

What RNs Can Do to Improve the Health of Their Communities

We can make a difference in the places we learn, pray, work, and live.

As an RN responsible for community benefit at St. Jude Medical Center, I have had the privilege to work to improve the health of underserved communities and to identify opportunities for RNs of various capacities to make a difference in their neighborhoods. Over a period of 15 years, I have taken part, with other key partners and community residents, in transforming a low-income neighborhood with a high crime rate, failing schools, no services, inferior housing, and disengaged residents into a vibrant community with local health and social services, improved housing and infrastructure, thriving schools, engaged residents, and a sense of hope.

In my role I have also been able to engage staff nurses and nurse leaders in addressing community needs. I invite every RN to consider taking one action to help create healthier communities and ultimately a healthier nation. We can make a difference in the places where we learn, pray, work, and live. Some actions may take only a few minutes, while others require more commitment of time and energy.

Schools. If the school district has a wellness committee, ask to join it. If it doesn't, become an advocate to start one. Read the district wellness policy and provide input. Does it support healthy eating and physical activity? Are the schools enforcing the policy? Help the schools transition from having parties with sugar-laden foods and drinks to offering healthier alternatives. Participate in or lead healthy fundraisers.

Faith-based organizations. To improve the health of their congregation, nurses can start with a simple survey of health needs. Find out if other members are health professionals, and share the survey findings to see how they might help. Possible projects include offering healthier snacks after services, incorporating healthy lifestyle education in religious education programs, and arranging for screenings or health education classes. For example, I identified an opportunity for retired RNs to conduct a needs assessment after services at their church.

Workplaces. I was involved in establishing a partnership where RNs, physicians, and other staff at our

hospital could volunteer to provide free same-day surgery to the uninsured. Health care workplaces should be role models for the rest of the community. Nurses can start a wellness committee to evaluate policies and practices in their workplace that affect health. They can also advocate for healthier food in the cafeteria and vending machines or organize fun physical activities.

Neighborhoods. Walking around the neighborhood and seeing if there is easy access to parks, healthy grocery stores, and bike/pedestrian paths can provide an opportunity for nurses to raise concerns to local council members. Nurses can provide testimony at council meetings when issues affecting the community's health are being discussed. Serving on commissions or running

for council are other ways nurses can positively influence the health of their city. Nurses can also help out more directly—for example, as a team-building activity, nursing unit staff from our hospital volunteered at a local food distribution center.

Advocacy. For nurses with little time to spare, a quick way to take action is through legislative advocacy. Issues affecting community health are decided every day in county commissions, state legislatures, and Congress. Join listservs of organizations that are addressing public health issues, and with a few clicks on the computer let your representatives know what is important to the health of the community. Nurses, as guardians of health, can make their voices heard to ensure that policies are passed. If health-promoting policies are not being proposed, find a legislator who might introduce legislation to make these policies a reality. For example, I recently met with a state assembly member to request support for a bill to encourage healthy beverages as the default in kids' meals.

How powerful would it be if every nurse took one action today to improve her or his community's health? What action will you take? ▼

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