

Addressing the Staffing Emergency in Long-Term Care in Canada

Submission to the Standing Committee on Human
Resources, Skills and Social Development and the
Status of Persons with Disabilities

Study on Labour Shortages, Working Conditions
and the Care Economy



Canadian Association
for Long Term Care
Association canadienne
des soins de longue durée

Summary

The long-term care sector in Canada is once again facing an emergency situation due to staffing shortages. While health human resource challenges are not new for long-term care homes, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the situation. When combined with decades of underfunding, outdated infrastructure and a lack of quality data, already stretched staff must go above and beyond to provide care in extraordinarily challenging circumstances.

The pandemic has helped shine a light on these problems, and governments around the country have mobilized in response. There have been investments in upgrading existing homes and building new homes, as well as reforms to regulations aimed at improving care, including increasing hours of mandated direct care.

These are positive and needed investments, however the underlying problem of staffing shortages remains and becomes more difficult to manage. The more long-term care beds that are built, the more trained professionals required to staff them. The more direct care that provinces and territories mandate be delivered, the more staff required to deliver that care. New infrastructure and increased hours of care are needed, but without an aggressive recruitment strategy that supports these investments, long term care homes may be left without the ability to fully operationalize new beds or hours of care.

Throughout the pandemic, provincial governments in Canada have addressed their own shortages by developing recruitment and retention incentives, however these risk moving the problem either from one health care sector to another, or from one province to another rather than expanding the capacity and pool of staff.

With an aging population, it is clear the demand on our health and long-term care system will only grow in the decade ahead. Not only do we need to address our current staffing crisis, but we need to develop clear and deliberate plans to expand the workforce for future need.

A pan-Canadian approach is needed to ensure the framework is in place to improve health human resources capacity. This includes improving our domestic workforce pipeline through improving education and training opportunities, easing the barriers to international recruitment and ensuring strategies are in place to keep skilled and experienced professionals employed in the health sector.

As the national body for long-term care operators, the Canadian Association for Long-Term Care (CALTC) has been advocating for urgent and coordinated action.

CALTC is calling on the federal government to work with provincial and territorial governments, health and educational stakeholders, and the long term care sector itself to develop a pan-Canadian health human resources strategy that addresses current and future needs and ensures all Canadians have access to quality long-term care.



The Scope of the Problem

The most current data from Statistics Canada indicates that in the fourth quarter of 2021, there were more than 35,000 vacant jobs in long-term care, nursing and residential care homes across Canada. This is an increase of 10,000 since the first quarter of 2021.¹ This is an unsustainable situation for the sector.

These vacancies and the staffing shortages affect every province and territory. For example, there are 3400 vacant positions in care homes in British Columbia, which has nearly tripled over the last five years. In January 2022, 19% of long-term care homes in Nova Scotia had closed admissions due to lack of staffing.²

We also know that as our population continues to age, this not only brings an expectation for increasing demand for long term care beds, but also an expectation that the long-term care workforce itself will face an unprecedented number of retirements over the next decade. For example, in Ontario, the report from the Long-Term Care Staffing Study conducted in 2020 stated that 25% of the 50,000 PSWs that work in LTC are in their mid-fifties.³ The same study called the staffing situation a “crisis” and the situation has only grown worse.

Canada is not alone in these challenges. Among OECD countries, it can be projected that number of employees in the long-term care sector will need to increase by 13.5 million by 2040.⁴ This is an important consideration in how Canada will attract skilled immigrants in the context of global competition.

¹ “Table 14-10-0326-02 Job vacancies, payroll employees, job vacancy rate, and average offered hourly wage by industry sub-sector, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality,” Statistics Canada, <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410032601-eng>

² “Impacts of Staffing Shortages in Long-Term Care,” *Standing Committee on Health, Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, <https://nslegislature.ca/legislative-business/committees/standing/health/archive/health/he2022jan11>

³ “The Long-Term Care Staffing Study,” *Long-Term Care Staffing Study Advisory Group, Ontario*, <https://files.ontario.ca/mltc-long-term-care-staffing-study-en-2020-07-31.pdf>

⁴ “Who Cares? Attracting and Retaining Care Workers for the Elderly,” OECD, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1787/92c0ef68-en>



Domestic Workforce Development

The long-term solution to Canada's health human resources crisis has to be through a sustainable pipeline of health professionals developed through quality education and training. Canada's existing educational structure does not have the capacity to meet the needs of the future, nor is it built to provide immediate support to the health and long-term care system.

Additionally, addressing the negative public perception of work in certain health professions should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Ontario's 2020 Long-Term Care Staffing Study identified the "social devaluing of elders and elder care" as a factor in the perception that long-term care was seen as a less desirable career choice than acute care. All stakeholders will need to work together to address these perception issues in order to develop better recruitment programs.

As it takes years to fully train health care professionals, it is critical this work begins now to ensure our pipeline keeps pace with the growth in demand.

Actions that can be taken to develop the domestic health workforce include:

- 1.** Reducing education waitlists by addressing barriers to accepting qualified candidates into health programs, for example class sizes being limited by a shortfall in funding to universities for nursing programs;
- 2.** Providing dedicated funding to expand health educational programs at colleges and universities, especially for nurses and PSWs;
- 3.** Investigating, developing and introducing new models of education and training, for example apprenticeship training for PSWs, which sees candidates gaining valuable on the job training while completing their education;
- 4.** Developing more robust data on the state of the current health workforce;
- 5.** Developing more robust data on the graduation rates from health educational programs;
- 6.** Developing more robust data on the state of waitlists for health education programs at universities and colleges; and,
- 7.** Promoting positions in high-need sectors including long-term care to challenge misconceptions and preconceived notions about work in long-term care and battle ageist attitudes which undervalue elder care.



International Workforce Development

Training a health care professional takes time and the need to address is a real and present concern. The government's recent announcement to relax restrictions on the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is an example of immediate action that can be taken to address urgent need.

Canada faces stiff global competition for internationally trained health professionals and other nations have already taken action to streamline their immigration processes in an attempt to become more appealing destinations. Improving the processes through which Canada attracts global talent will be critical to addressing short-term crises, while helping to grow our health workforce for the future.

Additionally, research has shown that a significant percentage of Canada's foreign trained workforce working in long-term care are overqualified for their roles, but unable to have their credentials recognized.⁵

The Supervised Practice Experience Partnership program in Ontario is a clear example of how steps can be taken to improve the process.⁶ Introduced by the College of Nurses of Ontario as a bridging program to help qualified candidates work in the field while obtaining the final requirements for registration, it illustrates how we can utilize the skills of internationally trained health practitioners to address current needs in the system while building for the future.

Clear action can be taken on streamlining immigration processes for other programs as well as supporting potential employers and communities who have no experience in navigating the complex system.

This can be accomplished through:

- 1.** Streamlining processes in all immigration programs for internationally trained health professionals to improve the time from recruitment to starting a new job;
- 2.** Prioritizing internationally trained health professionals for skilled immigration positions;
- 3.** Redeveloping the TEER system and ensure Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are re-classified to allow for express entry;

⁵ "Filling the Care Gap", *The Global Ageing Network*, https://leadingage.org/sites/default/files/LA_SodexoReport2018_Digital_r2.pdf

⁶ "Moving Nurse Applicants into the System: College of Nurses partners with Ontario Health," *College of Nurses of Ontario*, 11 January 2022, <https://www.cno.org/en/news/2022/february-2022/moving-nursing-applicants-into-the-system/>



4. Developing support programs for employers and communities in high need sectors and regions who have little or no experience in hiring international professionals to improve recruitment; and,
5. Working with regulatory colleges in their recognition of foreign credentials to streamline registration requirements and establish improved bridging programs for internationally trained health professionals.

Improving Retention

Even as investment is made in the development of the future health workforce in Canada, it will be critical to ensure employers are able to support and retain existing employees.

Throughout the pandemic, Canadians have faced significant mental health challenges, and this has been especially true for front-line health workers.⁷ The increased stress associated with providing care during the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant staffing pressures and challenging workplace conditions, contributed to experiences of high stress and burnout. While addressing staffing shortages will alleviate some of the pressure on overstretched staff, there remains more that can be done to support staff and particularly their mental health.

At this time, long-term care employers are largely responsible for providing mental health programming to staff without additional resourcing from government. Supporting employers and employees with additional targeted mental health resources, will help ensure the health and long-term care sectors.

To support employee retention efforts, the following action can be taken:

1. Developing sector specific mental health resources for all health care sectors; and,
2. Providing targeted funding to health and long-term care employers to provide mental health support for all employees.

⁷ "Promising Practices for Supporting Long-Term Care Provider Resilience," *Healthcare Excellence Canada*
https://www.healthcareexcellence.ca/media/amycqp4n/20211004_promisingpracticesforsupportingltcproviderresilience.pdf



Summary of Recommendations

- Develop a pan-Canadian Health Human Resources Strategy in coordination with the provinces, territories and health stakeholders.
- Reduce education waitlists by addressing barriers to accepting qualified candidates into health programs, for example class sizes being limited by a shortfall in funding to universities for nursing programs.
- Dedicate funding to expand health educational programs at colleges and universities, especially for nurses and PSWs.
- Investigate, develop and introduce new models of education and training, for example apprenticeship training for PSWs, which sees candidates gaining valuable on the job training while completing their education.
- Develop more robust data on the state of the current health workforce.
- Develop more robust data on the graduation rates from health educational programs.
- Develop more robust data on the state of waitlists for health education programs at universities and colleges.
- Promote positions in high-need sectors including long-term care to challenge misconceptions and preconceived notions about work in long-term care and battle ageist attitudes which undervalue elder care.
- Streamline processes in all immigration programs for internationally trained health professionals to improve the time from recruitment to starting a new job.
- Prioritize internationally trained health professionals for skilled immigration positions.
- Redevelop the TEER system and ensure Personal Support Workers (PSWs) are re-classified to allow for express entry.



- Develop support programs for employers and communities in high need sectors and regions who have little or no experience in hiring international professionals to improve recruitment.
- Work with regulatory colleges in their recognition of foreign credentials to streamline registration requirements and establish improved bridging programs for internationally trained health professionals.
- Develop sector specific mental health resources for all health care sectors.
- Provide targeted funding to health and long-term care employers to provide mental health support for all employees.

About the Canadian Association for Long Term Care

CALTC is the national association representing long-term care operators in Canada. Our membership includes provincial associations, public, private and faith-based organizations. Our mission is to advocate on behalf of seniors at the federal level and share knowledge, insights, and best practices to ensure seniors can live and age with dignity to achieve our vision of *quality long-term care for all*.



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