



**VON Provincial Negotiating Team
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An arbitrative decision in December 2023 dealt Registered Nurses in this sector a devastating blow. The assignment of 1.5% and 2% respectively in wage increase for 2023 and 2024 does nothing to offset inflation and cost of living increases. It can be described as a wage cut for community nurses already earning poor wages for a Registered Nurse in this Province. The previous contract that expired in March 2023, was also decided by an arbitrator with an award of only 1.5% in wage increase. These decisions increase the disparity with wages assigned to nurses in the hospital sector and can only escalate the issues of hiring and retention of nurses in this community sector where serious staffing shortages already are a reality.

ONA and VON entered into an agreement to roll several individual Collective Agreements into a single Central Agreement for members across the province. This arbitrative decision will not support removing the many disparities remaining with this Central Agreement. Nurses in some areas still do not have access to core provisions of the current Central Agreement, even after three rounds of negotiations. The wage scales still vary from one site to the next even for nurses doing the same work. This arbitrative decision will not support wage parity within the organization let alone any kind of parity with nurses in the hospital sector.

The staffing crisis has contributed to increased workloads, negatively impacting the ability to deliver safe, skilled and necessary care to the vulnerable clients in the community. Historically, clients have heavily relied on community services to provide necessary services in their homes and in their communities. Data supports the benefits of clients remaining in their homes and communities with supportive health care. We have already reached the tipping point where clients are not receiving vital care in a timely manner. Sadly, other clients are missed altogether. Privatization is beginning to take hold as we are also starting to see that other clients will get adequate care when care is affordable through private pay, and they can afford to pay. Our health care system is broken. How can we influence Employers to negotiate fair contracts with our health care workers? How can we get the Governments' attention in the allocation of much needed funds in community nursing, funds to support health care delivery to vulnerable clients whose wellbeing depends on this care?

The erosion of our bargaining unit works continues through multi-agency use. The fragmented client care is more costly so the wisdom of using an agency for provision of staff continues to escape me. Vacancies are left unfilled for many reasons, and although the lower wage in community is a barrier to hiring new staff, other factors are fueling the inability to hire and retain. Often enough, nurses are hired but once exposed to inadequate orientation, unreasonable workloads, infringements on work life balance, fragmented and inadequate client care, disillusion is inescapable, there is no incentive to stay in that work environment.

Nurses in the community come with unique and very specialized skills. They go above and beyond the provision of basic nursing, most times working single-handedly in silos to

provide a large range of holistic care. We deserve better wages that reflect our education, skills and heartfelt devotion to our work. Community nurses should not have to beg to be properly compensated, acknowledged or respected for the work they do in some extremely difficult environments. Post pandemic, data collected by our employer presents a steady increase of violence in our workspaces, adding another layer of health and safety concerns. It is recognized by the employer but the uptake for corrective measures is still quite slow.

VON workers have stepped up for this employer repeatedly. Members stepped up and effectively saved the Employer from financial hardships by allowing the Employer to temporarily use pension benefits in a deal signed with members in 2010. The Employer in return has failed to restore pension benefits to where they were and unilaterally cut them by one third. Instead of honoring their commitment, the Employer hides behind long and costly legal maneuvering just trying to avoid restoration of the pension benefits. Monies spent on legal costs could probably go a long way towards the restoration of our pension funds. Some of those monies could even be better spent on hiring new staff.

During and post pandemic, workers' commitment remained unwavering, consistently delivering health care to our clients. The poor wages and risks to their own well-being was never a deterrent. Looking back at the hardships experienced by our members during that period, it should be so easy for an Employer to value the commitment of our members and improve the quality of our work environment when possible, and it is possible!

VON has a long, rich history of successfully providing community health care in Ontario. There are clients and nurses who still attest to periods where VON showed leadership in their healthcare provision. Over time, both Employers and our Government have lost sight of priorities. Ongoing funding and provisions to maintain these health services have fallen through the cracks. The Government is focused on privatizing these services while the Employer hides behind claims of a lack of funding and financial distress. This is no longer acceptable. I stand with Erin Ariss, ONA's President in her call for justice:

“ONA members are sick and tired of employers failing to negotiate fair contracts with nurses and health-care professionals at the bargaining table. We’re putting them and the government on notice that this is just the beginning of our fight back for equity and better staffing for our clients.”

It's time for this employer to return to bargaining in good faith. No more hiding behind claims of financial instability and failing to provide documents to support such a position. Members demand fair, reasonable, realistic proposals aimed at fixing this broken system. ONA continues efforts to lobby the Government for further allocations of funds. It is time to mend our broken system, members deserve no less.

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