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**Standing Committee on Finance**

**Written Submission**

**for the Pre-Budget Consultations**

**in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget**

**By the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions**

**October 2022**

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **That the government provide immediate funding for proven retention, return and recruitment initiatives backed by firm timelines and accountability, including:**
   * **addressing excessive workloads;**
   * **creating and supporting more nursing seats;**
   * **new bridging and mentorship programs;**
   * **support for internationally educated nurses (IENs);**
   * **creating attractive new full-time nursing positions; and**
   * **immediate and ongoing support for mental health programs geared toward nurses, including internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy.**
2. **That the government introduce patient care and safety legislation that enshrines mandated nurse-to-patient ratios across the country.**
3. **That the government introduce a new tax credit for nurses who maintain their readiness to return to the workforce.**
4. **That the government establish a national health workforce body to improve decision-making, with better data to facilitate ongoing pan-Canadian coordination – backed by the tools and investments needed to support health workforce planning in all our communities.**

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) is Canada’s largest nurses’ organization, advocating on key health priorities and federal engagement in public health care.

We thank the Finance Committee for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the 2023 Budget.

Canada’s nurses are facing a dire daily reality. A shortage of nurses and other health workers is pushing our health care to the brink. Patient care services are being reduced or closed in communities across the country, threatening the sustainability of our cherished public health care system.

While Budget 2022 focused on economic recovery by providing supports for the skilled trades, the 2023 Budget represents an opportunity for the federal government to assist Canadians in hard economic times and meaningfully address the health care crisis by investing in retaining, returning, and recruiting nurses to grow the number of nurses in the profession. Years of underinvestment and privatization have led to catastrophic gaps in staffing, funding and care that demand the Government of Canada’s immediate intervention.

The health workforce accounts for more than 10% of all employed Canadians and makes up nearly 8% of Canada’s total GDP.

Nurses are the largest group of regulated health professionals in Canada, representing about half of the total health workforce. Our 448,000 nurses – 1 in 2 of whom report wanting to change jobs or leave nursing altogether – are also responsible for most of the direct care provided in Canada’s health system.

Nurses and other health care workers are looking to all levels of government to take urgent action to build a robust health care system and a thriving workforce able to deliver care for patients and keep Canadians healthy. Below are the CFNU’s priorities for the 2023 Budget.

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**Canada’s nurses have a clear message for our leaders: our public health care systems are in crisis. At the heart of this crisis is a dire shortage of nurses and other health professionals.**

The effects are being felt by health workers and the people they care for in every community across Canada. We’ve already seen hospitals forced to cut services or shut down entirely because of critical shortages of nurses and doctors.

We didn’t get here by accident. This crisis follows years of underinvestment, inadequate planning and weakened regulation.

With stress and exhaustion at critical levels before COVID-19, 94% of nurses now report experiencing symptoms of burnout[[1]](#footnote-1) after over two years on the front lines of the pandemic.

Nurses are leaving the profession and the health care sector in record numbers. Fewer nurses working in the public health system directly impacts patient safety and erodes our ability to provide the high quality of care that everyone in Canada deserves.

Asking nurses to work even harder – taking on more shifts and more overtime – is not a solution. We need lasting, concrete solutions to prevent the collapse of our health care system.

Investing in the future of health care requires a pan-Canadian retention, return and recruitment action plan that responds to the current and future needs of our aging population and ensures the well‑being and sustainability of our health workforce for years to come.

It means collecting and sharing better data so we can predict future needs and develop evidence-based strategies to address the health care challenges facing communities.

And it means working together on solutions to ensure that our public health care system will be there for future generations of Canadians.

Earlier this year, at a series of roundtables and a symposium hosted by Health Canada, stakeholders were united in proposing key recommendations, including nationally-coordinated retention, return and recruitment of health care workers, a renewed focus on the mental health and well-being of the health care workforce, and the need for enhanced data to support effective workforce planning and management.

Canada’s nurses are eager to work with federal, provincial, and territorial governments on our proposals to invest in solutions to the human health resource crisis. Increased health care spending must include provincial and territorial accountability for improving health outcomes for patients while better supporting nurses and other health care workers. We look to leaders at all levels throughout Canada to work with us to deliver solutions to this crisis.

The CFNU was honoured to join premiers from across the country at the Council of the Federation meeting in July 2022, and we echo their urgent call for the federal government to boost health care spending and discuss solutions to the health workforce crisis with the provinces and territories.

**KEY FACTS**

**The Nursing Shortage: Canada’s Health Care Disaster**

* Statistics Canada’s July 2022 *Labour Force Survey* revealed that the proportion of nurses working paid overtime was at its highest level for the month of July since comparable data first become available in 1997.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* In a 2021 survey[[3]](#footnote-3), 83% of respondents believed their institution’s core health care staff was insufficient to meet patient needs.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* Across Canada, health care facilities are experiencing a severe shortage of nurses and are increasingly relying on agency nurses to fill gaps in our overburdened health care system. This affects the continuity of care that patients and residents receive, and represents a significant loss of funding that could be better invested in strengthening Canada’s public health care system.
* Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of vacancies in the health care and social assistance sector has reached over 118,000 as of the third quarter of 2021. Close to 34,000 of these postings were for nurses, and many remained unfilled for more than 90 days.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* In many jurisdictions, overtime is both routine and mandatory, with shifts of 24 hours a common occurrence. Across Canada, millions of hours of overtime have been incurred – many unpaid.

**Impacts on Quality of Care: Patient Care and Safety**

* High levels of burnout even before the pandemic highlight the longstanding issues with nurses’ working conditions, with prolonged stress and heavy workloads the norm across Canada. These impossible conditions led to worsening mental health symptoms during the pandemic and are directly impacting the care provided.
* Two in three nurses said the quality of health care has deteriorated in the last year. One in four nurses give patient safety at their workplace a poor or failing grade.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* Safe, high-quality care for patients is inextricably linked to safe nurse-patient ratios and high‑quality work environments for health workers.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* Canada needs federal patient care and safety legislation with mandated nurse-patient ratios.

**Mental Health: A Profession in Crisis**

* The 2019 CFNU-University of Regina [report](https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OSI-REPORT_final.pdf) on nurses’ mental health was based on a survey of over 7,000 nurses, revealing rates of mental health disorder symptoms similar to public safety personnel. Almost half (47.9%) of participants screened positive for a mental disorder.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* During the pandemic, another pan-Canadian CFNU [survey](https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Viewpoints_Survey_Results_2022_January_EN_FINAL-1.pdf) revealed that the deterioration in nurses’ mental health has continued. Two thirds of nurses said their mental health was worse when compared to one year ago, and their level of stress at work due to the pandemic is high or very high.[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Since 2019, the proportion of nurses reporting clinical levels of severe burnout has increased from 29%[[10]](#footnote-10) to 45%[[11]](#footnote-11).

**The Future of Nursing: Retirements and Resignations**

* A January 2022 Conference Board of Canada report revealed that Canada could lose about 20% of all its health care workers to retirement between 2021 and 2026.[[12]](#footnote-12)
* A CFNU [survey](https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Viewpoints_Survey_Results_2022_January_EN_FINAL-1.pdf) in late 2021 found that more than half of all nurses are considering leaving their current position in the next year.[[13]](#footnote-13)

**SHORT-TERM ACTION**

* **Emphasize retention and return**, including through an expert taskforce, incentives to rehire retired nurses, new opportunities for late-career nurses to remain in the health care system, and continuing education programs.
* **Invest in recruitment and orientation** by providing new funding to the provinces and territories to boost nursing seats and provide new nursing graduates with full-time permanent jobs. Enable employers to offer six-month to one-year paid orientation and preceptorship programs to new graduates to facilitate their successful integration into the workplace.
* **Provide funding toward new assistance programs**, including for personal support workers (PSWs) and nurses in long‑term care, bridging and laddered credentialing programs for PSWs, LPNs and RNs to increase the nursing skill mix and provide greater access to primary care, continuing education programs for nurses to upgrade skills within their designation, debt forgiveness, and tuition assistance for nursing students to help fill positions in rural and remote regions. Similar programs should be offered for internationally educated nurses and Indigenous students who aspire to a career in health care.
* **Provide funding to the provinces and territories for the establishment of apprenticeship pilot programs** for nurses and other health care workers that are similar to existing programs for skilled trades, thus enabling health care workers to learn on the job while earning an income during their studies. A tiered-pathways approach through modular education and laddered credentialing would provide students the option to graduate into the workforce at various stages of training.
* **Establish a new tax credit** modeled on the Volunteer Firefighter Tax Credit for retired nurses who are providing services, including responding to and being on call for nursing and related emergency calls as a nurse and taking part in training to maintain their readiness to return to the workforce.
* **Provide sustained funding for existing virtual mental health programs** targeted at health care workers through Wellness Together Canada, and expand these programs to increase access.
* **Funding for the expansion of internet-delivered cognitive behavioural therapy for nurses suffering from clinical levels of severe burnout,** based on existing services currently provided to public safety personnel.
* **Targeted new investments to facilitate the hiring of support staff** to ensure that care teams can focus on care duties, not administrative tasks.

**MID- TO LONG-TERM ACTION**

* **Establish a dedicated coordinating body to address critical health workforce data gaps**. This body should collect and coordinate health workforce data and analysis across workers, sectors and jurisdictions to allow for customized planning at the provincial, territorial, regional and training program level. The development of these strategies should be based on leading international practices.

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The CFNU hopes the Standing Committee on Finance includes bold action to preserve Canada’s health care system in its Budget 2023 recommendations. Canada’s nurses are committed to working with all levels of government to find and implement solutions to these critical challenges.

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12. Conference Board of Canada. (2022, January). https://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=11445 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. CFNU. (2022, January). Viewpoints Research Survey Results Summary. https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Viewpoints\_Survey\_Results\_2022\_January\_EN\_FINAL-1.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-13)