The Importance of the Ontario Nurses’ Association for Health Care Professionals

The Ontario Nurses Association (ONA) is a professional body that aims to improve and negotiate many aspects of nursing such as wages and working conditions. More accurately, ONA is a trade union that represents the “68,000 registered nurses and allied health professionals working in hospitals, long-term care facilities, public health, community agencies and industry throughout the province of Ontario” (ONA, 2021). Just as nurses are called to be an advocate for their patients to receive care that is high quality and patient-centered, ONA serves as the voice for all nurses to achieve optimal pay and working conditions. During the pandemic, health professionals and especially nurses have endured a lot- working overtime, in conditions where PPE may have been lacking or unavailable, experiencing burnout, and having to adjust to working in unfamiliar circumstances. During the past year’s public health crisis, ONA was instrumental in in protecting both front-line workers and patients. Early in the pandemic, Sharan Basran- who is a senior executive on ONA’s legal team played a pivotal role in hospital sector preparedness by ensuring proper infection and prevention control procedures were being followed, cohorting and isolation protocols were in place and creating an awareness of the misinterpretations about how the virus is spread (ONA, 2021). Basran claimed in a video that “there is so much more to protection of health workers than just PPE…the key underlying principle is that… employers must act before having scientific certainty”. In April of 2020, the supply of PPE became so low that Premier Ford publicly appealed to all industries, “asking them to donate their supplies and equipment to front-line registered nurses and health-care professionals”. ONA also echoed these concerns and issued their own expressing the need for donated supplies. Standing up for healthcare workers in this way also occurred during the SARS pandemic. By advocating for both nurses’ and patient’s safety alike, ONA proved to be leaders in health care during one of the most difficult times in history and have inspired current and future nurses to lead in the same way.
ONA also has a huge impact on the lives of nursing students. During the pandemic, ONA also advocated for nursing students when they were forced to stop their clinical placements and resort to completing their course work online. As I have experience with this issue, I know that being 100% online via virtual placements, labs and theory courses cannot replace the in-person hands-on experience that nursing students traditionally require. Without these hands-on experiences, nursing student’s learning surely suffered. One of the efforts by ONA to address this concern was to support the extension of government funding for “clinical externships” across the province and beyond just one year. Despite being outside of a traditional academic setting, clinical externships are beneficial for both the nursing student and the experienced nurse. Students can learn new skills in a setting that is identical to that of a hospital placement while completing their courses online and benefit registered staff by offloading some of the workload that they have especially during the pandemic. A bonus is that nursing students get paid while doing this work and can use this money towards paying for tuition fees, living costs etc. I personally have the opportunity to accept a clinical externship role for the remainder of the summer while completing my studies online. Up until June 2021 I had not had the experience of a clinical placement whatsoever, but the clinical externship will allow me to further my learning and further contribute and help during the pandemic using the clinical skills I have learned thus far. I believe that ONA always has been and will always be FOR students—supporting them in every capacity that they can. Another issue that was brought up by students was access to PPE. ONA has been fighting for immediate action to ensure students can safely attend in person placements by advocating for: “access to PPE including N95 respirators, access to…orientation[s] that cover rights and responsibilities in the clinical setting and when caring for highly infectious patients, guaranteed sick days as schools should not penalize students that need to quarantine, and reassignment options for students who are concerned about exposure to COVID-19 (i.e. students who are immunocompromised)” (ONA, 2021). Therefore, ONA’s
supportive role is not limited to just registered staff, but they have also been a huge advocate for safety, financial supports and enhanced learning for students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, ONA not only supports experienced nurses and nursing students, but also new graduates of accredited nursing programs. The Nursing Graduate Guarantee is “a program funded by the ministry that supports new Registered Nurses and Registered Practical Nurses who are within 12 months of registering with the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) by providing them with a full-time employment opportunity, above staffing complement.” This program improves students’ transition into practice, and into full-time employment. Although it is a program funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, the initiative is very much supported by ONA. The initiative is a “$18 million investment, which provides full-time salaries and benefits to over 600 nurses with a focus on recruiting in areas of need, such as long-term care homes” (ONA, 2020). Overall, the program expands the pool of available nurses and provides stability for recently graduated nurses. The goal of this initiative goes hand-in-hand with ONA’s role as it supports nurses early in their career, allowing them to earn adequate income and ensures hospitals and long-term care homes are fully staffed thus reducing the burden that nurses face especially during a pandemic and a nurse staffing shortage.
References

https://www.ona.org/covid-19-series/