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FEDERAL ELECTION

Nurses vow to turn up heat

Health care will be central issue

A national nurses union is gearing up for the federal election by training members to spread the message about health care and push campaigning politicians to make it a priority — or risk losing votes.

Linda Silas, president of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, said Thursday that for the first time the group is educating hundreds of members about certain health issues so they can talk with co-workers, neighbours and political candidates.

“Now we’re taking a stand — we’re telling you we need to act and act fast,” she said at a conference in Halifax.

“Nurses are very particular that they want their union to remain non-partisan . . . now our members have accepted (that) we will lose our Canadian health-care system.”

Silas said many of the 1,000 nurses at the gathering this week are being trained to discuss the unions’ priorities ahead of the federal election this fall.

That includes health care financing, a national prescription drug care program and safe care for seniors.

She said she’s not asking nurses to support a particular political party, but to elevate health care as a central campaign issue by questioning candidates on whether they support their concerns.

If not, Silas says the 200,000 members should look elsewhere politically.

“If they don’t commit to concrete action, they’re not getting our support and we will publicly denounce them,” she said.

The federation is also for the first time planning to apply for third-party status, which will allow it to run ads throughout the campaign.

She said they will use social media and ads to spread the message about reductions in federal health-care funding.

Janet Hazelton, president of the Nova Scotia Nurses’ Union, said it’s a different approach for nurses who tend not to align with a particular political party.

But she said calls for Ottawa to restore funding and stop downloading responsibility for health care to the provinces are driving nurses to get involved.

“We’ve never done it before — this is a new game for us, but we have to,” she said. “We need nurses to start holding MPs or future MPs accountable.”