



Prince Edward Island Nurses' Union

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January 20, 2024

To the public and all of our partners in healthcare across the Island:

On behalf of the PEI Nurses' Union, I am writing to you today to express our unequivocal support and agreement with the January 18th letter from the East Prince Medical Staff Association's that declared that **"an emergency exists regarding critical and acute care services at Prince County Hospital."** We also agree with the statement made in the January 19th letter from the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 942: **"Current staffing levels have resulted in staff being overburdened to the point that patient safety is being compromised."**

I will elaborate on these issues but feel it is worthwhile to summarize what the PEI Nurses' Union believes must happen to address these issues.

Health PEI Leadership & Administrators must:

1. Treat healthcare workers with the same level of respect and dignity that is expected to be provided to patients who access the healthcare system.
2. Bring us to the same table and allow us to work with you. Stop wasting time in meetings to develop plans "behind the scenes" only to roll them out with little or no time to engage in meaningful consultation with affected Associations/Unions and Employees.
3. Speak out publicly when Health PEI is being pressured by government to implement solutions that undermine our ability to ensure the safety and sustainability of healthcare services.

Government must:

4. Stop interfering "behind the scenes" in the delivery of healthcare services at Health PEI.
5. Equip and empower Health PEI with the financial resources, decision-making authority, and autonomy to manage its operations without political interference.
6. Stop undermining the public healthcare system by simultaneously creating opportunities for private business to encroach on public healthcare.

Under-Staffing is Unsafe & Unsustainable

In alignment with our colleagues, we want to emphasize the critical need for adequate staffing levels and resources to ensure the safety and well-being of both healthcare workers and patients. The dedication of our nurses and all our colleagues has never wavered, but the strain of operating under these challenging conditions is taking a toll on their collective ability to deliver quality care to patients in Summerside/Prince County and across this entire province.

We know that nurses (and all our colleagues in healthcare) are widely recognized as being professionals who routinely go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the well-being and safety of their patients. Often, this occurs despite the personal sacrifices it requires on the part of the individual; despite the overwhelming workloads, crippling red-tape, persistent political interference in the delivery of healthcare services, empty promises, and demoralizing



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mischaracterizations by government. We also know that working this hard, and under this much pressure, will lead to burnout.

Healthcare professionals have reached their collective limits; they are burnt out. One-by-one healthcare professionals are reaching their individual limits. One-by-one healthcare professionals are leaving. Not only are they leaving their positions, but they are also leaving the public healthcare system, and, in some cases, they are leaving the healthcare profession entirely.

This is reflected in the data published in the Health PEI Annual Reports:

| 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | Net Change 2020-23 |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 2,280 Nursing Staff | 1,862 Nursing Staff | 1,847 Nursing Staff | - 433 (-19%) |

Less than 2 weeks after the Health PEI Annual Meeting, the honourable Minister of Health and Wellness (who continues to focus on recruitment as being the solution required to address the staffing challenges) was quoted as saying that he was “pleased to see this work starting to pay off as we welcome more nurses and care support workers to the system”. This is type of mischaracterizations from government that has become demoralizing to healthcare professionals are experiencing even more overwhelming workloads than ever before.

Our nurses witness daily the strain placed on the system and the challenges faced by healthcare workers and, ultimately, our patients. The increasing demands on our services, coupled with the ongoing and ever-worsening staffing shortages, have created a health human resource crisis that requires immediate attention and collaborative action.

Listen & Act on the Advice of Our Healthcare Professionals

Political interference in the delivery of healthcare is not the solution to our current crisis or the chronic issues in healthcare. We urge our elected leaders and administrators to consider the possibility that the planning and work they are doing “behind the scenes” (as stated by the Minister of Health and Wellness) is not paying off and has yet to solve the problems that our healthcare system is facing; in fact, it may be the worst it's ever been.

Until present day, Health PEI has never (to our knowledge) been faced with a decision to close the ICU at Prince County Hospital due to staffing shortages.

Perhaps it is time to consider that the best ideas, the best planning, and the most reliable and efficient way to work toward fixing our island’s healthcare system (including the current emergency that exists regarding the critical and acute care services at Prince County Hospital) might require a fundamental change in the way Government and Health PEI engage with the Healthcare Professionals who actually provide care to patients in this province. It is time to listen & act on the advice of our island’s healthcare professionals, all of whom are ready, willing, and able to work together.



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Healthcare Services should not need to be a 'Good PR' story for Our Government

We recognize that members of the public are voicing their concerns to their elected leaders and demanding change, demanding to have critical and acute care services restored at PCH. We would urge the public to be more specific:

We must demand to have safe, quality healthcare services restored at Prince County Hospital.

Unfortunately, our elected leaders appear to prioritize the short-term preservation of their public image/support (ie: votes) over ensuring that the solutions will be effective. The band-aid solutions that get forced onto Health PEI through political interference/pressure in these circumstances will not fix the staffing crisis at Prince County Hospital. It causes extreme moral distress to the individuals and teams when they know they are unable to provide safe, quality care to their patients. In the end, these quick-fix solutions that get pushed through for the sake of our elected leaders public image/support then perpetuates the retention issues that continue to plague Health PEI.

Health PEI knows how important it is to restore these services as quickly as possible and no one wants the current situation to become the new normal. However, being pressured to provide services that are not appropriately resourced causes extreme moral distress on frontline healthcare workers because they know they will be unable to provide safe, quality care. Much like Healthcare Providers are expected to ensure that they provide patient-centred healthcare, Healthcare Administrators must be expected to ensure they provide employee-centred employment.

Government must align what they 'Say' & what they 'Do' for Public Healthcare in PEI

Government needs to equip and empower Health PEI Executive Leadership to make decisions about their operations, to give them a real opportunity to fulfill their mandate, and to stop creating opportunities for the privatization of healthcare in PEI. The red-tape that government has kept in place since Health PEI was first established is kryptonite to our public health authority. It increases the workloads of every healthcare worker and contributes to the stress that eventually pushes them out the door. In just the last two years, we have lost hundreds of frontline healthcare workers, the Chairperson of the Health PEI Board of Directors, the CEO, and countless others. Yet the common denominator through this time has been our government and the expansion of private businesses encroachment on public healthcare.

Our nurses' commitment to the well-being of the residents of Prince Edward Island remains unwavering. Nothing short of fundamental changes from our Government and Health PEI can be tolerated any longer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Barbara Brookins'.

Barbara Brookins, RN
PEINU President
