

AMSN Advocacy Toolkit for Medical-Surgical Nurses

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AMSN Advocacy Toolkit User Guide

Purpose

The AMSN Advocacy Toolkit was developed to help medical-surgical nurses build confidence and competency in advocacy. The toolkit introduces nurse advocacy with essential topics, tools, and examples. It will aid any nursing professional—from student to CEO—in becoming more confident and engaged. While this toolkit prioritizes the medical-surgical nurse perspective, the principles and recommendations apply broadly and are based on resources and tools found in more general advocacy and legislative training.

Who Should Use This Toolkit?

The AMSN Advocacy Toolkit was created for nurses at any stage of their career who are interested in developing advocacy knowledge, skills, and confidence. This may include:

- Nursing students
- Bedside nurses
- Charge nurses
- Nurse managers and leaders
- Nurse educators
- Nurses interested in leadership, policy, or advocacy

Using The AMSN Safe Staffing Toolkit

Step 1: Learn the Fundamentals

Begin by reviewing the sections describing advocacy, why it matters, and where advocacy occurs. These sections provide a foundation for understanding how advocacy can influence patient care, professional practice, workplace environments, and healthcare policy.

Step 2: Develop Advocacy Skills

The toolkit is organized around five key advocacy competencies:

- Understanding a Problem
- Framing a Problem
- Building and Maintaining Connections
- Asking for Action
- Following Through

These competencies can be applied in any advocacy setting, from communicating with a manager to meeting with elected officials.

Step 3: Practice Communication Techniques

The toolkit includes practical guidance for:

- Elevator pitches
- Email communication
- Phone conversations
- In-person meetings

Step 4: Apply the Tools

Use the examples, templates, and scenarios provided throughout the toolkit as a starting point for advocacy efforts. The examples are intended to illustrate how advocacy principles can be used in different situations and practice settings.

Important Considerations

Advocacy is most effective when it is grounded in facts, professional expertise, and a commitment to improving outcomes for patients, nurses, and healthcare organizations. When using this toolkit, nurses should:

- Gather objective information whenever possible.
- Follow organizational policies and procedures.
- Protect patient privacy and confidentiality.
- Focus on solutions as well as concerns.
- Communicate professionally, respectfully, and collaboratively.
- Use appropriate organizational channels when addressing workplace issues.

Practice Environment Considerations

Nurses practice in a variety of healthcare settings and organizational structures. Opportunities for advocacy may vary depending on organizational policies, governance structures, state regulations, and applicable labor agreements. Advocacy may occur through:

- Unit-based committees
- Shared governance structures
- Professional practice councils
- Quality and safety initiatives
- Leadership meetings
- Professional nursing organizations
- Community engagement activities
- Legislative and policy opportunities

Background

The Academy of Medical Surgical Nurses (AMSN) is the only professional organization directly representing the interests and needs of over 600,000 medical-surgical nurses across the US and Canada providing outstanding care to patients in every imaginable healthcare setting. Our members let us know that, while they have much to say, it can be difficult to know how, when and where to have their voice heard on topics that matter to them.

Nearly every professional nursing organization has resources and tools to aid their members in becoming more active with policy and legislative efforts, few address the more fundamental competency of developing a strong advocacy competency that becomes the foundation for a professional nursing career of increased influence.

This document serves as an introduction to the topic of nurse advocacy beyond the bedside with essential topics, tools, examples and scenarios that will aid any nursing professional—from student to CEO—to become more confident on how to be engaged and be heard.

While this toolkit prioritizes our medical-surgical nurse members, the principles and recommendations apply broadly and are based on resources and tools found in more general advocacy and legislative training.

2026 Advocacy Committee
Academy of Medical-Surgical Nurses

Why Advocacy Matters

Advocacy begins with awareness, grows through engagement, and creates change through collective action. Because nurses witness healthcare challenges firsthand, they are uniquely positioned to identify barriers, elevate concerns, and speak out for meaningful change.

Many nurses hear “advocacy” and think:

- Congress
- Politics
- Lobbying

Instead, advocacy can occur anywhere where knowledge, passion and commitment combine. When advocacy happens, nurses improve:

- Patient outcomes
- Work environments
- Professional practice
- Population health

Advocacy Happens Everywhere



Decisions will always be made by people with position, power, and influence. But these people often don’t have the expertise needed to make the BEST decision.

How often could **YOU** be the person who helps others make the best decision for those involved?

Advocacy

While often discussed in terms of legislation, policies, and politics, **advocacy** refers to efforts to promote a position or to influence an outcome or decision.

Legislative and political advocacy are more specific efforts to influence opinion and decisions in formal groups like state and federal government.

A list of common terms and definitions related to advocacy can be found in the Appendix.

The Med-Surg Nurse's Unique Voice

One of the first hurdles to using your voice is convincing yourself that you have an opinion or experience that others will want to hear. Consider the following:

Medical-surgical nurses:

- Care for the broadest range of hospitalized patients
- See the largest slide of healthcare- admissions, transfers, placements, discharges
- Translate policy, practice regulatory, and financial decisions into care every day
- Are trusted communicators and translators of complex healthcare for patients and families

Most importantly, nurse voices carry credibility because they are grounded in a caring profession and lived experience, both theirs and their patients.

Advocacy competency can help you turn frontline experience into meaningful improvements.

Let's be honest, if this were easy, everyone would be doing it. While many nurses have strong feelings about specific topics and issues, they often cite a variety of barriers to action.

"I don't know enough"	"I'm not political."	"I'm just a bedside nurse."
"I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing."	"I wouldn't know where to start."	"I don't have time for this stuff."

These concerns are completely understandable and are common for anyone who wonders how or why their voice should matter. The truth is every voice DOES matter, but the beauty of having an organization and a profession behind you is that you're not "just one voice," but **millions**.

The remainder of this toolkit will provide key knowledge, concepts, tips and tools to illustrate these points and support your efforts in being heard and having an impact on the issues you care most about.

Where Advocacy Happens

Let's start with the questions of "Where advocacy happens?" Remember, advocacy is about using your knowledge and experience to help others understand what you see and what you know; what is working and what is not. For the patient, that happens when we speak on behalf of the patient to improve the medical or discharge plan. What about advocacy away from the bedside?

Unit	Hospital	Community
• Reporting safety concerns • Leading practice improvements • Shared governance	• Hospital Committees • Quality Councils • Speaking with leadership • Professional governance	• Health fairs • School partnerships • Local organizations
State	Organizations	National
• State association • Board of Nursing • Legislative Day • Political engagement	• Membership • Committees • Conferences • Leadership	• Public comment opportunities • Federal legislators • Political engagement

Patients and Families

We have an obligation to advocate on behalf of the patient to ensure they get the care they need. Even when uncomfortable, nurses are experts at speaking up on behalf of their patients and their families.

Unit and Hospital

The hospital where you work is an outstanding location for early advocacy efforts. Things never improve if someone doesn't **speak up and step forward**. Advocacy is about influencing the decisions being made—your unit and hospital likely have **many** areas where your voice and unique perspective is needed.

State and Federal Government

While this can be the most intimidating for early advocacy efforts, it is a critical location for significant policy and financial decisions that impact patients and nurses. Fortunately, there are multiple groups that can support individual advocacy efforts, removing some of the intimidation while also amplifying our individual voices.

Advocacy Competencies

While every medical-surgical nurse is equipped with the expertise and experience to make them a valuable voice in many critical topics, that doesn't mean there are skills and competencies that need to be developed for maximum effectiveness.

Knowing the answer and shouting it out (even VERY loudly) rarely results in change on its own. The true power of advocacy comes when you can effectively:

- **Understand** the problem
- **Frame** the problem for others
- **Build** and **maintain** connections
- **Ask** for what you want/need
- **Follow through**

These skills apply equally whether you are talking with your manager, presenting to the CNO, or meeting with your state legislator.

Competency #1: Understanding a Problem

Effective advocacy begins with understanding the issue before proposing a solution. Strong advocates seek to understand *what* is happening, *why* it is happening, and *who* is affected.

Why It Matters

Many workplace and healthcare challenges have multiple contributing factors. Proposing solutions without fully understanding the problem can lead to ineffective or short-lived changes. Taking time to gather information builds credibility and helps ensure that advocacy efforts are focused on the root cause rather than symptoms.

Questions to Ask

- What exactly is happening and who is affected?
- What information or data supports that this is a recurring issue?
- What factors may be contributing to the problem?
- What impact does it have on patients, nurses, or the organization?

Example

Rather than saying "We're always short staffed."

Try: "Over the past month, our unit has frequently cared for high-acuity patients while experiencing more admissions and delayed discharges. Staff have reported missed meal breaks, delayed documentation, and impact on care."

Competency #2: Framing a Problem

Once you understand an issue, the next step is framing it in a way that resonates with your audience. Different stakeholders may care about different outcomes, so effective advocates tailor their message while remaining truthful and patient centered.

Why It Matters

The same issue can be framed in different ways depending on who is listening. Leaders, policymakers, and colleagues are often more receptive when they understand how an issue affects outcomes they are responsible for.

Effective framing can connect the issue to:

- Patient safety
- Quality of care
- Staff well-being and safety
- Operational efficiency
- Regulatory or accreditation standards
- Financial stewardship

Example:

Rather than saying “Our documentation system is frustrating.”

Try: “The current documentation process requires duplicate charting, reducing the time nurses can spend providing direct patient care and increasing opportunities for errors.”

The issue hasn’t changed, but the framing highlights why it matters.

Competency #3: Building & Maintaining Connections

Advocacy is built on relationships, not one-time conversations. Whether working with unit leaders, executives, legislators, or community partners, trust develops over time through respectful, consistent engagement.

Identifying the key stakeholders or experts who possess the knowledge, influence and authority to make a difference is the first step in knowing who to make connections with. And don’t forget that, for many topics, YOU are a key stakeholder with critical information others need to make the best decision possible. Be sure to use this to your advantage!

Why It Matters

People are more likely to seek out and act on input from individuals they know to be knowledgeable, reliable, and collaborative. Advocacy is often more successful when relationships or partnerships are established before an urgent issue arises.

Ways to build connections:

- Participating in committees or shared governance councils

- Attend town halls or listening sessions.
- Meet your elected officials before asking them to support specific legislation.
- Follow up after meetings with appreciation and additional information when appropriate.
- Stay engaged even when there isn't an immediate issue to address.

Competency #4: Asking for Action

The purpose of advocacy is to create positive changes. Effective advocates clearly state the action they are requesting rather than assuming others already know what they want.

Why It Matters

People may agree that a problem exists but still be unsure how to help. A specific request makes it easier for leaders and policymakers to respond.

Effective requests are:

- Clear, realistic, appropriate
- Action-oriented
- Measurable or observable

Examples:

- “Could we review our discharge workflow at the next staff meeting?”
- “I’d like to recommend a pilot project to evaluate this workflow change.”
- “I ask that you support legislation that strengthens workplace violence prevention.”
- “Please consider meeting with nurses from our community to learn more about the issue.”

Competency #5: Follow Through

Advocacy does not end when you send an email, attend a meeting, or make a request. Meaningful change often requires persistence. Following through demonstrates professionalism, builds trust, and increases the likelihood that your efforts will lead to meaningful action.

Why It Matters

Healthcare systems and public policy are complex and change rarely happens after a single conversation. Leaders are balancing competing priorities, and even well-supported ideas may take weeks or months to move forward.

Ways to follow through:

- Follow up on the data to confirm the action had the desired effect.
- Thank individuals for meeting with you or listening to your concerns.
- Send a brief follow-up email summarizing key discussion points and next steps.
- Provide additional evidence or resources if requested.
- Align on next steps

- Share updates with colleagues and celebrate progress, even if it is incremental.

Example:

A nurse identifies recurring delays in discharge due to inconsistent communication among members of the interdisciplinary team. Rather than raising the concern once and assuming someone else will address it, the nurse:

- Shares observations and supporting examples with the unit manager.
- Participates in a workgroup exploring discharge improvement strategies.
- Helps pilot a standardized interdisciplinary discharge huddle.
- Provides feedback on the pilot's effectiveness.
- Follow up to review outcomes and discuss additional improvements.

Although the process takes several months, the nurse's continued engagement contributes to a more efficient discharge process and improved patient flow.

Advocacy Communication Tips & Tools

How a message is delivered is at least as important as the message itself. Effectively communicating your knowledge and experience using a variety of formats will enhance your ability to advocate for change.

For all communication types, the most important general rules include:

- Be clear, succinct, and address a single issue.
- Sign your name with RN or LPN and include other relevant credentials.
- Tell your story and frame the message in a way that is meaningful to the decision maker.
- Research your audience to understand their current public position. Visit their website for issues they have championed or opposed, their voting record on similar issues, and the committees they belong to.

Elevator Pitch

An elevator pitch is a brief - 30-60 seconds - engaging summary that introduces you and your issue during a short encounter or meeting. It is meant to create awareness and interest in the audience, opening the door for further information

Recommendations:

- Open with your name and identify yourself as a nurse.
- Directly state which issue you are referring to
- Present data supporting what it is and why it matters
- Offer to follow-up as appropriate (phone, email, etc.)

Example

"Hi, Senator. I'm a registered nurse and your constituent. I'm here to advocate for safe staffing standards because when nurses are stretched too thin, patient safety suffers. I am requesting you support HB123. Please establish enforceable staffing standards that give nurses the resources to provide the safe, quality care our communities deserve."

Email Communication

While not as engaging as an in-person conversation, email communication is often the quickest and least intimidating way to advocate for a particular issue. The two biggest risks with email communication are being too informal or being too generic.

Recommendations:

- Tell a story that illustrates the importance of your position
- Use your elevator pitch as a framework and elaborate a bit more
- Close by offering clarification on any of your points

An advocacy email template can be found in the Appendix.

Phone Communication

A phone conversation is most effective when used as a prelude to an in-person meeting or as a follow-up. If that sounds intimidating, use a script or notes to guide the interaction.

Recommendations:

- For legislators, most phone communications will be with legislative aides or assistants (LAs), but these roles are tremendously influential and should be treated with the same level of respect and consideration.
- Introduce yourself as a nurse and constituent (or not) and state your request
- Rehearse with a friend to feel more confident but avoid sounding too rehearsed.

A sample script for a phone call with a legislator can be found in the Appendix.

In-Person Meeting

Though you may find in-person meetings with leaders and stakeholders to be stressful, these encounters have the most potential for lasting impact. Advocacy is about influencing others towards action and establishing a relationship is a critical part of this.

Recommendations:

- Make an appointment
- Be professional (communication and appearance)
- Prepare and research
- Be clear about your ask
- Offer support or assistance for future work on the issue.
- Schedule a follow-up before leaving.

A sample script for an in-person conversation can be found in the Appendix.

Advocacy Exemplars

It would be impossible to present examples of every advocacy situation a nurse may find themselves in. This section will present three different issues and demonstrate various ways a nurse might take steps to advocate for a particular position or outcome.

Advocacy checklist:

- Identify the concern
- Gather objective examples
- Know your organization's policies
- Identify the appropriate person or committee
- Communicating the patient-safety impact
- Offer or ask about solutions
- Document and follow up
- Escalate when appropriate

Concerns About Safe Staffing Within a Hospital

Scenario/Concern

You are a medical-surgical nurse experiencing recurring staffing challenges on your unit. Patient assignments may not consistently reflect patient acuity, breaks are frequently missed, and short staffing is becoming routine. You are concerned about the impact on patient safety, quality of care, and the nursing workforce.

Understand and Frame the Issue

- Document objective examples of staffing concerns, patient acuity, missed breaks, overtime, near misses, or other safety issues.
- Review your organization's staffing, escalation, incident-reporting, and shared-governance policies.
- Identify the appropriate pathway for raising concerns—such as your charge nurse, nurse manager, staffing committee, shared governance council, or professional practice council.
- Consider potential solutions, not just the problem.

State What You Want

- Choose an appropriate setting to communicate clearly and professionally. For example: "I'm concerned about a recurring staffing pattern that is affecting our ability to safely care for patients. I have documented several examples and would like to discuss how we can address the underlying staffing issue."
- Share specific examples and data
- Clarify concerns and questions about current staffing challenges:
 - What process is used to evaluate staffing against patient acuity?
 - How can nurses escalate the unsafe assignments?
 - Is this concern being tracked at the unit or organizational level?

- Provide any recommendations identified from observations, staff discussions, professional guidelines, etc.
- Ask what actions will be taken, who is responsible, and when the issue will be reassessed.

Follow Up

- Keep a record of your concerns, advocacy efforts, and responses
- Follow up with the appropriate leader or committee.
- If the concern remains unresolved or creates an immediate patient-safety risk, use the organization's established escalation process and appropriate external resources.

Concerns About Recent Workplace Violence Events

Scenario/Concern

You are a medical-surgical nurse who has experienced or witnesses verbal threats, aggressive behavior, intimidation, or physical violence from patients, visitors, or others. You are concerned about the impact on staff safety, well-being, and patient care. Advocating for a safe work environment is an important part of promoting quality care and supporting the nursing workforce.

Understand and Frame the Issue

- Document incidents, near misses, or recurring safety concerns.
- Report events through established organizational processes.
- Review workplace violence prevention policies, reporting procedures, and support resources.
- Identify the appropriate forum for discussion, such as your nurse manager, safety committee, shared governance council, or workplace violence committee.
- Consider potential solutions as well as the concerns.

State What You Want

- Choose an appropriate setting and communicate professionally. For example: "I'm concerned about several recent incidents of aggressive behavior on our unit and would like to discuss opportunities to improve staff safety and workplace violence prevention efforts."
- Share objective examples and observations.
- Ask questions such as:
 - What training and resources are available for staff?
 - How can frontline nurses participate in prevention efforts?
 - Offer practical recommendations based on staff experience or best practices.
 - Ask what actions will be taken and when progress will be reviewed.

Follow Up

- Keep a record of concerns raised and responses received.
- Continue reporting incidents and near misses.
- Participate in safety and shared governance initiatives when possible.
- Follow up on action items and timelines.

References & Additional Resources

Resources

- AMSN Advocacy: <https://amsn.org/Advocacy>
- Association for Public Health Nurses (APHN) Advocacy Toolkit: <https://www.phnurse.org/advocacy-toolkit>
- American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR) Advocacy Toolkit: <https://www.ancor.org/advocacy/toolkit/>
- American Nurses Association (ANA) Federal Advocacy: <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/advocacy/federal/>
- American Organization of Nurse Leaders (AONL) Advocacy Center: <https://www.aonl.org/aonl-advocacy>
- American Association of Critical Care Nurses (AACN) Policy and Advocacy: <https://www.aacn.org/policy-and-advocacy>

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Appendix

Email or Letter Template

Dear Senator or Representative [Insert legislator's name and correct title]

I am reaching out to you as a constituent and professional medical-surgical nurse with [number] years of experience and I'm asking for your support/opposition of **[HB/SB number]**, **[Bill Title]**.

This bill is important to me as a medical-surgical nurse because **[explain why it is important]**. Passage of this bill will **[describe the anticipated effect]**. The importance of this bill is supported by **[relevant experts, professional organizations, research, or other evidence]**.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Full Name and Nursing Credentials]

[Address]

[Email address]

Phone Call or Meeting Script

Legislative Staff: Thank you for calling (visiting) the Office of **[Senator / Representative]** **[Last Name]**. How can I help you today?

You: Hello, my name is **[Your Name]**, and I am a constituent living in **[Your City or Zip Code]**.

Legislative Staff: Thank you. What is the reason for your call?

You: I am calling (visiting) to ask **[Senator / Representative Last Name]** to **[SUPPORT / OPPOSE]** **[Bill Number or Topic]**. This issue matters to nurses and patients because **[provide a brief reason, such as: "it will improve patient safety in the hospitals"]**. Can I count on **[Senator/Representative Last Name]** to vote **[yes/no]** on this bill?

Legislative Staff: I will make sure to pass your comments along to the legislator.

You: Thank you so much for your time and for taking my comment. May I leave my contact information to reach me with any follow up questions?

Meeting with the CNO

Thank you for meeting with me. I would like to discuss **[issue]** and its impact on nurse well-being and patient safety. Our data shows **[brief evidence or key finding]**. I recommend **[specific solution or action]**. Would you support this recommendation and help identify the next steps? May we follow up by **[date]**?

Email to Nursing Leadership

Subject: Request to Address **[Issue]**

Dear **[Name]**,

I am requesting your support in addressing **[issue]**, which directly impacts nursing well-being and quality patient outcomes. When **[issue]** occurs, it can contribute to **[stress, fatigue, burnout, workload concerns, or other effects on nurses]**, increasing the risk of **[errors, delayed care, communication breakdowns, or other patient-safety concerns]**. Addressing this issue is therefore important to support a healthy work environment and ensure that patients receive safe, timely, and high-quality care.

I recommend **[specific action]** based on **[data, staff feedback, or evidence]**. Taking this action would help **[reduce stress, workload, improve staffing or communication, improve staffing or communication, strengthen teamwork, prevent errors, improve outcomes, or achieve another relevant benefit]**. It would also demonstrate the organization's commitment to supporting nurses and promoting high-quality patient outcomes.

May we meet to discuss the next steps?

Thank you,

[Name and Credentials]

[Position/Department]