

# 2008 Key Public Policy Issues



## INTRODUCTION

As the national association for occupational and environmental health nurses (OHNs), the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses, Inc. (AAOHN) is actively involved in legislative, regulatory, and public policy that impact positively the profession and the health and safety of workers, worker populations and community groups. In a support and advocacy role, the association collaborates with AAOHN chapter leaders; nursing community advocates; other health and safety disciplines; regulatory committees, departments and agencies; policy makers; and other stakeholders to accomplish ENDS, mission and Public Policy agenda.

AAOHN is a visible force in federal legislative and regulatory affairs, as well as, state and local public policy involvement through its chapters. The association supports an interdisciplinary approach to health care and the right to prevention-oriented, cost-effective healthcare and health and safety programs and services.

Through a number of strategies (e.g. providing comments/testimony and writing letters, developing position statements and practice resources, and establishing alliances with other agencies and organizations), AAOHN takes action on emerging occupational and environmental health and safety, professional practice, and national and global regulatory and public policy issues.

AAOHN's 2008 Public Policy priorities are:

- health promotion, wellness and productivity,
- preparedness and response for emergencies and disasters,
- quality work and community environments, and
- professional practice.

## HEALTH PROMOTION, WELLNESS AND PRODUCTIVITY

Since 2000, the U.S. has been impacted with soaring health care costs and the effects of health conditions on the workforce and on society as a whole.

Approximately 50 percent of businesses' profits go

toward health care costs, e.g. chronic pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease, cancer and other conditions related to personal behavior and lifestyle choices (Sullivan, 2000).

The health status of the workforce mirrors the health status of society. Because the workplace reflects the diversity of society (e.g. different age groups, cultures, income, educational levels and lifestyles), it provides an ideal environment to have the greatest impact on individual health that in turn impacts societal health. As the nation's health care costs continue to increase from \$1.9 trillion in 2004 to a projected \$15 trillion in 2015, experts agree that it is time to rein in healthcare costs. Wellness/health promotion programs have ignited new interest as a strategy for businesses and government to reduce healthcare, Medicare and insurance costs by addressing social and behavioral factors such as smoking, alcohol consumption, sedentary lifestyles and accidents.

AAOHN supports appropriate incentives to enhance health promotion, disease prevention and other strategies needed to integrate lifestyle improvement programs into national policy as a means of reducing health risk and healthcare costs. In the U.S., there are approximately 135 million working adults who spend more than 1/3 of their day at work (BLS, 2006). Therefore, the workplace provides a unique opportunity to promote health and wellness principles to individuals, groups and the workforce as a whole by creating healthy cultures and communities. AAOHN supports the active participation of occupational and environmental health nurses in the decision-making and development of health strategies to implement health promotion and wellness programs and increase productivity.

## PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE FOR EMERGENCIES AND DISASTERS

AAOHN understands the complexity of establishing and implementing an effective national disaster response plan. Each governmental level and/or departmental (federal, state, and local) has its own priorities and resources. As a member of the Occupational Health sub-council of the Healthcare

Sector Coordinating Council under the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services, related to the Federal Emergency Response Plan, AAOHN stresses the importance of communication, coordination and identification of roles when responding to a natural, biological, chemical or man-made emergency or disaster.

Companies, organizations and associations play a critical role in ensuring the continuity of the nation's health care system in responding to emergencies or disasters. AAOHN supports the inclusion of these entities in national and local infrastructures for effective emergency preparedness and response to all hazards. The association supports the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) having an active role in emergency response since OSHA's primary responsibilities are keeping workers and worker populations safe.

Occupational and environmental health nurses (OHNs) are key players in workplace and community preparedness. As the primary health care provider in the workplace, OHNs possess the competencies, knowledge and expertise necessary to identify environmental hazards, physical exposures and prevention strategies. AAOHN supports the inclusion of occupational and environmental health nurses in the recognized system of delivery for responding to and mitigating human, natural and technological health and safety threats and disasters. In addition, the association advocates for policy that positions occupational and environmental health nurses as integral in providing emergency education and training, assessment, and emergency response to threats in the workplace and the community.

## **QUALITY OF WORK AND COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTS**

The workplace is characterized by multidimensional and complex environments that affect the quality of worker performance, health, safety and productivity. Occupational health and safety should be considered an integral part of all health programs and services. A range of hazards and exposures in the workplace and the community directly or indirectly affects most Americans. AAOHN supports legislation, regulation and public policy that assure so far as possible that all workers in the nation have healthful and safe working conditions. Occupational health and safety programs and services affect not only the worker, but also the worker's family, significant others, community and society.

As the primary health care provider in the workplace, it is the professional obligation of occupational and environmental health nurses to understand, analyze and recognize possible hazards and exposures, their mechanisms and pathways as well as to be an active participant in the development or influence the development and implementation of strategies that protect workers, worker populations and communities.

In the health care sector, health care providers face a wide range of job hazards and exposures. Health and safety risks to nurses are key factors in the severe nursing shortage threatening the U.S. health care system. In order to retain nurses and recruit new nurses, AAOHN supports a number of strategies to foster healthful and safe work environments for nurses and all health care providers.

Federal appropriations for agencies such as Mine Safety and Health Administration, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, and the Department of Health and Human Resources at appropriate levels are imperative for these agencies to fulfill their mandates in protecting workers, worker populations and communities.

## **PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

Occupational and environmental health nursing is the specialty practice that provides for and delivers health and safety programs and services to workers, worker populations and community groups. Occupational and environmental health nurses are professionally accountable to workers, employers, communities and their profession. The basis for the scope of practice, knowledge, skill, and the legal and ethical framework is the *AAOHN Standards of Practice* (2004), *AAOHN Code of Ethics and Interpretive Statements* (2003), *Core Competencies* (2007), and *Core Curriculum in Occupational and Environmental Health Nursing* (2006).

As healthcare delivery and the provision of health and safety programs and services evolve, the following will continue to be important public policy issues:

- barriers to access to quality cost-effective care for clients (e.g. individuals, families, worker populations and community groups),
- the protection of client rights as recipients of care, and
- challenges to the legal scope of nursing practice.

These issues will not only impact occupational and

environmental health nursing, but also the profession of nursing in general.

AAOHN supports the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC), a mutual reorganization model, because it clarifies the authority to practice for many nurses currently engaged in telenursing or interstate practice; provides greater mobility for nurses; improves access to licensed nursing during a disaster or other times of great need for qualified nursing service; enhances the discipline of nursing and provides information sharing among participating NLC states. More importantly, NLC improves access to quality nursing care, e.g. advanced practice nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, etc. in remote areas and to the uninsured and aging populations.

Privacy legislation is enacted at the state and federal level. At either level, AAOHN champions the need for comprehensive legislation to provide universal security standards and safeguards that protect the integrity and confidentiality of personal health information. Such legislation would not hinder employers' ability to fulfill their administrative obligations under the American with Disabilities Act, Family Medical Leave Act, and various workers' compensation requirements.

And, since most legislation/regulation affecting professional scope of practice is enacted at the state level and these laws vary from state to state, AAOHN strongly advocates that the professional nurse remain vigilant for possible actions by special interest groups, which may impact nursing in general and occupational and environmental health nursing practice.

#### References:

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