



CANADIAN FEDERATION  
OF NURSES UNIONS  
LA FÉDÉRATION CANADIENNE  
DES SYNDICATS D'INFIRMIÈRES  
ET INFIRMIERS

## **Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget**

**by:**

**The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions**  
***Toward a Healthy Recovery for Canada***

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. That the government invest in the building blocks of a healthy society, with targeted funding for the social determinants of health, including a living wage, pharmacare, housing, child care and essential services.**
- 2. That the government invest in long-term care to allow our seniors to live in dignity.**
- 3. That the government invest in healthy workplaces, a priority for all workers and employers.**
- 4. That the government invest in a climate health and just transition strategy for workers and communities, and accelerate the shift to a green economy.**

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) thanks the federal government for its invitation to contribute to the development of the 2021 Budget. It is our hope that our submission will help to inform the government's reflection on a healthy recovery for Canada in these uncertain times.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an unparalleled global crisis. Its profound impacts across geographic, demographic and economic lines have laid bare the shaky foundations of our system, which have been eroded by years of neglect and underinvestment in the most essential sectors of our economy, including health care.

The chilling unemployment figures reported in March and April brought into sharp focus the low wages and precarious work faced by too many Canadians. Equally alarming is the number of health care workers in Canada who have contracted COVID-19. Today, that figure stands at 21.5 percent.

As a nation, we must learn the lessons the pandemic has taught us about the importance of investing in crisis-proof systems that will help us weather the uncertainties of a rapidly changing world.

We must make different choices to prepare for a future that experts say is likely to include new pandemics, along with the challenges of an aging population and a shifting global economic landscape.

Canada's nurses propose the following recommendations for the 2021 Federal Budget to achieve a healthy recovery for our nation.

### **Investing in the building blocks of a healthy society**

To chart a course toward recovery post-COVID-19, Canada will have to make significant new investments in the basic building blocks of a healthy society, including making it possible for everyone to earn a living wage, and assuring access to quality health care, mental health supports and essential services.

Targeting federal funding toward these social determinants of health will help to ensure a high quality of life for present and future generations of Canadians.

Statistics Canada reported that in March and April, three million Canadian jobs were lost, leaving many across the country without coverage for prescription drugs. Even before the pandemic, a quarter of Canadian families couldn't afford life-saving medications. In a nation as wealthy as ours, that's simply unacceptable.

The real possibility of future pandemics poses a particularly grave risk to the many Canadians without drug coverage, as well as to our economy. A universal, single-payer pharmacare system is an investment in Canada's future and an effective bulwark against future disease outbreaks.

Similarly, we must begin to consider mental health within the framework of the determinants of health and recognize the impact of mental health challenges on individuals, families, workplaces and economies. Government must step up to increase access to mental health services across the country.

One of the key takeaways from the COVID-19 pandemic has been the lack of affordable quality child care options for families across the country.

The child care sector, staffed largely by women, has long been plagued by low wages and precarity. With a perennial lack of government investment, the cost of any improvements is directly passed on to already-strained families.

With so few affordable options, parents – mostly women – are forced to choose between quality child care and going to work.

All of these critical challenges demand that our governments invest in health care and essential public services to support families and communities and to set our country on a path to a healthy economic recovery.

The CFNU recommends that your government:

- Work closely with the provinces and territories to put into immediate action the recommendations of the government’s 2019 Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare, with the goal of establishing a universal single-payer pharmacare system with a full drug formulary by 2027.
- Protect our universal single-payer health care system from encroaching privatization.
- Implement binding nationwide regulations for water quality on First Nations reserves.
- Provide federal funding to build and upgrade water and wastewater infrastructure, and decontaminate source waters in Indigenous communities.
- Implement federal legislation guaranteeing the right to affordable housing for everyone in Canada.
- Introduce a \$15 per hour federal minimum wage standard.
- Work in partnership with provincial and territorial governments to fund and implement sustainable evidence-based mental health services and supports to respond to the increased demand for mental health care for all Canadians.
- Increase the federal government’s cash contribution to the provinces and territories by a minimum of \$277.5 million per year to improve timely access to mental health services for everyone.
- Provide an additional \$2 billion per year allocated toward a publicly funded child care system, in partnership with the provinces/territories and Indigenous governments.
- Establish a federal secretariat to lead and coordinate the government’s early learning and child care work, and adopt legislation (similar to the *Canada Health Act*) to set out principles,

conditions and accountability mechanisms for federal child care payments to provinces and territories.

### **Allowing our seniors to live in dignity**

Nurses and other health care workers have long called for government to intervene in Canada's broken long-term care system. Tragically, decades of neglect resulting in insufficient staffing and substandard conditions across the country led to seniors bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inadequate physical space and unsuitable layouts found in many existing long-term care facilities hindered infection prevention and control measures, which are essential to tackling infectious disease outbreaks.

The sector's largely female and racialized workforce has long been faced with the impossible challenge of providing quality care while contending with high resident-to-staff ratios, limited resources and few, if any, protections for their health, safety and jobs.

Your government should:

- Develop and enact federal legislation immediately to bring long-term care into the public health care system and regulate it under the *Canada Health Act*.
- Eliminate private, for-profit business from the long-term care sector.
- Work closely with provinces and territories to implement a national standard of 4.5 hours of direct care per resident each day in long-term care facilities to improve seniors' quality of life.
- Work with provinces and territories to introduce a mandated minimum of one registered nurse (RN) per shift (worked hours), with an increase in RN numbers as required by the acuity level of residents.
- Collaborate with provinces and territories to conduct a comprehensive analysis of critical health care infrastructure needs, and invest federal dollars to build and upgrade long-term care physical infrastructure.
- Implement best practices in health and safety for workers. Governments should work with employers to ensure that Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committees are functional and play a robust role in developing plans to protect health care workers.
- Collaborate with the provinces and territories to match wages and benefits for long-term care workers to the value of the work they perform, including providing supplementary funding to ensure full-time work at higher pay rates for long-term care workers.

## **Healthy workplaces – a priority for all workers and employers**

For years, experts have discussed how technology and artificial intelligence will shape the future of work. With the added dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic, this question has taken on greater urgency than ever.

What started for many as a few weeks of working from home has evolved into a catalyst for a seismic shift in how we work and live. Millions of Canadians have transitioned to remote work, while others who provide essential services have faced unforeseen new demand for their work during the pandemic.

More than ever, we have an obligation to build healthier workplaces, reform employment insurance provisions, and ensure that all workers in Canada have access to strong and effective occupational health and safety protections, including migrant workers and those who are faced with precarious and unsafe work.

We recommend that your government immediately take the following steps:

- Work in partnership with the provinces and territories to develop a nationwide health human resources strategy to respond meaningfully to the documented shortage of nurses and the crisis in long-term care.
- Develop reliable domestic production of personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers.
- Amend the *Public Health Agency of Canada Act* to require the Public Health Agency of Canada to adopt a precautionary approach to all worker safety guidance.
- Undertake significant overdue reforms to Employment Insurance by:
  - Waiving qualifying hours altogether for EI regular and sickness benefits. Alternatively, move to a uniform entrance requirement equal to the lesser of 300 hours or 12 weeks of insurable employment.
  - Increasing the duration of benefits to 50 weeks for all claimants.
  - Disregarding earnings paid by reason of a lay-off or separation.
  - Disregarding complicating reasons for separation, since the vast majority of claims with complicating reasons result in eligibility for benefits.
  - Ensuring a minimum benefit in the transition period.
  - Introducing a pilot to allow claimants to enroll in educational programs.
  - Enacting a federal policy of ten days paid sick leave for workers and facilitating the implementation of similar measures at the provincial/territorial level.

## Climate Health and Just Transition

Canada's future health and economy rely on our natural environment. We are privileged to live on land that is rich with natural resources, but human activities – including polluting commercial practices, deforestation and poor management of wildlife – pose a serious threat to these resources as well as our health.

Over 60% of emerging infectious diseases originate from animals, particularly from wildlife. We must lessen our footprint on the environment to reduce the risk of future pandemics.

To mitigate the damage caused to our environment by human pressures and build climate-resilient communities, Canada must greatly speed up its plans to phase out fossil fuel-based energy systems.

The IPCC's sobering 2018 report on global warming of 1.5°C makes it clear that our window to prevent catastrophic events is closing fast. Our communities are feeling the impacts of climate change, and we are lagging in fulfilling our international commitments.

The massive changes required to shift our infrastructure and technology to a green economy would result in profound impacts on energy sector workers, their families and communities. The only way to respond meaningfully to these significant challenges is by accelerating current mitigation plans.

Labour unions have long called for the rapid implementation of a just transition strategy, and we stand ready to collaborate with government to help minimize the impacts of climate change and climate policies on fossil fuel workers, their communities and our economy.

Canada's approach to climate health and just transition should include:

- An acceleration of the implementation of climate change policies and greenhouse gas emissions targets in keeping with our international commitments.
- A pledge to ensure that any costs of our transition to a low-carbon economy are not unfairly borne by workers.
- The immediate implementation of your government's 2019 report by the Task Force on Just Transition for Canadian Coal Power Workers and Communities.
- A commitment to include governments, workers, labour unions and industry in the development of appropriate just transition plans.
- Targeted federal funding for the greening of health care facilities, as the health care sector is a significant generator of pollution and waste.

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The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions thanks the federal government for its invitation to assist in the development of the 2021 Federal Budget to respond meaningfully to the challenges our country faces as we head into the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that the substantive recommendations brought forward in this submission will be carefully considered and implemented.