A Vision Realized

At National Nurses United’s RN Heroes conference, a movement came into its own.

As Texas RN Miriam Flores looked around at the banquet hall packed with over 1,000 nurses from around the country, the red-lit, star-spangled stage and the podium where AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka was addressing the crowd, she had just one wish: that all of her coworkers in El Paso, who had been struggling to win collective-bargaining representation in one of the most anti-union states in the nation, could be there to witness the scene.

“It's overwhelming, the support we feel here,” Flores said. “I wish they could see how united people can be.”

United, indeed. National Nurses United’s first annual staff nurse assembly illustrated the broad reach of the new organization…and the power that an active, organized union of professional patient advocates can command. An overflow crowd of nurses poured in from nearly every state in the country for the three-day event of panels, continuing education classes, and rallies. The RNs had come to Washington, D.C. in part to lobby for legislation to improve patient care nationwide, and the steady stream of members of Congress and other elected officials stopping by the conference to meet with the nurses made clear that NNU had arrived.

“This is the vision I had since I started in nursing 40 years ago,” Sandra Falwell, RN, past president of the District of Columbia Nurses Association and an NNU vice president, told the crowd at the conference’s opening plenary session. “We are about to become the biggest movers and shakers you’ve ever seen.”

With registered nurses now unified in a national organization, they have tremendous authority and responsibility to influence the country’s health policy, NNU Co-president Karen Higgins, RN, told the assembled nurses.
“We’re the voice of not only nurses but patients across the country,” Higgins said. “When we leave this room I want everyone to remember that. When it comes time to make decisions about healthcare and people say ‘leave it to the experts,’ tell them ‘I am the expert.’”

**National Standards for RNs and Patients**

For many RNs, the conference was the first time they’d had a chance to hear from their colleagues in other states about their efforts to protect their patients in an era of healthcare industry cost-cutting. A panel of nurse leaders painted a picture of a contentious work environment, with hospital management demanding the steepest concessions nurses have seen in decades, and RNs increasingly fighting back. Minnesota Nurses Association President Linda Hamilton, RN, reported from her state, where 12,000 nurses stood ready to strike over hospitals’ contract proposals that include “31 takeaways and not one improvement in patient care.”

“Our nurses are fired up, patients are fired up, there’s been a great response from politicians and we are ready to go,” Hamilton said.

Shawn Shuler, RN, brought news from Borgess Medical Center in Michigan, where poor staffing has led to an exodus of critical-care nurses, and management is demanding to convert most of the patient care standards in the nurses’ contract to hospital policy that would be subject to change at any time. Shuler got a standing ovation when he told the audience: “I am tired of being told how to do my job by people who do not know how to do my job.”

To combat the challenges RNs face in such an environment, the assembly passed by a voice vote a resolution committing NNU to uphold national standards for patient care and nurse rights, including minimum nurse-to-patient staffing ratios and a ban on mandatory overtime, in all contracts. The resolution, which also says NNU will refuse to accept any takeaways such as layoffs or reductions in benefits, is a bold step at a time when many in the labor movement are giving in to employers’ demands to tighten their belts. But it’s a necessary response to profitable corporations who reward executives with bonuses while using the economic crisis as an excuse to shortchange nurses and patients, said NNU Executive Director Rose Ann DeMoro.

“We’ve got to say something in a united way that tells employers it’s a new day in America and RNs are going to stand up and not take it anymore,” DeMoro said in introducing the resolution.

Conference attendees also heard from colleagues involved in organizing drives in hospitals around the country. Wearing a straw hat and flanked by RNs from across the Lone Star State, Flores’s fellow El Paso nurse Monica Sanchez took to the stage on the first day of the conference to thank NNU for being a “lifeline” for Texas nurs-
es working to unionize. "We will show them what it means when we say ‘Don’t Mess With Texas RNs,’” Sanchez told the crowd.

El Paso—where two weeks later, nurses at two hospitals would vote overwhelmingly for NNU representation—is just one stop on a larger NNU organizing drive at hospitals in several states owned by HCA, the nation’s largest hospital corporation. “We’re starting with Texas, then Florida, and rolling across the country,” said Malinda Markowitz, RN, an HCA nurse and NNU vice president. “We’re going to get every nurse that’s not organized and bring them into NNU.”

Lobbying on Capitol Hill

Legislative advocacy was a key part of the conference, which coincided with National Nurses Week. At a midday rally in Upper Senate Park, throngs of nurses in red scrubs turned out to support three bills in Congress: S. 1031/H.R. 2133, which would mandate minimum nurse-to-patient ratios in acute care settings; S. 1788/H.R. 2381, to establish safe patient lifting policies, and S. 362/H.R. 949, which would restore collective bargaining rights for nurses in Veterans Affairs hospitals.

Carrying signs reading ‘I’m a Patient Advocate’ and chanting “We are the nurses nation,” RNs heard from legislators including Senator Barbara Boxer, author of the ratios bill. “Too often you are overworked because of staffing levels that are inadequate, and that is unacceptable,” said Boxer. “We know that nurse-to-patient ratios work, and it is time to enact them around the nation.”

Senator Al Franken, author of the safe lift legislation, called nurses “tireless advocates for the country’s well-being.” “You’re the ones we trust to care for our loved ones, and it’s simply unacceptable that you’re putting your health on the line to care for patients,” Franken said. “One injured nurse is one too many.”

Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis also spoke to the nurses earlier in the conference and pledged her support for the safe lift bill, which aims to reduce patient and nurse injuries and promote retention of experienced RNs by requiring hospitals to provide lift equipment. More than 36,000 healthcare workers were injured in 2008 from lifting and transferring patients, and 12 percent of nurses plan to leave the profession in part because of a back injury, Solis said.

“What a waste when the career of an experienced nurse is ended years or decades too early because of an easily preventable back injury,” she said.

After the rally, nurses filed into the Capitol to talk to their legislators about the bills. Stephanie Stevens, a 40-year nurse from Plymouth, Mass., joined other RNs from her state in the office of Senator John Kerry. Stevens, whose husband served in the Navy with Kerry, was apprehensive but looking forward to speaking out on the need for safe staffing in her hospital.

As the RNs gathered with one of the Senator’s aides around a long wooden table, next to a bronze bust of John F. Kennedy, Stevens summoned up the courage to talk. Staffing at her hospital used to be sufficient and both nurses and patients were satisfied, she said. Then management reduced the number of RNs. “We now have the dubious honor of the most serious reported events in the state of Massachusetts,” she said. “Most of them are directly related to inadequate staffing.”

“The law limits the amount of well children that can be cared for
NNU Resolution on National Contract Standards

...Be it Resolved that the First Annual National Nurses United Staff Nurse Assembly will promote national collective bargaining standards for all NNU contract agreements, and that will be our program for all unrepresented RNs as we seek to organize them into NNU, and

Be it Further Resolved that these standards should emphasize improvements for patients and RNs and our profession, including:

■ Enhanced RN staffing, based on individual patient acuity with minimum, specific RN-to-patient ratios and contract language to enforce staffing ratios;
■ Restrictions on unsafe floating;
■ A ban on mandatory shift rotation and mandatory overtime;
■ Mechanisms to contain exposure of patients and nurses to pandemics and other communicable diseases;
■ Improved retirement security through adequately funded and guaranteed defined benefit pension plans and employer-paid post-retirement medical benefits;
■ Limits on the introduction of new technology that displaces RNs or RN professional judgment;
■ Workplace safety protections to provide for RN health and safety;
■ Provisions that enhance and promote unity and collective strength for union RNs

And, Be it Further Resolved that NNU affiliates will not sign concessionary agreements that are injurious to our patients, our members, and our profession that undermine all represented RN contract standards, including:

■ Takeaways in compensation, health benefits, retirement plans, or work hours or schedules;
■ Two-tier plans that establish reduced pensions, lower pay or other reduced standards for new hires;
■ Merit pay agreements or other proposals that erode seniority or years of service as an RN;
■ Layoffs of RNs or displacements of RNs with other staff...

Read the full text of the resolution at www.nationalnursesunited.org

VOICES FROM THE CONFERENCE
What is your definition of an RN Hero?

“An RN hero is fearless, somebody willing to stand up and fight back and throw herself in front of a bus if it has to happen. Doesn’t think about the negatives, only about the positives. Just like a mother can pick up a car that is crushing her child, a nurse can pick up a broken healthcare system that’s crushing a patient.”
—Judy Lerma, RN, San Antonio, TX

“Integrity. When we say we’re going to take care of patients, that’s our word.”
—Pat Meave, RN, Kalamazoo, MI

“Someone who saves lives and isn’t afraid to stand up for what they believe in.”
—Angela Calvert, RN, Kansas City, MO

“An RN hero is just doing her job—with trust, respect, and compassion.”
—Sue Bedinghaus, RN, St. Petersburg, FL

“Someone who listens and comforts.”
—Liberty Santos, RN, Santa Rosa, CA

“All of us here.”
—Joan Greaves, RN, Washington, DC

“Somebody who goes to work every day at a facility where the ratios are too high and patients are acutely ill and still gives 110 percent, every patient, every shift.”
—Sheila Ainsworth, RN, Brighton, MA

by one daycare provider,” Stevens continued. “But there is no limit to the amount of sick children a nurse can take care of.”

Afterwards, Steven said she was a little nervous. “But I remembered what [NNU Executive Director] Rose Ann DeMoro said about it being time to demand that they listen to us. I actually started to get a little angry, and that made the nerves go away.”

Kerry’s aide said she would speak with him about co-sponsoring the ratios legislation.

Time Out for Fun

In keeping with the theme of RN Heroes, the conference also honored nurses who had traveled to Haiti to tend to victims of the country’s recent devastating earthquake. Nurses heard speeches from Trumka—who called NNU “a super-union for super-heroes”—and eminent journalist Helen Thomas, who spoke about the need for universal, single-payer healthcare. And they took some time out to relax with karaoke and a dance party.

In interviews, many nurses said they were thrilled to have the chance to connect with their colleagues around the country.

“It’s been very exciting and empowering for all the nurses in Massachusetts to be among other nurses who are taking their own time off to fight for what they believe in,” said Donna Kelly-Williams, RN, president of the Massachusetts Nurses Association. Kelly-Williams said one MNA member had flown in on the last day of the event just to be there for a few hours.

“The thing I’ve learned the most here is how powerful solidarity is,” said Ashley Calvert, RN, of Kansas City, Missouri. “To see how we can move on and support new hospitals with their fights has been a wonderful experience.”

Liberty Santos, RN, of Santa Rosa, Calif. said she appreciated the chance to learn from more experienced nurses. “It’s interesting to me because I’m very young compared to other nurses,” she said. “Knowing what my elders have gone through is a big eye-opener for me.”

The best part of the event, according to Massachusetts RN Jennifer Rogers?

“It was wicked fun.” —Staff Report