

Why Your Nurses Should Serve on Community Health Boards

BY LAURIE BENSON, B.S.N., NURSES ON BOARDS COALITION,
AND KIMBERLY J. HARPER, M.S., RN, INDIANA CENTER FOR NURSING

Although the fate of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is uncertain, this landmark legislation, and its accompanying regulations, has placed a renewed focus on community and population health.

Nurse leaders are able to impact the health of the communities they serve not only through their roles as clinicians, but also through service on non-profit and community boards of directors.

Despite being the largest health profession with 3.6 million registered nurses across the nation, nurses comprise less than 1 percent of voting members on hospital and health system boards.¹ This trend, unfortunately, carries over to the governance of community health efforts. According to a 2014 study examining a dozen successful community health partnerships, nurses comprised only 4 percent of the direction-setting bodies.²

In contrast with this low representation, public health nurses specialize in “community-building, health promotion, policy reform, and system-level changes to promote and protect the health of populations” to improve health and promote health equity.³ Further, board service, conducting community needs assessments, and participating in community groups are all competencies required for nurses to receive the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Advanced Public Health Nursing Certification.⁴ Clearly, nurses are well positioned to positively impact community and population health.

There are major benefits for all parties—community members served by a healthcare organization, the nurses these organizations employ, and the hospitals and health systems themselves—when

nurse executives are encouraged to serve on boards of community health organizations.

Benefits for Communities

Nurse leaders provide assets to the communities in which they live and serve in areas that reach beyond their formal employment. Through their volunteer appointments on community boards, philanthropic organizations, governmental task forces, and commissions, nurse leaders carry their substantial expertise into the boardrooms of community organizations across the nation. Further, nurses have been rated by consumers as the most honest and ethical profession in the nation 15 years in a row, and are thus best positioned to leverage the trust of the communities they serve to improve health.⁵

“I have seen the impact that it is possible to have by moving beyond the bedside to serve in a broader, more far-reaching capacity,” says Christine Schuster, RN, M.B.A., President and CEO of Emerson

Key Board Takeaways

Everybody wins when nurse executives serve on the boards of non-profit and community health organizations. Communities experience improved health; nurses increase their job satisfaction and grow professionally; and healthcare organizations reap the benefit of new insights, best practices, and enhanced reputation. It is therefore beneficial to healthcare organizations to support the volunteer efforts of their nurse executives in community service, including board service.

Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts.

“Emerson nurses are working in collaboration with our community agencies, such as Councils on Aging and regional senior care assistance organizations, to develop best practices in reducing readmissions. These collaborations improve patient quality of life, lower costs, and advance patient care quality. I am very proud to see our nurses stepping forward to achieve measurable goals in enhancing patient care by working *outside* the walls of our hospital.”



1 Kathryn C. Peisert, *21st-Century Care Delivery: Governing in the New Healthcare Industry*, The Governance Institute’s 2015 Biennial Survey of Hospitals and Healthcare Systems.
2 Lawrence Prybil et al., *Improving Community Health through Hospital–Public Health Collaboration: Insights and Lessons Learned from Successful Partnerships*, Commonwealth Center for Governance Studies, Inc., November 2014.
3 American Public Health Association, Public Health Nursing Section, “The Definition and Practice of Public Health Nursing: A Statement of the Public Health Nursing Section,” 2013.
4 ANCC’s Advanced Public Health Nursing Certification (see <http://nursecredentialing.org/AdvPublicHealthNursing-PCO>).

5 Jim Norman, “Americans Rate Healthcare Providers High on Honesty, Ethics,” Gallup, December 19, 2016.

The power of nurses to improve community health is echoed by Susan Orsega, M.S.N., FNP-BC, FAANP, FAAN, Rear Admiral, United States Public Health Service (USPHS), Assistant Surgeon General, and USPHS Chief Nurse Officer, who leads a team of 1,500 nurse commissioned officers. “Commissioned Corps nurses play a vital role in reaching the population where they work, play, and pray,” said Orsega. “Population health is a staple of what we do in our varied assignments across the country. The Commissioned Corps nurses fulfill critical roles in clinics, hospitals, and public health outreach programs and policies that are vital to the health of families and communities across the nation.”

“The involvement of their nurse executives in high-profile community boards builds credibility and enhances the reputation for the organizations that employ them. Serving on community boards, nurses are extending the reach and reputation of the hospital beyond the clinical environment in helping shape policy and strategy decisions that impact these critical areas of patient care across the continuum of care.”

—Lawrence W. Vernaglia,
Foley & Lardner LLP

“The Commissioned Corps community outreach, as an outside activity, to support a culture of health is ever present,” Orsega continued. “Our nurses lead community events that bring together several organizations to organizing community runs to serving on church boards and school activity boards. We also bridge federal resources to the community, whether state, local, or tribal, providing an exceptional opportunity for the promotion and support of the Surgeon General’s priorities, calls to action, or public health initiatives. My nurse team impacts the health of every American using

a model of care centered on population health, wellness, and prevention. We want to create a culture and world where good health is in the reach of every person.”

Benefits for Nurses

Nurses gain a valuable professional development opportunity when they serve on community and non-profit boards. The Center for Creative Leadership’s 70-20-10 rule for leadership development states that leaders need to have three types of experience, using a 70-20-10 ratio: challenging assignments (70 percent), developmental relationships (20 percent), and coursework and training (10 percent).⁶ Board service is an excellent way for employers to expose nurse leaders to developmental relationships and thus foster the leadership of its nursing workforce. Additionally, serving on community boards often has a positive impact on job satisfaction.

Benefits for Healthcare Organizations

Healthcare organizations stand to gain when they promote nurses participating in community service. As Lawrence W. Vernaglia, Partner and Chair, Healthcare Practice, Foley & Lardner LLP, states: “The involvement of their nurse executives in high-profile community boards builds credibility and enhances the reputation for the organizations that employ them. Serving on community boards, nurses are extending the reach and reputation of the hospital beyond the clinical environment in helping shape policy and strategy decisions



that impact these critical areas of patient care across the continuum of care.”

Nurses’ service in community governance roles also helps them bring back new ideas, best practices, and even professional connections gained through board service to their places of employment. “The experiences gained by the nurses on community boards is often reflected back through the evidence-based learning that they apply within their own hospitals as a result of their community board roles,” Vernaglia adds.

Finally, by remaining “in touch” with the community, nurses can also conduct environmental scans, alerting hospitals and health systems to new and emerging healthcare issues.

It is increasingly beneficial—to communities, nurses, and healthcare organizations—when hospitals and health systems support the volunteer efforts of their nurse executives serving in board and other leadership roles in their communities. ●

The Governance Institute thanks Laurie Benson, B.S.N., Executive Director, Nurses on Boards Coalition, and Kimberly J. Harper, M.S., RN, Chief Executive Officer, Indiana Center for Nursing, Nursing Lead, Indiana Action Coalition—National Future of Nursing Campaign for Action, and National Co-Chair, Nurses on Boards Coalition, for contributing this article. They can be reached at laurie.benson@ana.org and kharper@ic4n.org.



⁶ Ron Rabin, *Blended Learning for Leadership: The CCL Approach*, Center for Creative Leadership, 2014.