

The Proposed "Nurse Draft" Legislation

Hearings before the House Military Affairs Committee

HEARINGS on the May bill (HR 1284) were held before the Military Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, February 6 through 9 (during which the Army announced the new quota of 60,000 for the Nurse Corps) and on February 13 and 14. This bill, introduced in January by Representative May of Kentucky, Chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee, would extend the Selective Service Act to include registered nurses.

Representative R. Ewing Thomason, Texas, presided during the first week; Representative May during the last two days. Testimony was presented by representatives of the War Department, Army Nurse Corps, United States Public Health Service, the Navy, the Veterans Administration, the Procurement and Assignment Service; American Red Cross; American Hospital Association; the three national nursing organizations, the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, and the National Nursing Council for War Service. Mrs. Edith Nourse Rogers, who is sponsoring a bill to create a Nurse Corps in the Veterans Administration, testified as did representatives of several women's organizations and other individuals.

Surgeon General Thomas Parran, USPHS, and Dr. Donald Smelzer, President of the American Hospital Association, made a special point of the need to safeguard civilian nursing services. Said Dr. Parran,

"The major civilian health problems are still ahead of us. We shall see the cumulative effects of fatigue, long hours of work, worry, anxiety, and grief."

Dr. Harvey B. Stone, Vice-chairman, Directing Board, Procurement and Assignment Service, War Manpower Commission, and Dr. Paul Barton, Executive Officer of the Service, both testified. Describing the work of P&AS committees, Dr. Stone urged that:

"If there is to be a draft, some service should be charged with the civilian responsibility and that service should be one which is familiar with the nursing profession and the relative importance of positions. . . ."

The testimony of Virginia Dunbar, American Red Cross, was factual since the American Red Cross takes no position on the proposed bill. About 10,000 applications were received January 6-27, about half of them in the first week after the President's message on January 6. Ordinarily, 68 per cent of applications may result in assignments, Miss Dunbar said, but many "unpredictables" in the present situation may make usual percentages inapplicable. Between Pearl Harbor and December 31, 1944, the Red Cross certified 81,145 nurses—volunteer recruits—to the Army and Navy.

Two witnesses appeared for the Veterans Administration—Colonel George E. Ijams and Brigadier General Frank T. Hines. Both emphasized the extreme need of the Veterans Administration for nurses—1,000 nurses at once and 2,000 to 4,000 nurses and technicians within the next two or three years. They urged measures giving Veterans Administration nurses active service status—the Veterans Administration is losing about 100 nurses a month to the Army and Navy. Pay, status, and benefits are not at present as desirable for Veterans Administration nurses as for those in the armed services,

though the former are also caring for World War II wounded. The question of granting them commissions is now under consideration in another bill.

Katharine Densford, ANA President, testified for the American Nurses' Association; Anna D. Wolf and Sister Olivia Gowan for the National League of Nursing Education; Mabel K. Staupers for the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, and Stella Goostray for the National Nursing Council for War Service (very briefly; the Council had not been scheduled to testify since the American Nurses' Association is the member organization responsible for federal legislative activities of the nursing profession). The statements from the Men Nurses Section and NOPHN were presented for the record.

Basically, the position taken by the several nursing groups is identical (the total prepared statement made by Miss Densford for the ANA appears on pages 172-174), however there were different points of emphasis. The NLNE:

"Supports in principle a selective service act for women with a draft of nurses as a first step in order to meet military needs and a national service act to meet civilian needs."

The League fears that some schools of nursing may be forced to close because of inability to secure essential instructors and believes a selective service of nurses is necessary to provide for their equitable distribution as between civilian and military. Its representatives expressed the belief that to amend the Bolton Act to make possible the drafting of cadets would not secure the numbers needed for military service and would reduce admissions and enrolments.

While the position of the American Nurses' Association is likewise that it would accept a draft of nurses only as a first step in selective service for all women and supplemented by a national service act in order to stabilize civilian nursing services, Miss Densford stated her belief that, *given authority, funds, personnel, and an adequate public information program, the voluntary recruitment could produce the nurses needed, but only if the four conditions stated were met.*

Strong testimony in support of a draft was offered by Robert P. Patterson, Under Secretary of War, who stated that "voluntary recruiting cannot be relied on to make good the shortage in time." On the constitutionality of the proposed bill, Mr. Patterson stated that "the Constitution gives the Congress power to raise and support armies. Army nurses are part of the Army."

In the later hearings the point was repeatedly made that HR1284 as now written provides for the deferment of nurses in essential civilian positions.

The final witness was Major Edna B. Groppe, Chief, Nursing Branch, Military Personnel Division, Office of the Surgeon General. (See page 175.)

[As we go to press, word comes that the amended May bill has been renumbered HR 2277, dated February 20, 1945. Comments on the amended bill and copies of it were mailed by the American Nurses' Association Headquarters office to all state nurses associations on February 23, 1945. See also page 240. — EDITOR.]