



# WeRPN Pre-budget Submission 2023

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## **Nursing Retention & Recruitment – Solving Ontario’s Health Human Resources Challenge**

For the last several years, Ontario’s healthcare system has remained in a state of crisis. Throughout that time, over 60,000 Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) delivered dedicated care to the Ontarians who need it most. RPNs are integral to our health care system. They are the backbone of our long-term care homes working at the bedside of our parents and grandparents who need 24/7 care. They are the glue that holds our hospitals together, working at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic and now to ensure that the surgical and diagnostic backlogs created by the pandemic are reduced. Whether it’s mental health services, home and community care, or community surgical and diagnostic clinics, no aspect of our health care system can function at its highest level without the skill, knowledge, judgement, passion, and compassion of RPNs.

Despite this, we hear every day from RPNs who are struggling. RPNs are facing unique challenges and pressures. Over the past several years, the RPN role has continued to grow and is closer to the RN role than ever before. More and more health care organizations are leveraging the knowledge and expertise of RPNs, but so far, their wages have not kept pace. We continue to ask RPNs to do more yet have not put in place competitive compensation that accurately values their contributions. RPNs are telling us they are burnt out after three years of personal sacrifice and significant risk on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic. Without some major changes, we risk losing many of these dedicated nurses. In fact, a 2022 survey of our members showed that 47 per cent of RPNs are considering leaving the profession. Imagine the devastating impact on patient and resident care if Ontario lost over 28,000 RPNs.

We know that the government recognizes the challenges that such a mass resignation would pose and has already taken important first steps toward addressing recruitment and retention in nursing. Investments in initiatives such as WeRPN’s Bridging Educational Grant In Nursing (BEGIN) program, mental health supports for health care workers, the Nursing Program Transformation in Ontario’s Colleges, among others, are critical to revitalizing perceptions of nursing as a desirable, rewarding, and meaningful career. And we know that 2022 was, by the numbers, a record setting year for nursing recruitment in Ontario. But the numbers don’t tell the full story.

We need the remaining pieces of the recruitment and retention puzzle in place if our health system is going to keep up with the growing needs of our aging population. These pieces must build on the progress we’ve made together to create a stronger, more sustainable health workforce in the wake of COVID-19.

Ontario needs bold action to address the existing nursing shortage and prevent future nursing losses. Recognizing and responding to the unique experiences of RPNs will be a critical part of that plan. We’re eager to share our nursing recruitment and retention solutions and value the opportunity to continue to work with government to make these recommendations – and your vision for a better more resilient post-pandemic health care system – a reality.

## **RPNs and WeRPN**

In Ontario, nursing is one profession with two categories, Registered Nurse (RN including Nurse Practitioner) and Registered Practical Nurse (RPN). Not every health care intervention requires an RN. RPNs have the knowledge, skill and judgment required to provide safe, quality nursing care in a variety of settings. Notably, RPNs are generally viewed as leaders in the delivery of elder-friendly care in Ontario.

The Registered Practical Nurses Association of Ontario (WeRPN) is the professional voice of more than 60,000 RPNs working in the province and the second-largest regulated health professional group in Ontario. For over 20 years, WeRPN has been a trusted advisor to government, offering evidence-based solutions to health system challenges. We have led the efficient administration of several government-funded programs, including the Nursing Education Initiative (NEI) and the Recruitment and Retention Incentive (RRI) Program for the retirement home sector. Most recently WeRPN has partnered with Ministries of Long-Term Care and Health to design and launch an innovative new program, the BEGIN initiative: Bridging Educational Grant In Nursing. We are eager to continue to work with government to realize the goal of ensuring a strong health system to care for the people of Ontario.

## The Challenge

Ontario faces a serious health human resources crisis. What started years ago as region-specific shortages of certain health care professionals has become a system-wide staffing shortage leading emergency rooms to shutter their doors and allowing a triple-demic of COVID-19, influenza, and RSV to nearly topple the system.

Now, as the triple-demic has started to ease off, we have more than 12,000 children waiting for surgeries. We have hundreds of thousands of diagnostic procedures that have not been performed which is likely to lead to greater numbers of significant health problems down the road. And we have a voting public that knows more needs to be done to address decades long, systemic problems that have come to a head over the last three years because of unforeseen circumstances.

At the same time, we have a nursing workforce that is exhausted and demoralized. While Bill 124 limited the wages of all nurses, Ontario RPNs have faced a unique experience of wage compression. RPNs saw their personal support worker colleagues receive well-deserved pay increases, however without a commensurate increase for these nurses, it is not uncommon for RPNs to be making less than PSWs they supervise. We have heard stories of practical nursing students working as PSWs during their studies who go on to experience a pay cut when they graduate and join the nursing workforce. Considering the growing demands and responsibilities of the RPN role and these nurses' accountabilities to the College of Nurses, many RPNs are beginning to wonder how long they can remain in the profession.

Ontario can and must take steps to ensure RPNs are supported and receive competitive compensation. Valuing RPNs appropriately is essential in order to build our health system capacity and tackle the next major health crisis, handle the strains of an aging population, and to ensure that every single Ontarian gets the care they need, when they need it.

## **The First Step – Retaining the Nurses We Already Have**

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Ontario recruited more than 12,000 nurses in 2022 with thousands more working their way through our education systems. However, more needs to be done to retain the nurses already working in the system. A 2022 WeRPN survey found that 47 per cent of RPNs had actively considered leaving the profession entirely.

The potential loss of RPNs could have catastrophic impacts on the health care system. New nurses would be delayed from entering the system because of a lack of mentors to learn from, patient care would suffer from the loss of decades of experience, and costs to government and care providers would skyrocket as they had to foot the bill for training new hires, increased use of temporary nursing agency staff, and potential legal costs.

Clearly, the balance of our focus in 2023 must shift back toward retaining the incredible nurses already working in Ontario. We encourage the government to take these simple actions to achieve that goal:

### **Action 1 – Competitive + Harmonized Nursing Wages to Incentivize Retention**

Wage compression happens when there are small differences in pay that ignore education, experience, skill level, or seniority. Today, we have situations where PSWs earn wages very close to RPNs despite the differences in these areas. Wage compression leads to employee disengagement that, in turn, results in staff resignations. Often this means losing tenured RPNs whose experience we need on the frontlines. In addition, differential compensation across areas of the health system, like hospital, long-term care, and home care, also makes it challenging to retain and recruit nurses to care for some of our most vulnerable people. Government can take action to address these issues by ensuring that nursing wages are raised to a level that is competitive with opportunities outside of health care and by harmonizing wages across sectors. WeRPN is also urging the government to withdraw its legal challenges to Bill 124 to demonstrate its support for nurses.

### **Action 2 – Legislated Nurse-to-Patient Ratios to Enhance Patient Safety**

For far too many RPNs, the reality of a day at work is choosing what care to provide based on the limited time available rather than providing all the care that is necessary. For nurses this is extremely distressing as it goes against their education and significantly increases the chance that patient issues are missed. This is also a leading driver of burnout among nurses and subsequent desire to find a new career. While we all work together to attain an average of four hours of care per resident per day in long-term care, it is critical that we legislate how many patients nurses should be responsible for in all settings to make that achievable without further increasing burnout rates.

## **The Second Step – Educational Opportunities for Nurses**

Increased wages and a better work environment will play a critical role in ensuring we retain nurses and address Ontario's health human resources challenge. And these actions will also support our collective efforts to recruit new nurses. By creating a renewed vision of nursing as a career that is stable, meaningful, and rewarding, both personally and financially, we will be able to grow our nursing workforce and restore some stability to our health system in the face of an aging population and ever-greater health care needs.

Once nurses have entered the profession, they want opportunities to advance in their careers through a simple combination of hard work, perseverance, and continuing education that teaches them the skills they need to thrive at the next level. WeRPN is pleased to recommend some additional actions that will expand educational opportunities to support successful recruitment in 2023.

### **Action 3 – Renewed Investment in the Nursing Education Initiative to Expand Access**

WeRPN's Nursing Education Initiative (NEI) is an integral tool to support nursing recruitment and retention across the province. The program provides meaningful opportunities for nurses looking to grow their specialized knowledge in the nursing profession. The NEI program has been extremely successful since its introduction in 1999 to the point that demand now outstrips funding on an annual basis. Over the past five years, WeRPN has had to decline more than 4,000 applications and with the current agreement set to expire this year we urge the government to renew and enhance their investment in education for nurses. We have submitted a detailed proposal for renewal including enhanced cultural competency education, a strengthened accountability framework, and an increase in funding to allow more participation among eligible nurses. We believe that the options presented must be funded to enable this program to continue.

### **Action 4 – Expansion of the Bridging Education Grants In Nursing to Acute Care Settings**

Over the last three years, acute care settings in our health care system have borne the brunt of health human resources challenges. From closed emergency departments to massive surgical backlogs, it is clear that more staff are necessary to ensure acute care settings across the system can not only continue to operate but also ramp up capacity when needed. Government has taken steps to enable this with programs like Nurse Offloading but even those are suffering from staff shortages. To help address the needs in acute care staffing, WeRPN recommends expanding the successful Bridging Education Grants In Nursing program to support PSWs and RPNs in acute care to bridge to RPN and RN respectively.

## **The Final Step – Health Spending Efficiency**

WeRPN understands that the actions we have proposed to further the government’s ongoing work to boost retention and recruitment of nurses will not come without cost. And we also understand that in a single payer healthcare system every dollar comes from Ontario taxpayers.

Recognizing that it is a priority of government to respect the tax dollars collected from Ontarians by ensuring that their money is being spent with the highest level of efficiency possible we believe one further action is necessary:

### **Action 5 – Reduce Overreliance on Nursing Agencies to Save Money**

With nursing wages not keeping pace with inflation, nurses have had to find other solutions. For some, this means working multiple jobs while others have turned to for-profit nursing agencies that hire out temporary staff at significantly increased wages. The result is a two-tiered payment system that sees our hospitals, long-term care homes, and home care agencies spending extra money to hire the same nurses through agencies that they couldn’t afford to keep on full-time to start with. This is a highly inefficient use of Ontario’s health budgets and must be addressed. We can reduce our overreliance on nursing agencies by increasing the number of full-time nurses, enhancing wages and harmonizing them across sectors, and growing educational opportunities. This will ultimately save the health system money in the long-term and serves as a significant stabilizer of staffing levels to help avoid future human health resource challenges.

### **Final Thoughts – Lets Work Together to Care for Ontarians**

There is no solving Ontario’s nursing crisis until all the fundamentals of retention and recruitment – competitive and harmonized wages, legislated staffing ratios, increased educational supports, and more efficient spending – are in place. Taking only one action – or worse, none – will only serve to place a band-aid on a wound that needs much more healing.

WeRPN’s budget recommendations support the government’s health human resource goals by enhancing the recruitment and retention of nurses at a time when they are so desperately needed. We remain committed to working with government and our health system partners to ensure Ontario emerges, post-COVID-19, with a stronger, better-integrated, and sustainable health system.

## **About WeRPN**

Founded in 1958, WeRPN is the voice of registered practical nursing in Ontario. There are over 60,000 RPNs working in Ontario, playing a vital role in the province's health care system. We champion the critical role of RPNs and we do this by advancing expertise, driving evidence, advocating for and leading in the delivery of high quality care across the continuum of care.

## **Contact Us**

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