

April 16, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL

The Honourable Stephen McNeil, M.L.A.
Premier of Nova Scotia
premier@novascotia.ca

Dear Premier,

Re: Fairness for health care workers, patients, and residents

We've all read the horrific reports coming out of health care facilities throughout the country resulting from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are aware of the unfathomable working and living conditions in our long-term care facilities, wherein patients and residents are dying alone; overworked health care staff are risking exposure to COVID-19 due to insufficient personal protective equipment; and undercompensated workers, who often have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, are jeopardizing the health of their residents, their patients, and themselves. The pandemic will eventually come to an end, but unless concrete action is taken to protect all health care front-line workers, patients, and residents, the extreme challenges they have faced will endure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the systemic problems that health care workers have faced for years. The industry has relied on part-time and casual staff, with many "working short," meaning patients and residents do not get the care they need or deserve. Such working conditions make the transmission of any illness, COVID-19 or others, from one facility to another, much more likely. The solutions we need to combat COVID-19 are the very same we need to prevent future outbreaks, epidemics, or pandemics.

On April 15, the Prime Minister announced he will work with provincial governments to address compensation for essential workers, including those in long-term care facilities. This development is heartening, but until the systemic problems in our health and long-term care systems are addressed, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past.

I am writing to you to immediately address front-line health care workers' concerns with systemic and COVID-19 related issues in our long-term care facilities, hospitals, social services, group homes, retirement homes and assisted living facilities.

These measures should include:

- Requiring long-term care facilities, hospitals, and retirement homes, to upstaff to help provide safe care;
- Providing workers with access to benefits and paid sick time;
- Compensating for lost income if restricted to work at one facility;
- Mandating employers to provide funds for additional childcare costs, transportation and alternative housing when required;
- Providing appropriate PPE for all staff;
- Implementing a minimum premium pay of \$3 per hour immediately for all front-line care workers;

For far too long, working and living conditions have been allowed to deteriorate as a direct result of inadequate funding.

One lesson we must take from this pandemic is that we can't afford to hope that pandemics will remain as rare occurrences. That kind of approach has left us vulnerable to this disaster and will only ensure the same tragic outcome in the future. It's too late for a proactive approach, but we can correct the mistakes of the past. I urge you and your government to ensure that these measures are implemented immediately and permanently. Residents, patients and all vulnerable people deserve the best possible conditions of care. So do our COVID heroes, who had already proven themselves worthy of fair compensation and adequate protection long before this pandemic struck.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda MacNeil". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Linda MacNeil
Unifor Atlantic Regional Director

LM/klcpe343