

VA Nurses Advocate for Best Care

The Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs (NOVA) is a national nonprofit professional organization whose members are VA nurses working at VHA facilities throughout the country and caring for America's heroes. For more than 35 years, NOVA has been the voice of VA nurses. Speaking strongly on behalf of its more than 3,000 members, NOVA leaders recently met in Washington, DC, for the annual Capitol Hill meetings and Legislative Roundtable.

With the elections over and new members taking their seats in the 115th Congress, NOVA leadership spoke candidly about ongoing VA transformation, choice, recruitment and retention, and access to care with respect to the new advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) regulation being implemented across VHA facilities. The APRN regulation allowing APRNs to practice to their full authority within the VA cleared in December. It grants 3 of the 4 APRN roles (nurse practitioners, certified nurse-midwives, and clinical nurse specialists) the ability to practice to the full extent of their education and training.

Armed with copies of the organization's 2017 Legislative Priority Goals, NOVA leadership met with congressional members and staff of

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the House and Senate VA committees. Among NOVA's priorities for the 115th Congress are the following:

- Effects of the federal hiring freeze
- VA transformation
- CHOICE/community-integrated health care
- Information technology
- Retention/recruitment and staffing

For a complete list of the 2017 Legislative Priority Goals, visit vanurse.org

Committee members were eager to hear the opinions of NOVA experts on the Choice Act and on the status of hiring initiatives at their facilities. A key staffing provision of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act included an increase in hiring authority and a more generous loan repayment for those looking to work at the VA. In addition, Congress authorized \$5 million in funding to hire more medical professionals. A VA internal audit found that the need for additional doctors, nurses, and specialty care was the highest barrier or challenge to providing access to care. NOVA testified on this issue before the 114th Congress.

Staff of House and Senate VA Committees shared other legislative priorities, including the reauthorization of the Choice Act and continued oversight of many areas within the VA, to include a sharp look at access and coordination of care and accountability.

The meeting concluded with the

NOVA Legislative Roundtable discussion. Held at the Washington, DC, offices of the Disabled American Veterans service organization, the roundtable was attended by more than 25 organizations that have a stake in veterans' health care. Leaders from various professional nursing organizations, veterans service organizations, VA Office of Nursing Services, the American Federation of Government Employees, and staff from both the House and Senate VA committees were in attendance.

A lively discussion was held regarding the future of VA health care, APRN implementation, workforce/retention and recruitment issues, as well as telehealth and the opioid epidemic as it relates to VA patients. The release of the President's proposed budget also was discussed. As is often the case with a new administration, a "skinny" or outline of a budget proposal is released in advance of an actual detailed budget, which included a substantial 10% increase in VA's anticipated budget for overall discretionary items (over FY 2017) and an 8.3% increase for medical care (over FY 2017). The agency estimates it will treat about 7.1 million patients in FY 2018, and veterans who served in the ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are estimated to reach 995,196 in 2018.

For more information about NOVA or to become a member, visit vanurse.org. ●