

# Taking a Stand: *Developing a Nurse's Pledge to Champion Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity*



American Organization  
for Nursing Leadership



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Last year, the Organization of Nurse Leaders (ONL), which represents nurse leaders in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Vermont, worked with the New England Regional Black Nurses Association (NERBNA) to create the Nurse's Pledge to Champion Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity. This article details the development of the pledge.

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Following the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and the national spotlight on social injustice, ONL felt compelled to act, but was challenged by the lack of diversity around our board table and within our organization. Before acting, we wanted to listen and understand. We reached out to our colleagues at NERBNA to begin a dialogue about actions nurse leaders and organizations could set in motion to address social injustice and persistent disparities. The dialogue reminded us that “the racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable.”<sup>1</sup>

The year 2020 revealed deep and significant racial and ethnic injustice in the United States as evidenced by disproportionately higher COVID-19 death rates in nonwhite communities, and a tragic number of high-profile police shootings of black and brown people. The confluence of these circumstances struck a chord with nurse leaders who were continuously trying to support nursing and care teams to cope with—and better understand—these long-standing inequities.

The US Department of Health and Human Services describes these disparities as “preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations.”<sup>2</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths were more than 2 to 4 times higher in vulnerable populations. The color of a person's skin, a person's ethnicity, as well as where they live, work, and worship, are social determinants of health that can

exacerbate health challenges and, ultimately, keep a population at substantial risk.<sup>3</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic forced the health care system and nurses to rise and meet the challenge of serving all those needing care.

ONL and NERBNA, which have enjoyed a long-standing partnership, worked together to co-lead an effort to align and unite our profession in service to communities and the country. The result was the creation of The Nurse's Pledge to Champion Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity<sup>4</sup> (*Figure 1*).

## CREATING THE PLEDGE

ONL and NERBNA jointly drafted the pledge using the principles of the American Nurses Association Nursing Code of Ethics, which obligates nurses to collaborate with others to change unjust structures and processes that affect both individuals and communities.<sup>5</sup> The language of the Nurse's Pledge implores nurses to be vigilant and take action to influence colleagues, community members, leaders, legislators, government agencies, nongovernment organizations, and international bodies in all related health affairs to address the social determinants of health.

As an invitation to all nurses, the pledge was developed to stimulate self-reflection and discussion concerning the racial status quo in their own lives and their professional circles. It challenges nurses to go beyond awareness of racism to the next step of contributing to the formation of a just and equitable society.<sup>6</sup>

*As a nurse, I pledge to:*

- Actively listen to learn
- Champion strategies that advance equity
- See, hear, and accept people from every race and culture
- Promote the practice of self-assessment for unconscious biases
- Examine my practice and consider methods I can employ to stop contributing to systemic racism
- Be anti-racist, and stand with and stand up for, those with racially and culturally diverse backgrounds
- Foster a culture of diversity, equity and inclusivity
- Increase diversity within my sphere of influence
- Advocate for anti-racist training in formal education
- Hold myself and others accountable to committing to reforms and action
- Pursue social justice by listening and engaging in dialogue with others, even when it is uncomfortable
- Support legislative efforts aimed at eliminating racism and discrimination, and supporting basic human rights
- Educate myself about systemic injustice, and then use my trusted voice to influence and educate others

**Figure 1.** The Nurse’s Pledge to Champion Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity

Upon completion, both ONL and NERBNA shared the pledge with their members, distributed the pledge using social media, and shared it with other professional nursing organizations such as the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL). Our goal was to cast a large inclusive invitation to all nurses and nursing students to take the pledge. By October 2020, nurses in 46 states, plus the District of Columbia, had taken the pledge. Many nurses who have signed onto the pledge shared strong support in the comment field such as:

- “I want to be an active member of the purposeful change to eliminate racism.”
- “I commit to this pledge. As an African-American nurse, I have encountered numerous racial discriminatory practices along my professional journey... I am here to help in whatever capacity.”
- “As a white nurse, I am more than honored to stand beside my colleagues to continue to break down the barriers that have for far too long been a part of the fabric of this country. Unity and peace today, tomorrow, and forever more!”

Other nurses commented on the different ways they are applying the pledge in leadership practice:

- “I am happy to take this pledge and put it into action in my nursing classroom and in my life outside the classroom.”
- “I am the lead of our newly formed Diversity and Inclusion Taskforce for our school of nursing. This is a great resource, thank you.”

By activating the largest health care profession, nurses can have a profound impact on the disparities and access to care. We will need to act and lead differently, and we must be leaders in this movement. Ending systemic racism will take courage and awareness. The

authors of the pledge recommend actions that all nurses can bring to bear to change structures and help shift beliefs to influence institutional culture and policy.

**THE PLEDGE IN PRACTICE**

ONL is receiving frequent feedback about how the pledge is being used in practice. At one academic hospital in Boston, the frontline nursing leadership team initiated a call to action to eliminate structural racism. Inspired by the pledge, they wrote a letter to their entire team communicating, “To remain silent is to be complicit. Join us in taking the Nurse’s Pledge.” Several clinical nurses, in collaboration with their chief nursing officer, initiated a nursing diversity committee, to address, educate, and inform the nurturing of an anti-racist, and inclusive culture. Understanding that leadership is local, this is 1 example of how the most trusted profession, guided by ethical values, has decided to lead the change it wishes to see throughout the country.

Nurses in academic settings also are using the pledge as a catalyst. Two senior nursing students approaching their graduation requested permission to use the Nurse’s Pledge in their white coat and pinning ceremonies. ONL was honored and is hopeful that others will use the pledge to advance the critical work of building a more just and inclusive society.

NERBNA and ONL are proud of the Nurse’s Pledge and recognize the importance of partnering to build more inclusive dialogue and strategies. This is the beginning of a powerful movement that will take hard work, commitment, and crucial conversations. It will require nurses to use their influence and trustworthiness to confront racist actions, raise awareness, and address biases. It means initiating uncomfortable yet meaningful dialogue with frontline nursing, nurse managers, and nurse executives to bring institutional awareness. It is an exciting time for

The Organization of Nurse Leaders—MA, RI, NH, CT, VT (ONL) is a not-for-profit, professional membership organization for current and aspiring nurse leaders. Its membership comprises more than 1100 nurses from across 5 New England states—Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Vermont. ONL’s mission is to advance a culture of health. Current strategic priorities include championing leadership development for nurses, integrating social justice into advocacy efforts, and advancing diversity among members and program attendees. ONL is an affiliate of the American Organization for Nursing Leadership.

The New England Regional Black Nurses Association (NERBNA) is a not-for-profit, professional membership organization that has served the Boston area and beyond to improve the issues that affect the issues that Black nurses and consumers of health care face. Since 1972, NERBNA has contributed to the national effort of unifying, educating, and increasing diversity in the nursing workforce. NERBNA is dedicated to investigating, defining, and determining the health care needs of African Americans throughout New England. NERBNA is committed to implementing the necessary changes to ensure that optimum health care is available to African Americans and other underserved communities. NERBNA is an affiliate of the National Black Nurses Association.

nurses to do what we do best—assess, plan, and implement changes that will bring about inclusivity and break down racial barriers. We believe this continued collaboration is laying the groundwork for nurses to create environments and communities that are inclusive of diverse people and perspectives.

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