



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

## POSITION STATEMENT

### Canada's Nurses and Climate Change

October 2022

#### BACKGROUND

In May 2009, the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* published a report on climate change and health, authored by a collaboration of dozens of experts from around the world, identifying climate change as “the greatest health threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>1</sup> Six years later, a second report published in *The Lancet* warned that climate change threatens half a century of progress made in global health.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the report found that effectively tackling climate change presents the greatest opportunity for improving peoples’ health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations’ body responsible for convening the world’s leading scientists and researchers on the issue to report on the status of climate change, reported in 2018 that the global community has until 2030 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% below 2010 levels. Failing to achieve that target will bring average temperatures up by over 1.5 degrees Celsius – as compared to global average temperatures before the Industrial Revolution – which is the upper limit to stave off some of the worst impacts of climate change.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2019, a report released by Environment and Climate Change Canada noted that warming in Canada is roughly double the magnitude of warming globally. For Northern Canada, it has warmed to-date and will continue to warm at more than double the rate globally.<sup>4</sup> Within that context, Canada’s nurses are confronted with a colossal threat to human health here at home. Extreme weather events such as wildfires, floods and heat waves have already been occurring with higher frequency and greater severity across the country, causing serious health repercussions.

The innumerable adverse health effects that will continue to rise in Canada as a result of climate change include but are not limited to the following: higher rates of heatstroke and stress; mental distress and post-traumatic stress symptoms from displacement due to floods and wildfires; cardiorespiratory distress from wildfire-caused air pollution; increased allergens from more intense and prolonged pollen seasons, exacerbating asthma sufferers’ symptoms; and increased incidents of vector-borne illnesses such as Lyme disease and West Nile virus.<sup>5</sup>

In response to these mounting health impacts for people living in Canada, the CFNU commissioned a discussion paper on climate change and health, and its relationship to Canada's nurses, entitled *Climate Change and Health: It's Time for Nurses to Act*. The goal of the paper was to spur further discussion and action among Canada's nurses on this issue. Shortly after the paper's release, over 900 nurse delegates to CFNU's 2019 biennial convention voted unanimously for the CFNU and its Member Organizations to push for strong action on climate change.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, the CFNU has raised awareness about climate change and health among our members and mobilized members towards engaging in the climate action movement, including through the Global Climate Strike in 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The CFNU also helped to initiate and has signed onto numerous statements and joint letters with allies in the health care sector, who seek to deepen Canada's commitment to mitigating and adapting to climate change within our health care systems and beyond. We helped to influence Canada's decision to sign onto the World Health Organization's COP26 initiative on climate-resilient, low-carbon, sustainable health systems.<sup>8</sup>

## CFNU POSITION

The CFNU believes that:

- Considering the high emissions stemming from the Canadian health care sector,<sup>9</sup> nurses are in a position to be leaders on climate action within their workplaces through joining or starting a workplace environment committee, otherwise known as a "green team" or "green committee." Initiatives of these groups include but are not limited to green procurement policies, changes in delivering high greenhouse gas-emitting anesthetics in the operating room, cycling- and transit-friendly infrastructure, reusing and recycling programs, and increased locally sourced and plant-based menu items.
- However, in the context of a prolonged nursing shortage crisis and punishing workloads across the health care sector, pursuing climate action in the workplace through volunteer commitments may be unrealistic for a great number of nurses. The administrators of health care facilities should be strongly encouraged by workers – including nurses of all designations – to establish the best practices available in mitigating against and adapting to climate change. Benchmarking tools such as the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care's *Green Hospital Scorecard* should be used as a helpful guide in workplace-centered climate action.
- Nurses should be leaders in raising awareness about the health impacts of climate change in conversations with their colleagues, patients and the broader public.
- Nurses' unions and their members should join with the CFNU to lobby government on responding to the health impacts of climate change, and the necessity to take bold action to mitigate against and adapt to climate change through a just transition.
- Canada must meet its commitments under the Paris Agreement to keep warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The federal government has a responsibility to ensure that Canada does its part within the international community, including through ensuring a just transition for workers.

- The federal, provincial and territorial governments must provide necessary resources to educate the public about the health impacts of climate change, and the necessary training and upgrades of health care workers and facilities – respectively – to adapt to its effects. The CFNU seeks to support and work with governments on fulfilling the federal commitment to climate-resilient, low-carbon, sustainable health systems. Nurses should unite with the broader, cross-sectoral movement for climate action to ensure a just transition to a sustainable economy is pursued in a timely and socially responsible manner. Within a just transition, no workers from the high-emission industrial sectors should be left behind.
- With a rise in the adverse health effects from climate change, staffing shortages will become even more apparent. There must be an increase in health human resources that corresponds with the climate change-related increase in demand for care.

We will work alongside organizations, including the Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment (CANE), the Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care, the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), on raising public awareness of the health impacts on climate change and advocating for large-scale action to mitigate against and adapt to climate change. Lastly, as individuals and in our communities, we have a moral responsibility to make a difference. It will take a truly collective effort to overcome the climate crisis, meaning that both micro-level and macro-level action will be required.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(09\)60935-1.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(09)60935-1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60854-6.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(15)60854-6.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://changingclimate.ca/CCCR2019/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CFNU\\_climatechange-web.pdf](https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CFNU_climatechange-web.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://nursesunions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ENG-Convention-Tab-9.pdf>, p. 194

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/CFNU/status/1177633140094963712>,

<https://twitter.com/CFNU/status/1177658417441325056>

<sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/s\\_guilbeault/status/1458209336530964480](https://twitter.com/s_guilbeault/status/1458209336530964480)

<sup>9</sup> <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002623>