Honor and Recognize the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps Now!
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Daughter of a Cadet Nurse

The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps was the nation’s first federally funded education program for women. In early 1943, Rep. Francis Payne Bolton of Ohio introduced a bill that Congress approved and that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed into law in June 1943. The program began in July 1943 under the U.S. Public Health Service. Over the course of its 5-year existence, approximately 180,000 young women participated, and of that number, some 124,000 graduated and became licensed nurses. They proudly wore the uniform of this service corps, and they provided up to 80% of nursing service in hospitals stateside, which were at the verge of collapse as graduate nurses left for military service during World War II. In exchange for a promise to serve in essential nursing service for the duration of the war, these young women received a federally funded education. For many of these children of the Great Depression, they would not have been able to afford this education. When the war ended, many continued in nursing; some served for decades. Some continued their education and became leaders in nurse education, public health, advanced nursing practice, and other emerging fields in healthcare delivery. Many were also innovators in new nursing fields, such as outpatient surgery, emergency nursing, geriatric nursing, and many other areas that today we take for granted as having always been there. The truth is, these fields emerged after World War II, and nurses who began in the profession as Cadet Nurses were at the vanguard of these innovations.

When we take the time to connect the dots from the 1920s, when the Rockefeller Foundation commissioned Goldmark Report advised that nurse education move from hospital-based programs to programs based in colleges and universities, we see an additional, generally less understood service of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps in promoting this transition. Although the majority of the 1,125 participating schools of nursing in the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps were hospital based, some 150 were housed in colleges or universities. Also, in order to meet program standards, many hospital-based U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps programs began to seek out instructional resources in neighboring colleges. By the 1970s the majority of nursing programs in our country had moved to higher education settings, where student nurses’ educational needs were prioritized. The huge enrollment of Cadet Nurses was an impetus for this trend.

So the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps program both addressed an immediate need in the healthcare delivery system during World War II and a longer-term process to improve the quality of nurse education. By all measures, the program was a resounding success because of Cadet Nurses’ patriotism during World War II, a patriotism that shaped their service as professional nurses and community members after the War.

For these and many more reasons, the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps program and Cadet Nurses in particular deserve formal recognition. Many of their sons, daughters, grandchildren, friends, and community leaders have realized this and have taken it upon themselves to carry out local events—luncheons, receptions, plaque dedications, proclamations, and presentations, for example—to recognize and memorialize Cadet Nurses’ patriotism in service to country and commitment to the advancement of the nursing profession. All of these events are admirable, and they demonstrate in a concrete way that this group of special women deserve formal thanks from the federal government, the original sponsor of the
legislation that made their service possible in the first place. Local events are important because they are personal, and when well documented, prove that there is a real interest in accomplishing more enduring recognition, a recognition that will live on after the last Cadet Nurse has departed this life.

Some may say that because Cadet Nurses received a free education and earned a nursing credential, that is recognition enough. This assertion is short-sighted. Not to recognize 180,000 women’s service and not to recognize the 124,000 women whose service led to a nursing credential, a professional career, and contributions to that profession and the national economy, disrespects the program and the many people who served in it. Failure to formally recognize Cadet Nurse service in a tangible way also disrespects the very agencies that were responsible for its establishment in the first place.

Dr. Barbara Poremba, a nurse educator in Massachusetts, has recently taken up this cause with remarkable results. In contrast to the over 20 years that bills have been introduced in Congress, only to die and be reintroduced in the next session, the latest effort, introduced by Senator Elizabeth Warren, is most encouraging. As of June 30, 2019, there are two sets of bills in Congress. The first is the United States Cadet Nurse Corps Service Recognition Act: S.997 in the Senate and H.2056 in the House, the latter of which was introduced by Senator Warren and received bipartisan support. Rep. Cheri Bustos introduced H.2056 in the House. Some 22 Senators and 39 Congressmen representing 31 states are co-sponsors. These bills seek honorary veteran’s status for honorably discharged Cadet Nurses, thus opening a pathway to federal recognition, including burial benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, and award of a service medal by the Secretary of Defense.

A second, and more encouraging approach is a set of amendments to the National Defense Authorization (NDAA) Act: S.Amdt.386 to S.1790 in the Senate and H.Amdt.257 to HR.2500 in the House. The terms of these amendments are the same as the bills mentioned above, but the NDAA must be voted on promptly, while the bills above could languish for a while. Therefore, the likelihood of success for Cadet Nurse recognition is far more encouraging via these amendments to the NDAA than it may be for the freestanding bills, which, though introduced, may take longer to garner enough support to lead to a vote and passage. As of this writing, some 22 Senators and 18 Congressmen representing 40 states have co-sponsored these amendments to the NDAA.

Introducing AND passing bills or amendments to the NDAA will be a most welcome capstone to the myriad celebrations, recognitions, ceremonies, and other events that have taken place in the years since I first became interested in Cadet Nurse Corps history some seven years ago. Although Cadet Nurses truly appreciate these local expressions of gratitude for their service and patriotism, there remains a yearning for something more substantial and enduring that only the federal government can provide. It is my personal hope that enduring, formal recognition at the federal level is realized as soon as possible. The remaining Cadet Nurses are in their 90s, and it would be nice if they live to see this long overdue recognition from the same level of government as that had established the program from which they and their country benefited. Time is of the essence, and it is also important that their service does not fade from the nation’s collective memory after the last Cadet Nurse passes away.

Contact your Congressional delegations now and encourage them not only to co-sponsor, but also to pass S.Amdt.386 and H.Amdt.257 of the National Defense Authorization Act. It is the right thing to do not only to honor and respect the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps program and Cadet Nurses. This recognition also helps us all remember the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps legacy in many healthcare delivery practices and
in similar federally funded education programs since World War II for those in public health, military and other forms of public service.

About Elsie Szecsy
Dr. Elsie Szecsy retired in 2015 from Arizona State University, where she was an education research professional in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Education. Her areas of interest include equitable educational opportunity, especially in linguistically and culturally diverse settings, and qualitative research methods. She has written several articles, book reviews, and chapters, as well as two books: The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps in Arizona: A History of Service and The U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps Guidebook: A History of a Program and Legacy of its People. She has also spoken numerous times about Cadet Nurses and is a speaker on this topic with Arizona Humanities, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

About the USCADETNURSE.ORG Foundation:
The mission of the USCADETNURSE.ORG Foundation is to build leadership in recognizing Cadet Nurses. This mission is carried out by providing resources about the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps program and a platform to encourage interaction among Cadet Nurses, their families, and friends. The USCADETNURSE.ORG Foundation is a 501c3 charitable and educational organization.

About the Friends of U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps World War II
The mission of the Friends of the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps World War II is to pass legislation to make the women who served in the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps honorary WWII Veterans. Dr. Barbara Poremba leads this effort. For more information about this work and the latest information on pending legislation, contact Barbara Poremba at FriendsofUSCNC@gmail.com, or visit the website: https://www.nursingandpublichealth.org/