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Health Human Resources: Addressing Staffing Shortages in Long-Term Care

Staffing shortages have continued to grow in long-term care and is for many homes an emergency situation as the demand for long-term care increases and new beds are built across Canada. This is a situation that predated the pandemic, but were exacerbated by the experiences throughout the pandemic.

A long-term care home is exactly that – a home for residents. Day-in, day-out staff work to support residents who face a wide spectrum of health challenges and provide a home environment for the later stages of a resident’s life. The personal nature of the job is what makes the job rewarding, but also challenging.

As long term care homes continue to navigate past the height of the pandemic, staff in long term care who worked through the most intense waves of the pandemic have faced issues of burnout and the need for on-going mental health support. The extraordinary work done by long-term care staff, operators, public health and respective governments has seen vast improvements in the protection afforded homes since early in the pandemic, but recruitment and retention remain a challenge.

Long-term care homes rely on a wide mix of skills from health professionals such as nurses and PSWs, to administrative and support staff including nutrition managers and cooks, recreation program managers, cleaning, and laundry staff. The acute staffing crisis affects all these areas and unless action is taken, the problem will only grow more acute as new beds are built to

support an aging population and growing demand.

It is clear that the current system for education and training does not support long-term workforce planning for the health and long-term care sectors. Shortages across all areas of the Canadian Health System reflect a lack of data and planning for future need. Establishing improved workforce data, considering factors such as workforce age and expected retirement timelines, is crucial to laying a foundation for long-term workforce planning. Improved workforce data can be compared to demographic and health data to understand how to meet the expected future demand for care, particularly as Canada’s population ages, lives longer and develops more complex health conditions.

CALTC has engaged with the federal government to address health human resources issues in the long-term care sector, including participation in the Health Canada Coalition for Action for Healthcare Workers. CALTC and its members are committed to partnering with the federal and provincial governments to find solutions to the health human resources crisis.

Recruitment

Canada's long-term care sector needs an urgent injection of new staff as well as a long-term plan for recruitment that will ensure the sustainability of the sector. It is the position of CALTC and its members that several actions can be taken in the short and long-term to improve recruitment in the long-term care sector. Some of these actions, particularly in regard to immigration, are completely within the power of the federal government. Other recommendations require collaboration between the federal government, provincial governments and long-term care stakeholders.

Immigration

Many of the roles in long-term care homes are highly skilled and require the completion of college and university education programs. This means that filling roles in long-term care can take years if we rely purely on developing a domestic workforce pipeline. The current situation is urgent and with new beds being built on a regular basis and increasing demand for long-term care due to an aging population, the need for staff is only growing and is often being addressed with emergency responses such as utilizing staffing agencies or closing beds to reduce staffing numbers needed. One avenue to address the crisis in the short-term is increasing the pool of health care professionals through immigration.

CALTC supports ethical immigration of health care professionals as per the WHO's Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel. CALTC supports the development of a Canadian framework for ethical immigration practices within long term care and the greater healthcare system. This includes workplace equality of gendered and racialized immigrants, support for utilization of professional skills, and support for transition and integration into the workforce. There is also an opportunity to recruit through the Economic Mobility Pathway Program with skilled refugees who are healthcare professionals.

The experiences of long-term care home operators to date with welcoming newcomers to their workforce has offered an important insight into the need for settlement supports. Although these types of services are offered through organizations that are focused to support newcomers, their services are often not available in rural/remote communities, or limited in urban settings due to growing demand. As a result, many long-term care employers are supporting settlement activities such as, housing, transportation, credential recognition support, and various aspects of training. Settlement support for newcomers is essential to retention of valuable workers, but support of these employers is needed with added funding and expert resources. Making settlement funding available to long term care employers is needed to support related expenses for the newcomer employee and possibly their family to ensure that immigration is a variable option for long term care homes to use for workforce recruitment.

CALTC is proposing the federal government:

- Acknowledging the efforts made by the Federal government to date to prioritize Internationally educated nurses and recognizing personal support workers as skilled workers through the TEER/NOC, as a next step, significantly increase the number of annual work visas granted to internationally educated health care professionals who are seeking employment in long term care, and ensure there is a pathway to citizenship for skilled professionals.
- Expand the Employment Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP) and develop a funding envelope for employers to invest in settlement supports funding for eligible individuals.
- Continue to invest in improvements to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada processing times, to ensure skilled workers can obtain visas quickly.

Professional College Registration Requirements

The provincial and territorial regulatory college system has created barriers to entry for internationally educated health care professionals. Canada competes for skilled workers and the fragmented regulatory college system has created challenges not shared by similar nations, such as the UK and Australia, where most registration is completed at a national level.

CALTC is proposing the federal government continue to work with the provinces, national health associations and regulatory colleges to:

- Streamline requirements for internationally educated health professionals, so there is a unified credential recognition process across provinces and territories.
- Ensure opportunities are provided for internationally educated professionals to either have their qualifications recognized or participate in bridging programs to meet the requirements for registration.
- Address labour mobility barriers between provinces and territories, with an acceptable standard of registration/ licensing accepted interprovincially and Territories.

Domestic Education and Training

While urgent action is needed, the federal and provincial governments and health stakeholders also needs to plan more effectively for future staffing needs. Canada's population is aging, demand for long-term care is increasing, provincial governments are increasing mandated hours of care, and there will be a need both for more beds and more staff to care for residents in the future. This requires a dedicated and creative long-term plan to ensure the supply of new staff is commensurate with the increasing demand. A domestic workforce development strategy is needed to understand through metrics and targets who is working in long-term care now, projected retirements and projected demand for the future; what training capacity exists in Canada, how do we support broader capacity for colleges and universities, improving healthcare education for any role be accessible and affordable for students, and how do we keep support employees to have career development opportunities through career laddering.

CALTC is proposing the federal government work with provincial governments, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies and national health associations to build a domestic workforce strategy, that uses metrics to build workforce projections, and support the following:

- Develop, fund, and implement plans to increase the number of annual places for nurses, PSWs and care professional degree, diploma and certificate programs.
- Develop, fund, and implement plans to increase the number of degrees, diploma and certificate programs with "on the job" workplace training placements which allows students to obtain academic credit, while providing additional staffing resources to long-term care homes.
- Enable long term care homes to host clinical training and preceptorships, which would support increasing the number of nursing program places, while ensuring a broader base of training in geriatrics across nursing education programs.

Sector Promotion

The extraordinary challenges faced by long-term care homes during the early waves of the COVID-19 pandemic were front page news across national, regional and local papers. The damage to the sector's reputation and the influence it had on discouraging potential staff for applying to jobs is incalculable. Recruiting staff will rely on marketing the positive opportunities in long term care.

CALTC is proposing the federal government work with provincial governments, long-term care homes, universities and colleges to:

- Promote careers in long-term care through marketing campaigns targeted at high school, college and university students.
- Promote nursing career opportunities in long-term care to men and gender diverse population.

Retention

Even as the long-term care sector looks to recruit new staff, long-term care homes must continue to ensure they retain the staff who currently work in homes. Retention has been a considerable problem as a result of the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic and decades of underfunding in the long-term care sector. It is important that employee access to mental health supports and resources are available across Canada in a consistent way. In addition, long term care homes are facing a significant number of employees who are reaching retirement age, without a succession plan to replace them.

CALTC is proposing the federal government:

- Continue to invest in the Wellness Together Canada initiative with funding to produce sector specific resources aimed at providing mental health support for front line health care workers.
- Ensure funding through the Canada Health Transfer or alternative bilateral agreements is at an appropriate level that homes can provide enhanced workplace benefits to staff.

Career Pathways

Building a successful culture and welcoming environment for staff includes offering opportunities for career advancement, which is also essential for retention. Increasing opportunities for staff to grow in their roles, access educational opportunities, develop skills and earn promotions in pay is critical to retaining staff over the long term.

CALTC is proposing the federal government work with provincial governments, universities, colleges, regulatory bodies and national health associations to:

- Further develop bridging programs which allow staff who have completed a diploma or certificate to have their previous academic credits and workplace experience count as credit towards a full degree program.
- Develop and fund dedicated professional development courses for long-term care staff.
- Expand the nursing retention tool kit to specifically consider the long term care sector workforce.

About CALTC

The Canadian Association for Long Term Care (CALTC) is the national voice of long-term care, delivering resident-centred care services to seniors across Canada when they can no longer live at home. Since its inception in 2002, CALTC has been working together to share information, best practices, and evidence to improve the quality of care provided to residents in long-term care, no matter where they live.

