



March 12, 2020

**Joint Statement: Healthcare Unions call for adequate protections for workers as World Health Organization (WHO) declares COVID-19 a pandemic**

Today, representatives from the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union, the Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and Unifor met with representatives from government, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, infection control specialists, and the Chief Medical Officer. We called on the Nova Scotia government to uphold the precautionary principle when it comes to providing personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers. The precautionary principle, as outlined by Justice Campbell following the SARS crisis in 2003, says that in the absence of scientific certainty we must err on the side of caution and protect workers. Two nurses and a physician were among the casualties of SARS, and many other health workers were infected. No parties in the health system wish to see that again.

At this time, we lack scientific certainty regarding the transmission method of COVID-19. We know that transmission via touch is likely the primary means, but several studies, and several infectious disease experts, warn that airborne transmission can also occur. In light of this, and respecting the precautionary principle, we believe that workers testing potential COVID-19 cases, and those caring for confirmed cases, should be provided with fit-tested, NIOSH-approved N95 respirators. The N95 respirator is designed to protect against 95% of airborne particulates and is the accepted baseline protection against airborne pathogens. Other controls should be put into place to ensure as few workers as possible face potential exposure.

At our meeting, we learned that there is a potential worldwide shortage of N95 respirators, particular if the situation becomes much worse. Based on previous discussions, we believed that we had an adequate supply of the respirators. It is the employer's responsibility to ensure this supply, and to ensure workers are regularly fit-tested. We are clearly not as prepared as we should be.

If you are asked to participate in testing for suspected COVID-19 cases, or to care for future confirmed COVID-19 patients, the employer plans to offer you a gown, face shield and surgical mask as protection. If you believe the mask is insufficient, you may request an N95 respirator. If your employer is unwilling to provide the respirator, you should request to be reassigned to other work. If you are not given the opportunity to turn down the work, and you feel your

safety is jeopardized, you may exercise your right to refuse under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*. Please contact your union if you wish to exercise the right to refuse.

The priority of healthcare workers is ensuring the safe and quality care of Nova Scotians throughout our healthcare system. This care can only be provided if we put appropriate measures in place to protect our workers.