

Cadet Corps Seeks Congressional Recognition

World War II nurses petition Congress for veterans' benefits, honors.



▲ A World War II recruitment poster.

Members of the Cadet Nurse Corps of World War II are looking for recognition—almost 60 years after the fact.

If Ruth Sartori, EdM, RN, CSN, and her colleagues have their way, a bill before Congress will become law and extend veterans' benefits to thousands of women who served stateside in the Cadet Nurse Corps during World War II. More important, Sartori says, the law would honor those who served but who received no official recognition.

"We want to let the world know that we were contributing to our country in World War II," says Sartori, 78, a retired school nurse who helps coordinate the movement. "During the war, there was a critical shortage of nursing—even worse than now."

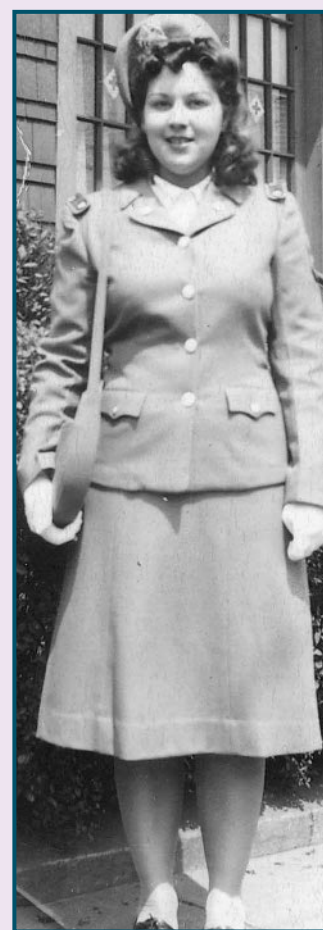
The Cadet Nurse Corps was created in 1943 to fill the gap left by experienced nurses recruited for overseas service. Nearly 124,000 young women signed up for the scholarship program and served for the remainder of the war in hospitals nationwide (see *They Also Served*, page 131). "Many girls entered the corps and, without them, these hospitals would have shut down," Sartori says.

She and her colleagues feel entitled to the same benefits enjoyed by other veterans and wartime nurses, such as the Women's Army Corps, since the Cadet Nurse Corps was part of the United States Public Health Service.

"We wore military-type uniforms and the insignia of the Commissioned Corps of the Public Health Service, which Truman declared to be a branch of the military on June 21, 1945," Sartori says. "It said that anyone in the commissioned corps would get veterans' benefits." Sartori says that extending these benefits would be an official recognition long overdue. "We took care of veterans' wives and families and shipyard workers who were injured on the job," Sartori adds.

First introduced to the 105th

Congress by Representative Nita M. Lowey (D-NY) in 1997, the bill never made it out of committee. Lowey and Representative James L. Oberstar (D-MN) reintroduced the bill in 1999, but again it died in committee. Although the bill never made it to



▲ Ruth Sartori, cadet nurse, in the 1940s.

They Also Served

The Cadet Nurse Corps: nurses who stayed stateside in World War II.



▲ Two of the 124,000 students recruited during World War II.

the House floor a third time in 2002 during the 107th Congress, the bill has gained momentum for this year's Congress.

On January 29, the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps Equity Act of 2003, HR 476, was introduced in the House.

Finding nurses who can become politically involved has not been easy. Sartori requested attendees' names from a 50th anniversary Cadet Nurse Corps celebration in 1994 but was told the information had been lost. She

finally got 700 names from the Women's Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, which documents the contributions of women during wartime. Sartori sent form letters to about 10 cadets who helped her get the word out to the hundreds of others. The grassroots campaign has steadily picked up steam in two years.

For Sartori, this is only a recent call to duty. Now that the cadets are well into their 70s and 80s, she says there's a sense of urgency about it, though for

When 250,000 nurses, about 20% of the nursing workforce, were recruited for military duty in 1943, the U.S. Public Health Service sought to fill the void they left by creating the Victory Nurse Corps, later the Cadet Nurse Corps. The Bolton Act (named after Ohio Representative Frances Payne Bolton, who introduced the bill) funded a huge campaign to recruit about 124,000 nursing students by 1948 from high schools and colleges around the country.

The nurses-to-be received free tuition, books, and uniforms, as well as a monthly stipend, at state-accredited schools that had accelerated their programs of study. In exchange, the students would serve as military or civilian nurses for the war's duration. Senior cadets completed residencies at school hospitals or at state, federal, military, or public hospitals or clinics. Nurses enrolled before the war's end in 1945 were allowed to finish their studies; the scholarship program ended in 1948.

The program offered thousands of young women a once-in-a-lifetime chance to earn college degrees. Students followed a strict regimen that involved wearing military-style uniforms, adhering to curfews in dormlike settings (usually in sections of hospitals converted into living quarters), and submitting to bed checks by strict housemothers. Cadets were forbidden to marry until graduation.

Created to ease the nursing shortage, the Cadet Nurse Corps had the unintended effect of upgrading nursing schools nationwide. And it can serve as a model now to those seeking resolution to a similar nursing crisis; the Nurse Reinvestment Act, signed into law on August 1, offers incentives for nursing recruitment including loan reimbursements and increased career options.

many nurses, Sartori included, the financial motive isn't primary. "I would like everyone in future generations to be aware of our contribution," Sartori says.

For more information, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Sartori at 196 Leonia Avenue, Leonia, NJ 07605-1639, or call her at (201) 944-8923.—David Belcher, associate editor ▼



▲ Ruth Sartori poses with memorabilia. "We want to let the world know that we were contributing to our country in World War II," she says.