

Canadian nurses' unions urge politicians to crack down on for-profit nursing agencies

BY KELLY GRANT (HEALTH REPORTER)

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Canadian nursing leaders are urging health ministers meeting in Prince Edward Island this week to rein in the use of private, for-profit nursing agencies as they and other health leaders look for ways to solve the human-resources crisis bedevilling the country's medical system.

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) raised the issue, along with other strategies for retaining experienced nurses in the public system, during a meeting with federal Health Minister Mark Holland Wednesday, the first day of a two-day gathering where Mr. Holland and his counterparts were also expected to discuss bilateral deals for health funding.

"Public dollars are going into for-profit agencies and really starving our public-sector employers that are trying to retain their nurses and they can't," Linda Silas, president of the CFNU, said in an interview before the meeting. "It's a no-win situation."

Recruiting nurses, physicians and other health workers and keeping them in the public system is among the top priorities of participants in the Charlottetown meeting, which is scheduled to wrap up Thursday.

The shortage of nurses and physicians that followed the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is at the root of many problems besetting Canada's medical system, including a lack of access to primary care, temporary closings of rural emergency departments and long waits for surgery.

"What is the role that the federal government can play in assisting on what is on everyone's mind, which is health human resources?" Ontario Health Minister Sylvia Jones said, adding that she would like to see Ottawa smooth the immigration pathways for internationally trained health workers who want to practise in Canada.

Ms. Jones said in an interview Wednesday that although a bilateral deal was "close," the Ontario government has not yet reached an agreement with Ottawa on how it will spend new federal money promised in February.

"To be blunt, we were underwhelmed last [February] with the announcement of how much funds were coming to individual provinces and territories," Ms. Jones said. "So we're working through how we can incorporate that into programs that we have put in place or that we have announced and are working toward."

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government offered \$46.2-billion in new health care funding over 10 years, comprised mostly of a modest increase to the Canada Health Transfer and \$25-billion for tailored agreements with each province and territory.

In exchange, Ottawa asked premiers to back a national health data-sharing system and to negotiate one-on-one deals that include commitments to public reporting on whether they're achieving their goals.

Despite the federal offer falling short of premiers' demands, every province and territory but Quebec grudgingly accepted the accord in principle. Quebec balked at the possibility of being held accountable by Ottawa through a one-on-one deal.

On Tuesday, British Columbia became the first province to announce a bilateral agreement under the accord. The \$1.3-billion, three-year deal includes implementing a new model of care at 83 acute-care sites in B.C. that would allow nurses to spend more time with patients; expanding mental-health and addictions services for youth; and increasing to 75 per cent the share of patients in the province with access to their own electronic health information.

Canadian Medical Association President Kathleen Ross, who was also in Charlottetown for the health ministers' meeting, emphasized that family doctors need support to work in teams with colleagues such as nurses, physiotherapists and social workers.

"In this time of economic struggles in all jurisdictions across Canada, asking for more money and more money repeatedly, it's not going to land well," Dr. Ross said. "Our focus needs to be on reforming how we deliver care."

Ms. Silas of the CFNU said concerns about cash-strapped hospitals and long-term care homes spending tax dollars on for-profit nursing agencies prompted her organization to launch a study of the industry in Canada, led by Queen's University nursing professor Joan Almost.

Dr. Almost, whose research is just getting underway, is scheduled to address health ministers Thursday morning.