violence Prevention for Health Care and Social Service Workers Act, nurses from the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) flooded lawmakers' offices with calls and emails. Their advocacy helped push the bill through committee stages.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Find your legislator's contact information online.
- Share your perspective on current bills, such as the **Safe Staffing for Nurse and Patient Safety Act** or increasing funding for nursing education under STEM designations.
- Make your message personal—explain how the issue impacts your patients and colleagues.

- 5. Collaborate with Grassroots Leaders and Organizations-** Finding and connecting with other nurse advocates strengthens your collective impact.

### **Real-World Examples of Grassroots Nurse Advocates to Follow:**

- **Citizen Nurse (LinkedIn):** Shares actionable tips for influencing healthcare policy and legislative processes.
- **NursesTakeDC (Facebook/LinkedIn):** Focused on achieving federal safe staffing laws.
- **Commission for Nurse Reimbursement:** Leading efforts to create CPT codes specific to nursing services to improve reimbursement.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Follow these leaders on LinkedIn or other platforms to stay informed.
- Join local advocacy groups or professional organizations like your state's nursing association.
- Attend their webinars, Advocacy Days, or rallies to learn and contribute.

### **Key Topics to Advocate For:**

1. **Safe Staffing Ratios:** Push for laws requiring adequate nurse-to-patient ratios to protect patient safety and prevent burnout.
2. **STEM Designation for Nursing:** Advocate for nursing to be classified as a STEM profession under federal guidelines, unlocking new funding and educational opportunities.
3. **Reimbursement for Nursing Services:** Support efforts to develop CPT codes for nurse-specific billing to reflect the value of nursing care in healthcare systems.

# Professional Advocacy for Nurses: Safe Harbor, Peer Assistance, Peer Review, and Citizen Nurse Advocacy

As part of advocating for nurses' rights and improving their working conditions, it's important to understand the tools available for professional support. In states like **Texas** and **New Mexico**, programs such as **Safe Harbor**, **Peer Assistance**, and **Peer Review** provide essential resources for nurses, allowing them to ensure safe practices and protect their well-being. Nurses can also work through state nursing associations to advocate for improvements or enhancements to these programs, leveraging existing structures for meaningful change.

## 1. Safe Harbor (TX and NM)

Safe Harbor allows nurses to refuse assignments they believe are unsafe or beyond their scope of practice, protecting them from disciplinary action. In **Texas**, Safe Harbor is a **verbal** process, while **New Mexico** requires written documentation.

- **Purpose:** Safe Harbor ensures that nurses can legally refuse unsafe assignments, such as when there is a risk to patient safety due to inadequate staffing or excessive workload. It protects nurses from retaliatory action for putting patient safety first.
- **Advocacy Opportunity:** Nurses can advocate for expanding Safe Harbor by using the existing **verbal** framework in Texas and pushing for written documentation across both Texas and New Mexico. Each healthcare organization is required to have a policy regarding Safe Harbor, and nurses can work through their **state nurses association** to ensure these policies are clear and accessible.
- **Action:** Rather than reinventing the wheel, nurses can examine **Texas Safe Harbor policies**, which are already in place, and adapt these policies to their own organizations or push for improvements through their state nurses association.
- **Example:** If a nurse is assigned to an unsafe situation, such as working short-staffed in the ICU, they can invoke Safe Harbor verbally in Texas, ensuring they are legally protected. Nurses can advocate for their institution to adopt a clearer and more formal written process for Safe Harbor, which would provide greater transparency and security.

## 2. Peer Assistance (TX and NM)

Peer Assistance programs help nurses facing mental health issues, substance use disorders, or other personal challenges. In Texas and New Mexico, these programs offer confidential support without the risk of disciplinary action, allowing nurses to recover and continue practicing.

- **Purpose:** Peer Assistance provides confidential, non-punitive support for nurses dealing with personal issues. It connects nurses to resources for rehabilitation, counseling, and recovery, helping them manage their challenges while continuing their careers.
- **Advocacy Opportunity:** Nurses can advocate for increased access to Peer Assistance programs and greater awareness within their institutions. By working through state nursing associations, nurses can push for a broader and more accessible implementation of these services.
- **Example:** A nurse struggling with substance use can self-refer to the Texas TPAPN (Texas Peer Assistance Program for Nurses) for help. Advocacy can involve pushing for wider institutional awareness and better support for nurses who need these services.

## 3. Peer Review

Peer Review involves nurses evaluating their colleagues' clinical practices to ensure that patient care standards are maintained. This system promotes professional development, accountability, and quality control.

- **Purpose:** Peer Review is designed to assess the quality of care provided by nurses, ensuring adherence to best practices and identifying opportunities for improvement.
- **Advocacy Opportunity:** Nurses can advocate for stronger Peer Review policies in their workplaces and for the integration of Peer Review as a part of continuous professional development. By involving their state nurses association, nurses can work to standardize Peer Review processes across organizations.
- **Example:** If a nurse consistently provides excellent patient care, Peer Review can highlight this. Alternatively, if there are concerns about a nurse's practice, Peer Review allows for constructive feedback and targeted improvement.

## Advocacy Through State Nurses Associations

State nursing associations are powerful tools for advocating for improvements to Peer Assistance, Peer Review, and Safe Harbor systems. Nurses can work within their state's association to push for better implementation, clearer policies, and more robust protections.

- **Using Existing Structures:** Nurses don't need to reinvent the wheel—states like Texas already have robust Safe Harbor policies, Peer Assistance programs, and Peer Review frameworks in place. By advocating through their state nurses association, nurses can bring these existing structures to their own institutions and advocate for improvements or adaptations.
- **Advocacy Example:** A nurse in Texas could work with their state nurses association to propose enhancements to the Safe Harbor process, such as moving from verbal to written documentation for greater legal protection, or advocating for better education on Peer Assistance programs to ensure more nurses access help when needed.

By utilizing **Safe Harbor**, **Peer Assistance**, and **Peer Review** effectively, nurses can create a safer, more supportive working environment that prioritizes both patient care and professional well-being. Through advocacy and collaboration with **state nurses associations**, nurses can leverage existing frameworks and push for necessary improvements, ensuring that they are protected and supported in their roles.

The key to success is **empowering nurses to advocate** for better policies and practices within their institutions and state associations, using the tools already in place to create a stronger, more resilient nursing profession.



## Proactive Engagement

This is about being involved before things go wrong. It's like planting seeds today so you can enjoy a healthy garden tomorrow. Nurses can:

- **Understand Bills:** Learn how laws are created and track bills that impact healthcare. A **bill** is an idea for a new law, and nurses can help it succeed by supporting it early.
- **Stay Informed:** Follow nursing organizations, like ANA or your state board, for updates on new legislation or funding opportunities.
- **Meet Policymakers:** Attend events like “Nurses Day at the Capitol” to speak with lawmakers. Bring real stories about how safe staffing or pay issues affect patients and nurses.
- **Network and Mentor:** Build connections with nurse advocates and teach others how to get involved.

## Relevant Facts

- **The Issue:** Nurses face unsafe staffing levels, low pay, and limited recognition for their contributions. Without legislative action, these issues worsen, leading to higher turnover and compromised patient care.
- **The Stakes:** Policies like **safe staffing ratios**, **CPT codes for nurse billing**, and **Homeland Security STEM recognition** can dramatically improve conditions for nurses and patients.
- **The Opportunity:** 2025 is a big year for change with new lawmakers in office. Nurses have a chance to influence decisions that shape the future of healthcare.

## Why Advocacy Matters

Advocacy is how nurses protect their patients, their profession, and themselves. By working together—at the bedside, in their communities, and with lawmakers—nurses can make healthcare safer, stronger, and better for everyone.

## Timeline of Advocacy Action

1. **Identify Key Issues:** Determine the policies and bills that matter most, such as safe staffing mandates or nurse licensure compact legislation.
2. **Educate Yourself:** Research the issues, understand the legislative process, and learn how to effectively communicate your message.
3. **Engage Your Network:** Mobilize colleagues, professional organizations, and community members to amplify your voice.
4. **Take Action:** Attend advocacy days, meet with legislators, and participate in public forums or hearings.
5. **Follow Up:** Track the progress of bills, stay connected with policymakers, and continue to advocate as needed.

## Deviations from Advocacy Best Practices

- **Inaction:** Failing to engage in advocacy efforts leaves critical decisions in the hands of others.
- **Misinformation:** Spreading or acting on inaccurate information about legislation or policies can harm credibility.
- **Isolation:** Attempting to advocate alone without leveraging networks or professional organizations can limit impact.

## Legal Actions and Consequences of Inaction

- **Civil Impact:** Unsafe staffing and inadequate policies can lead to increased patient harm and lawsuits.
- **Administrative Impact:** Lack of advocacy for nurse protections can result in stricter disciplinary actions and reduced workplace support.
- **Professional Consequences:** Without proactive engagement, nurses may face worsening conditions and diminished ability to advocate effectively for patients.

## Protecting Yourself: Advocacy and Engagement Tips

1. **Know Your Rights:** Familiarize yourself with your Nurse Practice Act, workplace policies, and whistleblower protections.
  2. **Leverage Professional Organizations:** Join groups like your state nurses association or specialty nursing organizations to stay informed and connected.
  3. **Speak Up Safely:** Use reporting tools such as ADO forms or Safe Harbor requests to document unsafe conditions and advocate for change.
  4. **Engage Legislators:** Schedule meetings, write letters, or attend town halls to share your perspective as a frontline healthcare worker.
  5. **Stay Informed:** Follow legislation and updates from organizations like Citizen Nurse and Advocates for Nurses to remain active in the conversation.
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