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**COVID-19 infections among Ontario health care workers spike**

***Release more N95 masks, other protections before it’s too late to curb spread***

**TORONTO, ON** - The fight against the spread of COVID-19 hinges on Ontario hospital and long-term care, home care workers and paramedics not contracting the virus in large numbers, so that they can care for the sick across the province.  But already dozens of health care staff have COVID-19. This includes one who is very ill with the virus contracted at a home where residents have died from coronavirus.

Recent member polling and information gathering by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) -which represents about 90,000 health care staff in Ontario shows that masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) are being rationed at their workplaces, locked up or in some cases being denied to them entirely. Seventy (70%) per cent of CUPE’s 2400 hospital sector members said that the Ontario government is not doing enough to protect them or the people they care for.

“Health care workers rise each day and meet the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, at risk to their own health and that of their families. All that they ask is that they be given adequate protection,” **says** Michael Hurley president of CUPE’s Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU/CUPE).

In Italy and in Spain more than 10 per cent of health care workers are now infected, following safety protocols like Ontario’s and with similar equipment shortages. Hurley is urging “the Ontario government to revise its protocols on safety and release its stockpile of expired N95 masks immediately, across the healthcare system. Every day that equipment is rationed, and staff become infected, they can infect other staff and more importantly, very vulnerable hospital patients and long-term care residents. Immediate action can make all the difference now.”

Following the SARS Royal Commission recommendation, Ontario stockpiled 55 million N95 masks, but allowed that stock to expire and did not replenish it. Some masks have been destroyed. Now there are just under a million of these N95 masks that may be earmarked for use outside the health sector. The N95 mask is recommended for use on viruses that *could* be airborne. Many respected organizations call for health care workers who some into direct contact with suspected or actual COVID-19 cases to take airborne precautions, including an N95 mask. Ontario changed its policy on the airborne nature of the virus when it became clear it does not have enough masks.

“Let’s not squander the small window of opportunity we have left to flatten the COVID-19 contagion curve,” says CUPE Ontario secretary-treasurer Candace Rennick. She is urging the Premier and long-term care minister to increase access for nursing home staff to PPE.

“To them I say, please consider that fragile residents are at greater risk of getting COVID-19. However, care staff have little access to regular surgical masks and few to N95 masks even in homes in Durham, Toronto and the Hamilton area, where we know residents are COVID-19 positive.  Don’t abandon the dedicated long-term care staff when they do so much under challenging workloads, at the best of times. Protect them. Keep them safer.”

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