



Global Health and Nursing Advocacy

Promoting health and nurse leadership at the United Nations.

Editor's note: The Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing is a global organization focused on leadership and scholarship, with more than 135,000 members from more than 100 countries. This second article in a series highlights the work of Sigma's representatives at the United Nations and their perspectives on advocating for global health and nursing leadership.

Last year's National Academy of Medicine report, *The Future of Nursing 2020–2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity*, called on nurses of all ages and backgrounds, from all roles and settings, to advance health equity.¹ As global citizens and informed health care leaders, nurses have a responsibility to address issues that influence health outcomes, both locally and worldwide.

Since 2012, the Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing (Sigma) has had special consultative status with the United Nations (UN), allowing nurse leaders to assume an increasingly global role in advancing world health and promoting the nursing profession through advocacy, policy influence, and leadership development. This status grants Sigma participation in the UN's intergovernmental processes and committees. Sigma appoints six representatives to promote global health and the profession at the UN. In recognition of the importance of empowering young people and providing them with mentorship, these representatives include four liaisons and two youth representatives, all of whom are appointed for two-year terms and advocate for health equity by promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and, more specifically, key actions that address the social determinants of health. Powerful mechanisms to improve health and well-being, the SDGs aim to reduce health disparities and improve quality of life for people around the globe. Sigma's UN representatives speak on behalf of nursing leaders across the globe and conduct global outreach to help all nurses better understand the SDGs and the work of the UN.

In this article, Sigma's UN representatives share their perspectives on efforts to build a healthier world through nursing advocacy, with emphasis on the work of Sigma's youth representatives to the UN and the development of future nurse leaders.

They also discuss the importance of all nurses developing global health advocacy skills.

WHY NURSE REPRESENTATION MATTERS

Most UN meetings feature expert panels of global health professionals, yet nurses aren't consistently included. Although some progress has been made, nursing expertise remains underutilized in discussions in which important health care decisions are made.¹ The presence of nurses in high-level meetings is a visible reminder that nurses are key players in addressing health inequities around the world.

Improving health everywhere by ensuring nurses are more visible and participatory in conversations that affect health care and outcomes is the main focus of Sigma's UN representatives. Creating sustainable change in health care is a complex and intricate process, so the efforts of Sigma's representatives are threefold: each team member develops strategic relationships, creates spaces for nurse participation, and leads efforts to ensure an informed public. Attending and being actively engaged in virtual and in-person high-level meetings enables Sigma's UN liaisons and youth representatives to join decision-making conversations and provide input on how nurses contribute to the goals and priorities of the UN. Nongovernmental organizations that are in consultative status with the UN, such as Sigma, are also permitted to submit position statements on behalf of their organizations and professions. Through such statements, Sigma represents the voices of nurses worldwide, highlighting the critical role nurses play in achieving the SDGs.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AT THE UN

On International Youth Day 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized that young people can't confront local and global issues



alone. They need allies to provide them with the tools and opportunities necessary to lead on issues such as inequalities in food security, the empowerment of women and girls, and the climate emergency. He urged leaders to hear, empower, and “guarantee young people a seat at the table.”²

The UN has long supported youth leadership. In 2009, its Department of Global Communications launched the Civil Society Youth Representatives Programme. This program serves as an advocacy platform, bringing together young people to address world challenges. Organizations associated with this department, such as Sigma, appoint two youth representatives, creating opportunities for young people to bring ideas, passion, and innovation to the UN. Youth representatives must be members of the organization they are representing at the UN, complete an application, and participate in an interview as a part of the selection process.

In 2018, the UN launched Youth2030, which guides its efforts to strengthen its work for and with young people worldwide. Youth2030 seeks to improve the UN’s capacity to engage young people and take into account their input regarding the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the SDGs.³ In November 2020, one of us, DIM, who’s currently serving her second term as a Sigma UN youth representative, attended a briefing about this strategy that provided an opportunity for her and others to learn about the progress of Youth2030, including the creation of a systemwide repository that provides easy access to all youth-related knowledge and programs across the UN. She has also been involved in discussions about avenues for engagement through her participation on several youth advisory boards that facilitate input from young people regarding UN work.³

The roles of Sigma’s UN liaisons and youth representatives are the same except that the latter also attend meetings and events focused on youth initiatives. The liaisons actively mentor and support the youth representatives, helping to develop their leadership abilities. Youth representatives are selected from a pool of international applicants between the ages of 18 and 28 who are students or early career nurses. The candidates are interviewed and selected by a committee representing Sigma’s leadership teams. Key responsibilities of the role include traveling to UN events in New York City, developing a comprehensive plan for Sigma’s engagement with the UN, and recommending strategies to promote Sigma and nursing

at appropriate conferences; meetings; and other events, workgroups, and committees. Sigma’s consultative status with the UN provides its youth representatives with access to the UN compound in New York City year-round and the ability to participate in the highest-level events, including the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development held in July and the UN General Assembly held in September. Along with the liaisons, the youth representatives provide a strong nursing presence at the UN and conduct outreach around the world, helping nurses to better understand and contribute to the aims of the UN.

As a Sigma youth representative, DIM has worked closely with the Civil Society Youth Representatives Steering Committee to plan high-level events, including the 68th UN Civil Society Conference that helped to amplify the youth voices and advance their engagement. She notes that this “unique opportunity . . . helped reinforce what role I want to take on in the world as a nurse, young leader, and, most importantly, as a human being.”

ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

Sigma’s UN representatives work together to cultivate relationships with world leaders to share the critical viewpoint of nursing, elucidate nurses’ values, and increase the visibility of the profession. Because many of the players on the global stage remain consistent, moving to new positions as they advance in their careers, these relationships can have long-lasting impacts and lead to ongoing collaboration.

As key stakeholders, Sigma’s UN liaisons and youth representatives are also invited to workshops and meetings held outside the UN. One of us, VCM, a former Sigma UN liaison, notes that such meetings can provide unexpected opportunities for Sigma’s representatives to engage with health leaders. She recalls a spontaneous discussion that arose over breakfast during a workshop sponsored by the global health division of a multinational company a few years ago. As they ate, she and the person next to her talked about global work conditions for health care workers and shared insights and experiences, including hers as a bedside nurse, union activist, and nurse researcher with firsthand knowledge of the job insecurities many nurses experience. It transpired that the person she was speaking with was the keynote speaker of the event and worked for the World Health Organization. Their informal conversation, she notes, “provided a rare opportunity to share the perspective of a nurse.”

Sigma UN representatives are also active in building foundational relationships with other organizations and their representatives. In August 2019, DIM and AS, a Sigma liaison, participated in a session at the 68th UN Civil Society Conference highlighting the connection between nurses' environmental stewardship and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Nurses are involved in responding to these climate changes and in preparing their communities, especially regarding disaster response, in which nurses are often the first responders. This session underscored the important role nurses can play in advocating for change and reframing climate discussions to make them more understandable and relatable for patients. Powerful outcomes of participating in this event included having the chance to share information about the work of Sigma's members, cultivate new connections with like-minded attendees and organizations, and reaffirm nursing's right to have a seat at the decision-making table. AS notes that "representing Sigma at this conference truly opened my eyes to how important advocacy in nursing is."

One of us, PSB, a former Sigma UN liaison, describes how her participation in a UN high-level political forum demonstrated the potential for establishing networks with high-ranking policymakers:

I attended a session on global migration policies with panelists from Canada, Kuwait, and the Dominican Republic. Migration has many intersections with the SDGs, so I asked a question about nursing and its potential to assist with migration issues. This opened a discussion about nursing migration, nursing brain drain, and the negative impact of both, particularly in resource-limited countries. Nurses frequently work with vulnerable migrant populations but may not see the importance of proactively advocating for immigrants. After this session, the representative from one of the countries approached me to discuss the potential for nursing to have a more active role in his country. . . . Nurses must seize these opportunities to establish and build collaborative networks through which to advocate.

More recently, two members of Sigma's UN representative team attended a town hall meeting in New York City, at which the president of the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly, Abdulla Sha-

hid, outlined his vision and priorities for the upcoming year. As stakeholders in the work of the UN, they were invited to submit a statement on behalf of Sigma and the nursing profession. Their testimony reminded the UN leadership team that nurses are a part of the solution when addressing the current challenges of COVID-19 recovery, vaccine distribution, and climate change, among other issues. This work emphasizes that nurses are the principal health care providers in primary health care systems and are leading SDG initiatives worldwide and, as such, have the ability to transform the way health actions are organized and care is delivered.

ADVOCACY RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES

Nurses are uniquely positioned to offer innovative solutions, but to do so, they must be included in and heard at high-level meetings and in collaborative efforts, where they can advocate for the communities they serve. In the *State of the World's Nursing 2020* report, nurse leaders assert that the global health agenda to achieve the SDGs cannot be attained without nurses in key leadership positions to influence public policy.⁴ DIM highlights the importance of nurses being present in policymaking arenas:

Nurses play vital roles in the health of nations, and I want to make sure our voices are heard on the world stage. During the town hall meeting [in March] for the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, I asked António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the UN, how he is listening to nurses. . . . Nurses are present in every health care setting, and we possess a unique role in formulating policies that promote world health.

Raising awareness. All nurses can employ advocacy efforts, such as the effective use of social media platforms to promote awareness and encourage support of policies that reduce health inequities, to inform policymakers and the public about the conditions they observe in their everyday practice. Globally, nurses are already strengthening social media networks to exert a greater influence on policies that impact global health. One of us, JH, is a Sigma liaison and longtime champion for the UN Foundation's Shot@Life campaign, which sponsors an annual Advocate to Vaccinate campaign. This spring, nurses and other vaccine champions involved in this campaign sent almost 700 tweets to members of Congress requesting funding for global vaccine programs. Efforts like these during the past 10 years



Resources: United Nations

Learn: Expand Your Knowledge

United Nations (UN) Institute for Training and Research
www.unitar.org

SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) Academy
www.sdgacademy.org

UN Summer Academy
www.unsdglearn.org/courses/un-summer-academy

UN SDG: Learn
www.unsdglearn.org

UN Visitor Centre and Tours, New York
www.un.org/en/visit/tour

UN Web TV
<https://media.un.org/en/webtv>

Lead: Develop Your Leadership Skills

UN Young Leaders Training Programme
www.unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/multilateral-diplomacy/our-portfolio/multilateralism-training/united-nations-young-leaders-training-programme

UN Immersion Programme

www.unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/multilateral-diplomacy/our-portfolio/multilateralism-training/united-nations-immersion-programme

UN Diplomacy 4.0 Training Programme
<https://unitar.org/sustainable-development-goals/multilateral-diplomacy/our-portfolio/multilateralism-training/united-nations-diplomacy-40-training-programme>

Executive Diploma in Diplomatic Practice
www.unsdglearn.org/courses/executive-diploma-in-diplomatic-practice

Engage: Connect with Other Leaders

Volunteer with the UN
www.unv.org

Intern with the UN
www.un.org/en/academic-impact/page/internships

Teach the SDGs
www.teachsdgs.org

Interact with the UN on Social Media
www.un.org/en/get-involved/social-media

Resources: Sigma Theta Tau International

Learn: Expand Your Knowledge

Sigma Nursing Events
www.sigmanursing.org/connect-engage/meetings-events

Sigma Webinars
www.sigmanursing.org/learn-grow/education/sigma-webinars

SigmaCast Podcast
nursingcentered.sigmanursing.org/podcast

Sigma Academies
www.sigmanursing.org/learn-grow/sigma-academies

Lead: Develop Your Leadership Skills

Sigma's Nursing Now Challenge
www.sigmanursing.org/connect-engage/our-global-impact/nightingale-challenge

Center for Excellence in Nursing Education
www.sigmanursing.org/learn-grow/education/center-for-excellence-in-nursing-education

Emerging Educational Administrator Institute
www.sigmanursing.org/learn-grow/education/center-for-excellence-in-nursing-education/eeai-outcomes

Engage: Connect with Other Leaders

Sigma UN Liaisons and Youth Representatives
www.sigmanursing.org/connect-engage/our-global-impact/sigma-and-the-united-nations/un-representatives

The Circle, online member community and professional networking site
www.sigmanursing.org/connect-engage/thecircle

Interact with Sigma on Social Media
www.facebook.com/SigmaNursing
www.linkedin.com/company/sigma-theta-tau-international
twitter.com/sigmanursing
www.instagram.com/sigmanursing
www.youtube.com/c/SigmaHeadquarters

have resulted in more than \$5 billion in U.S. funding to support routine childhood immunizations worldwide.^{5,6} Greater awareness of nurses' work, fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, has further illuminated the importance of nursing expertise being included in efforts to improve health outcomes.^{4,7}

Linking the SDGs to nurses' daily work. In a recent scoping review on nursing and the SDGs, Fields and colleagues found that many nurses are not familiar with the SDGs or don't connect them to their everyday practice.⁸ In the past year, Sigma's UN representatives have intentionally increased their efforts to more broadly communicate the link between nurses' daily work to UN aims and efforts. These efforts have resulted in multiple presentations, keynote speeches, publications, webinars and social media posts to better broadcast this message. Additionally, in the coming year, Sigma plans to launch the Global Nursing Advocate Academy. Created and taught by former UN liaisons, the academy is designed to help nurses hone and operationalize their global advocacy skills, including working to advance the SDGs.

Advocacy opportunities. Nurses committed to understanding global health issues and making substantive, sustainable changes to promote a healthier world can use the SDGs as a road map for their advocacy efforts. There are multiple opportunities and resources available through professional associations and organizations and the UN that nurses, including those new to practice, can use to educate themselves, enhance their leadership skills, and engage with others. *Resources: United Nations and Resources: Sigma Theta Tau International* detail current opportunities available through the United Nations and Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing.

Working with a mentor is another way nurses can find support for their efforts to improve health in their communities and globally, as illustrated by this recollection from JH, who mentored a nurse who was passionate about keeping children healthy:

As a pediatric nurse, she had educated parents on the importance of routine vaccines for years, but she had not connected this to the need for advocacy for global vaccine programs for children. As part of the UN Foundation's Shot@Life campaign, I invited her to join me for a meeting with a Congressional representative. She had never done so before and had no previous experience with political advocacy. Intimidated by the unfamiliar process, she planned to just smile and

nod, listen and learn. But during the meeting, her passion for vaccines and healthy children propelled her into the conversation, and she ultimately became a national leader for global vaccine advocacy.

The work of nurses at all stages of their careers and at every level of practice is essential to achieving the goals of the UN. Nurses are effective change agents with strong collaborative skills and are vital to the development of partnerships with other disciplines and private industry. SDG 17—Partnerships for the Goals—emphasizes the importance of collaborative efforts at the local, national, regional, and global levels, highlighting the importance of all nurses developing global health advocacy skills. ▼

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