

Registered psychiatric nurses in Canada

Strengthening Canada's mental health nursing workforce



CANADIAN
FEDERATION
OF NURSES
UNIONS

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Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions

ABOUT THE CFNU

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) is Canada's largest nurses' organization representing frontline unionized nurses and nursing students in every sector of health care – from home care and LTC to community and acute care – and advocating on key priorities to strengthen public health care across the country. We are relentless advocates for the health and safety of our members and the patients that we care for from coast to coast to coast. Join us as we speak up for a stronger health care system and a better workplace for all nurses.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all the Inuit, Métis and First Nations Peoples that call this land home. The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions is located on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People. As settlers and visitors, we feel it's important to acknowledge the importance of these lands, which we each call home. We do this to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to improve relationships between nations, to work towards healing the wounds of colonialism, and to improve our own understanding of local Indigenous Peoples and their cultures.

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CFNU MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS





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Executive summary

Canada is experiencing unprecedented demand for mental health and addiction services while continuing to face significant human resource shortages. As governments seek innovative solutions to strengthen the nursing workforce, registered psychiatric nurses (RPNs) constitute an established highly specialized profession currently regulated in seven provinces — British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador — and three territories.

RPNs provide holistic, person-centered care that integrates mental, physical, emotional and developmental health. They work across acute care, community mental health, addictions, long-term care, corrections, emergency departments and outreach services, providing specialized care to individuals with complex mental health needs.

Although RPNs have been regulated in Western Canada for decades, opportunities remain to improve labour mobility, expand educational pathways and support legislative recognition in jurisdictions where psychiatric nursing is not yet recognized as a distinct regulated profession. Recent legislative developments in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador demonstrate growing national momentum toward broader recognition of psychiatric nursing. These provinces have legislation in place recognizing and protecting RPNs, signaling an important shift beyond Western Canada and providing a foundation for further regulatory development.

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) believes that strengthening recognition of RPNs across Canada represents an opportunity to improve access to specialized mental health care, enhance workforce mobility and better meet the evolving needs of patients in Canada.



Background

RPNs are a distinct regulated nursing profession with specialized education in psychiatric and mental health nursing. While sharing many foundational nursing competencies with registered nurses, psychiatric nursing education places additional emphasis on therapeutic relationships, mental health and addictions, psychosocial interventions, trauma-informed care, recovery-oriented practice, and the complex interaction between physical and mental health.

Across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, regulatory authorities consistently define psychiatric nursing as a holistic profession focused on promoting, restoring and maintaining mental health, recognizing that physical, emotional, developmental and social factors influence health and recovery.

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, nearly 7,000 RPNs are licensed across Canada, with approximately 5,900 providing direct patient care. The majority work full time in hospitals, community mental health services, addiction programs, long-term care, correctional facilities and private practices.

Although RPNs are recognized and regulated in several Canadian provinces, recognition remains inconsistent across Canada. Ontario, New Brunswick and Quebec have not yet established equivalent recognition, creating barriers to labour mobility for experienced RPNs despite nationally recognized competency and examination standards.



An established profession with national standards

One of the greatest strengths of psychiatric nursing in Canada is the consistency that already exists across Western jurisdictions. The current educational infrastructure is summarized below.

Province	Institution	Credential
Manitoba	Brandon University	Bachelor of Science in Psychiatric Nursing (BScPN) This program is also offered in Winnipeg through a collaborative partnership between Brandon University and the University of Winnipeg. However, the degree is still granted by Brandon University.
	Brandon University	Masters of Psychiatric Nursing (offered since 2011)
British Columbia	Douglas College	Bachelor of Science in Psychiatric Nursing
	Kwantlen Polytechnic University	Bachelor of Psychiatric Nursing
	Sternberg College	Regional Diploma in Psychiatric Nursing
Alberta	MacEwan University	Bachelor of Psychiatric Nursing (a 4-year degree or a 2.5-year diploma)
Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan Polytechnic	Bachelor of Psychiatric Nursing (suspended for the 2026-2027 academic year)
	Saskatchewan Polytechnic	Psychiatric Nursing Diploma

RPNs complete approved post-secondary psychiatric nursing programs that prepare graduates with specialized competencies in mental health assessment, therapeutic group facilitation, crisis intervention, addictions, recovery-oriented care and the delivery of psychotherapeutic interventions within their legislated scope of practice. These competencies reflect the unique role of RPNs in providing comprehensive evidence-informed mental health care across a range of clinical settings.

Graduates of these approved programs must successfully complete the Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada Examination and meet provincial regulatory requirements before entering practice. While this educational infrastructure has produced



a well-established psychiatric nursing workforce in Western Canada, the absence of comparable programs elsewhere in Canada — particularly where RPNs are now regulated, such as in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador — continues to limit workforce mobility and opportunities to expand access to specialized mental health nursing care.

While each Western province maintains its own regulatory authority, there is substantial alignment in education, competency expectations, professional standards and scope of practice. RPNs in each jurisdiction practice autonomously within their legislated scope while collaborating closely with physicians, nurse practitioners and other allied health professionals.

Numerous provinces, such as British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba, have also introduced advanced practice pathways that allow qualified RPNs to prescribe medications and order diagnostic tests after additional education, experience and regulatory approval, demonstrating the profession's continued evolution in response to changing health system needs.

Building Canada's mental health workforce

Mental health continues to represent one of Canada's fastest-growing health care priorities. As demand for services increases, so does the need for specialized mental health professionals capable of delivering comprehensive recovery-oriented care.

RPNs bring specialized expertise that complements the work of other nursing professionals.

Across western Canada, RPNs have become fully integrated into the broader nursing workforce. They are represented by established nursing unions, are often covered under the same collective agreements as those of registered nurses, and are employed throughout hospitals, correctional facilities and primary care settings.

This demonstrates that psychiatric nursing is not an emerging profession but rather a mature nursing discipline with decades of regulatory oversight and proven contributions to Canada's health care system.

Growing national momentum

Recent developments suggest that psychiatric nursing is gaining increasing attention beyond Western Canada.

Atlantic provinces, such as Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador, have legislation in place recognizing and protecting RPNs. While distinct regulatory colleges for RPNs exist in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, they do not exist in BC or in the Atlantic provinces, where RPNs are part of the same regulatory college as other regulated nurses. Ontario and New Brunswick continue to explore legislative recognition, while Quebec remains the notable outlier, with little movement toward recognizing or advancing RPNs as a distinct regulated profession.

These changes also create opportunities for governments to consider longer-term approaches to recognizing psychiatric nursing as a regulated profession and expanding educational opportunities to support future workforce needs.

At the same time, governments across Canada acknowledge the importance of improving access to mental health and addictions services. Recognizing and supporting psychiatric nursing aligns closely with these broader workforce planning objectives.

Opportunities for expansion

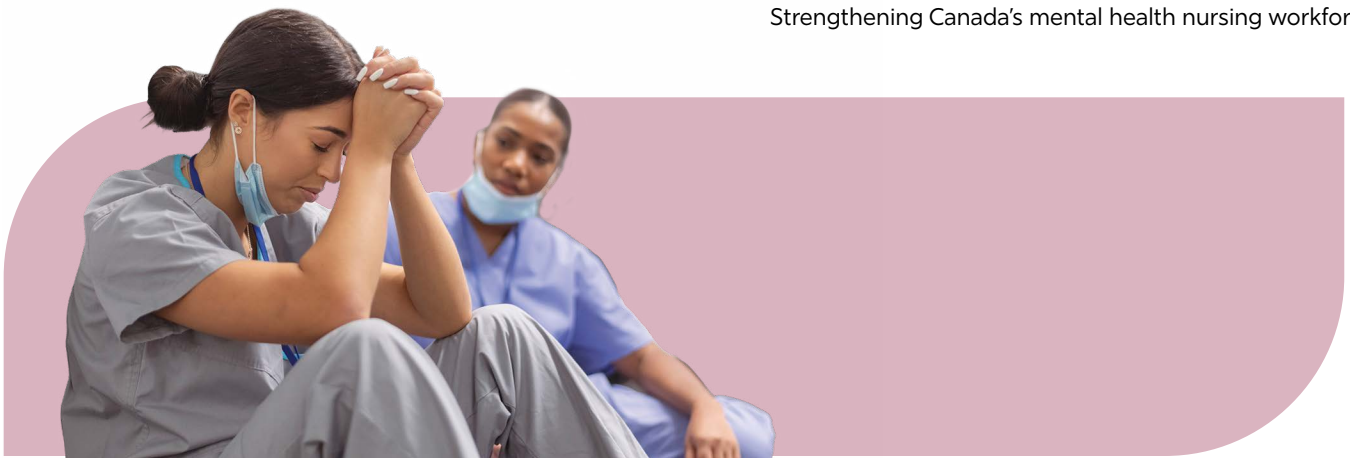
Building upon existing Western Canadian models presents several opportunities for governments, regulators, educators, employers and nursing organizations.

Expanding legislative recognition of RPNs would improve inter-provincial mobility while reducing unnecessary barriers for experienced Canadian nurses.

Supporting the creation and expansion of psychiatric nursing education programs would strengthen Canada's future mental health workforce while creating additional opportunities for students interested in specialized mental health practice.

Continued collaboration among nursing regulators, professional organizations, unions, educational institutions and governments could also support greater consistency in regulatory approaches, educational pathways and workforce planning across Canada.





Findings from CFNU's National Nurses Survey

Findings from CFNU's National Nurses Survey indicate that RPNs experience disproportionately high workplace violence and workforce pressures, compared with nurses overall. Statistically significant findings include:



96.9% of RPNs experienced verbal abuse in the past year, compared to 92.1% of total respondents.



73.5% of RPNs experienced physical violence in the past year, compared to 61.3% of total respondents.



52.5% of RPNs experienced sexual harassment in the past year, compared to 39.1% of total respondents.



25.8% of RPNs experienced online harassment in the past year, compared to 13.2% of total respondents.



54.7% of RPNs reported taking sick leave because they were unable to access vacation or other leave, compared to 32.3% of total respondents.

These findings reflect the demanding clinical environments in which many RPNs practice and underscore the importance of supporting and strengthening this specialized workforce.



CFNU policy direction and key recommendations

The recommendations outlined below align with the policy direction adopted by delegates at CFNU's Biennial Convention. In 2025, delegates passed resolutions calling for:

- The advancement of pan-Canadian recognition of RPNs through collaboration with nursing organizations, regulators and governments; and
- The exploration and expansion of psychiatric nursing education opportunities across Canada to strengthen the mental health nursing workforce.

The CFNU wants to work collaboratively with governments and stakeholders on the following recommendations.



Recommendation #1

Advancing pan-Canadian recognition of RPNs

Building on the experience of Western Canadian jurisdictions and recent developments in Atlantic Canada, provincial and territorial governments, regulators, educational institutions, employers and nursing organizations have an opportunity to strengthen Canada's psychiatric nursing workforce through the following actions.



Promote pan-Canadian recognition of RPNs

Provincial and territorial governments should collaborate with nursing unions, nursing regulators, employers and other key nursing stakeholders to recognize RPNs in provincial and territorial health professions legislation. Expanding legislative recognition would reduce barriers to employment, improve inter-provincial labour mobility and strengthen access to specialized mental health nursing care.



Build on emerging regulatory models

Governments and regulators should continue to monitor and evaluate recent developments in Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador to identify legislative and regulatory approaches that could inform broader implementation across Canada (feasibility study).



Promote national consistency in entry-to-practice standards

Governments, regulators and educational institutions should work collaboratively to support consistent education, registration and competency requirements for RPNs across Canada, including continued recognition of the Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada Examination as a common entry-to-practice standard.



Recommendation #2

Expand psychiatric nursing education across Canada



Assess opportunities for program extension

Federal and provincial governments, in collaboration with post-secondary institutions, nursing regulators, employers, nursing unions and professional organizations, should assess opportunities to establish and expand psychiatric nursing education programs in provinces and territories where they do not currently exist. Expanding educational pathways would help strengthen Canada's specialized mental health nursing workforce and improve access to care.



Address barriers to sustainable program development

Governments and educational institutions should collaborate to overcome barriers to program expansion, including faculty recruitment, clinical placement capacity, funding, bilingual education requirements and regulatory approval processes.



Strengthen national workforce planning

Federal, provincial and territorial governments should support workforce planning and research initiatives to better understand the current and future demand for RPNs and to inform decisions regarding education capacity, regulation and workforce distribution across Canada.



Recommendation #3

Stronger workplace supports for RPNs

Based on the results of CFNU's National Nurses Survey, RPNs experience higher rates of verbal abuse, physical violence, sexual harassment and online harassment as compared to other designations of nurses. They also report taking sick leave because they were unable to access vacation or other leave at higher rates as compared to other designations of nurses.

This signals the need for heightened awareness of these workplace health and safety concerns among management and health authorities. RPNs, like all health care workers, should not be subjected to violence and harassment for doing their job. They should also be granted vacation and other leaves as they are entitled to under their collective agreement.

Supports that would help to address these stark realities include but are not limited to:



Safe staffing levels, including minimum nurse-patient ratios



Mandatory violence-prevention and de-escalation training for RPNs and designated health care security personnel



Strict adherence to and enforcement of a violence-prevention policy and programs in every workplace, that would fulfill employers' duties to take all measures possible to prevent violence against nurses



Time to act

Canada's mental health system is evolving, and so too must the nursing workforce that supports it.

RPNs represent a well-established and highly skilled profession with decades of regulatory oversight, standardized education and specialized expertise in mental health and addictions care. Recent developments across Atlantic Canada demonstrate growing momentum toward broader recognition of psychiatric nursing, creating an opportunity to build a more coordinated and responsive national mental health workforce.

By strengthening and expanding legislative recognition and educational opportunities, as well as improving labor mobility, governments can build upon successful Western Canadian models while improving access to specialized mental health services for patients in Canada.

The time is right to recognize the important contribution RPNs make to Canada's health care system and to ensure their expertise can be fully utilized wherever patients need it most.



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