

One of the strongest protections for Ontarians is to keep health-care workers healthy and working during COVID-19 Pandemic

Toronto - March 13, 2020: Ontarians know that they can count on the commitment of the province's health-care workers to provide the best and safest care possible under challenging conditions, including under the current Pandemic COVID-19 outbreak. This is why nurses and other front-line health-care workers are calling on the Ontario Government to ensure health-care staff – and their patients – are kept safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, say the unions that represent more than 250,000 health-care sector workers in Ontario.

Patient care is the priority, but the unions say, health-care staff can only do that if they themselves stay healthy in order to continue to provide high-quality care. Front-line members are telling their respective unions that that personal protective equipment supplies are not readily available in some workplaces. It is imperative that front-line health-care staff have complete confidence in their own safety and access to full protective equipment and training in order to do the best for patients.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak spread to Ontario, the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA), the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU) of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) have been urging the government and health-care workplaces that *all* precautions must be followed, and protocols for personal protective equipment for registered nurses and health-care workers must be implemented. Staff must be fully trained, equipped and supported.

Following a leaked document that showed the government is watering down guidelines regarding the appropriate level of personal protective equipment for front-line health-care workers, the union leaders released a joint statement yesterday (<https://ochu.on.ca/2020/03/11/health-care-unions-call-for-honest-frank-collaboration-from-ontario-government-regarding-covid-19-protection-for-health-care-workers/>). The unions say they are deeply concerned about the lax guidelines issued and scarce availability and appropriateness of personal protective equipment (PPE) for protection during the pandemic.

Many Ontario health-care staff have lived through SARS and learned many lessons about infection control and best practices, and they have solutions and want collaboration and frankness with government during this difficult period, say the unions.

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Quotes from Four Health-Care Union Leaders

“As we learned all too well during SARS, without clear scientific evidence about transmission, every precaution must be taken to protect all front-line nurses and health-care workers,” says ONA President Vicki McKenna, RN. “When the science is conflicting regarding transmission of this virus, and dismissing our concerns risks repeating what happened during SARS – further spread and the death of two registered nurses – we simply cannot let history repeat itself.”

OCHU/CUPE President Michael Hurley is urging the province to apply the precautionary principle and treat “COVID-19 as though transmission is airborne, which is a position supported by many credible, respected medical and infectious disease organizations. We must also ensure that there is a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment for health staff from nurses at the bedside to cleaners fighting infection. Our front-line members tell us that PPE supplies are not readily available in some workplaces. As this crisis deepens, it will be critical for the safety of the people who receive care that the health staff don’t get sick themselves.”

OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas says front-line health care workers need to be supported. “The government must provide the necessary tools and resources for our front line health care workers to protect and care for Ontarians during the COVID-19 crisis. I call on the Ford government to ensure these tools are made immediately available.”

“As the number of COVID-19 cases continues to grow, it is time for the Ontario government to stop issuing recommendations, and instead work with us to create clear and mandatory directions to all healthcare providers,” says SEIU Healthcare President Sharleen Stewart. “Without that much-needed consistency, frontline healthcare workers, their families, and the people they care for, will continue to be put at risk.”