

January 27, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL

The Honourable Paul Calandra, M.P.P.
Minister of Long-Term Care
paul.calandra@pc.ola.org

Dear Minister Calandra,

I would like to congratulate you on your recent appointment as Minister of Long-Term Care. We appreciate that you have reached out to our union. The 15,000 members we represent in this sector have ultimately worked through a humanitarian crisis, one that still exists right across the province.

We understand that the government is taking steps to alleviate the crisis in LTC, including the establishment of a new Long-Term Care Act. Through our position on the Strategic LTC Advisory Table, we have had an opportunity to provide input and raise concerns, but it is important that we communicate these concerns directly to you.

First and foremost, while the move to include a provincial target of four hours of care is commendable, we are gravely concerned that this standard will be completely unenforceable.

Each LTC home should be accountable for this standard and the information should be readily available for the public and enforceable through a Compliance Officer. If this part of the Act is not amended to ensure its enforceability, it will essentially become meaningless. For-profit operators have had the worst outcomes throughout the pandemic, and holding them to account should be a top priority.

We also remain concerned that there has been no effort to genuinely improve wages, benefits, paid sick days and access to full-time work across the sector. Right now I can say with certainty that every LTC home in the province is working short, meaning there is simply not enough staff present at any given time to provide quality care.

Let's be clear: residents are suffering from neglect right now, simply because there are not enough hands.

These working conditions, along with the grossly inadequate compensation, do nothing to attract workers to the sector, let alone retain those who are currently there. Many feel disrespected by both the government and their employers, and are planning to leave the industry as a whole.

Negotiations in the sector are generally led by Bass and Associates and workers are covered under the Hospital Labour Disputes Arbitration Act (HLDAA), which prevents them from legally striking. Suppressing wages has been a priority of these mostly for-profit homes guided by their agents. In the last decade, these workers have not had a wage increase above 1.5%, and were even awarded a two year wage freeze. In real dollars, long-term care workers have seen their wages decline and their purchasing power diminished.

Arbitrators have not been kind to the sector and have blatantly ignored their obligation to consider “The employer’s ability to attract and retain qualified employees” as they are required to do under the Act. Even today at the bargaining table, employers’ offers have not been above 1.5%. There is absolutely no way any union in this sector could ratify a collective agreement with a wage offer that could only be seen as an absolute insult.

These same employers, when desperate, will enhance overtime pay, add temporary wage enhancements, and regularly use agency staff who often earn double what our members earn. Clearly they can afford to negotiate better wages.

This suppression of wages is exactly why LTC homes were in no position to survive a pandemic. We can never forget the thousands of lives lost in LTC, including front line workers, two of whom were Unifor Personal Support Workers. Improving the conditions of work will create an environment that will attract thousands of workers who have left, and in fact allow your government to speed up the implementation of the four hours of care. We can’t wait till 2025.

The temporary wage enhancement for PSW’s, while welcome, should be extended to every worker in the LTC sector and made permanent. These workers have also been denied decades of maintenance of proxy pay equity. The courts have recently determined their right to this maintenance, but the employers will continue to stall implementation, for perhaps years. As Minister on this critical file, we would ask you to stand up for the women in this sector and mandate pay equity immediately.

Registered practical nurses (RPNs) have played an incredible role during the pandemic in every sub-sector of our health care system, but their roles as leaders and direct care providers in LTC has been critical. Yet their compensation falls far below what they would earn in a hospital or municipal home. If you can imagine, there are actually nursing homes where a PSW with the wage enhancement earns almost as much as an RPN. No one denies that the PSWs deserve this enhancement, but so do the nurses and every other worker in LTC who have been covered under emergency orders that supersede their collective agreement rights.

I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and representatives of our leadership to discuss these issues at your earliest convenience. We would also appreciate an opportunity for a meeting with front-line LTC RPN’s to discuss their important work.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerry Dias". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jerry" and last name "Dias" clearly legible.

Jerry Dias
Unifor National President

cc. Fadi Dawood, Katha Fortier, Andy Savela.

JD/klcpe343