

June 14, 2020

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Hon. Scott Fielding  
Minister of Finance  
Room 103, Legislative Building  
450 Broadway, Winnipeg, MB  
R3C 0V8

Dear Minister Fielding,

At the request of the Finance department, MNU has on multiple occasions offered clear and consistent recommendations on the administration of the so-called Risk Recognition Program as it applies to nurses.

Our position has been clear: if the fund is intended to support lower-income earners, nurses would never stand in the way of that. Throughout the consultation process, we sought clarification on government's intended purpose of the fund. Our question was not answered until the program was announced on June 2 as a support for lower-income workers with an income threshold.

As caregivers and advocates, nurses are certainly supportive of government efforts to support less fortunate Manitobans, particularly during these challenging times. Government has announced that this program has been established to do that, and we're supportive of that fundamental goal.

MNU also believes nurses are deserving of recognition for their service to Manitobans. These two realities need not be put in conflict with each other. Several provincial governments have taken steps to do both through separate initiatives. Manitoba can take this approach as well—it's simply a matter of deciding to do so. If government's intent is to expand its recognition efforts, they should implement a program designed to actually reach those workers appropriately.

We are troubled by your government's approach to administering \$120 million dollars in taxpayer money. Though health care is stated to be one of the key sectors targeted by this program, the criteria do not appropriately reflect the diversity of the health care workforce. Instead, the program employs a one-size-fits-all approach with an arbitrary set of rules, determined by a crude and unusual voting scheme.

If nurses and other health care workers are to be recognized, an hourly top up is the fairest and most appropriate way to administer recognition pay. As it applies to nurses and many other health care workers, the current minimum hours threshold set out in the Risk Recognition Program is problematic.

Health care has always relied upon a large percentage of part time and casual workers to accommodate the reality of 24-7 scheduling. Furthermore, many nurses and other health care workers often choose to work less than full time to balance family needs. Given these factors, imposing an arbitrary hours threshold combined with an income cap creates a system that simply doesn't work in health care. Applied to nurses, it rewards only those working a very specific number of part time hours. Many nurses who work part time or casual still fall short of the threshold even though they face the same challenges

as their colleagues. To make matters worse, those who work full time are currently considered ineligible for working *too many* hours to qualify, which clearly does not make sense for a 'Risk Recognition' program.

Adding insult to injury, nurses heard government announce they were eligible for the fund, but quickly learned that only a tiny fraction--in our estimation less than 1%--could possibly qualify. RNs, RPNs, and NPs could not qualify in any circumstance but were listed nonetheless, causing significant and needless frustration among nurses across the province.

As the fund applies to LPNs, the very small number that are currently eligible would have to work no more than 228 hours (for a starting LPN) over the 10-week period. Any more and they are excluded. In the most egregious case, a Year 4 LPN would have to work *exactly 200 hours* to qualify for the program. 199 hours would fall short of the hours threshold, but 201 hours puts them over the income cap.

Naming but excluding the vast majority of nurses, and imposing a tiny window of eligibility for an arbitrary few, is entirely unreasonable and inappropriate. After the program details were released, we immediately called for a correction of these errors and clarification on nurses' eligibility. Again, your government refused to respond.

Under the new proposals, government has made clear that they are okay with maintaining this system, or simply raising the cap, which would include more nurses, but still arbitrarily excludes many and denies *any* full-time nurse recognition. This is, simply put, a backwards approach to policy making. It's apparent that this program was never designed with nurses or health care workers in mind.

At this point, we are left with the unfortunate conclusion that the Pallister government's approach to these consultations as applied to nurses are at best negligent in considering basic factors in health care, and at worst specifically designed to sow frustration among the same workforce that was repeatedly celebrated as "heroes" of the COVID-19 response.

Government can and should take appropriate steps to recognize nurses and show them respect that has been lacking for years. Nurses have worked under an expired contract for three years, and without a pay raise in four. Meaningful steps to restore the relationship with nurses must be taken.

We remain open to further discussions on how to recognize nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic and we again call on government to stop creating delays in the negotiation of a new, fair collective agreement for Manitoba's nurses. However, given that government has refused to address the obvious issues or accept any of the key recommendations we've brought forward, MNU continues to have serious concerns about this program's application to nurses.

Respectfully,



Darlene Jackson  
President  
Manitoba Nurses Union

CC: Hon. Brian Pallister, Premier  
Richard Groen, Deputy Finance Minister