

March 11, 2020

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



and Premiers of the provinces and territories

Dear Prime Minister and Premiers:

On behalf of the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), I am writing to express an urgent call for greater coordinated action related to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Canada and around the world. In advance of your upcoming First Ministers' Meeting, I thought it important to contact you with these grave concerns so that they can inform your deliberations.

On March 10, NUPGE coordinated a call from our Component unions across the country, and the variance in information and readiness among the provinces was very disturbing. Some provinces seem to have barely started to consider their responses to the crisis. It was troubling to hear that some provincial unions are receiving less information and experiencing less engagement from provincial governments than during previous outbreaks such as H1N1 and Ebola. This represents a step backwards at precisely the moment when we should be moving ahead and practising the lessons learned from the SARS outbreak.

Prime Minister and Premiers, complacency is the greatest danger when dealing with a potential public health emergency. Health care workers, public servants, and the Canadian public all need to have faith that governments are working together and taking coordinated action to address the impending outbreak of COVID-19. Canadians need to see that their governments are taking appropriate steps to protect their well-being. These steps must be based on sound science and advice from experts, and not be political or economic in nature.

We know that public health and epidemiology experts have called for a robust response to this outbreak. In January, NUPGE put out a statement calling for proper protective equipment to be made available to health care workers. But the Public Health Agency of Canada has released interim guidelines that call for lower levels of protective equipment than advised by public agencies in Europe and the Centers for Disease Control and



Prevention (CDC). Canada and the provinces must properly apply the precautionary principle to the protection of health care workers.

Testing is another area that must be addressed and coordinated on a national basis. To limit and contain the infection and avoid community spread, testing has to be widespread, readily available, and provide timely results. Sending the samples to the National Microbiology Lab in Winnipeg, as most provinces currently do, does not meet any of these criteria. The provinces that have their own testing are proving to be better equipped to identify and track cases of the virus: all provinces should have this capacity.

Prime Minister and Premiers, we are also asking that you take swift action to ensure workers who are quarantined, or who self-quarantine, are not financially harmed by an outbreak of COVID-19. While there has been an announcement of steps by the federal government in this direction, this is only a step towards a more comprehensive approach to the situation. Implementing policies that reimburse workers will ensure greater adherence to mandated protocols and ultimately protect public health and lives. This should be a high priority for all governments and employers.

Finally, we are asking you to work closely with stakeholders. Unions, health advocates, municipalities, Indigenous organizations, and other stakeholders all have a role to play in curtailing the worst effects of this outbreak. The reality is that, to properly fight the expected outbreak, it will take a concerted effort by the whole society. Federal and provincial leadership is needed. Resources are needed. Transparent decision-making is needed. Timely and accurate information is needed. Adherence to the precautionary principle is needed. On behalf of the almost 400,000 members of NUPGE, over 100,000 of which work directly in health care, I am calling on you to swiftly take action to address the deficits I have outlined in this letter.

Sincerely,

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

Larry Brown
President

cc: Bert Blundon, Secretary-Treasurer
National Executive Board