

MEDIA STATEMENT: Health-Care Unions Call for Honest, Frank Collaboration from Ontario Government Regarding COVID-19 Protection for Health-Care Workers

Toronto - March 11, 2020: The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA), the Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) are calling for honest and frank collaboration with the Government of Ontario regarding guidelines for COVID-19 protection for health-care workers – and their patients – during the World Health Organization-declared pandemic.

A leaked document shows that the province is watering down guidelines regarding the level of personal protective equipment for front-line health-care workers. The unions say the precautionary principle – to err on the side of caution in protecting workers – must continue to be followed.

ONA, OCHU/CUPE, OPSEU and SEIU say the science is not clear regarding the droplet-versus-airborne spread of COVID-19 and believe the government is repeating mistakes made during SARS. With conflicting scientific evidence of how COVID-19 is spread, the precautionary principle – to err on the side of caution – must be followed, say the leaders. If there is a shortage of personal protective equipment that will impact front-line health-care workers, union leaders believe they can work with authorities to ensure the use of administrative measures and engineering controls to protect workers.

The vast majority of health-care workers impacted by the guidelines are female. The unions note that first responders, notably, the male-dominated EMS workers, currently have access to proper personal protective equipment even as they transport patients to unprotected female-dominated professionals in our hospitals.

ONA, OCHU/CUPE, OPSEU and SEIU jointly represent more than one-quarter of a million health-care workers in Ontario, who are dedicated to providing care and services to Ontarians during this pandemic. It is imperative that all organizations and government work collaboratively to protect health-care workers and their patients from the spread of COVID-19. If health-care workers are safe and free of disease because they are protected, then it is safe for the public to access health care.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak spread to Ontario, all health-care unions have been urging the government and health-care workplaces that all precautions must be followed, and protocols for personal protective equipment (PPE) for all nurses and all health-care workers must be implemented. Staff must be fully trained, equipped and supported. We are counting on the government to do the right thing.

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