

July 15, 2021

SENT VIA EMAIL

The Honourable Doug Ford, M.P.P.
Premier of Ontario
premier@ontario.ca

Dear Premier Ford,

Re: Permanent Pandemic Pay

Earlier this month, you informally announced that the pandemic pay scheduled to end in August would become permanent for Personal Support Workers. While Unifor applauds this decision, it only addresses part of a much larger problem wherein many frontline health care workers, whose work and sacrifice carried us through the pandemic, continue to be excluded.

Long-Term Care homes, which in many ways bore the brunt of the pandemic, worked in tandem through code red outbreaks with an entire team. Without their dedication to residents, the results would have been far worse. Workers in all classifications stepped up to the call, even with the known risk of contracting COVID-19. Alongside PSWs, nurses, cleaners, dietary and recreation workers filled gaps as best they could, working long hours and for weeks on end without so much as a day off. This commitment and sacrifice must not go unnoticed.

All of these workers have been subjected to below inflation wage increases for the last decade. In the for-profit sector, they have been denied maintenance of proxy pay equity as their employers continue to challenge court orders with the support of your government. Adding insult to injury, all workers in the not-for-profit sector are subject to wage restraint capped at 1% under Bill 124.

The work ethic in our hospitals was nothing short of heroic.

Like Long-Term Care, they have had their collective agreement rights overridden by legislation. They were redeployed to retirement and LTC homes in crisis, and many spent weeks away from their families, self-isolating to protect them.

Awarding pandemic pay to only one classification of workers while the remainder are covered by Bill 124 is inherently unfair and arbitrary.

The retirement home sector was excluded from pandemic pay altogether. This has only served to exacerbate the exodus in this sector of nurses and personal support workers.

While largely unregulated, retirement homes include a large population of vulnerable seniors who are simply waiting for a bed in a long-term care home. They need and deserve qualified caregivers.

Our health care system will not be out of the crisis for some time. Long-Term Care and retirement homes continue to work short-staffed, relying on costly agencies, and hospitals will deal with a backlog of patients for years. As restrictions ease, more and more health care workers of all classifications will strongly consider leaving altogether.

Improving wages is an important step to retention. Still, it must include a thorough examination of the wage disparities amongst the various sub-sectors of our health care system and consider equity and scale. With pandemic pay, there are cases of nurses earning less than PSWs. While no one can make the case that PSWs do not deserve that increase, we need to balance this with the contributions of all other workers.

The pandemic has shown us which workers we rely on the most when in crisis. Investing in their fair wages has a multitude of benefits, including stimulating local economies.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss solutions with you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jerry Dias". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Jerry" and "Dias" being capitalized and prominent.

Jerry Dias
National President

cc. The Honourable Christine Elliott, The Honourable Rod Phillips, The Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy, Katha Fortier, Naureen Rizvi.

JD/klcope343