



A New Caregiving Role: Elected Official

BY KATHY KLEEMAN

Maryland State Delegate Shirley Nathan-Pulliam was—and is—a practicing RN. Her work in health care opened her eyes not only to individual patient needs, but to larger problems best addressed on a systemic level, rather than case by case. So she decided to help make those laws.

By age nine, Nathan-Pulliam says she understood the differences among the political parties in her native Jamaica. When she came to the United States, discussions at church about issues and policies helped her figure out where she fit into the American system, and engagement in campaigns taught her how politics worked at the grass-roots level. Before long, she had mapped out a route to making a difference that merged her interests in politics and health. Today, as a member of the Maryland state legislature, she's one of only a handful of minority nurses serving in elective office around the country.

Nursing and politics might seem like disconnected career choices, but their marriage actually makes a lot of sense. Texas Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, a nurse now in her ninth term representing her Dallas-area district in Washington, explains that the varied roles nurses play in hospitals, educational systems, nursing homes, and other health facilities “are great prepping grounds for candidacy in local, state, or elected official capacities. Critical-thinking skills are a key ingredient for success in both nursing and serving in public office.”

Mississippi State Representative Frances Fredericks, an

LPN, strikes a similar note. “The knowledge you obtain in nursing really helps a lot in making decisions in your political job. You learn the needs and the desires of people in your profession, and when you’re in the business of writing laws, you use that background to make laws that are reasonable and understandable for people to follow.”

Help wanted—new faces needed

With the fate of U.S. health care still very much in limbo, nurses are needed now more than ever in the halls of government. The Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, has long contended that the entire country suffers when governing bodies represent only a small pool of possibilities—traditionally, white men from a narrow range of professions. That’s why CAWP joined forces with California political strategist Mary Hughes to create The 2012 Project.

This national, nonpartisan campaign aims to increase the number of women in legislative office (at the Congressional, state, and local levels) by identifying and engaging accomplished women aged 45 and older from fields and industries traditionally underrepresented in government. Health—and nursing in particular—is one of those fields, along with finance, science, technology, energy, environment, small business, and international affairs. Outreach to women of color and diverse backgrounds is also a priority.

“More nurses need to find their way to the Statehouse, to Capitol Hill, and to their local councils to educate! If we did, it would make a difference for the individuals and families in our communities, and the kind of experiences that we see every day when we provide care.”

— State Delegate Shirley Nathan-Pulliam



Women well established in their careers and approaching the end of their more time-consuming family responsibilities may be looking for new ways to apply their energies. To them, The Project says, “Run for office in 2012!”

Why The 2012 Project?

The year 2012 presents a once-in-a-decade opportunity for women to increase their numbers in office. Following the 2010 census, every congressional and state legislative district in the country will be redrawn, creating new Congressional seats. Research shows political newcomers, including women, have more success winning open seats. It’s a simple equation: significantly increasing the number of women who run for office during the post-reapportionment election year will likely increase the number of elected women.

Why endeavor to elect more women? It’s in part a matter of fairness. More than half the U.S. population is female, but at no level of government do women hold even as many as a third of the available offices. In fact, the 2010 elec-

tions saw the first significant drop in the number of women officeholders, particularly at the state legislative level; only about 17% of the U.S. Congress is female, along with just six governors and less than a quarter of all state legislators. In a ranking of nations

around the world, based on the proportion of women in their national congresses or parliaments, the United States is tied with Turkmenistan in 73rd place, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

If it were just a numbers game, many might find



the under representation of women in government a less-than-urgent problem. But research from CAWP and others has demonstrated that having women in public office changes both the political process and the policies that emerge from it.

Making a difference, addressing women's well-being

Take women's health. A CAWP study of Congress found female representatives were stronger advocates for victims of domestic violence, women's health, and breast cancer funding. As one example, prior to 1992, most National Institutes of Health-funded medical trials were conducted on groups of men only, and those results were

simply assumed to apply to women. One congresswoman joked at the time, "Even the lab rats were white males." After 1992, Congresswomen Pat Schroeder (D-CO) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) led their female colleagues in calling attention to the flawed practices and forced NIH to include women in clinical trials. Today, women lawmakers remain in the vanguard of those monitoring funding and rules surrounding gender-based health issues.

State Representative Fredericks recalls how her distinctive nursing experiences helped her shape legislation on domestic violence in her state's judiciary committee. "We (the committee) were always dealing with abuse. Being in the

profession that I was, I saw some abuse. When it came down to writing laws, I was able to put that into practice because I knew what can happen to people, the end results of abusiveness," she says. "It was something I really didn't

have to think a lot about, because I knew what happened and was able to utilize those skills in order to try to pass laws to make it better for people."

Women like Fredericks don't just change the content of the public agenda; they also alter the way the governing process works. Both women and men in legislatures agree that women have brought greater openness to government, opting for more inclusiveness and more "sunshine" to ensure that all affected parties have a chance to listen and speak up as laws are written.

And women appear to approach public life not as power grabbers, but as problem solvers—a strength enhanced by training in nursing. "I believe as nurses we are taught the nursing process, and it's an excellent way of solving problems. And so I started looking at different problems and different issues and using that process to solve them," says Nathan-Pulliam. "I am positive that being active members in the Women's Caucus—the women legislators of Maryland—many of us women have made a difference on issues that impact women,



State Delegate Shirley Nathan-Pulliam

such as childbearing issues, pay parity, the issues relating to domestic violence and to children, because we are the nurturers.”

2012: positioning women for power

What will it take to get more women like Johnson, Nathan-Pulliam, and Fredericks into public office? Drawing on research, The 2012 Project starts with the assumption that women need more resources and support, or even an invitation, to run. A recent CAWP study found that most women state representatives ran for their first elective office because they were encouraged by those around them. Women were far less likely than men to be “self-starters,” who said their initial decision to run for office was entirely their idea.

The 2012 Project meets women on their own ground—whether in publications that women read or at meetings where professional women gather to talk shop—and issues those invitations. Among the inviters are women who know both the rewards and the stresses of holding an office, because they’ve “been there, done that.” The 2012 Project faculty of former elected women lawmakers and other public officials share the facts about women’s under-representation and the need for a national, coordinated effort to elect more women. When they speak, faculty members discuss why they ran, what they accomplished, and the difference it makes to have women setting the agenda and making decisions about public policy.

“ I believe the academic training for nurses prepares them for a career in whatever path they choose, whether it be bedside or in the halls of Congress. Therefore, I encourage nurses to get involved in administrative and leadership positions and/or committees within their respective organizations. ”

— Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson



Once women decide to look seriously at the possibility of taking the next step toward a candidacy, The 2012 Project can connect them to the leadership institutes, think tanks, campaign training programs, and fundraising networks in their own states. Dozens of organizations have joined The Project as allies, indicating their readiness to reach out to potential candidates with essential training and services that can help them make the decision to run and equip them for success.

How to get involved

If you’d like to run for office but don’t know where to begin, The 2012 Project can help. The process begins when you visit www.the2012project.us and click “Take Action,” or e-mail info@the2012project.us. You can also e-mail the same address if you’d like to arrange for a speaker to visit your organization to discuss The 2012 Project and the need for more women to run. Now is the time for you and your nursing colleagues to become tomorrow’s legislative leaders! **MN**

Kathy Kleeman is the Senior Communications Officer at the Eagleton Institute of Politics and its Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP). Kleeman has been at Eagleton since 1980, dividing her time among various Institute and CAWP programs. She works on many of CAWP’s education and information services programs, responding to inquiries and speaking to groups about women’s political participation.