

# Changes needed for Long-Term Care

**Workers doing the heavy lifting in our health-care systems should be compensated fairly**

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**Both the federal and provincial governments need to work together to implement national standards to address the gaps and shortfalls that exist within the system, writes P.E.I. UPSE president Karen Jackson.**

P.E.I. UPSE members in long-term care are facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic with courage and determination as they work on the front lines to ensure the health and safety of Islanders. They are doing so while at the same time having to deal with acute and chronic shortages in their professions. Low staffing levels have caused added stress, burnout, and high turnover rates. Further, the shortage has been made worse by staff absences caused by the recent outbreak of the virus. How can we expect long-term care workers to keep working under these conditions? They are overworked, underpaid, and at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

So, what needs to be done? First, we need to focus on proper recruitment and retention. The recent attempt to recruit untrained Public Schools Branch employees into the long-term care environment, although well intentioned, highlights a lack of

planning and preparedness in the face of an outbreak. What has been done to recruit LPNs and RCWs in comparison to other health professionals? I have been sounding the alarm about the need for recruitment and retention initiatives long before the pandemic began. Our front-line workers need to know we have their backs, by providing the proper resources they need to do their job effectively and safely. Unfortunately, at this point, they are feeling overwhelmed as they continue to do their best to provide care for their residents.

Second, in the short term, all essential workers, who are facing an outbreak in their worksites should receive pandemic pay on top of their regular pay, to recognize the increased risk they are dealing with. This is an important step in recognizing the vital role front-line staff play in caring for Islanders.

Third, the provincial government should immediately increase and implement long-term care funding for both public and private care. Long-term care has been underfunded for years and we have seen the consequences of this unfold across the country, since the onset of the pandemic. Fourth, we need to ensure that our essential frontline health-care workers, who are doing the heavy lifting in our health-care systems, are compensated fairly for the valuable services they provide; and this includes closing the gap between workers in the private and public sectors to create greater wage parity.

The implementation of national standards for long-term care in Canada is also key. Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, UPSE raised concerns about staff shortages, high turnover and low staff-to-patient ratios in long-term care facilities. These conditions are not unique to P.E.I. alone and are prevalent right across the country. The system was under great strain for years and was unable to cope with the added stress caused by the pandemic. If these concerns were addressed at the time, seniors across the country would have had a much better chance of living in safety and dignity. Sadly, over 19,000 COVID-19 deaths in Canada are long-term care related.

In Prince Edward Island we have had a different experience. We have had more time to prepare for an outbreak due to low infection rates, however; the recent spread of the virus has shown us how quickly things can change. If we have learned anything, it is that long-term care cannot be allowed to go back to "normal."

Both the federal and provincial governments need to work together to implement national standards to address the gaps and shortfalls that exist within the system and ensure consistency of care and staffing levels in every long-term care facility across

the country. The standards must be mandatory and pandemic proof. Our seniors deserve this and those who dedicate their lives to care for our most vulnerable population deserve it too. We must never forget the lesson this pandemic has taught us.

I want to thank all health-care workers in P.E.I. for their valuable service during the pandemic and for keeping everyone's health and safety at the forefront. Our members take great pride in their work, and many consider those they care for are like family. These jobs are often undervalued in our healthcare system but are so rewarding to those that choose to dedicate themselves to this profession. Many of our members have stated that “there is no greater honour than caring for seniors and those who are unable live independently.” You are doing a commendable job under the most stressful circumstances, and I know the residents, and their families, are grateful for everything that you do. Let's stand together to make the changes necessary for the good of all concerned.