



Tackling the Climate Crisis—Towards a Just, Sustainable, and Public Future

Reducing the Carbon Footprint of the Public Sector

2023





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



Reducing the Carbon Footprint of the Public Sector

In addition to the role of the public sector in supporting mitigation across the economy and adaptation in communities, the public sector also has a role to play in reducing its *own* environmental impacts. All sectors of the economy will be affected by climate change and will need to undergo a transition. The public sector is no exception—its institutions and services must also be part of the transition to a green economy. In fact, the public sector can be a leader in this regard.

In the UK, public services as a whole (excluding transport) represent about 8% of the UK's direct greenhouse gas emissions, according to a report by UNISON.¹ The National Health Service (NHS) alone represents about 4% of the UK's emissions. UNISON notes that, if you account for procurement, construction, and social housing, the impact of public services is even greater. The government has set targets for emissions reductions in the public sector, and the NHS has said it will reach net zero emissions by 2040.

The emissions of the health care sector, in particular, received international attention during COP26 in 2021. Globally, the health sector accounts for approximately 4.6% of GHG emissions.² Canada was among the countries to sign onto the COP26 Health Programme, which outlines a commitment to developing climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems.³ Notably, though, Canada did not commit to reaching net-zero emissions in the health system, as some other countries have.⁴

In Canada, health care is responsible for 4.6% of our total GHG emissions, according to *The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change* report from 2019.⁵ Compared to the health care sectors in 47 countries, Canada has the third-highest per capita emissions. And yet, the 2021 Lancet report found that only 3% of all federal climate adaptation funding since 2017 has been designated to health-related projects.⁶

In Canada, there is publicly available data on greenhouse gas emissions—overall, by sector, and by province or territory. The federal government releases information on the GHG emissions of federal organizations,⁷ but provinces don't necessarily do the same. It is, therefore, difficult to estimate the role of the provincial public sector from national data by sector (e.g., buildings or transportation). This is an area for further research.

The province of BC does release data on the emissions of its public sector organizations (PSOs).⁸ In 2013, Ontario public agencies became required to report their annual energy use and GHG emissions.⁹ However, there does not appear to be data reported since 2018.

The public sector has a role to play in the transition to a greener economy by decarbonizing public services and organizations themselves. Here we have just focused on the aspect of GHG emissions, but public services have other impacts on the environment too, such as producing waste and as consumers of energy.

In all of these efforts, it is crucial that public sector workers be at the table in determining how to reduce emissions and, more broadly, transition to a more sustainable future. This is

not only because they will be impacted but also because they have valuable expertise in their jobs and sectors.

Notes

- ¹ UNISON, *Getting to net zero in UK public services: The road to decarbonisation* (UNISON, November 2021), <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/11/26609.pdf>.
- ² "COP26 Health Programme," UN Climate Change Conference, World Health Organization, and Health Care Without Harm, November 2021, https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/climate-change/cop26-health-programme.pdf?sfvrsn=cde1b578_5.
- ³ Arthur Wyns and Ceridwen Johnson, "Countries commit to develop climate-smart health care at COP26 UN climate conference," Press Release, World Health Organization, November 9, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-11-2021-countries-commit-to-develop-climate-smart-health-care-at-cop26-un-climate-conference>.
- ⁴ "Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health (ATACH) – Country Commitments," World Health Organization, accessed September 8, 2023, <https://www.who.int/initiatives/cop26-health-programme/country-commitments>.
- ⁵ Nick Watts et al., "The 2019 report of The *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate," *The Lancet* 394, no. 10211 (November 2019), <https://www.lancetcountdown.org/2019-report/>.
- ⁶ "The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate: Policy Brief for Canada," (Lancet Countdown, Canadian Medical Association, and Canadian Public Health Association, October 2021), https://www.cpha.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/advocacy/2021_lancet/2021_Lancet_Countdown_Canada_Policy_Brief_e.pdf.
- ⁷ "Government of Canada's Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory," Government of Canada, last updated November 25, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/greening-government/government-canada-greenhouse-gas-emissions-inventory.html>.
- ⁸ "Provincial Inventory of greenhouse gas emissions," Government of British Columbia, accessed September 8, 2023, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/climate-change/data/provincial-inventory>; "Annual reports and CCARS table," Government of British Columbia, accessed September 8, 2023, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/climate-change/public-sector/cnar/annual-reports-cnars-table>.
- ⁹ "Conservation for public agencies," Government of Ontario, last updated August 11, 2023, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/conservation-public-agencies>.

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COMPONENTS



B.C. GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



CANADIAN UNION OF BREWERY AND GENERAL WORKERS



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF ALBERTA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



HEALTH SCIENCES ASSOCIATION OF SASKATCHEWAN



MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS



MANITOBA GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION



NEW BRUNSWICK UNION OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR ASSOC. OF PUBLIC & PRIVATE EMPLOYEES



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PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND UNION OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES



SASKATCHEWAN GOVERNMENT AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

The National Union of Public and General Employees is an affiliate of the Canadian Labour Congress and a member of the Public Services International.