Nurses Improve Policy

As the first recipient of the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis Excellence in Leadership Award, Helen Thomson exemplifies the school’s vision and mission through her leadership and commitment to improving health policy, especially early mental health care and expanded health insurance for children.

Thomson, a registered nurse, began her public service career in 1974 when she was elected to the Davis Joint Unified School District Board of Education. She was elected to the Yolo County Board of Supervisors in 1986 and reelected in 1990 and 1994. In 1996 she won the 8th District seat in the California State Assembly where she served three terms.

Further details about the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis and Helen Thomson are available at http://nursing.ucdavis.edu.

Q. What prompted you to pursue a leadership role?

A. I wish I could say my leadership role was planned! I came to California as a registered nurse and taught one of the psychiatric nursing classes in the area. I also visited psychiatric patients after they left the hospital. I am glad to be a psychiatric nurse—we approach things in a calm, reasonable way. If you can deal with person with psychiatric problems, you can deal with anyone.

My husband, Captain, and I moved to this area at the time the School of Medicine was founded at UC Davis. He was the founding director of mental health services at Yolo County and worked with the first School of Medicine faculty. The first thing he did was unshackle psychiatric patients from beds.

I wanted to complete my bachelor’s degree at California State University, Sacramento, having started two years of night school at Boston University. My credits didn’t transfer to Sacramento and I had to start over. But my first baby came during finals and I wasn’t able to finish.

I was bored at home and took on leadership roles in the kids’ preschool. Then I ran for the Davis Joint Unified School Board of Education and was surprised to be elected. I remained on the board for 12 years. I was active in the California School Boards Association where I went up through the ranks in education finance. I convinced people to keep school nurses and counselors and introduced a human reproductive program. This led to my interest in health policy and board leadership with a focus on psychiatric nursing and mental health issues in general.

When my youngest child was a junior in high school, I continued on next page
ran for a seat on the Yolo County Board of Supervisors which had oversight of Child Protective Services and adult day health care. Someone told me “no woman would ever be in the seat.” This made me angry and drove me to run for election. I was elected. Because I was a registered nurse, I was asked to take assignments such as chair of California State Association of Counties’ health and human services.

I gained influence in health policy which led to my interest in running for the California State Assembly. I had a better record than my opponent and ran on the platform: Can a nurse make a difference? Because I wasn’t into partisan politics, I was able to work with both sides of the house. My interests led me to become chair of mental health issues. The parity bill in California led to health reform nationally.

My interests came from the community. I was on the founding board of Yolo Hospice in Davis and worked on pain management and quality of life issues. If people’s pain is cared for, they can continue living a quality life. Scott Fishman, chief of Pain Medicine at UC Davis, and I did wonderful work. I passed bills on pain charts and advance directives such as the Physicians Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment Paradigm (POLST). Everyone deserves a pain-free death. I was also able to work a variety of other important community issues, including gay rights and abortion issues.

When I first started as an elected official, I wasn’t sure I could get anything done because the committee process is wild. Former Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl mentored me and said, “You can get anything done.” It also helped that I was older and had committee experience.

Q. What brought you to the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing at UC Davis?

A. I was excited about the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing because I was familiar with all the difficulties of nursing education. I organized and chaired a hearing in 2000 on the state of nursing in California. We tried to introduce bills that would help.

UC Davis is a part of our lives and I got to know a lot of university people through a variety of projects. My neighbors, who worked at UC Davis Health System and were also on a committee for public health in schools with me, introduced the School of Nursing. I was asked to be on the committee to recruit a dean for the school. That’s when I learned about the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and its $100 million commitment to launch the school.

Q. How can the Betty Irene Moore School of Nursing transform nursing education and health care?

A. Hospital leaders have to start thinking differently about the role of nursing within the health-care team. Health care is cooperative and collaborative, not just about labor issues. Nursing is growing as a profession. These changes permeate the whole system. The School of Nursing can help nurses define their own capacity and be the best they can be, while assisting hospitals and clinics in our community. Hospital leaders should give time and money to nurses for further education.

Nurses need to think about elected positions. There are only two registered nurses in elected positions in California. I would love to see the school connect students with policy and broaden their vision of nursing leadership. Nurses can lead health reform because they triage—think through problems, formulate a plan and go after it. Health policy needs to be science-based and evidence-based, looking toward outcomes, and nurses have great experience in this area.

You can be a nurse and a community leader by influencing organizations to which you belong. For example, on a board of family services, nurses can ask questions and get insightful results because of their experience and education.

Nurses are seen as helpful and wanting people to be healthy. They can ask tough questions without being critical.