United We Stand

Only two months old, the largest RN organization in United States history is already changing the face of nursing. By Felicia Mello

It may have taken more than a century for direct-care nurses to form their own national union. But the 150,000-member National Nurses United is wasting no time getting to work on an ambitious patient-advocacy agenda.

NNU “will transform the face of healthcare and nursing, rattle the windows in all those fancy hospital corporate boardrooms, and shake the halls of Congress and our state legislatures,” NNU co-president Deborah Burger, RN, told nurses gathered in Phoenix in December for the organization’s founding convention.

In the months since the convention, National Nurses United—formed by combining the California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee, the Massachusetts Nurses Association and United American Nurses—has won its first organizing cam-
campaign, coordinated a major international disaster relief effort, and launched a state-by-state campaign to win free, quality healthcare for every American. The successes signal a new era in nursing, in which RNs flex their collective muscle to transform the healthcare system, not just within individual hospital chains or regions, but nationwide.

The strength of that collaboration quickly became clear in January, when a catastrophic earthquake rocked Haiti, killing tens of thousands of that country’s residents and toppling hospitals and nursing schools. NNU put out a nationwide call for help and within hours, thousands of nurses had volunteered for an emergency nursing mission to care for earthquake victims. Members of the public responded to NNU’s ‘Send a Nurse to Haiti’ campaign with over tens of thousands of dollars in donations to pay for nurses’ travel and supplies. As the official voice of registered nurses in Washington, NNU worked with the White House and international governments to arrange transportation for the nurses and ensure their security in the field.

Having the backing of a national organization is proving equally important in negotiating contracts that address nurses’ day-to-day concerns on the job.

As 12,000 nurses in Minnesota’s Twin Cities region gear up for collective bargaining with the area’s hospitals this spring, they know their fight to protect their pension benefits is part of a larger NNU campaign to ensure a secure retirement for all nurses.

The Minnesota nurses will use their NNU ties to research contract language that has proven effective in other areas of the country, and to turn out large numbers of nurses for mass rallies and events, said Minnesota Nurses Association President Linda Hamilton, RN, an NNU vice president. "Our employers will know that they're not only dealing with nurses in the Twin Cities, that this is on a much larger scale."

Meanwhile, forming NNU has allowed nurses to speak with a single voice in the most pivotal national conversation since President Obama took office: the debate over how to overhaul the country’s healthcare system. As federal lawmakers haggled over the details of a weak healthcare-reform bill, NNU leaders took to the airwaves. They pointed out how the proposed legislation left the power of the insurance companies intact, and urged Congress to close loopholes that would allow insurers to continue denying coverage to sick patients and charging exorbitant premiums. Media outlets that had rarely interviewed nurses on healthcare reform soon began calling.

NNU is now building on that momentum to pass ‘Medicare-for-All’ laws in every state that will ensure universal health coverage,
regardless of what happens at the federal level. NNU board members met in late January to coordinate those efforts and share strategies, from phone-banking seniors to holding rallies at state capitols.

“In this country, in order to move real, true healthcare reform, it’s got to be all of us together, and it’s got to start with the nurses, because only nurses know how it needs to be done,” NNU co-president Jean Ross, RN, told nurses at the December convention.

A unified nurse perspective on national health policy “could have a very big effect,” said Sue Hassmiller, senior adviser for nursing at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a healthcare think tank.

“Patient care is at stake and when you have people like lawyers and policymakers at the table, not to have the voice of nursing is a real missed opportunity,” she said. “If there are one or two issues that policymakers at the table, not to have the voice of nursing is a real missed opportunity,” she said. “If there are one or two issues that nurses can really put their arms around and say this is what we stand for, that can go a long way.”

At the convention, NNU co-president Karen Higgins, RN of Massachusetts laid out a vision of a progressive nurses movement that can not only advocate on healthcare issues, but “stand shoulder to shoulder with other working people and American families for genuine social progress in our nation, to refuse to accept wide-spread joblessness, or hunger or poverty. As registered nurses we see every day the consequences of the economic crisis, the inequality, the disparities in wealth that are surely as destructive as a global pandemic.”

Many RNs who attended the convention said they’d been waiting their entire career for nurses to work together nationally. For two days, the event—part celebration, part business meeting—was punctuated with tears of joy.

“I’ve been a nurse for 34 years and I’ve represented nurses in contract negotiations and I always felt something was missing,” said RN Kris Michaelson of Michigan. “I needed more to feel I’d really accomplished something. And this is it. This is the legacy we pass on for nurses, for the women in this country. We are finally coming into our own.”

Besides electing Higgins, Burger and Ross as co-presidents, delegates to the convention named an executive director, Rose Ann DeMoro, the current CNA/NNOC executive director and one of the nation’s most prominent voices on labor and healthcare. They heard from Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions president Linda Silas, RN about nurse organizing in Canada, and from retired nurses and nursing students about their experiences and their vision for the future of nursing.

The convention was the culmination of years of struggle by direct-care nurses to take control of their practice, their organizations and their profession. Twenty years ago, most RNs were members of the American Nurses Association, a professional group controlled by nurse managers who weren’t involved in day-to-day patient care and often put hospital profits before the needs of patients. But as hospitals across the country started cutting costs and laying off nurses in the 1980s and 1990s, nurses realized they needed to work aggressively and independently to protect them-

FAQ on NNU

Why do nurses need a national RN super-union? Today’s nurses practice in a healthcare system in crisis. Employers are reducing RN staffing and benefits, affecting nurses’ ability to protect their patients. Meanwhile, an estimated 45,000 Americans die each year because they lack health insurance. With economic changes and new legislation promising to reshape the industry, RNs need a strong, united voice to effectively represent the interests of nurses and patients. National Nurses United will protect and enhance the gains in wages, pension and health benefits, and safe working conditions that nurses have made through collective bargaining, organizing unrepresented nurses to spread those achievements across the country. We will advocate for a single, excellent standard of healthcare for every American, regardless of ability to pay; win national patient-protection laws such as safe-staffing ratios and an end to mandatory overtime; and take back our profession so that every RN can advocate for patients without fear of retribution.

Where do NNU members work? National Nurses United represents 150,000 nurses across the country, from California to Maine. Most NNU members work in acute-care hospitals, but many also practice in clinics, skilled nursing facilities, schools, and home health—anywhere and everywhere that patients need care. National Nurses United has set up divisions so that RNs who work in similar environments—such as Catholic hospitals and university medical centers—can collaborate on shared concerns and goals.

How is National Nurses United governed? National Nurses United is a democratic organization run by and for direct-care RNs. Every two years, members gather at a national convention and elect a board of directors—all working direct-care nurses—to guide the organization. The board then elects a council of presidents who share responsibility for the day-to-day business of the organization; this year they...
selves and their patients. First California nurses, then nurses in Massachusetts and other states, left the American Nurses Association and founded new organizations dedicated to representing nurses in collective bargaining, organizing new nurses and ensuring affordable, high-quality healthcare for all. National Nurses United finally brings together those state-based groups into one union.

“This is a quantum leap for nurses, and to an outside observer it might seem like oh, this just happened,” said Martha Kuhl, RN of California, a longtime nurse activist who was elected NNU Secretary-Treasurer at the convention. “But it took years of conversations and consensus-building and outreach to get here.”

Kuhl said the biggest share of NNU’s funds will go towards organizing, to strengthen the national RN movement. About 20 percent of nurses nationwide are union members. That’s higher than the average for private-sector employees, but still leaves more than three-quarters of RNs with little protection when they speak out for their patients.

“Our numbers here today form the front line of a great movement, one with unlimited potential and opportunity,” Burger said in a convention speech. “Today we represent 150,000 RNs, but there are tens of thousands of other direct-care RNs who can, should, and will one day be with us.”

Another top priority will be passing national legislation that will make hospitals safer for nurses and patients—including setting nurse-to-patient staffing ratios, banning mandatory overtime, and protecting nurses who expose dangerous conditions at their hospitals.

National Nurses United will also set up divisions of nurses who work in similar settings—such as children’s hospitals or universities—so they can share experiences and strategies.

Nurses at HCA’s MountainView Hospital in Nevada, who won an organizing campaign with NNU in January—the first election victory since the formation of the super-union—said they have already experienced the benefits of being part of a national RN union. “We had HCA nurses from around the country standing with us throughout our campaign,” said Nenita Garcia, RN. “Their support, education and solidarity really made a difference.”

**Christopher Williams, RN, Texas**

“This is a phenomenal feeling, to be right here in the midst of all these nurses who want to change the world.”

**Kris Michaelson, RN, Michigan**

“T’ve been a nurse for 34 years and I’ve represented nurses in contract negotiations and I always felt something was missing. NNU is it. This is the legacy we pass on for nurses, for the women in this country.”

**But the new RN super-union**

include Deborah Burger, RN (California), Karen Higgins, RN (Massachusetts) and Jean Ross, RN (Minnesota). The board also appoints an executive director, currently Rose Ann DeMoro.

**So, is National Nurses United a professional organization or a union?**

National Nurses United is both a professional organization and a union. Through education and legislative advocacy, National Nurses United helps nurses improve their practice and have a greater voice in decisions that affect patient safety. And by representing nurses in collective bargaining and organizing new nurses on the job, NNU ensures that all nurses have the staffing standards and benefits they need to provide excellent patient care and attract new RNs to the profession.

**My organization hasn’t yet affiliated to National Nurses United, or is debating about joining. What’s going on?**

When registered nurses around the country decided to take the bold step of forming a new national nurse organization, they faced opposition from forces in the healthcare industry who were afraid of the collective power such a large and united RN organization would wield. Some of that opposition has come from within state nursing organizations, which some believe should continue to be controlled by nurse executives the way they were in the 1980s, rather than by the staff nurses who actually provide care. National Nurses United is committed to organizing direct-care RNs in any state who want to have a voice at work and within their professional organizations. If you have any questions about NNU organizing in your state, please contact your local NNU office.

**I just became a National Nurses United member. How can I get more involved?**

Visit www.NationalNursesUnited.org. You can also follow NNU on Twitter at @NationalNurses. And you can send story ideas to National Nurse at nationalnurse@nationalnursesunited.org.