Our Voice is Our Strength, ONA President Stresses

When ONA President Vicki McKenna kicked off the Biennial Convention by stating that we need to ensure our collective voices are heard now more than ever, not only did she echo the theme of the event, she set the tone for the next few days.

“In the past two years, we have been faced with an extraordinary set of challenges,” she said in her address, which was live streamed on Facebook for the first time. “Since the PCs moved into Queen's Park, we have been sailing through some rough and unchartered waters, as their actions have been swift and disastrous. Cuts seem to be valued over quality health care, and mega-mergers over tailored programs. And, they were done without any consultation with front-line staff, who are the experts. So we need to spread the word about these cuts and how the changes affect our patients and our work. I ask each of you to continue to advocate for Ontarians, and for better working conditions for yourself and your peers.”

Provincially, ONA has been addressing these challenges with action that is unprecedented for our union, both in scale and reach, McKenna added, noting that our Priorities and Promises campaign, which launched in the summer and continued in the fall, featured direct and stark print, social media, radio and transit shelter ads throughout the province lobbying against the government’s shot-in-the-dark approach to health-care reform.

“Our ads are everywhere, and who has taken notice? Well, our Premier has!” she stated. “In fact, in the fall, the Premier’s office called ONA to finally arrange a meeting, as we had been asking for a long time. The big, heavy door to access the government has just opened up and we now have regular meetings set up with the Health Minister and Deputy Premier. Plus, we have had a flurry of meetings with many other Ministers over the past few weeks, including the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Long-Term Care. We are raising important issues for our members that include violence, scope of practice, capacity in our system, public health, community health, long-term care – the list is long. Our key message is that ONA must be at the table for health-care transformation discussions.” (See McKenna’s column in the December/January issue of Front Lines for details on ONA’s asks to government).

Noting that it’s been a very busy two years since the last Biennial, McKenna also highlighted the launch of our Nurses’ Health Program; Bill 124, which caps public-sector salaries, and changes to the Public Sector Labour Relations Transition Act; challenges for our public health and Local Health Integration Network members; the long-term care inquiry; pay equity; and continuing violence in the workplace. Our work in all these areas is well known and deeply respected, she added.

“For more than 46 years, ONA has positioned itself as a champion for quality public health care, workers’ rights, equity, and a safe working environment,” she concluded. “We are a strong union with strong members, and I am so honoured to be your President. Thank you for all you do. We will not give up and allow this government to make changes at the cost of quality care. Because Our Voice is Our Strength!”

“We use our collective voice to make a difference. Every day I draw from members’ energy, heart and optimism. You inspire me. And when we stand together, we rise together.”

—ONA President Vicki McKenna, RN
Human Rights and Equity Caucus Marks an ONA First

While ONA has long spoken out about the issues faced by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and two-spirit (LGBTQI2S) community, our annual Human Rights and Equity Caucus, which kicked off Biennial Convention Week on November 25, was the first time we dedicated an entire education day to addressing them.

“Our hope is that today will be infused with the spirit of understanding, and that we can all speak freely and listen without judgment," outgoing Region 1 Vice-President Pam Mancuso said in opening the Caucus, the highest attended in ONA’s history, under the theme, Pride and Prejudice: LGBTQI2S Issues in Health Care. “We also want to provide opportunities for insight and self-reflection. A big part of our day is dedicated to providing education that you can take back to your workplace.”

And the jammed-packed agenda did precisely that. The session featured Indigenous drummer and singer Aqua Nibii Waawaaskone, highlighting her own emotional journey through prose and song; an informative and deeply personal pre-recorded interview with Dr. Carys Massarella, a transgender woman and ER physician at St. Joseph’s Healthcare Hamilton, who also runs a clinic for transgender patients in St. Catharines; educator Vanessa Russell, who led delegates through a brief history of oppression in Canada; Emily Hao, an RN from Community Health Clinics, who provided insightful tips for members’ practice, such as dropping heterosexual assumptions and using appropriate pronouns; and two panel discussions – one featuring three activists detailing health-care barriers faced by the LGBTQI2S community, and another highlighting the stories of two ONA members: Angel Paniagua Perez and Susan Leaman.

“Here we are at almost 2020 and there is still no shortage of equity and discrimination issues our members face,” ONA President Vicki McKenna told the delegates. “There is such division in our world today, and sessions like this, where we can be open to listening, learning and challenging some of the issues in our workplaces and our own families, are so important. Silence is not helpful. We can always learn new things from one another.”

ONA’s updated Human Rights and Equity Guide, distributed at the Caucus, is available at ona.org/guides.

We all Need to Step Out of Our Comfort Zone, First VP Urges

Building on the words of ONA President Vicki McKenna in her keynote address, First Vice-President Cathryn Hoy provided several examples of how Locals have effectively used their political action funds over the past two years to advocate for their patients.

“I have seen billboard messages in sports facilities, pop-up signage in shopping centres, and billboards on busy highways,” she said. “Many Locals and Bargaining Units have organized rallies and information pickets to protest cuts within their communities. I’m heartened to see so much local political action. Our members are stepping out of their comfort zones and voicing their displeasure at understaffing, workplace violence and more.”

And, we must continue to do so, she added, noting that ONA is here to help and support you.

“I know it’s tough work, but it’s impressive and inspiring – and it makes a difference. Please meet with your MPP and tell them your stories. We all need to step out of our comfort zones to talk about health care. Our collective voice is our strength, and we must use it together.”
There’s one thing that ONA CEO Bev Mathers wanted to make clear to convention delegates: the dedication of staff, working in conjunction with our Board of Directors and members, has resulted in great achievements for our union.

“My key role is to be a leader to staff and what a great opportunity that is,” began Mathers, a 25-year ONA staff member who was named permanent CEO in June after serving in that role on an interim basis for seven months. “I feel so honoured to be in this position, and am privileged to work with this staff and the Board. They have taken on a lot of challenges in the past two years and have been really dedicated to all of you. Our staff fulfils so many roles at ONA, and supports members in every facet. And I am proud of the voice we have and the strength we bring into this convention.”

Mathers, who began her career as an RN and served many roles in her Bargaining Unit prior to joining staff, provided updates in many servicing areas such as professional practice, finance, and communications and government relations, noting her first order of business was to build a strong leadership team while continuing to make hiring RNs onto staff, where possible, a priority.

“I’ve never lost my passion for being an RN, and I say to our staff all the time and leaders thinking of coming onto staff, that when you leave the bedside, or whatever capacity you work in as an RN, you never have to give up being an RN when you work at ONA. All it means is you take your RN career and turn its focus onto advocacy for nurses and health-care professionals in Ontario.”

Activism Comes in Many Shapes and Sizes, Guest Speaker Tells Delegates

We would live in a much better world if people were more politically engaged, and there are things we can do to make that happen, guest speaker Dave Meslin told delegates.

“For my entire adult life, I’ve been a non-partisan community organizer trying to figure out this political system, and there are two things I’ve learned: change is possible, and it’s way harder than it has to be,” said Meslin, author of Teardown: Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up.

That’s because the system is “rigged” against ordinary people, perpetuating concentrated power in the hands of a small group of political insiders and elites, he said, adding that the bigger problem is most people are disconnected from the political process, strangled by cynicism and frustration with a system they understand very little about.

“If we can’t get one-third of people to vote, imagine how many people aren’t participating in between elections,” he said. “We would live in a better world with better policy outcomes if the average person was engaged.”

But the system is designed in a way to ensure you aren’t engaged, he emphasized, using hard-to-read municipal public notices as an example. “And if we don’t know what’s happening, we are much less likely to get involved. But you are all natural born leaders, and it’s easy to forget that most people aren’t like us. The type of notice that might attract you to a meeting won’t attract your peers. You have to make it beautiful, clear and exciting.”

He also recommended leveraging media to help reach thousands “because editors are desperate for content, and if you can create an interesting story with a hook that is creative and engaging for their readers, they’ll come back for more. At the end of the day, politicians care about what people think and if your message is resonating with the public, you’ve got their ear.”

Another idea is to identify stakeholders in your communities, who want to support and help with your causes by reaching their own members, he suggested.

“History has been this never-ending trajectory of people coming together with a unified voice, rallying around underdogs and winning victories. You’re each an educator, a marketer, a communicator, an organizer, a choreographer and a cheerleader. And all those roles go into engaging members. You need to make them realize they don’t have to be a Nelson Mandela. Activism comes in many shapes and sizes, and everyone’s effort and support contributes towards massive political change. And if you can inform the general public and let them know what you are dealing with, they will back you up because the work of nurses and health-care professionals affects everyone every day, and is so important.”
Delegates Hear from Political Parties of all Stripes

Biennial Convention 2019 featured brief remarks from Health Minister Christine Elliott, as well as the leaders of the Liberal Party and NDP. Here are some highlights from their comments.

**Minister of Health Christine Elliott:**

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**“Zero Violence in the Workplace”**

Health Minister Christine Elliott has positive things to say about ONA’s work on ending workplace violence in health care.

“I commend ONA for all the work you have done on violence prevention,” the Minister told delegates. “We want to ensure you are safe, and want zero violence in the workplace.”

To that end, Elliott said her government has reached out and wants workplaces to use 18 workplace violence prevention tools. While making no formal announcement and acknowledging that there is much more to be done, Elliott added that her government is committed to ending workplace violence.

The Minister also said the government is working to improve access to care through its Ontario Health Teams, which are being rolled out on a daily basis, and that it intends to expand the scope of practice of a range of health-care providers, including RNs, RPNs, NPs, pharmacists, dental surgeons and others.

The bottom line, she concluded, is “we want to build an open, accessible and sustainable public health-care system.”

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**Andrea Horwath:**

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**“You Deserve a Safe Workplace, Free of Violence”**

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath thanked delegates for “devoting your all to help patients,” while also saying she knows that nurses deserve more than our gratitude – they deserve to know their voices are being heard.

Horwath said that an NDP government would take care of everyone – with dental care, pharmacare and an expanded medicare system.

Premier Doug Ford and his government are making the health-care system – which was “left wanting” by the Liberals – even worse, Horwath noted, adding that the urgent care centre in Peel Region is currently at 500 per cent capacity, and long-term care wait lists are lengthening daily.

“Taking better care of Ontarians also means taking better care of nurses,” she concluded. “You deserve a safe workplace free of violence.”

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**John Fraser:**

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**“Nothing Else Matters When Your Loved One Needs Care”**

Ontario Liberal Party Interim Leader John Fraser told members that nothing else matters when your loved one needs care.

The son of a retired Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) RN, Fraser, MPP for Ottawa South, talked about his feelings when his now-elderly mother suffered a stroke, saying that we all need our health-care system and to value those who provide that care – nurses.

Fraser is critical of the speed and scope of changes that the province is making to the system, and urged members – who “are the voices of the patients and residents” – to speak out.

“Your voices are important to patients,” he said, “and to government, which should listen to you.”
Student Affiliate Membership “Huge Success:” CNSA Ontario Regional Director

ONA plays a large role in the successes that Ontario nursing students have had, the Canadian Nursing Students’ Association (CNSA) Ontario Regional Director told the assembly.

“Last December was the 10th anniversary of ONA members voting at a Biennial to create a student affiliate membership,” said Jaclyn Sicard, who is in her last year of a nursing program at York University. “This visionary decision to help organize the next generation of our profession at no cost to students has proven to be a huge success.”

One of those successes is the recent decision of the Ontario Divisional Court to strike down the government’s Student Choice Initiative, which allowed students at provincial colleges and universities to opt out of paying essential fees that funded things such as student campus groups, newspapers and clubs, also putting the fate of CNSA chapter schools in question. The Judicial Review was launched by the Canadian Federation of Students and the York Federation of Students, and was supported by ONA.

“We couldn’t be happier with the court decision, as our chapter members will not have to question their good standing or voting eligibility in future years,” Sicard said. “This couldn’t have been done without the continued support from ONA, financially and professionally. I would like to thank ONA and all members for always making CNSA members feel welcome at their table. We are truly proud to be a part of your organization.”

## Key Constitutional, Statement of Beliefs Amendments Carried

Significant Constitutional and Statements of Beliefs amendments were carried at the Biennial Convention by voting delegates. Here is a summary:

- **Board Term of Office**: The length of term for Board members will shift from two to three years. There are extensive competencies that a Board member must obtain to function as a high-performing regional representative, as well as an effective advocate for their assigned portfolio. With the two-year term, they spend their first year in office getting oriented to their fiduciary, regional and portfolio duties and accountabilities, and then have six months to function most effectively before finding themselves preparing for the next election. This change means the Board will now hold office from January 1 of the calendar year following an election to December 31 of the third calendar year.

- **Local Term of Office**: A similar change in term of office was carried for Local and Bargaining Unit executive positions. A longer term will allow more time for novice leaders to develop while retaining strong leaders and improving representation to members. There are also financial savings to the Local in running an election every three years instead of two.

- **Health-care Professionals**: Wherever it appears in the Constitution, the term “allied personnel” has been changed to “health-care professionals,” which better reflects the work performed and the value brought to our health-care system by our non-RN members. This amendment brings the Constitution in line with the practice currently used in other ONA publications.

- **Provincial Leadership Meeting**: The Joint Sector Meeting, held each spring in the Toronto area for Bargaining Unit leaders, will now be referred to as a Provincial Leadership Meeting. This name better reflects the purpose and content of this meeting, and avoids confusion with the sector meetings that are called to deal with centrally negotiated/ arbitrated collective agreements.

- **Biennial Convention**: The amendment clarifies that holding ONA’s Biennial Convention in November is subject to availability of an appropriate hotel in that month. On one occasion, it was held in the first week of December due to hotel availability constraints.

- **June Provincial Coordinators Meeting (PCM)**: Region 3 will now have the flexibility of hosting the June PCM, when their turn comes, in Toronto to facilitate securing appropriate hotel and meeting space.

- **Statement of Beliefs**: One amendment clarifies that funding through the central collection of union dues is necessary to maintain not only the solvency but also the sustainability of the union. Another amendment adds a new section on professional responsibility, intended to reflect the importance of our members working in a safe environment that allows them to provide quality care and meet their professional standards.

The Constitutional and Statement of Beliefs Amendments Passed document will be posted on our website early in 2020.
CFNU President Urges ONA Members: “Don’t Stay in Your Lane”

In the kind of energetic, rousing address she is known for, Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) President Linda Silas rallied ONA members, urging them: "Don’t stay in your lane."

Nurses need to be strong, caring for patients, but also care for themselves, she said. More importantly, “don’t let anyone tell you that nursing isn’t political. You need to be the most bad-ass nurses in your province and speak out.”

Silas believes that governments are intentionally making health-care dysfunctional and pretending that its state is “normal and OK. Nurses need to tell people they know better and that governments must fix health care.”

The CFNU is launching the Take up Space campaign, inspired by a quote from poet and activist Tonya Ingram – “do not minimize yourself for the convenience of others.”

Silas encouraged ONA and our members to speak to the Health Minister about what it is like to work short-staffed, the impact on patient care, the need for nurse-patient ratios and the impact of violence.

“The government tells us that all is going to be fine,” Silas said. “But we have seen too many health-care reforms with no attention paid to nurse staffing. As nurses, we believe that health care is a human right, and nurses worldwide are in solidarity, she said, noting that nurses are active in drawing attention to the health impacts of climate change.

Citing statistics from California on the impact of nurse-patient ratios, Silas believes they are needed in Canada as well. She also noted that “we are so close” to success on a national pharmacare program and must continue to push for it.

“We have momentum,” she said. “Canada has 100,000-plus plans and we just need one!”

As for nursing in Ontario, Silas said ONA should “not take one step back in anything, especially in negotiations with the Ford government. Nurses can work with politicians of any stripe.”

Finally, Silas reminded delegates that “politicians don’t act because we convince them. They move because they feel the heat.”

ONA and its members must join nurses worldwide, and turn up the temperature.

“Breaking Busy:” Keynote Speaker Entertains, Inspires

As RNs and health-care professionals, ONA members focus on caring for others, but how often do they ask themselves how they are?

Biennial keynote speaker Linda Edgecombe entertained and inspired members in a rousing, humourous and meaningful presentation, urging delegates to take note of their state of mind and to pay particular attention when feeling judgmental of others.

We have all become too busy, and receive positive reinforcement from others when we say we are busy, Edgecombe said. While we can’t “break busy,” we can take action to ensure we are living a happier, balanced life.

Edgecombe shared her own story of recognizing the need to become a happier, more balanced person, and recounted the lessons she learned while walking the Camino Trail.

After being inspired by the movie, “The Way,” Edgecombe set out to walk the famous French/Spanish pilgrim’s trail – approximately 15 kilometres per day for 35 days – without first doing any research. Hoping to meet others and maybe even make a new friend, Edgecombe instead found herself the only person walking the trail. It rained every single day, and she recalled that rather than being present and taking the time to reflect, she was instead in a fury.

Lesson learned? “Do the work first,” she said.

While not advocating that everyone take such a drastic action as walking a 1,700-kilometre trail, Edgecombe has some suggestions for everyone: pay attention to one area of life to which you can bring a little more time and attention.

In the New Year, “lean into the work. It isn’t easy. If something isn’t comfortable, that’s when it needs to be done,” she said, adding we all need the following elements to be well: movement; sleep; laughter; clarity (what do we want); time to think; contributions to others; and gratitude.

While we will never “break busy,” we can be happier, more well-balanced people if we “turn the dial a little bit and just start,” she concluded. “Then let momentum and physics take you forward.”
A Fond Farewell and Warm Welcome

As the year comes to a close, so too does the term for ONA’s 2018-2019 Board of Directors, who were recognized during the Biennial Convention.

“They are virtually at the forefront of everything we do as a union,” said CEO Bev Mathers. “The expert decisions they make on behalf of all ONA members navigate our union through the good times and are even more important during the challenging ones.”

In bidding farewell to Region 1 Vice-President Pam Mancuso, Region 3 Vice-President Andy Summers and Region 4 Vice-President Laurie Brown (left photo) – and sharing a few humourous anecdotes about them – Mathers added, “Thank you for your dedication to making the lives of our members and the people they care for better. You have done our union proud!”

Mathers also introduced and warmly welcomed the new members of the 2020-2021 Board – Region 1 Vice-President Dawn Armstrong, Region 3 Vice-President DJ Sanderson and Region 4 Vice-President Angela Preocanin – who join President Vicki McKenna, First Vice-President Cathryn Hoy, Region 2 Vice-President Bernadette (Bernie) Robinson and Region 5 Vice-President Karen Bertrand (right photo).

“This Board will bring new ideas and thoughts to the table and they’ll listen to your ideas and thoughts, so please share them,” concluded Mathers. “And together the Board will continue to ensure that ONA is the best union in the world!”

Read more about the 2020-2021 Board and its exciting renewal process in the cover story of the December/January issue of Front Lines.

Thousands Raised for Stephen Lewis Foundation

A selection of gifts donated by our Biennial sponsors were raffled off throughout the convention, with ticket sales, totaling more than $4,000, benefiting the Stephen Lewis Foundation. ONA has long supported the work of the foundation, a non-governmental organization that assists mostly AIDS and HIV-related grassroots projects in Africa.

Outgoing Board members

The 2020-2021 ONA Board of Directors

Want to Read More?

Looking for more information about the work of our union over the past two years, which was highlighted throughout the Biennial Convention by the Board of Directors and staff?

Check out our “2019 Biennial Report,” distributed to all delegates and placed on our Biennial Convention app. Read yours at ona.org/biennial19 or on the app.

Watch Again!

Most videos shown at the Human Rights and Equity Caucus, Biennial Convention and Education Session are available on ONA’s Youtube channel at:

youtube.com/OntarioNurses
Violence in the Workplace: Take Action Now!

During the Convention, delegates were handed a “Code White” postcard to complete, which urges the government to keep nurses and health-care professionals and their patients safe.

“We are asking that you please share this postcard,” ONA President Vicki McKenna said. “We need your stories so we can continue to draw attention to this serious issue and apply pressure for action. The wider this postcard goes, the better we can depict the realities of what our members are experiencing.”

You can also fill the postcard out online at ona.org/prevention.

Next Up: Provincial Leadership Meeting

The Biennial Convention may have just wrapped up, but plans are already underway for our Provincial Leadership Meeting (PLM)!

A combination of full plenaries, education sessions on an array of hot-topic labour relations issues, and breakouts by sector, the PLM, formerly called the Joint Sector Meeting (see page 5), will be held on April 7-8, 2020 at the Sheraton Centre Toronto. We hope to see you there!

Registration will go live in the spring; stay tuned for further information.

Education Session Focuses on Member Advocacy

Nurses and health-care workers are finding themselves in unworkable conditions where it is difficult to adhere to their standards of practice, but you are uniquely positioned to guide change, delegates learned at the education session, which drew ONA’s 2019 Biennial Convention to a close.

“Our system needs to be better funded and we need to be stronger and more resilient,” said First Vice-President Cathryn Hoy in introducing the session. “We are on the front lines and know what is needed and what is right. I understand fear, but fear is just that change won’t happen. Politics was not my area of expertise and I thought I couldn’t do anything about the political situation. I found my voice because I became frustrated, and I didn’t realize that was political. But once you start speaking out on something you think is small, it has a snowball effect because that action affects so many people.”

Through motivational presentations by ONA Organizer Molly Kraft and Government Relations Specialists Etana Cain and Sebastian Ronderos-Morgan, a panel discussion with three seconded members from our recent Nurses Vote 2019 campaign, videos of members explaining why it’s important to find your voice, and small group work, delegates were given the tools needed to feel comfortable sharing their stories and become more politically active.

They were also urged to contact ONA’s Communications and Government Relations Team at cgrintake@ona.org for assistance with meeting with their elected representatives, using social media, planning events, producing flyers and managing the media – to name a few – and reminded to tell the team about those activities afterwards for a potential story in Front Lines to inspire fellow members!

“When you start to tell your story, you go from being alone to being part of a 68,000-member collective,” said Kraft. “Advocacy cannot be done alone.”

Read a full overview of the involvement of ONA members in our Nurses Vote 2019 campaign in the December/January issue of Front Lines.