



**BC NURSES'
UNION**

Standing up for health care

RATIOS

SAVE LIVES

BRIEFING NOTE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

ISSUE

The nurse staffing crisis has had serious consequences for BC's health-care system and the province's population that relies on it. Short-staffing means working conditions for nurses and care conditions for patients both suffer. A BC Nurses' Union member survey conducted in 2024 reported more than 90 percent of nurses work short-staffed at least once a month.

In April 2023, BC became the first province in Canada where government and nurses negotiated minimum nurse-to-patient ratios – a critical policy solution shown in other jurisdictions to be effective at addressing such a staffing shortage. However, the province requires a sustained and effective strategy to support nurse retention and recruitment for the policy to be fully implemented.

All levels of government, including local governments, have policy levers that can contribute to retaining and recruiting the nurses BC needs to ensure everyone has access to the high-quality health care they deserve.

WHY NOW?

Nursing vacancies

> A high number of nursing vacancies continues to be a major barrier to health-care systems being able to provide timely, accessible care to British Columbians in many parts of the province. The latest data from Statistics Canada reports more than 5,000 nurse vacancies across the province.

Emergency room closures

> Temporary closures of emergency rooms are one of the serious results of the health-care staffing shortage. They mean patients commuting further and waiting longer for care, particularly across the Interior, Vancouver Island and the North, where there are often long distances to the next-closest facility.

Health and safety risks

> Far too many nurses in BC report frequent experiences of verbal and physical violence, as well as exposures to illicit substances and weapons. The vast majority of nurses report

working short-staffed at least once a month, a problem that can contribute to the frequency and severity of these health and safety risks, as well as increase risks to patient safety.

Nurse retention concerns

> More than a third of nurses in BC say they are seriously considering leaving the profession or are already making plans to do so.

Skyrocketing spending on agency nursing

> Health employers are increasingly filling the staffing gap by spending tens of millions of dollars on for-profit staffing agencies, which result in problems for both nurses and patients. Research has linked the use of agency nurses to increased staff turnover, deterioration of the quality of care, inequities in working conditions and salaries, and destabilization of health-care teams.



BRIEFING NOTE *continued*

WHY RATIOS?

Nurse-patient ratios will give BC a strong, simple, clear mechanism that transparently indicates nurse staffing expectations across the province. There is a wide body of research and evidence from California and Australia clearly demonstrating that minimum nurse-patient ratios present a feasible solution that positively impacts outcomes for patients, nurses and health-care organizations. After the implementation of mandatory minimum nurse-patient ratios:

- > Nursing vacancies in Sacramento, California decreased by 69% within four years.
- > Over 7,000 inactive nurses returned to the workforce in Victoria, Australia.

Benefits to Patients

- > Nurse-patient-ratios have been demonstrated to influence many patient outcomes, including reduced medication errors, restraint use, nosocomial infections and most notably, a measurable and significant reduction in patient mortality. Numerous studies have demonstrated that each additional patient in a nurse's assignment translates to a 7 - 16% increase in risk of death within 30 days.

Benefits to Nurses

- > Minimum nurse-patient ratios have been demonstrated to decrease nurse occupational injuries and illnesses by 31.6%. Using WorkSafe BC data, this translates to a potential savings of approximately \$195 million over a 10-year period, in addition to the savings associated with replacement and turnover costs resulting from nurse injury.

Benefits to the Health-Care System

- > Hospitals across California saw turnover and vacancy rates fall below 5%, well below the national average.
- > In Victoria, Australia, the number of employed nurses grew by 24.1%, with over 7,000 inactive nurses returning to the workforce after the implementation of mandatory minimum nurse-patient ratios.

- > A 2021 study in the Lancet showed a net cost savings associated with the implementation of mandatory nurse-patient ratios: "In addition to producing better outcomes, the costs avoided due to fewer readmissions and shorter length of stay were more than twice the cost of the additional nurse staffing."

WHAT CAN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS DO?

Local governments can play a key role in nurse retention and recruitment by making their communities more attractive to nurses. Nearly half of BC nurses are under 40, and over 90% are women, making local resources that help promote work/life balance essential. Particularly important are investments that make housing, child care, transportation and recreational opportunities more readily available and affordable.

Local governments can also be allies with nurses in advocating to the provincial and federal governments for investments that help retain and recruit nurses and educating the public about minimum nurse-to-patient ratios and what is needed to make them a reality.

CONCLUSION

All levels of government need to be on board for BC to solve the nurse staffing crisis and ensure high-quality health care is available to everyone when they need it. Nurses are committed to working with local governments to maximize the positive impact their actions and policy decisions can have on retaining and recruiting the nurses their communities need.

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