



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

## POSITION STATEMENT

### Agency Nurses

September 2022

#### BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

In Canada, decades of underinvestment, privatization and weakened regulation have led to catastrophic gaps in funding, staffing and the delivery of health care services.

Untenable working conditions, including unsafe staffing levels, mandated overtime and rampant violence, are driving an exodus from the nursing profession. 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.<sup>1</sup> A CFNU survey conducted in late 2021 confirmed this trend, with more than half of all respondents considering leaving their current position in the next year.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) notes that Ontario's ratio of registered nurses to population is the worst in Canada, and the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) estimates that the province's shortage of nurses now stands at close to 30,000.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with perennial shortfalls in funding along with the unprecedented challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the provinces and territories are increasingly relying on agency nurses to deliver care and fill gaps in our overburdened health care system.

All premiers are currently lobbying the federal government for billions more by increasing the federal share of health care spending through the Canada Health Transfer to the tune of an additional \$28 billion per year. With no obligation to invest these funds in strengthening public health care, the CFNU has significant concerns that the unchecked use of private nursing agencies will only grow.

This approach affects the continuity of care that patients and residents receive, and represents a loss of millions of dollars – funding that could be better invested in strengthening Canada's public health care system and improving patient safety.

Unfortunately, there is little publicly available data that reveals the extent of the use of agency nurses across Canada, though nurses report that the problem is both widespread and growing.

Adopted September 2022

Where data is available, it paints a stark and alarming picture. Canada's largest research and teaching hospital network, the University Health Network in Toronto, reports that for its last fiscal year ending in March 2022, it has already spent \$6.7 million on agency nurses. This figure represents a significant increase from 2018, when UHN spent \$1.035 million.<sup>4</sup>

## CFNU POSITION

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) recommends that:

- The federal government work with the provinces and territories to determine spending on agency nurses, including disclosure of total dollars spent, average pay rate, numbers utilized, changes in pay over the past five years, and how this data compares between health care sectors, including hospitals, long-term care and home care.
- The federal government work with the provinces and territories to investigate and determine the value Canadians are receiving for the monies spent on agency nurses.
- The federal government work with the provinces and territories to limit how much hospitals can spend on agency nurses.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, J., Florco, L., Thibault, T. (2022, January). Talent Trends: Languishing and the Great Attrition. Conference Board of Canada. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/product/talent-trends-languishing-and-the-great-attrition/>

<sup>2</sup> CFNU. (2022, January). Viewpoints Research Survey Results Summary. <https://nursesunions.ca/governments-need-to-act-now-nurses-are-hanging-on-by-a-thread/>

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Institute for Health Information. <https://www.cihi.ca/en/registered-nurses>

<sup>4</sup> *Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/investigations/2022/08/16/its-going-to-bankrupt-healthcare-spending-on-temp-agency-nurses-up-more-than-550-per-cent-since-pre-pandemic-at-one-toronto-hospital-network.html>