

Nurse and Legislative Fellow: Lindsey Harris, DNP, RN, FNP-BC, FAAN

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Lisa Bonsall: Hello, this is Lisa Bonsall, Senior Clinical Editor for Lippincott NursingCenter. I am pleased to be speaking with Dr. Lindsey Harris. Dr. Harris is a family nurse practitioner, an educator, a leader, and now public servant as a legislative fellow in Representative Lauren Underwood's office. Thank you for joining me today.

Lindsey Harris: Thank you so much for having me. I am so excited about this interview.

Lisa Bonsall: Dr. Harris, can you talk about your career journey in nursing, please? What were your goals initially and how did your path change along the way?

Lindsey Harris: So, you know, one of the reasons why I went into nursing is just because of my passion for helping others. Nursing is such a holistic profession. We have the opportunity to, you know, help people from birth all the way to death. So throughout the lifespan and so what a great, profession and then every aspect, you know, nurses can work literally anywhere. You know, they have nurses in, in Walmart, I in factories, in hospitals and clinics and, and even in the United States capital. So, there's just so much opportunity in nursing. When I went in, I really had no expectation but to serve others. That was my only, you know, expectation. And it really evolved through me starting in professional organizations. I had a professor when I was in school, in undergraduate at the University of Samford in Birmingham, Alabama, and her name was Dr. Jennifer Cole. And I'll never forget, she was a member of many nursing organizations. One of the organizations that I did join at the time that students were allowed to join was the National Black Nurses Association, of which, you know, they have different chapters, in different states. And so, I joined the Birmingham Black Nurses Association, and it was there that I received initial mentorship from, you know, all the members and beyond and became, you know, a student representative to a secretary, to a treasurer, to eventually the president of that organization. And so it was in that professional mentorship that I received, it really brought in another aspect of health care and another way that I can fuel my passion as it relates to helping others, and that's through policy. So I became, shortly after being the president of the Birmingham Black Nurses Association, I became the president and the first person and youngest person, but first person of color to become the president of the Alabama State Nurses Association and during the height of Covid. So at that time, I became not only an advocate for those that we serve each and every day, our patients within the state of Alabama. But I also became an advocate for the 100,000 plus nurses that we have in the state. And I realized that a couple of things. Number one, we as nurses, we're truly taught to advocate for our patients each and every day. But we're not taught to advocate for ourselves. So I found out during that time how important it was that we have to begin to advocate for ourselves and, you know, advocating

for our patients, understanding a lot of the inequities and the biases that I saw during Covid that, you know, policy really affects the masses. And if I really wanted to evoke change, you know, I can influence, a greater mass, by utilizing policy change.

Lisa Bonsall: Wow. Fantastic. So you recently completed a fellowship in health policy with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Can you tell us more about that?

Lindsey Harris: Absolutely. The RWJF is what we call it, RWJF Health Policy Fellowship is a year long fellowship. And it is an amazing transformational experience. So they take mid-career providers or just mid-career professionals I should say, because we have anyone from, you know, nurses to physicians to lawyers to licensed professional counselors. so the gamut, with those who are interested, really in health care and learning more about health care policy, and they bring you to Washington, DC. For the first three and a half months, you learn about health policy. You have briefers from all around the world, all around the country that talk about, you know, our government, different legislation, but just also, media and policy or also the economics of policy. So everything surrounding policy. And then you're placed on the hill, sort of like a matching opportunity where you decide if you want to work in, the different branches of government, the executive, or legislative branch or agencies, as well. And so I, decided and was chosen as well, in the office of Representative Lauren Underwood, who we all know is a nurse. She's one of three nurses. in my opinion, she's the best nurse in, here in Congress, but just had the opportunity, to work in the office as a legislative fellow. So working on legislative policy, any anything that, you know, was needed through the office, on any of her portfolios. But my main focus was, legislation surrounding health legislation.

Lisa Bonsall: Wow. So interesting. So what is your work like now as a fellow? Can you tell us about a typical day?

Lindsey Harris: Oh my goodness. Honestly, there is no typical day. I mean, I can tell you one of the things that we really do every day is really pay attention to the media, the news outlets. For me, I worked on...I helped to work on the health portfolio. So I paid attention to what's going on, you know, with environmental health, with, you know, new advances in health, with AI in health. So I had the opportunity to look at those. But honestly, you know, one day would vary it it could be we spent, you know, several days to a week voting on a speaker. Or it could be, where I'm meeting with constituents in thought groups, and really just understanding and maintaining the pulse and what our constituents of Illinois District 14, what they need. So it was a wide of range of, things throughout the day, never a dull moment. and I loved every moment of it. Fantastic.

Lisa Bonsall: So you and I were introduced by the executive director of the Nurses on Boards Coalition. So I wanted to ask you, why is it important for nurses to get involved with board membership?

Lindsey Harris: Wow. This is, really almost a loaded question, because I can tell you. And it's really beyond boards, but specifically on boards. I feel like there's a saying that, if you don't have a seat at the table, then you're on the menu. And I really, truly believe that. I think that, you know, it's important for nurses to be on all boards. you know, even outside of the health care sector, because health truly touches everything. so just very important, that we are very involved. And, you know, it's important just so we can lend our expertise and lend our voice. We all know that nurses, we are the most trusted profession and have been for the past , years. And we also understand that we are the foundation of health care. And so without nursing, there would be no health care. And so we are also, I mentioned

earlier, we also take care of people from birth to death. So we understand what the community needs. And so it's just so important for us to exercise our voice and provide the knowledge that we have, with or for our communities.

Lisa Bonsall: I couldn't agree more. I think that we have a perspective like nobody else. Right. And I'm glad you mentioned, you know, being on boards outside of health care because we bring that perspective. and I think it's so, so very valuable. We think of things that people don't tend to think about. Right. So we definitely bring unique ideas and perspectives. So thank you for that. What advice do you have for nurses who are interested in advocacy and health policy?

Lindsey Harris: My first advice would be just to remain curious and ask the question. A lot of times, in health care, sometimes, or maybe in, sometimes in academia, maybe it may be said, well, why do we do things? And we say, well, that's the way we've always done it. And oh, that, that really with our ever evolving communities, technology, we always need to ask the question - why? We always need to ask the question, you know - what? You know, just being inquisitive and being curious, I think, is number one and hugely imperative for us to progress our communities and move our country forward. so that would be number one. Number two, obviously is, voting. You know, you can exercise your individual right by voting, being in professional organizations, that is huge. Your professional organization is the one that really, is out advocating for you, advocating for your profession, and just by you being a member contributes to that advocacy. Getting involved. Of course. When you're asked to write your legislatives or just keeping up to date with any type of legislation that relates to you or your profession is very important as well. So, you know, nurses, we have a perspective, as you mentioned earlier, that no other profession has, and we definitely need to be involved. Run for office. I mentioned about boards, being on boards. Every opportunity that we can have in a leadership or have a seat at the table is important, even if it's for school board, county commissioner, those things are so important. And I think, we as nurses, we're so innovative and we have a perspective, that could improve outcomes for all. Wonderful. Thank you. And this I think this takes us full circle to what you said at the beginning, about, you know, we're taught to advocate for our patients and the people in the community, but not so much for ourselves. So this is a way to advocate for ourselves, right? Join our organizations, get out and vote. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, being on, you know, the both local and national boards, the hospital board, the I mean, there's so many opportunities for us to lend our expertise and really just improve outcomes.

Lisa Bonsall: So wonderful. Well, I know that you're very busy there in DC, so I thank you so much for sharing these words. and for your hard work there on behalf of all of the nurses out here. So I really enjoyed talking with you.

Lindsey Harris: Well, thank you so much for the opportunity.

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