



Dolores Wennlund, Florida Public Health Nursing Leader

A Career Journey

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Dolores Wennlund, Florida Public Health Nursing Leader

Introduction

Dolores Wennlund was born in New York City and received her nursing and graduate education in New York State. She had a long career in military and public health nursing. After suffering from breast cancer, she came to Florida for a rest in 1970 and found that the warm climate improved her health. She became a public health nursing consultant in 1970 and rose quickly through the ranks, becoming State Nursing Director in 1974. She led the nursing workforce through a turbulent time in the evolution of the state public health system. She retired in 1989 to Pasco County.

Early Years

Dolores Marie Neyland was born May 17, 1922 in the Bronx, New York. She was the oldest of four children, three of whom survived until adulthood. For the first several years of her life, Dolores was an only child. When she was ten years old, a brother was born but died shortly after birth. Four years later, a sister was born with Down syndrome. The last child, another sister, was born when Dolores was 16.

As a child, Dolores knew three young women on her street who were nurses, and she admired them. However, she decided to consider a career as a physician first. She joined a pre-medical society in high school. As part of this experience, she visited a local physician. Her impression of him was “a big fat slob smoking a cigar” (Wenlund, Dolores. Personal interview. 11 March 2008). She wasn’t interested in emulating the physician and changed her focus to nursing. Wennlund received her nursing diploma from Mary Immaculate Hospital, New York, graduating in 1942 at the age of 20 (Society of Nursing Professionals, 1986).

Military Service

Following completion of her basic nursing education, Wennlund chose to enlist as a military nurse and serve her country during World War II. She gave much thought to selecting the branch of the service to join. Several family members had been in the Navy, and she initially investigated this. She was told that the Navy only sent nurses “to places where they could wear white” and she understood this to mean most of her time would be spent on a ship, not in the field (Wennlund, Dolores. Personal interview. 11 March 2008). She chose the Army, along with three of her nursing school classmates, and they enlisted together in February 1943 (Wennlund, undated).

Wennlund joined the 31st General Hospital Nursing Unit. She was initially assigned to the 231st Station Hospital in Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Wennlund recalled working with Dr. Howard Rusk, who later founded the Rusk Rehabilitation Institute. She observed and participated in the novel methods of post-surgical care that were being tried, such as early ambulation within one day following surgery. At that time, it was standard for patients to be confined to bed for one to two weeks following surgery, so these new methods were considered quite remarkable.

Wennlund recalled suffering from measles, followed by mumps, both of which she apparently contracted from some of the young enlisted personnel training at Jefferson Barracks. Later, she developed a painful wrist ganglion, felt to be caused by shaking down “seventy thermometers three times a day” (Wennlund, undated)

Wennlund stayed in the St. Louis area for six months, then was reassigned to a unit in the Pacific Theater. After a long sea voyage, she arrived in New Caledonia, a group of islands east of Australia. They then traveled north to Espiritu Santo where she worked for almost a year in a field combat hospital. Somehow Wennlund made time to attend services in her Catholic faith and to enjoy some free time with her fellow nurses.

In the spring of 1945, Wennlund’s company was moved north to New Guinea, where she was assigned to the 51st General Hospital. Six weeks later, she was flown to the Phillipines, where she was eventually stationed on Luzon. During this tour, she met her future husband, Lester Wennlund. The war in the Pacific ended August 15, 1945. Wennlund returned to New York in November, 1945, having earned three combat medals for her years of service.

Civilian Career 1945-1970

Dolores Neyland married Lester Wennlund on April 4, 1946. They settled on Long Island. The couple’s first child died of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Very little was known about SIDS at that time and little help was available to support the grieving parents. They later had two healthy sons, Gerald (Jerry) and John.

During these busy years, Wennlund also found time to continue her education, eventually completing her Bachelor of Science degree in 1960 and then a Master of Science in Public Health Nursing in 1962, both from St John's University in Brooklyn, NY. Lester Wennlund suffered a number of chronic health problems, and died in 1962 of consequences of malaria acquired during his World War II service, leaving his wife with two young sons to raise.

Wennlund had worked in rehabilitation nursing and a children's hospital. She wanted more career mobility than hospital nursing could provide, so she sought a position as a public health nurse. For ten years, she worked as a visiting nurse and then supervisor in Hempstead Long Island, with the Nassau County, New York, Health Department. In addition to her public health duties, she was recruited in 1967 to teach school and occupational health nursing at Adelphi University. She continued teaching until she moved to Florida in 1970 (Florida Public Health Association, 1979).

Wennlund was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1969 and underwent treatment. Her recovery period was long and difficult. A friend invited her to visit Florida for a rest. She did, and found that the warm climate improved her physical well-being.

Career in Florida 1970-1989

Wennlund originally came to Florida with a plan to teach at the new University of South Florida school of nursing. However, shortly after her move she was contacted by Sadie Reading, an assistant administrator the newly formed Division of Health within the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS).

Wennlund was recruited and became one of the first of a newly created job description: Public Health Nursing Consultant.

She started in school health nursing. Wennlund conducted a survey of each county health department to determine the level of school health services. She then established a nursing advisory committee on school health. She created and implemented model standards for nursing services for school-aged children. She conducted workshops throughout the state to ensure implementation of these standards (Donovan, 1987).

She served in this capacity as a consultant for the southwest Florida area as her leadership skills increasingly became apparent. In 1974, she relocated to Jacksonville after being selected as the state nursing director, at that time titled Public Health Nursing Program Supervisor, for the Division of Health, within HRS.

The totality of public health nursing leadership in Florida up until this time was comprised of very few women. Ruth Mettinger, the first nursing director, had an almost unbelievably long service to the state from 1934-1963. Sadie Reading, who had served as acting nursing director after Enid Mathison (1963-1970) retired and again after Dr. Jane Wilcox (1970-1974) resigned, did not want the top job (Wennlund, 1992). It was left to Wennlund to take up the charge.

The beginning of Wennlund's tenure in the state public health office coincided with that of Dr. E. Charlton "Skeeter" Prather as the new state health officer. New leaders were needed for a changing department. As a result of a 1969 revision to the state constitution, the State Board of Health had just been abolished. The state legislature placed the Board of Health and two dozen other health and social services agencies under a new agency, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). The Board of Health became one of many divisions of the new agency (Bigler, 1989).

As a part of this change, State Health Officer Dr. Wilson Sowder was relieved of his authority, but he remained with the new agency until his retirement in 1974. An editorial in an Ocala paper from June 23, 1969 reflecting on this overhaul was titled "Board of Health is Dead". These actions occurred under the leadership of the first republican governor of Florida in 90 years, Claude Kirk. Kirk served from 1967 to 1971 when he lost his re-election bid.

In 1974, the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services was given \$300,000 to assess needs for a minimum public health program. Shortly after this, in 1975, the "HRS Reorganization Act" was enacted to decentralize and unify health and social services. This again caused massive restructuring of these agencies into eleven district and three central offices. In 1976, HRS moved the Health Program Office staff from Jacksonville, site of the original Board of Health building and central management team, to Tallahassee. Many long term employees retired or resigned to avoid relocating, causing further turmoil in the agency (Wennlund, 1992).

Wennlund came on board just as these changes were beginning. She had the task of dealing with a professional nursing staff undergoing multiple types of restructuring, and the recent loss of a doctorally prepared nurse, Jane Wilcox, who was their leader and role model. Wilcox had apparently left for reasons related to loss of control within the new structure, and the reduction in the requirements for educational preparation of public health nurses. In looking back on her early experiences in HRS, Wennlund later said, "The wheels of reorganization moved slowly but inexorably toward the total bureaucratization of public health. There were multiple layers of accountability and barriers placed between the expertise at the state level and the service delivery system. Communication was regimented and convoluted." (Wennlund, 1992).

Wennlund's work extended to the national and international levels. She traveled to the Soviet Union, Italy, Asia, and South America to study public health nursing practice. She was appointed to an American Public Health Association ad hoc committee to study the implementation of capitated reimbursement rates for nursing services. She met with providers and the American Nurses Association staff in Washington, DC to investigate methods to achieve this.

Other important contributions included the design of a curriculum for nurses and social workers for conducting genetic screenings, initiation of a program for preventive health services for the elderly, rules for licensure of home health agencies, and the organization of an annual Education/Service forum to bring educators and community health nurses together for mutual benefit. Wennlund did pioneering work in the development of a nursing information system, a prototype for a later management information system.

Wennlund re-established the baccalaureate degree as the minimum qualification for community health nurses. However, barriers such as pay scales have not always made this standard feasible. Equally importantly, Wennlund was outspoken in ensuring the positioning of public health nursing within the public health power structure in a way that nurses continued to be involved in establishing health policy. She worked directly with state legislators to advocate for nursing issues, providing testimony to the Florida Senate Committee on Health and Rehabilitation Services on a variety of topics. She also testified before the U.S. Senate subcommittees on alternatives to nursing home care. In 1979, Wennlund wrote to then-Senator Lawton Chiles about her opinions on creating a separate, Cabinet-level Department of Education at the national level. Wennlund and Chiles exchanged detailed letters discussing the benefits and drawbacks of this addition to the bureaucratic structure (Chiles, 1979).

After her many years of distinguished service, Wennlund's retirement was met with disappointment but gratitude from state public health leaders was the recipient of numerous awards and honors. Deputy Secretary for Health and State Health Officer Charles Mahan wrote, "Even though you have received many national and state honors for your work, I hope you realize the deep appreciation your immediate colleagues have for you" (Mahan, 1989). During her career, Wennlund received the Meritorious Service Award from the Florida Public Health Association (Florida Public Health Association, 1979). She was also inducted into the National honor Society for Public Affairs and Administration, Pi Alpha Alpha. Finally on October 20, 1987, she was the recipient of the Ruth B. Freeman Distinguished Career Award from the American Public Health Association (American Public Health Association, 1987).

Retirement Years

Wennlund has stayed active in her church and in writing projects. She has long enjoyed her work as an author, and composed a number of position papers and policy statements during her tenure in the public health system. After her retirement, she authored a monograph, "Memories of a Nurse in the Army" that recounts her exploits during World War II. This story was featured in a Community News Publications article in 2007 (Nakamine, 2007).

In 1992, she self published "Annals of Public Health Nursing in Florida", an extensive monograph that is often cited by those exploring Florida public health history. Wennlund took the book to a publisher but it was rejected, she recounted that it was turned down because she had already distributed numerous copies at nursing meetings.

In citing some of the key differences between public health nurses then and now, Wennlund noted that the requirement for uniforms for public health nurses has ended, and home visits are infrequently made under

the current system. Wennlund recalled that at the time of her retirement, there was a public health nurse consultant located in each district, rather than at the central office in Tallahassee. Wennlund remained an advocate of staying close to patients, saying, “stay in touch with the public, don’t stay in the office and don’t give up home visits”.

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