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Healthy Members, Healthy Union, Healthy Communities

July 23, 2020

The Honourable Jim Reiter
Minister of Health
Room 204 Legislative Building
2405 Legislative Drive
Regina, SK S4S 0B3
he.minister@gov.sk.ca

Dear Minister Reiter:

As President of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses, I am joining with nurses' unions across the country in calling for presumptive legislation for health care workers who contract COVID-19 to urgently be brought into place by your government. I am also voicing my support for the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's request for presumptive legislation for frontline workers in this province who contract COVID-19.

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 in this province 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-idUSKBN248375>, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7158513/covid-19-coronavirus-patients-long-term-health-impacts/>

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 your government recognized this risk through concerted action. We implore you to swiftly introduce presumptive coverage for frontline health care workers who have contracted COVID-19.

As I am sure you would agree, nurses and other health care workers who contract the virus should focus their limited energies on resting up, so that they can get back to providing care for others. Requiring these workers to prove their illness is work-related during their recovery could hamper the recovery process, thereby delaying a healthy return to the workplace.

I am calling on you to show your gratitude for this province's health care workers and provide presumptive coverage for them when they contract COVID-19. These workers should not be forced to wait for – or even be denied – access to workers' compensation benefits after falling ill with this virus.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tracy M. Zambory".

Tracy Zambory RN
President

cc Linda Silas, President, Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions