

## **Using Your Nursing Voice - The Nurse's Role in Policy & Advocacy**

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### **Guest: Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez, MSN, MPH, RN**

Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez is a former nurse and health industry leader who has dedicated her life to improving the health of people in Wisconsin and around the world. Sara started her service as a reproductive health educator in Samoa through the Peace Corps, providing resources and education to improve community sexual health. She later earned her nursing degree and became an emergency room nurse where she saw firsthand the way gaps in our healthcare system left people behind. As an intelligence officer with the Centers for Disease Control, Sara served on the frontlines to provide care across the world to communities ravaged by infectious diseases. Committed to strengthening access to quality, affordable health care for all people, Sara later became a leader in the healthcare industry, working to improve access to care across Wisconsin. And in 2020, Sara chose to take her two decades of experience as a healthcare leader to fight for a healthier, safer Wisconsin by running for the General Assembly and later Lieutenant Governor. She has served as Lieutenant Governor since 2022.

### **Host: Candace Pierce DNP, MSN, RN, CNE**

Dr. Pierce is a nurse leader committed to ensuring nurses are well prepared and offered abundant opportunities and resources to enhance their skills acquisition and confidence at the bedside. With 15 years in nursing, she has worked at the bedside, in management, and in nursing education. She has demonstrated expertise and scholarship in innovation and design thinking in healthcare and education, and collaborative efforts within and outside of healthcare. Scholarship endeavors include funded grants, publications, and presentations. As a leader, Dr. Pierce strives to empower others to create and deploy ideas and embrace their professional roles as leaders, change agents, and problem solvers. In her position as the Sr. Course Development Manager for Elite, she works as a

project engineer with subject matter experts to develop evidence-based best practices in continuing education for nurses and other healthcare professionals.

## Transcript

### Episode 1: Nursing Voices in Policy: A Journey with Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez

Candace Pierce: This is Dr. Candace Pierce with Elite Learning by Colibri Healthcare. And you are listening to our Elite Learning podcast, where we share the most up-to-date education for healthcare professionals. Thank you for joining us for this podcast series topic about how we as nurses can use our voice in policy and advocacy at all levels of government. I'm really excited today to have Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez joining us for this topic. Sara is currently the 46th lieutenant governor of Wisconsin, elected in 2022. But before that, you served in the Wisconsin State Assembly, representing the 13th Assembly District, right?

Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez: Correct. Yes.

PIERCE: So, I can only imagine that you have been really busy. And I just want to thank you for taking time to share the knowledge that you've gained on your journey, where you are using your expertise, and have been, and voice to impact so many people. I want to focus on your past and what you have learned that will help another nurse who maybe sees themselves going on this journey. And then we're going to focus on kind of the background in your story of how you actually got into where you are. So, I want to start with why. Why did you decide to become involved in policy and advocacy in such a visible role?

RODRIGUEZ: First of all, thank you so much for having me. I think it's fantastic that you're talking about policy and healthcare and specifically how nurses can be involved within policy because it is really, really important. And so many people ask me, why did you start,

or did you ever think you were going to be in politics? And the answer to that is no. I never thought that I was going to be in the policy arena. I never thought I was going to run for office. I have been in healthcare for all of my career. I've been a nurse for over 25 years and working within different roles within healthcare, mostly public health nursing. And, you know, I decided to run for assembly first, because it was right during COVID, and I was sitting at home, and I was so frustrated. I was angry about the misinformation and the disinformation that was coming out of our legislature. And I wanted to be able to use my nursing voice, my public health background to make a difference in Wisconsin. And so, I ended up calling, actually my local party, who I had been in contact with before, and said, hey, I want to help. How can I help? What can I do that might be different than I've been doing in the past? And they actually let me know that this particular seat in the assembly may be one that we could flip. And the current seat was a Republican seat. I'm a Democrat, and so it was possible to be able to flip that seat, and really encourage me to think about it. And it took me a while. It took me a while to say, yes, I'm the right person to be able to do this. Yes, this is a way that I want to use my voice and decided to run for assembly. And we won that seat. We did flip that seat with just a little over 1% of the vote. And so that was really exciting to be able to do that.

PIERCE Absolutely.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah. And so, I ended up serving within the assembly for two years, was the health committee. There are other types of committees that I was able to use my nursing background and my nursing voice, and we had a redistricting within the state of Wisconsin, and my district really changed. And it was a very different district than I had run in the past. And I thought, well, maybe I'm done, maybe this is it, just these two years. And then our lieutenant governor at the time decided to run for Senate, and his seat became open. And it was something that, again, I had to think about and say, hey, is this the way that I want to use my voice? Is this the microphone that I want for health policy? I had some conversations with friends, had some conversations with my husband and my

family, and decided to run for lieutenant governor. And I'm very, very glad that I did. I am so honored to be in this spot and to be a nurse in this spot as well. You may or may not know, but I am the second nurse ever to be lieutenant governor across the country. It's really exciting.

PIERCE Yeah, that's very exciting. Yeah, I didn't know that. Okay.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah. So, the other one's in Delaware, and she's now running for governor here. And so, when she wins, I will say when she wins.

PIERCE: Speaking it!

RODRIGUEZ: Governor. Yes. And I think it's really an exciting way that we can use our background, our knowledge on really interesting and exciting policy initiatives.

PIERCE: Absolutely. So, what prepared you, you think the most, for this role when you went in? Well, for it, for any of the roles for when you went into the 13th Assembly District, but also as lieutenant governor, what do you feel really prepared you for that?

RODRIGUEZ: So, what I have found the most interesting walking into this role is how much my nursing background has prepared me. Number one, we know what happens on the ground within healthcare systems. We know how important it is for people to have access to affordable healthcare. I have been an executive within a healthcare system. So, I also understood kind of how the sausage is made on a broad level. And what reimbursement looks like all of these different types of things. And so that really prepared me to look at legislation in a different way. Because sometimes, there are policies that look really good on paper, but there are unintended consequences of those policies that we would need to make sure that we are fixing as we move forward. The other thing that I think prepares nurses really well to be in policy is that we are used to having difficult conversations. We

are used to advocating for our patients and these are high stakes conversations that we have needed to have within hospital systems at the bedside with individuals who may not agree with us.

And we can do it appropriately, professionally, and respectfully. And so, that's the same skill set that you need within the policy arena. You need to be able to talk to people who may or may not agree with you and see if you can find some common ground to advocate for policies, to advocate for the people whom you represent.

PIERCE: Yes, that's really good. And we do, we have conversations like this all the time at work, at the bedside, at the clinic, and you don't realize just how much of a skill that is that we have. So, I love that you highlighted that because that's really good. In your various roles professionally, because I saw where your focus has been on public health and population health management within your professionally before you moved into these roles. So, in both healthcare and politics, what key experiences have shaped your perspective on healthcare advocacy?

RODRIGUEZ: So, when I started working within public health, this is pre-Affordable Care Act. So, this was prior to that being passed into legislation. And so, when I was working, and I'll tell you one story, when I was working within a public health clinic, this was during a recession pre-ACA and this woman had lost her job, and she was offered COBRA, but she was an administrative assistant, and that amount for COBRA insurance coverage would have been more than she was really making, and it was absolutely unaffordable. And so, she had to stop taking her heart medications. She had to stop taking her blood pressure medications. And she came to us, basically having a heart attack. And we had to get her by ambulance to the hospital system where she ends up

PIERCE: That's so heartbreaking.

RODRIGUEZ: It is heartbreaking. And she was 62 years old. So, she was just shy of Medicare. And this is a woman who worked every day of her life. She did what we tell everybody to do. You know, she made the compact with society. She was taking care of herself. And through no fault of her own, she ended up being let go from this particular job without having access to healthcare at 65 for Medicare. So ended up having a procedure, had to declare bankruptcy to be able to even pay for anything relative to her healthcare. And so, I've seen what it looks like pre-Affordable Care Act, and I know that I don't want to go back there. I don't want to have those conversations with patients again where they don't have any options. And you may or may not know, in Wisconsin, we are now only one of ten states that has not expanded Medicaid or Badger care within the state of Wisconsin. And it can be heartbreaking, those conversations that we have to have with individuals out there when there is a solution to what would be able to cover them. And we're not implementing it here in Wisconsin. And that's really frustrating.

PIERCE: Yeah. And those are conversations that as nurses, we have them a lot nationwide, and we see them a lot. And it does it breaks our heart, and there's nothing that we can do individually to help that.

RODRIGUEZ: Not individually.

PIERCE: Key word there, individually.

RODRIGUEZ: Individually. Yes. And so, I say this to nurses all the time in my office, in my statewide office. I'm very, the joke in my office, if a nurse calls, I'll take it, right. Because it's really important to me to have impact within this office, within nursing overall. However, it is really challenging for me to meet with individuals. It's just too hard in a statewide office. But guess what I can, who I can meet with? The Nurses Association, the Heart Association, the Lung Association, they are all working on policy. They are all trying to make sure that we have accessible healthcare within the state of Wisconsin. And so those are types of

organizations that nurses can get involved with so that they can have their collective voice to be able to talk to their elected officials.

PIERCE: Right. And so, I want to move a little bit towards our profession as a whole. So, I'm going to give you some statistics and then I have a question for you at the end of the statistics, and I bet you're going to know what that is as I start to tell you. So, I did a really quick search right before we met to record this, just because I was curious how many nurses have had a position in a state or federal level. Now, I found some interesting statistics. So, I'm going to share what those are. So let me start at the federal level. Currently, and this is as of January of 2023, we had three nurses at the federal level, and I saw Congresswoman Lauren Underwood, Congresswoman Cori Bush, and Congresswoman Jenn Kiggans, I think that's how you say your name. But in 2015, we actually had six nurses who were serving in Congress, and then at the state level and again, January 2023 statistics, we had about 68 nurse legislators. But in 2013, we had 97 nurse legislators. So obviously at the federal level, we've had like a 50% drop and at the state level we've had a 30% decrease. So why do you think we have such a decrease, and what factors do you think really have played a role in this decrease as far as nurses being visible in advocacy at such a high level?

RODRIGUEZ: So, it is not easy to be involved in politics right now, and the divisiveness that we see within the political sphere, I can imagine it's challenging for clinicians like ourselves to be willing to put ourselves within that fray. I think it's worth it, because nurses are the most trusted profession, and every time they survey it, we are the trusted profession.

PIERCE: How many years has that been now?

RODRIGUEZ: I don't even know.

PIERCE: Double digits at this point.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

PIERCE: Maybe triple.

RODRIGUEZ: Really honestly, we are. And so, and probably who is the least trusted profession? Most likely a politician, right. But how can you lend our trusted voices to policy? How can we lend our background, our skill set into policy and to be able to really move things forward? That's what's really exciting to me. With the divisiveness that we find in politics today, it is more challenging to be able to encourage people to run and particularly, to encourage women to run. And as we know, we are still a majority woman profession. The standards for women in politics is different than it is for men, we just have to acknowledge that, and it can be a whole lot more challenging for women to run in terms of the environment that we are in right now. But I still think it's worth it. I still think it's important, because we have such an important skill set to bring to the table to really try to bridge that divide. We're used to doing that. We're used to having those difficult conversations. And so, the skill set nurses bring to the table is just invaluable.

PIERCE: Right. So, as we are looking at this decline, kind of talking through it a little bit. We know that there are obstacles. We're mentioning those obstacles. And I think it's really important for those who are really starting their journey to know kind of what to expect and maybe even how to break through some of those barriers. So can you share some obstacles that that you have faced or that you can see that in the future you're going to have to face and ways to break through some of the barriers that you've been able to break through.

RODRIGUEZ: So, I would say when I ran for assembly, it was a huge challenge because I was flipping a district and received threats when I ran for office. And that was an enormous obstacle for me to really sit back and think about, okay, I am doing this for



what I consider to be the right reasons, but it comes with all sorts of other issues that can affect myself, my family, my kids. I have two kids at home. And so, but for me, I didn't want to live in an environment where I didn't do something out of fear. And so, it was really important to me to not give in to that and to realize that 90% of people, 99% of people are really, really good, and that we honestly agree on so much more than we disagree on. I happen to live in Waukesha County, in Wisconsin, and it is a ruby red county. So, if I didn't have Republican friends, I wouldn't have very many friends. And so again, I'm used to having those conversations. And I realize that there is so much more that unites us than divides us. And we cannot pay attention to a very loud minority who are creating this level of divisiveness. So that's really where I came from, is to get over that and to be able to know that I live in this community. I am part of this community, and I have enormous supporters in this community who are not going to allow that type of behavior to continue. But it is a challenge. So very few, we still have not achieved parity with women in politics. When I was in the Assembly, actually, though, our Democratic caucus was majority women. That's not the case on the Republican side. So, we looked at it overall, it was about two thirds men, one third women. But in the Democratic caucus, which is smaller, we were majority women. Right now, the minority leader for the Democrats in the Assembly and the Senate within Wisconsin are both women and have been women. And so that was a really good place for me to be, to have some mentorship of what this look like and to see that women belong in these spaces, because we bring perspectives that nobody else is going to bring to the table.

PIERCE: Absolutely. So, you really have kind of those there's two things going for you that are barriers, I think, and that is obviously female, because it is hard for females to really break into politics. But then also as a nurse, it's not a typical role that you see when you think of advocacy at the state and federal level. For me, I know I always look at those who have gone through the legal professions, those are usually who I see there or top businessmen who've moved their way up there. But you don't see a lot of nurses, and you

don't see a lot of women. So that's definitely two obstacles that you had to overcome. Are there any other obstacles to that?

RODRIGUEZ: You know, I think, so there's a statistic out there, and it's really interesting, that says, oftentimes, and this is again within men and women, we are a vast majority female profession, that men often self-select to run for politics. They often say, yep, I have the skills to do it. I can do it. I really feel like I can.

PIERCE: I know where you're going with this. I've seen this. Keep going with this.

RODRIGUEZ: Women need to be asked to run.

PIERCE: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: They need to be asked an average of six times to say yes.

PIERCE: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: Which makes me laugh. So, when I talked to nurses and they said, well, I cannot do what you are doing, Sara, I was never an executive of a healthcare system. I did not do the, and I was like, what you bring to the table is enough. It is enough. Your perspectives are enough, and you bring a valuable perspective. You do not need to have an executive like me. You have to have multiple master's degrees. You do not need to have any of that. And what you bring to the table is such an invaluable perspective that it needs to be talked about, because other folks are not going to be able to have that same perspective as a nurse, as a woman, juggling childcare, juggling these other things, those are the kind of things that you want to make sure you're talking about, and what that

looks like for the state of Wisconsin, what that looks like for folks who are living all across the state, trying to juggle all of these different things at the same time.

PIERCE: I want to throw another study that's out there into this, because I think it's really important too, and that is a study between men and women. And it showed that men were more likely to apply for jobs in roles that they weren't actually 100% qualified for. And women were more likely to read through that job description and disqualify ourselves, and then we never applied for the role. So, we would never know if we could do the job. So, I think that's huge. That we need to start saying, you know what, I can do this. I can do it and do it.

RODRIGUEZ: We need everybody. That's the thing. If all we have are lawyers who are politicians, you're going to get a very legal perspective. In all we have our businesspeople who are politicians, you're going to get the perspective of a business owner. So, if you want to have a perspective as a nurse, as a mom, as a community member, then you need to run for office, because nobody else is going to be talking about the things that are important to you. And so that's why it's so critical for nurses to run for office and for women in general to run for office.

PIERCE: Absolutely. Can you share some examples from your experience that really highlight the impact nurses can have on shaping healthcare policies?

RODRIGUEZ: Absolutely. So, a couple of the areas that I worked on when I was in the assembly is I was the author on the Medicaid expansion bill, and we put it out there every year and it doesn't get a hearing, but it is really important for us to continue to push this type of legislation forward. And when I'm talking about these things, I can give those examples. I can say this is what's happening out there in the world, because I've seen it as a clinician. And so that's a way that we can do things as nurses, as clinicians to be able to highlight the impact of what we do or do not pass this legislation. The other issue that

often will come up is sometimes, I was on the health committee, and sometimes they like to legislate how healthcare is delivered, whether that is restrictions on the type of healthcare that's delivered.

And as nurses, we are scientists, right? And some of the questions I would ask within those committee meetings is, where is the evidence that you have that what you're proposing is evidence-based? Where are you getting this information from? What type of studies are you looking at? Are these randomized controlled trials? Are these something.

PIERCE: Opinions? Are they opinions?

RODRIGUEZ: Opinions. But you're trying to legislate how doctors or nurse practitioners take care of patients. You better have the data and the information behind it to be able to solidify your position here. And oftentimes, those questions would go unanswered. They didn't even have an idea of what I was talking about. And so, then I had to explain to them, look, this is how clinicians make decisions. We make decisions based on evidence, we make decisions based on data. And what you're trying to propose here as legislation seems to have no basis in data. And so, you're asking clinicians to put patients at risk with no evidence, and so that's the kind of conversation that I would have with people who are testifying, trying to change medical protocols without any sort of evidence. And the other thing that often would happen is, people really don't understand basic biology, which is sad to me in general, but that's again, something that nurses can bring to the table. Like this is not how the body works. And what you are proposing just doesn't make any sense in terms of clinically, biologically, these types of things, and so you can bring those opinions to the table, not opinions, those perspectives to the table. And really try to push

PIERCE: And the facts, where to find the facts and data.

RODRIGUEZ: The appropriate resource to be able to find this information.

PIERCE: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: We know that as clinicians, we know that as nurses, we know that as scientists. And so that's the kind of thing that I was able to do on the health committee, is to bring some of those things forward. I would just come with things. Well, this is from JAMA, this is from New England Journal of Medicine. Here is another article that is saying quite differently than what you've got there. How do we square this here? How do we how do we make sense of these two different pieces of information? Yours is an opinion article. Mine comes from a scientific journal. What levels of evidence do you think should carry more weight when we're having this conversation?

PIERCE: Absolutely. That's so good. So, what do you consider is the most impactful aspect of nurses in advocating for positive change? Most impactful?

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, the most impactful thing that we bring to the table is, yes, we're scientists, yes, we have data, but we are also, we are so involved with our patients, and we have those stories because at the end of the day.

PIERCE: Oh, you're going to make me cry. The stories, when you talk about the stories, we all have stories.

RODRIGUEZ: We do! We do! And politicians are people. They're people, right? And they are able to be swayed as well with those stories. And so, yes, have your data, have your information. Make sure you're coming with the right pieces. But at the end of the day, if you want to be able to convince somebody who may not be really necessarily thinking that they want to agree with you, providing them with stories of the impact of their policies is just so important.

PIERCE: And putting faces, you're making it real, personal.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes. That's what we can do. That is the hugest impact that nurses have. And there's a lot of us. That's the other thing. We are the largest healthcare provider workforce. There is a lot of us. And so, if we band together, if we really do our best to advocate for our patients, for our communities, we have enormous power to make change, but we have to band together to be able to do that.

PIERCE: Absolutely. So good. I think this is a perfect place to end episode one. We are at the end of our time for episode one. Please join me and Lieutenant Governor Rodriguez as we continue this discussion and episode two.

## **Episode 2: Nursing Voices Amplified: Collaborating for Healthcare Change**

PIERCE: Welcome back to our series on using your nursing voice, the nurse's role in policy and advocacy. I'm so thankful to have Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez back with us to continue this discussion. If you are listening to this episode, but you have not gotten to the first one, I highly recommend taking some time to listen in, as this episode is a continuation of the information Sara shared about how and why nurses can use and should use their voice.

Sara, thank you for continuing this discussion with me today.

RODRIGUEZ: Thank you for having me.

PIERCE: Absolutely. We know that nurses have some expertise and some valuable areas. And not even to get political, but when we when it comes to our overall healthcare system and patient outcomes with payment and insurance, public health emergency management, we have so much expertise in these areas, and we've seen so much in these areas. How do you think nurses with expertise in different areas like these can collaborate to address broader healthcare challenges?

RODRIGUEZ: So that's a great question. One of the areas that I know is really important to many nurses out there is social determinants of health. And I see these things all the time, right?

PIERCE: Yes, we do.

RODRIGUEZ: We've got, and I say this consistently. As a nurse, I know the medicine we give you the procedures that we do, it is the tiniest fraction of how healthy you are. It is about where you live It's about the air you breathe, and the water you drink, and a good paying job, and a roof over your head. And so, we've seen that as clinicians. When people come into the emergency department with things that could have easily been taken care of earlier and now have become a crisis because they delayed care, they didn't have the money to be able to do it, they didn't have the coverage to be able to go into their primary care provider, or there isn't just a culture of going into primary care. And so, we can advocate more broadly with these healthcare stories on policies that help individuals in this way. And I'll give you some examples. In Wisconsin, we are having a huge housing shortage, just huge, all across like different levels of housing, whether it's high-end housing, all the way down to affordable housing or workforce housing. And we need to be able to put in simply more roofs all across the state of Wisconsin. And that is going to be enormously helpful for people who are able to take care of themselves, be able to take care of their healthcare. And so, it's not just about specifically healthcare policy that nurses can advocate for, but it's a larger policy discussion about do we have food deserts? You know, we have housing deserts, childcare. Oh my gosh, my kids are older now, 14 and 17. So I've got different things to worry about, right. When I talk to folks all across the state of Wisconsin, childcare is just huge. They are so challenged to be able to find good quality childcare that I talk to folks who are thinking about getting pregnant and try to get their name on a list for, and they are not even pregnant yet! They try to get their name on a list for childcare. It's really a challenge. And we as nurses know that childcare is so

critical to be able to take care of yourself, right. So, if you need to get in for that mammogram, you need to be able to put your kid somewhere. You know, all of these things. And so, these are the kind of policies that we can advocate for with stories, from our general profession and from the experiences that we have had.

PIERCE: Absolutely. Now, what do you think are some distinct opportunities and challenges that nurses face when advocating for healthcare change at all levels local, state, federal?

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, I do think it is challenging to be able to make your voices heard, particularly we talked about this in the last episode individually. That's really, really hard. Do I recommend that you know who your representative is, who your senator is at the local, state, and federal level? Absolutely. And you should be reaching out to them and letting them know where you stand on particular policy or legislation. They need to hear from you, and they need to know that you're a nurse when you write to them because it creates credibility. When you're writing to them about a healthcare issue or a larger community issue, and you are a nurse, that is important. And so coordinating with other agencies is going to be really key, whether that's the Nurses Association within your state, whether that is the Heart Association, the Lung Association, all of these other places that you can work together to be able to advocate for policy. It's really, really hard to get face time with an elected official.

PIERCE: Right.

RODRIGUEZ: But you can do that if you coordinate with others. We have a nurse advocacy day coming up at the Capitol in Wisconsin. That is an area where nurses can come in and talk to their legislators, where nurses can come in and talk to me, and tell me what their priorities are. That's really important. Likely every state has something along those lines.



You can do that. You can go ahead and put that request to go and be able to sign up and be able to talk to your legislator in a more coordinated way. But it is challenging. We are all so busy. So, I live and breathe politics every day, right.

PIERCE: Yes. Obviously obvious. Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: However, the vast majority of people we are trying to go to work, take care of our kids, make sure we're doing the right thing. It can be challenging to be able to pay attention to all of the things that are going on out there, which is why I highly recommend getting information from your professional organizations, because they can kind of create easily digestible information on things that might be important to you. And so that's a way to have it be less overwhelming. It feels really overwhelming to people.

PIERCE: Right. Yeah.

RODRIGUEZ: But you can get an email once a month, whatever that kind of talks about what is going on in terms of legislation, that can be a little bit easier to be able to figure out where you want to put your energy and effort.

PIERCE: Right. I mean, I think it's amazing that you are at such a high level in Wisconsin that you're able to make change. I think it's also important for listeners to understand we're not saying you have to go run for office or to go,

RODRIGUEZ: Although I think you should! [Laughter]

PIERCE: But you do not have to. You can still make a difference right there by, signing up and watching what's going on in your state or watching what's going on at the federal level where there's something that's really close to you that's impactful to you, that you can then look for ways of. I have a question. So, if I wrote you a letter. Do you get those?

RODRIGUEZ: I do. Yeah, we do. So, I get I get all the letters. Sometimes they'll get summarized for me, if there's like, let's say we get maybe there's some really controversial legislation that's coming up, sometimes that will have a lot of information in my inbox. And so, my staff members will summarize and say, okay, we have got 500 emails and 20 letters in support of this particular piece of legislation and X number you know, not in support of it. So when I was in the assembly, so my district, of course, was a little smaller. When people would reach out to me, particularly on legislation, I call them back. If they left a number, I gave them a call. And even if they were emailing me to tell me that they disagreed with my position, I would still call them back, because I wanted them to know that, (A) it reached me, and (B) then I heard what they were saying, like, here is what I hear you are saying. We use these things all the time, right within nursing, we always use this type of communication. And so, I call them back and talk to them and say, okay, here is what I heard you say in your email or your letter, did I get it right? And then maybe we'd have a little bit of a conversation. And then I'd ask them, is it okay if I tell you kind of where I'm coming from? Are you all right with me telling you that? Asking permission to say, okay. And then we would have that conversation, and we did not necessarily agree by the end of it in terms of which way I was going to vote or which way I was going to be promoting.

But they understood where I was coming from, and I understood where they were coming from. So, at the very minimum, I'm hearing it, and I have an opportunity to change my mind if what they're coming up with is evidence based and databased and all of these things. So that's the kind of thing that I think is really important when we when we talk to constituents. I certainly made sure that I did that as an assembly member. It's a little bit harder to call people with statewide office to call people. Because that district was a little smaller, I had an opportunity to be able to do it as long as people were respectful and not aggressive or rude or threatening. I called people all the time.

PIERCE: Well, I think it is just good to hear that even if I do not have the capacity, the bandwidth, or the time right now to be able to advocate on a larger scale that even just taking time for something that really hits me, that I'm passionate about, that's coming up that it gets to that level. It gets to whoever is in that seat or in that federal for federal level. I don't know, it makes me feel good to hear you say, yeah, I do get those.

RODRIGUEZ: The one thing that I would suggest to people, though, is sometimes they will send the same letter to every single representative. I do not recommend that. I recommend that you send it to the one who is in your district. So oftentimes there's some sister districts that we have where people aren't sure what district they're in because the line is really close. And if I got a letter from somebody who ended up being in a different district, I would forward that letter along to the appropriate active or senator. That's what I would suggest, rather than sort of blanking it, blanketing it to everybody, really focus your attention on your representative and your senator, because that's going to make the most impact.

PIERCE: Right. So, what are some actionable steps that our listeners can take to really be active and contributing with healthcare? I mean, across their community? Because I know you have a lot of experience in public health. So, starting at their community level and kind of going up towards having a more of a federal view, what are some actionable steps that we can do as bedside nurses.

RODRIGUEZ: As bedside nurses, number one, know who your legislators are. Absolutely. You have to know who they are at the local, state and federal level. Also know that there are a lot of positions, elected positions, within your local community that oftentimes they don't have anybody running for them. I am talking about town representatives, the representatives for your city, your city alder people, your school board. Sometimes are elected positions on the library board. These are really important positions at your local community level that doesn't really require the spotlight that you would get at a state level

or a federal level. So, you can participate in a way that makes sense, bring your skills to the table, and it is so it has such a huge impact. I'll give you an example. One of the school boards that was very close to me had an infectious disease physician who was on their school board, and that was when COVID hit. And guess what? He was able to provide a perspective.

PIERCE: Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: That was invaluable to that.

PIERCE: Absolutely.

RODRIGUEZ: Same thing with a nurse. Having a nurse on that school board would have been a very similar situation. They would be able to provide a really good impact in that way, which I think is really, really important. So, some of those local positions that may have broader impact than you think it would within the local communities. They decide where you can put housing, affordable housing, workforce housing. They vote on those types of things. So, if you want to make sure that your community members have places to live so they can take care of their health. that's something that you can have an impact on. Another area that I think as a bedside nurse is really important, is that many states, Wisconsin doesn't have this, but many states have citizen led initiatives to be able to put a referendum on the ballot. And so, I've talked about this in the last episode about Medicaid expansion. Wisconsin is only one of ten states that has not expanded Medicaid or Badger Care here in Wisconsin. Other states have done citizen-led initiatives to be able to put a referendum on the ballot, and they have been able to expand Medicaid in their states through that initiative, through that referendum process. And so, if there are certain organizations that are working on that, you can help with that as well. You can get those signatures; you can get that initiative going.

PIERCE: So, I have a question about that.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, ma'am.

PIERCE: How do you know if your state has citizen led initiatives?

RODRIGUEZ: So, you would have to Google it with the state that you are in. I know, I know. It's in different places in every state. Honestly, you got to Google it. For a referendum to be able to see the process, because certain states have it, there's a percentage that they have to get. Certain states have it where it has to come from every county. So, it's very different in every state. But, you can reach out to your elected representatives as well, and they can point you in the right direction of how you could do a citizen led initiative within your state, if that's available. Wisconsin, again, doesn't have it, but many, many states do have that ability to do that citizen led initiative for a referendum.

PIERCE: Okay, you keep going. Sorry, I had a rabbit hole there.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah. No, no, it's good. So those are. No, I appreciate that. And that is really interesting because all politics is local, right. And so how you elect your representatives, how you elect your senators is very local and specific. And so, you have to make sure that you, and really and I'm saying Google it, but that is the way to do it, because every state has a little bit of a different way to be able to do this. And so that's a way that you can figure out what this looks like, how you can do it, and what the process is. So, for example, in Wisconsin, they will have a referendum on the ballot. They are not citizen led, they are legislative. And the way to do it in Wisconsin is they have to pass it through two different cycles, two different legislative cycles pass it, and then it will go on the ballot, and it cannot be vetoed by the governor. So that's a way that the citizens can say what they want through a referendum that cannot be vetoed by the governor. But again, every state is a

little different. Some of it is just one cycle. Some of it is, there's no way to do that. It's only a citizen led referendum. So, it's just it's really interesting how every state is just a little different and how you can advocate. So, making sure that you know how your state works is really important. And some of these advocacy organizations I talked about, Heart Association, Lung Association, the Nurses Association, know exactly how to do them.

PIERCE: Right? Yes.

RODRIGUEZ: You should talk to them as well. If you're like, I couldn't find it. But that is a way that you can also talk to your advocacy organizations to say, hey, can you explain how this works so that I have a better understanding of it, particularly if you're a member. That's going to be a really important way to do that.

PIERCE: Absolutely. And that was my next question is resources and organization. And I know you've talked about some of the bigger ones that we know of, but are there some that we're not as familiar with but that we could look into?

RODRIGUEZ: So, there is an organization for probably anything that you would like to be interested in. I will tell you that right now, if you're interested in gun violence prevention, there are a multitude of organizations that you can get involved in. There is an organization here in Wisconsin that is very, very local. It is healthcare providers for the environment, and it's little local chapter. And that's what they do. They bring together nurses, doctors, pharmacists, all the people to be able to advocate for clean water and clean air. If what you want to be interested in, if that is your focus area, fantastic. So those are the kind of things that you can look for across your state. Sometimes they are national organizations that are larger, and they have some deeper pockets to be able to do more advocacy. But some of these local organizations really, they have a huge impact because they are fiercely local. They are this is fiercely, Wisconsin, right? We are looking at the environment in Wisconsin as healthcare providers, because we know that that impacts

health. And so, looking across your state to be able to find some of those smaller organizations that you may feel like you have a bigger voice and a bigger impact in is kind of interesting as well.

PIERCE: Absolutely. And, we have talked about organizations and resources. We have talked about community, federal and state levels of advocacy, but also even just sitting on a board like you were talking about, I know there is a big push to get more women on boards. There is a push to get more nurses on boards, websites where you can go and see what seats are open, apply for the seats to get your voice heard, to get nurses voice heard, to get healthcare in general, to bring that expertise that you have in healthcare. So, I mean, even just sitting on a board, it seems like would be a great way to start advocating.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah, that is a great way to start. And some of these boards, perhaps sometimes your elected officials, will be looking for people to fill positions on these boards. And they are not going to know about you unless you raise your hand. And so if you are emailing your elected officials, and you're putting your credentials on there. They're like, yeah, you know, I remember a letter from Candace and she I know she's a nurse. I know she got this really great background in healthcare. I'm looking for somebody to be on this board. Let me reach out to her and see if she might be interested. And so, making sure that you are making those connections as well. And if you see something right now, I am running a healthcare workforce task force to try to increase healthcare providers across the state of Wisconsin. When you see something like that, you can say, hey, I am really interested in doing something along those lines. What would this look like for you?

PIERCE: Absolutely. I personally never thought about reaching out, saying, hey, I'm interested in and helping out on a board to a legislator. That is a really good idea, I've got to jot that down. But so, as we get close to our time ending, what are some of those key

takeaways that you really want our listeners to understand and the power that nurses can bring to healthcare policy?

RODRIGUEZ: So, number one, your voice matters, and you bring such an important perspective to the conversation. The stories that you bring, the experiences that you have are just so critical to make sure we are putting policy and legislation in place that really bolsters our communities, bolsters our patients. So never doubt that what you bring to the table is enough, or that you don't have a really important perspective, you do. Number two, know your legislators. You got to know who they are. You got to make sure that you know who represents you, and where they stand on certain policies that are important to you. So, make sure that you are researching that today. Every state has a way to do that. Wisconsin, you can just put in your address, and it shows you all your different legislators and with their contact information so that you can have it. Number three, get involved within a larger organization such as your Nurses Association, such as the Heart Association, the Lung Association, whatever interests you, there is an organization that you can work with that's going to be having a policy arm that's important. And lastly, I would say honestly, consider running for office. It is so important that we have nurses at the table when these decisions are being made. It is critical. And so, if a nurse is not at that table, then your perspective is not being considered. And they are going to be making decisions about policy that could affect your career, could affect your patient's health. And it's so important for you to consider running for office because it is it is such a critical, critical perspective and skill set that you bring to the table.

PIERCE: Sara, what prepares you the most for this role that you're in right now? When you look back over your career, what prepares you the most?

RODRIGUEZ: I would say those critical conversations, that's what prepared me the most. As a nurse, we have difficult conversations all the time, and we are also used to talking to all sorts of different types of people from different backgrounds and trying to make sure



that we are communicating in a way that our patients need. And that is a skill set that I think prepared me well to be able to be part of the political process. I think a lot about vaccine hesitancy and how we as nurses would talk to folks about individuals who may be a little hesitant to get their vaccines. And we know from the research, we pepper them with facts. They tend to go back in the other direction. But if we respond with empathy, if we listen, if we hear what they're talking about, if we understand their perspective, then they're more likely to be receptive to a conversation about how this may be really important for your health. And so that's the same skill set that we would use with anyone when we're having a conversation. If you respond with respect and empathy, you tend to get a little bit more ground than if you respond in a different way.

PIERCE: And that's one of the things that I've always loved about our profession is we get more time, we get to know the patient, we get to know their families, we get to know their stories, we get to connect with them, and that's one of the things that I've really loved about being a nurse. And it makes you want to advocate more because you know who you are advocating for on a personal level. We have the faces with situations that a lot of a lot of people don't get, that they don't see the faces. It's not personal, it's not personable. That's a very great perspective that you also get to bring to the table. I love that. Sara, thank you for sitting down with me for this discussion. Learning from you is an absolute joy and I am so excited for the amazing things that you are going to accomplish and the visibility that you bring to our profession. Thank you.

RODRIGUEZ: Yes, thank you for having me. And I will always say this. Being a nurse was the best decision I ever made ever in my life. And so, I think it is such a valuable job and such a valuable skill.

PIERCE: Absolutely. And thank you for emphasizing the need and the abilities and the knowledge that nurses have, which is what makes us amazing advocates at all levels of

government. So hopefully you have given people some courage that are maybe sitting there thinking, I wonder if I want to do this.

RODRIGUEZ: Do it.

PIERCE: Yes, do it.

RODRIGUEZ: Yeah.

PIERCE: Absolutely. To our listeners, I encourage you to explore many of the courses that we have available on [elitelearning.com](https://elitelearning.com) to help you grow in your careers and earn CEs.