

News Release – for immediate release

Actions to Improve Emergency Care Don't Go Far Enough to Address Nurses Concerns

(Halifax, January 19, 2023) Members of the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union, nurses working in emergency departments across the entire province, don't see their concerns reflected in the provinces new plan to improve emergency care.

On January 17th, Michelle Thompson, the Minister of Health and Wellness announced a plan to ensure people with the most urgent needs receive care first. A host of actions were listed but few address the staggering nurse vacancy rate and urgent and untenable pressures on nurses.

"I'm happy to see an all-hands-on-deck approach to this ongoing but far from new crisis," said Janet Hazelton, president of the Nova Scotia Nurses' Union. "The NSNU has been talking about the nursing shortage and excessive workloads in emergency, as well as other areas of care for well over a decade."

The union president says there isn't really anything immediate in the plan. However, she's most concerned about initiatives that risk adding to the workload of existing nurses if there isn't a significant shift in filling vacancies, or at the very least, initiatives to retain the nurses we currently have. Without nurses in emergency departments, wait times will remain unacceptably long.

"We can get patients to emergency faster, we can get more ambulances on the road, but if we don't have professional staff and beds on the other side of the waiting room, wait times will not be reduced. Plain and simple, we need more nurses and more nurses working to their full scope of practice. We need to fill nursing vacancies," says Hazelton.

Nurses need non-nursing work such as administrative tasks and other duties removed from their practice in emergency, and elsewhere. Nurses need to focus on timely and precise patient care. There is no mention in the plan to cover these non-clinical tasks for nurses.

Although patient advocates may seem like a logical solution for anxious patients lingering in waiting rooms, their roles, qualifications and boundaries must be very well-defined. There is a significant distinction between a patient's medical needs verses their comfort needs, and how the advocate is to intervene. In conjunction with the advocate role, NSNU is asking that a licensed practical nurse, someone with medical expertise, is present in waiting rooms to ensure patients are observed and assessed.

Hazelton says, she would have liked to see nurse-prescribing as an action item considering many patients presenting at emergency departments are looking for prescription renewals. Nova Scotia's piloted program should be scaled up to meet the needs of Nova Scotians.

Government must also provide consistent tuition relief for nurses who wish to bridge beyond their current designations and provide funding for nurses to acquire additional training to confidently apply to work in areas like emergency departments.

NSNU maintains, a plan that does not include restoring a full complement of nursing staff in every emergency department in Nova Scotia will fall short of meeting the government's goal of offering more places for people to receive care, faster care, while easing pressure on emergency departments.

NSNU will continue to work with government and employers to ensure the resources necessary to provide safe and urgent care are made available.

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The NSNU represents over 8000 Registered Nurses, Nurse Practitioners and Licensed Practical Nurses working in hospitals, long term care facilities, and community care (VON and Canadian Blood Services). NSNU represents nurses in acute care in hospitals across the province including Zone 4 (formerly Capital District Health Authority); the IWK, Dartmouth General Hospital, Hants Community Hospital and Cobequid Community Health Centre. The NSNU represents most nurses working in long-term care facilities throughout Nova Scotia. The NSNU is a member organization of the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions which represents over 200,000 nurses and student nurses across Canada.

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