

February 2, 2022

Hon. Harry Bains
Minister of Labour
P.O Box 9064
STN PROV GOVT.
Victoria, BC V8W 0E2

Email: LBR.Minister@gov.bc.ca

Re: Impact of COVID-19 on nurses' health and safety

Dear Minister Bains:

I am writing regarding several urgent issues of concern facing nurses throughout British Columbia and to request a meeting to address these concerns.

As Minister of Labour, you are responsible for the promotion of fair employment relationships and providing oversight to legislation impacting the health and safety of workers. As such, it is incumbent upon you to ensure that all workers in British Columbia have access to safe and stable employment. This is especially vital for those employed in the health-care sector, as their work ensures the wellness of all British Columbians.

Today, as we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witness to stunningly low staffing levels that are threatening nurses' occupational health and safety and crippling our ability to provide safe patient care. I have been conducting daily media interviews about the staffing crisis speaking on behalf of our 48,000 members to remind the public about the care they deserve.

Last month I wrote to Minister Dix demanding that he address the dismal recruitment and retention practices that have failed to attract or keep our nurses in the system. I am now asking that you do the same. Your mandate letter from the premier states that you are responsible for putting people first through the enhancement of public services. To accomplish that mandate, you must work to create safer workplaces for nurses while simultaneously increasing the number of nurses at the bedside.

Our nurses are in crisis. There are simply too few of us to provide British Columbians with the quality care they deserve. The 2019 *BC Labour Market Outlook* notes that the province will need nearly 24,000 nurses by the year 2029 to adequately staff the health-care system.

I want to remind you that this is not a problem of the future; it is a problem that exists in the present. As I write, shifts are going unfilled, care is being reduced and people are being forced to wait, all because of a lack of investment in nurses and the care that we provide. We are calling on you and your ministry to take every step possible to increase the number of nurses practicing in British Columbia.

We are also calling on you to work directly with WorkSafeBC to immediately increase the safety levels for nurses currently at the bedside. Our members are continuing to tell us their safety is not prioritized, that PPE is unavailable or difficult to acquire and violence in health-care workplaces remains rife. Perhaps even more alarmingly, our members continue to tell us that WorkSafeBC officers are conducting an inadequate number of inspections, despite the fact that health care is a key part of both the 2018-2020 and 2021-2023 High Risk Strategies and Industry Initiatives, which seek to reduce injury through enhanced activities of WorkSafeBC.

We have reviewed the publicly available statistics in response to our members' concerns. In 2020, only 124 WorkSafeBC orders were issued in the health-care sector, with none resulting in an administrative penalty. This contrasts with general construction, where 1,865 orders were issued, with 99 resulting in administrative penalties. During the same period, health-sector workers had a 21 percent higher risk of being injured while on the job. This statistic is not an anomaly of a particular year, nor is it related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between the years 2018 and 2020, health-care workers' injury rate increased by 16.7 percent while the rate of injury for those in general construction fell by 17.1 percent.

To be clear, we are not calling for WorkSafeBC to increase administrative penalties. The removal of any funds from the health-care system would negatively impact all British Columbians. We are calling on you, as Minister of Labour, to do everything in your power to provide WorkSafeBC with the resources needed to fulfill its mandate. We must ensure that health-care employers are properly motivated to provide safe, sustainable workplaces.

We should also be clear that we do not begrudge the resources provided to ensure workers in the construction industry are safe. Rather, we are asking that health-care workers are given equal treatment to those in other high-risk industries and that your ministry, in conjunction with WorkSafeBC, invest the resources needed to ensure the safety of our members and all health-care workers in the province.

Finally, we would like your assurance that your government will provide direction regarding claims resulting from exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace, and that exposure continues to be considered a workplace injury. Our members are going to work daily and are at an elevated risk of exposure. It is only fair that current rules adopted by WorkSafeBC regarding health-care workers and COVID-19 exposure are maintained and, where possible, strengthened and clarified. Maintaining the presumption of injury for those exposed in certain health-care workplaces would show you are adhering to your mandate and continuing to put people first.

I look forward to meeting with you personally to further discuss these important issues.

Sincerely,

BC NURSES' UNION



Aman Grewal, President

c.c. Hon. John Horgan, Premier
Hon Adrian Dix, Minister of Health
Trevor Hughes, Deputy Minister of Labour
Stephen Brown, Deputy Minister of Health
Michael McMillan, President & CEO, HEABC
Anne Naser, President & CEO, WorkSafeBC
Jeff Parr, Chair, Board of Directors, WorkSafeBC
Jim Gould, Interim CEO, BC Nurses' Union
Moninder Singh, Executive Lead, External Relations and Communications, BC Nurses' Union
Aida Herrera, Executive Councillor, BC Nurses' Union