

November 12, 2020

The Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, PC, MP,  
Prime Minister of Canada  
Office of the Prime Minister  
80 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0A2

*Via Email*



Dear Prime Minister:

On behalf of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), I am writing to again express our deep concern about your government's failure to protect people in long-term care (LTC) in Canada. Long-term care residents are extremely vulnerable and at a high risk of death from COVID-19, and we must take action to protect them.

NUPGE represents workers on the front lines of health care in Canada, including in residential care facilities. I wrote to you over 6 months ago, on April 17, to call for action based on the tragedy that we saw unfolding in the sector. At that time, we called for LTC to be brought under the *Canada Health Act (CHA)*, which would have provided enhanced protection and oversight for residents and workers. Subsequent to our letter, we were shocked that the situation was allowed to deteriorate to the point where it required the intervention of the Canadian Armed Forces in facilities in Ontario and Quebec.

Prime Minister, we are now in the midst of a second wave of the pandemic and infections and deaths are once more increasing in these residential facilities. Since we first raised the alarm on this issue, Canada has gained the distinction of being the worst country in the world at protecting our vulnerable seniors. The numbers are stark, with over 80% of our COVID-19 deaths coming in these congregate settings, a rate twice that of other comparable countries in the OECD. This is a collective stain on Canada and action is needed.

The first phase of the pandemic hit long-term care the hardest and exposed the structural problems with the way the sector is organized and managed. What is inexcusable is that the lessons of the first wave of pandemic deaths have not led to the changes needed to protect our most vulnerable citizens and the workers who care for them. The initial failure led to thousands of people dying needlessly, with many thousands of families grieving as a result. Without concerted action, we fear that thousands more will die.



We welcomed your commitment in the Speech from the Throne “to work with provinces and territories to set new, national standards for long term care.” Unfortunately, we have seen no action that would lead us to these needed national standards, and our seniors in care cannot afford to wait any longer. Furthermore, the commitment to “further target measures for personal support workers” is also welcome, but similarly vague and lacking in action to resolve the situation.

Prime Minister, taking decisive action on this issue is supported by Canadians. In a poll NUPGE commissioned in May, Canadians overwhelmingly supported moving long-term care under the *Canada Health Act* (CHA). The poll showed 86% support for including LTC under the CHA, with only 2% of those polled opposing this move. This result shows the level of concern that Canadians have with ensuring our seniors in LTC are cared for properly and not left at risk under the current ad hoc system of care across the provinces.

It is also clear, Prime Minister, that in addition to bringing the sector under the *Canada Health Act*, we need enforceable national standards for LTC. Every senior in Canada deserves to be treated equitably, and implementing national standards would support this principle. As part of the forthcoming national standards, we are urging you to mandate a minimum of 4 hours of direct care per resident per day. The Ontario government is reported to be including this standard in its upcoming provincial budget, and I am asking for a commitment to fund national standards in long-term care, including 4 hours of direct care per resident.

Alongside national standards, the workforce crisis must also be addressed. The workers in LTC have been very poorly treated even before the pandemic. This is a workforce that is overrepresented by racialized Canadians, new immigrants, and is predominantly female. They have been paid low wages and offered few benefits, yet they have a very difficult job involving heavy lifting under difficult conditions, given the endemic staff shortages. In the Speech from the Throne, your government commits to “better value their work and their contribution to society.” It is important that these words be turned into action, not only for the workers themselves but for the good of our society. Action must address the workers’ need for support and appropriate compensation. The shortage of workers in LTC will only be remedied if we provide these workers with the support and compensation they need to perform what is a vital service for our society. Wages across the sector must be increased, and benefits, including paid sick leave and health and drug benefits, need to be mandated.

While increased pay and benefits, alongside national standards, will go some way to deal with the immediate crisis, these are not enough to truly address the long-standing exploitation of these workers. To truly address the problems more fully so that we have a truly robust system we can be proud of in Canada, we are asking that all governments work closely with the workers and their unions to identify and implement reforms that will benefit LTC residents and the workers who care for them.

Prime Minister, a key issue in this crisis is the role of for-profit providers in long-term care. The pandemic has exposed this as a catastrophic failure. For many years, advocates have been calling for an end to private for-profit long-term care. The pandemic has left no doubt that we must stop subsidizing and supporting for-profit corporations in this sector. It was predictable that the worst outbreaks and highest death rates would be in for-profit homes. Public investment is needed and quickly. COVID-19 has dramatically exposed this failed profit model, and I must caution against any “solutions” to this crisis that involve subsidizing for-profit corporations.

Further, Prime Minister, I would encourage you to be bold as you tackle the pandemic and look for a path forward. The importance of health care and front-line workers has been dramatically highlighted during this pandemic. Health care has been chronically underfunded for decades, and I urge you to make the next federal budget a health care budget, with resources for long-term care, mental health, pharmacare, and public health.

And finally, your government must hold provinces accountable for spending transfers on the initiatives for which they were designated and enforce the *Canada Health Act*. The choices our governments make in response to this pandemic and the commitment to invest in strong public services will define who we are for decades to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LB', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Larry Brown  
President

cc: Premiers of the Provinces and Territories  
Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer  
National Executive Board