

Hospital Employees' Union (HEU) Submission for the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services Budget Consultation 2024

Recommendations

Restore common standards for working and caring conditions in seniors' care homes in order to recruit new workers, retain experienced staff and promote continuity of care for residents.

HEU supports the B.C. government's recent improvements to seniors' care including training and hiring of more workers and extending pandemic-related wage levelling in long-term care and assisted living beyond the expiry of related public health orders in December 2022.

In addition to these measures, HEU urges the government to deliver on its long-standing commitment to restore common standards in the sector by:

- ensuring that benefits, pension plans, sick leave, and measures related to working and caring conditions also match the applicable B.C. public sector collective agreement; and
- ending the sub-contracting of care and support services.

Two decades of privatization and sub-contracting in seniors' care resulted in a fragmented workforce subject to a wide range of working and caring conditions. Levelled up wages during the pandemic were needed to ensure low wage employers could retain staff when public health officials restricted workers to a single site.

And while wages continue to be levelled up, benefits and working conditions vary widely across seniors' care.

For HEU members working in long-term care outside of the public sector collective agreement, annual paid sick leave is typically limited to five to seven days and retirement savings plans are paltry and inadequate. This contrasts to 18 days of annual sick leave and enrollment into the Municipal Pension Plan for their counterparts covered by the public sector collective agreement. These inequities put workers and residents at risk and undermine recruitment and retention efforts.

Ending sub-contracting and establishing common wages, benefits, and working conditions in seniors' care is critical to improving worker recruitment and retention. It will prevent workers from having to hold more than one job and will reduce the 'churn' of staff moving from employment with inferior to superior remuneration and working conditions. Stable employment for workers improves the quality and continuity of care for residents.

Improve transparency and accountability in long-term care

HEU strongly supports action towards the government's commitment to build more public long-term care homes and improve accountability for private operators. The long-term care sector has shifted significantly away from public and non-profit to for-profit ownership. Currently, one in three long-term care facilities are for-profit companies, and there is high and increasing corporate chain consolidation in

the sector. This is the result of legislation that has encouraged privatization and allowed operators to remove themselves from the public sector collective agreement. Limited access to capital funding and technical support to develop or expand long-term care homes further disadvantages non-profit and smaller-scale operators.

Too many for-profit operators prioritize profit-making at the expense of quality caring and working conditions. The B.C. Seniors Advocate's *Billion Reasons to Care* report highlighted how for-profit operators' expenditures for wages and direct care hours were far below that of non-profit operators. For-profit operators also claimed more expenses and higher profit margins. The report also revealed issues with financial transparency, oversight, and accountability in the long-term care sector.

It is time to re-establish balance in the ownership patterns in long-term care and improve the transparency and accountability of contracted operators by:

- guaranteeing all new long-term care builds are public or non-profit facilities;
- developing a capital building program with access to public financing and capital funding grants to help non-commercial providers build and renovate more seniors' care homes;
- creating a standardized funding approach across health authorities and ownership types;
- requiring that funding for direct care is spent on direct care or that surplus funds are returned to the health authority, and strictly defining operator profit and eligible appropriate expenses;
- developing accurate, verifiable, and standardized reporting for direct care hours, and monitoring and enforcing staffing levels; and
- enhancing government oversight and public reporting of facility-level financial information including expenditures and profits.

Invest in promising practices to aid recruitment and retention

There is a major staffing crisis occurring in the health and seniors' care sectors, amplified by pandemic impacts. Increasingly fewer people are wanting to work in these sectors, particularly in the most demanding jobs. Staffing shortages, heavy workloads, and a lack of support means that too many new hires become overwhelmed and leave the job and existing staff burn out. Improvements are needed to jobs in health and seniors' care to better attract the number of workers needed to ensure patients and residents are able to receive timely and appropriate care.

HEU advocates for forward-thinking recruitment and retention strategies that sustainably grow the health care workforce, provide access to career development opportunities, and improve job stability, financial security, and workplace support by:

- developing a cohesive and equitable approach to career laddering for current health care workers, whether they work for a health authority or for a contracted provider;
- accommodating health care workers to move from one area of health care into another with greater demand without losing years of service, accompanying benefits, and job security;
- creating more permanent and full-time positions;
- establishing mentor positions to provide consistent, high-quality orientation and ongoing peer support and mentoring for key occupations;
- independently evaluating the Health Career Access Program (HCAP) to identify successes and make recommendations to address issues;

- continuing to work with Indigenous partners to recruit more Indigenous workers, improve cultural safety in health care, and establish other best practices to support and retain Indigenous workers;
- exploring innovative solutions to the development of workforce housing; and
- collecting and reporting data on health care worker turnover, sociodemographic information, and work environment and experience to better target recruitment and retention initiatives and address existing issues and gaps.