



WeRPN Pre-budget Submission 2024

We RPN

Registered Practical Nurses
Association of Ontario

Retaining and Recruiting Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) in Ontario

Practical solutions for solving Ontario's health human resource challenges

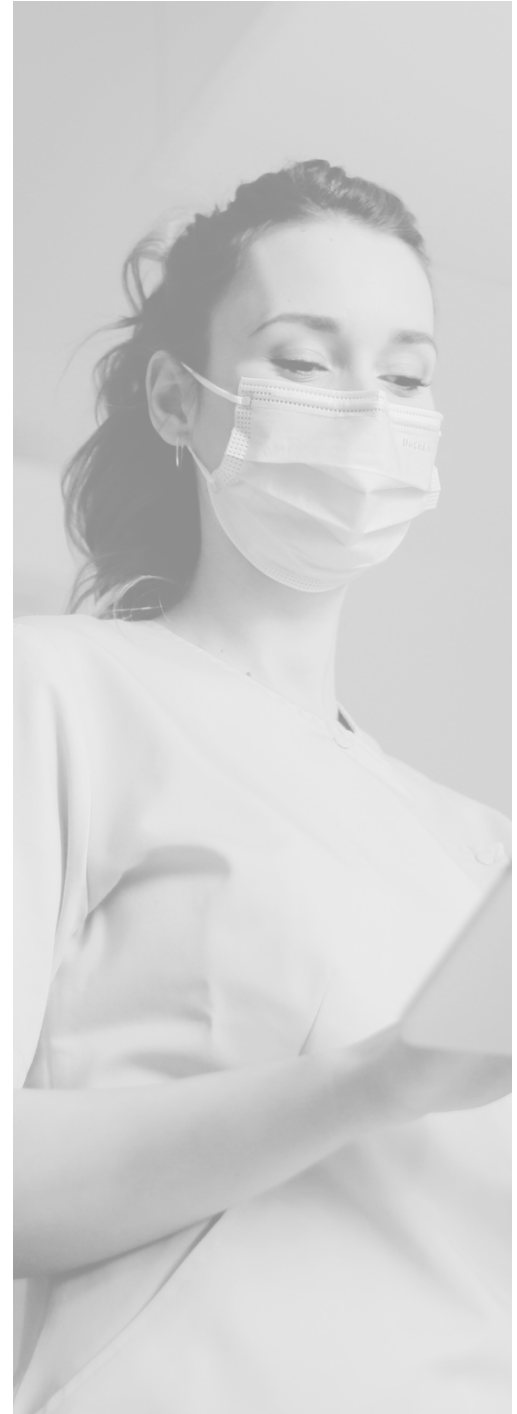
For many years now, Ontario's healthcare system has been challenged by the global pandemic, staffing shortages and the increasing care needs of the province's aging population. Together, these challenges highlight the urgent need for more nurses on the front lines of our healthcare system. Further action is necessary to recruit, retain and reward the talented and dedicated RPNs we already have in the system.

With more than 61,000 Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) across all sectors of our health system, it is clear that they are the backbone of healthcare in Ontario. In long-term care homes, RPNs represent more than 67 per cent of those working at the bedside of our parents and loved ones whose complex health needs often require 24/7 care.

In the community, RPNs are the professionals who go from client to client providing compassionate care in people's homes while allowing them to stay out of hospital or congregate care as long as possible. And in our hospitals, RPNs distinguish themselves with their specialized skills, including expertise in medication administration, wound care and therapeutic interventions as part of seamless healthcare delivery to their patients.

RPNs bring to the table the ability to collaborate with interdisciplinary healthcare teams and their commitment to delivering patient-centered care makes them invaluable contributors to the overall healthcare landscape, enhancing the quality and efficiency of medical services across diverse patient populations.

Knowing the important role RPNs play in Ontario's healthcare system, it is distressing to see the significant challenges that they continue to face each day, from stagnant wages to a workplace environment that hinders their ability to deliver the best care possible, to significant staffing shortages. These challenges continue to take a toll on nurses with our most recent survey revealing that 75 per cent of RPNs are burnt out and that 91 per cent of RPNs have witnessed patient care being impacted negatively by staffing shortages.



RPNs and WeRPN

Besides these ongoing workplace realities for RPNs, they are also struggling to pay their bills. Their salaries, particularly in long-term care, home care and primary care, haven't kept up with inflation, recognized their growing workloads or been adjusted to ensure they are being compensated appropriately for the knowledge and skill level that they provide. Now, more than 60% of RPNs are actively considering leaving nursing altogether. Although there were 5,400 new registrants during the past year, the net increase was only 30 RPNs, indicating that RPNs are indeed leaving the workforce in significant numbers. Alarming, in the sectors where the demand for nurses is expected to grow dramatically in the coming years, such as in LTC, the numbers of nurses, particularly RPNs, has not recovered to its pre-pandemic levels.

With Ontario's aging population and our health system under sustained pressure, it is critical that we take further steps to retain and recruit more RPNs to deliver the care Ontarians deserve.

WeRPN is pleased to present the following practical solutions to the Government of Ontario's 2024 budget consultation process. We believe that following these recommendations will help ensure that Ontario can turn the tide and address the health human resource challenges impacting our healthcare system today by retaining the RPNs we have now and creating an environment that takes the challenge out of recruiting new nurses for the future.



Practical Solution One – Retain the RPNs We Already Have

Ontario has had success increasing recruitment of nurses over the last few years. According to the CNO, more than 60 per cent of IENs coming to Ontario registered as RPNs¹. However, more needs to be done to retain the RPNs already working in the system. Without taking additional measures to help ensure greater retention of RPNs, recruitment alone cannot keep pace with the growing need for care. We also need to take into consideration the increasing loss of nurses through resignations and retirement with more than 15,800 leaving the profession in the past 5 years.

In 2022, Ontario lost 3,695 RPNs, up from 2,746 in 2018². The loss of long-tenured RPNs will not only impact patient care, it could also delay recruitment and training across the system due to a lack of qualified preceptors. This will lead to increased costs to government and care providers as they shoulder the burden of educating new hires or in extreme cases, deploying the use of temporary nursing agency staff to bridge gaps. Retaining RPNs already working in Ontario starts with fair compensation.

Solution One – Competitive & Harmonized Nursing Wages to Incentivize Retention

Over the past several years, the breadth of knowledge and expertise of the RPN role has evolved. Now the role of the RPN in healthcare aligns most closely with their Registered Nurse (RN) counterparts however, their wages continue to be closer to that of their PSW colleagues. Fair and professional compensation for RPNs is not keeping pace with their skill and knowledge.



¹Mary Crea-Arsenio, PhD, Andrea Baumann, PhD, and Jennifer Blythe, PhD, “The changing profile of the internationally educated nurse workforce: Post-pandemic implications for health human resource planning.” Published online 2023 Aug 31. doi: [10.1177/08404704231198026](https://doi.org/10.1177/08404704231198026)

²College of Nurses of Ontario, “[Gains and Losses Report 2022](#)”, December 14, 2022

A team-based approach to care is critical for enabling providers to maximize efficiency by ensuring that those with the appropriate level of skill and education are providing the appropriate level of care. Unfortunately, the current reality of the wage differences between RPNs, RNs and PSWs is not reflective of the differences in education, accountability, ability and experience.

WeRPN regularly hears from members that their PSW colleagues earn wages nearly equal with their own while their RN colleagues make significantly more. This phenomenon, known as wage compression, means that differences in pay are created when the system ignores education, experience, skill level, accountabilities, and seniority. Nurses tell us through our annual survey that this issue is the leading cause of job dissatisfaction. By addressing wage compression for RPNs, the Ontario government could help contribute to increasing retention while properly reflecting RPNs' value to the health system.

Wage disparities across sectors also makes it challenging to retain nurses in long-term care and home care settings. Through our regional consultation events, Leading Change: RPN Community Conversations, we have heard from many RPNs who are keen to work across sectors, however, the significant wage and benefits differences between those working in hospital settings and elsewhere serves as a major barrier to choosing key care settings like home care and long-term care.

This disincentive for RPNs to work in these critical sectors creates significant care gaps while applying pressure on hospitals which are often the most expensive place for patients to be receiving care. The government of Ontario can take action to incentivize RPNs to work in long-term care and home care settings by harmonizing wages across care settings.

“Nursing has been my dream job for as long as I can remember. I’ve always wanted to help people when they are sick, and I truly care for the clients I visit in their homes every week. But the reality of today is that I might have to find a new career because I simply can’t keep up. My wages have stagnated while the cost of everything around me has skyrocketed. How can I stay in career that doesn’t pay enough for me to raise my family?”

Practical Solution Two - Improve the RPN Work Environment

For far too many RPNs, the reality of a day at work includes choosing what care interventions to provide based on the limited time available rather than providing all the care that is necessary for their patients, residents and clients. For nurses, this is an extremely distressing reality as it goes against their education and significantly increases the chance that patient issues are missed. This situation not only causes patient safety issues but RPNs report that this moral distress is the second leading cause of RPNs considering leaving the profession to find a new career.

Further, during our [Leading Change: RPN Community Conversations](#) events we heard repeated stories from nurses who were unable to take lunch breaks, who could never use their vacation and who were afraid to take a sick day out of concern for the impact on their patients and colleagues. This is not sustainable for any work environment, let alone the environments that provide healthcare and support to the people we love. After three years on the frontlines of a pandemic most of the world has moved on and are not aware of the harsh realities nurses continue to face in healthcare. Nurses urgently need a more supportive and safe work environment if we are to ensure RPNs can be retained, and more new nurses can be recruited.

Solution Two - Legislated Nurse-to-Patient Ratios

It is critical that the Ontario government consider introducing legislated nurse-to-patient ratios to ensure that workloads remain manageable while RPNs continue to achieve optimal care for their patients. Regulating how many nurses are employed in a given healthcare setting by using a professional practice model will ensure that the government can achieve its important goal of providing four hours of care per resident per day by 2025 without exacerbating the workplace culture and safety challenges already impacting RPNs. Legislated nurse-to-patient ratios will promote a culture of safety for the patient, resident and nurse. This in turn will help alleviate the moral distress that is causing significant burnout among RPNs and build a workplace culture that attracts the best and brightest to nursing for many years to come.

There is already significant evidence demonstrating the positive benefits of legislated nurse-to-patient ratios, not only for nurses, but for patients and health systems as well. A study carried out by the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing found that Queensland's ratio system in Australia saved the lives of 145 patients in the first year. It also helped to avoid 255 readmissions and 29,200 hospital days, saving the state government between \$55 million and \$83 million in one year alone.

British Columbia recently passed similar legislation which would provide a good case study to inform the basis for these policy solutions in Ontario. The new ratios in B.C. are meant to improve patient care, reduce nurses' workloads, increase safety and keep nurses in the healthcare system, which are key priorities for RPNs and the government of Ontario as well.

³ The Lancet "[Effects of nurse-to-patient ratio legislation on nurse staffing and patient mortality, readmissions, and length of stay: a prospective study in a panel of hospitals.](#)" May 2021.

Practical Solution Three – Greater Educational Opportunities

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. These actions will also support our collective efforts to recruit new nurses to the profession. 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 combination of hard work, perseverance, and continuing education that teaches them the skills they need to thrive with a greater level of knowledge, allowing them to provide specialized care. WeRPN is pleased to recommend some additional actions that will expand educational opportunities to support successful recruitment in 2024.

Solution Three: Enhance Opportunities and Access in the Nursing/Learning Continuum

To support the growth in all categories of nurse to meet the growing needs of our health system, it is essential to bolster accessibility of nursing education across the province. This means growing the number of seats in practical nursing programs, developing more streamlined pathways for RPNs who wish to become RNs and allocating increased funding for preceptors.

To support the ongoing retention of RPNs, it is essential to maintain programs that allow them to gain specialized knowledge and skills to grow their practice. Through the continuation of WeRPN's Nursing Education Initiative, the government is helping to support more RPNs to remain in the profession.

“The BEGIN program is the reason I am working as an RPN today. Without the support it offered I couldn't have afforded the additional education I needed to get to this point. As I continue in my career, I hope there will be more opportunities to continue to grow my skills, and that the same opportunities I have will be available to others who follow me into this wonderful profession.”

While some RPNs are interested in bridging to the RN role, there remain barriers to access. The limited spaces, length of bridging programs and lack of recognition of prior experience continue to make this path inaccessible for some RPNs. The government has addressed some of these barriers through investment in WeRPN's Bridging Education in Nursing Grant (BEGIN) program but further effort is needed to streamline bridging education for RPNs who choose this path.

The pivotal role of preceptors is to guide students in merging nursing theory with practical application. The scarcity of preceptors in Ontario poses a risk to the success of government investments in expanding nursing education. It is therefore imperative to address this issue to ensure a seamless learning experience for nursing students. Ontario's colleges, while producing exemplary RPN graduates, grapple with insufficient practice sites and preceptors. Establishing a financial incentive program to encourage RPNs to serve as preceptors is crucial.

By implementing these comprehensive measures, we not only facilitate a more efficient educational process but also address critical aspects such as preceptor availability, ultimately strengthening the nursing workforce and the healthcare system as a whole.

“Working in long-term care is so rewarding, the residents where I work have become a second family to me. That's why it is so hard for me to know that they aren't always getting the care they deserve. At current staffing levels my colleagues and I regularly have to choose between doing what our training teaches us and what we have time for. Between the moral distress this causes and the reality that it will get worse as our population continues to age, I'm just not sure I can keep doing this job.”

Practical Solution Four– Health Spending Efficiency

WeRPN recognizes that our recommendations to further 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 the same place, Ontario taxpayers.

Recognizing that it is a priority of the 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.

Solution Four – Reduce Overreliance on Nursing Agencies

Across our healthcare system, the nursing shortage led many organizations to fill staffing gaps through an overreliance on privately-run nursing agencies. While these agencies do have a role to play in our system when it comes to filling care gaps in an emergency, too many providers have come to rely on these agencies more often than they should. This overreliance presents a significant challenge for our hospitals, long-term care homes and home care operators.

The reality is that nursing agencies charge significantly more on a per hour basis than the cost that would be incurred for the same amount of time with a staff nurse. As a result, budgets within the province’s healthcare system are being consumed by these agencies without seeing any increase in the amount or quality of care being provided. This has created a significant inefficiency of spending within Ontario’s health budgets that must be addressed.

By reducing the overreliance on nursing agencies to fill gaps in staffing we will ensure that the practical solutions outlined above can not only improve the care available to Ontarians but also simultaneously save the health system money through increased efficiency, knowledge retention and greater overall use of taxpayer dollars.



Working Together to Care for Ontarians

There is no solving Ontario’s health human resource challenges without addressing the fundamental issues hindering the retention and recruitment of RPNs. By working to ensure that RPNs have competitive and harmonized wages, introducing legislated staffing ratios, increasing educational opportunities and more efficient health human resource spending we can finally put an end to the most intractable challenge our health system faces. Ontario’s 61,000 RPNs not only want to be a part of the solution, they need to be part of the solution and WeRPN believes that working together will ensure that healthcare transformation can happen in Ontario.

About WeRPN

Founded in 1958, WeRPN champions the critical role of RPNs in Ontario. We work with them to advance understanding of their expertise, drive evidence-based solutions to the challenges they identify and advocate for and lead in the delivery of high-quality care across the health system. RPNs are the second largest group of regulated health professionals in our healthcare system with more than 61,000 of them working across every sector of the health system.

WeRPN is proud to be the voice of registered practical nurses in Ontario.

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