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July 22, 2020

The Hon. Filomena Tassi, Minister of Labour
The Hon. Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health
By email: Filomena.Tassi@parl.gc.ca; hcminister.ministresc@canada.ca

Dear Minister Tassi and Minister Hajdu,

As President of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU), I am joining with nurses' unions and health care unions across the country in calling for presumptive legislation for health care workers who contract COVID-19 to urgently be brought into place by provincial and territorial governments. I am requesting that, as Minister of Labour and Minister of Health, respectively, you help to amplify nurses' voices on this critical issue during your federal-provincial-territorial discussions.

As the World Health Organization notes, health care workers "face higher risks of potential COVID-19 infection in their efforts to protect the greater community."¹ Based on an analysis of data from the U.S. and the U.K., frontline health care workers had a nearly 12 times higher risk of testing positive for COVID-19 than individuals from the general population. The risk was even greater for those workers who lacked access to personal protective equipment (PPE).²

Frontline health care workers have a higher likelihood of being exposed to COVID-19 because of their workplace and, in some cases, will be frequently exposed to it over lengthy durations. Through the nature of their work – treating COVID-19 patients or being exposed to an environment with individuals testing positive for COVID-19 – it should come as little surprise that health care workers have been disproportionately infected with the virus across the country. Over one in five (21.52%) cases of COVID-19 in Canada is a health care worker. That amounts to 20,891 cases as of July 16, 2020.

The long-term impact of COVID-19 is unknown. Health care workers who contract the virus could experience a wide range of long-term health effects, as evidence is now revealing how the virus can cause damage to the body in myriad ways.³ Without a vaccine, we should expect health care workers to continue to contract the virus in disproportionate numbers.

¹ <https://iris.wpro.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665.1/14482/COVID-19-022020.pdf>

² <https://www.massgeneral.org/news/coronavirus/study-reveals-risk-of-covid-19-infection-among-health-care-workers>

³ See <https://www.msnbc.com/11th-hour/watch/doc-covid-19-damages-lungs-of-patients-showing-no-symptoms-87129669600>, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-brains-idUSKBN24837S>, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7158513/covid-19-coronavirus-patients-long-term-health-impacts/>

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While our nurses and other frontline health care workers are praised for their tireless and devoted service, we are failing to provide them with the support they need. Rather than accepting that frontline health care workers operate in a uniquely high-risk environment where their patients and colleagues may have fallen ill with the virus, we are requiring these workers to enter into adjudication on their claims when they themselves fall ill with the virus.

Workers' compensation boards across the country should no longer be requiring frontline health care workers to prove they contracted COVID-19 as a result of their job. The risks to these workers are significantly heightened, and it is high time governments across our country recognized this risk through concerted action.

I am calling on you to reach out to your provincial and territorial counterparts and to encourage them to provide presumptive coverage for health care workers who contract COVID-19. Furthermore, the federal government should examine what can be done so frontline workers who fall ill with this virus are covered under federal jurisdiction.

These workers should not be forced to wait for – and especially be denied – access to workers' compensation benefits after falling ill while taking care of us.

I would also like to draw your attention to the call from federations of labour across the country for presumptive coverage to be extended to all frontline workers who contract COVID-19. The CFNU supports these efforts, as well.

I have attached the CFNU's position statement on this issue for your reference.

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. The CFNU Government and External Relations Officer, Tyler Levitan, can field any inquiries from your office. He can be reached at tlevitan@nursesunions.ca or by phone at 613-809-0722.

Sincerely,



Linda Silas, CFNU President

Cc: Debbie Forward, President, Registered Nurses' Union Newfoundland & Labrador
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