

**OPEN LETTER:
OMSA stands with Ontario nurses
in the call to repeal Bill 124**



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Written by the OMSA Advocacy Portfolio

Key points

- Bill 124 is wage-suppressive legislation that limits wage increases for nurses and other public sector healthcare workers. Bill 124 devalues the crucial work nurses do in maintaining the integrity of our healthcare system.
 - Inadequate wage increases and the lack of support for nurses exacerbates the worsening shortage and burnout of nurses. Nurses have to work longer hours, at faster paces, with larger patient loads – during the global COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Bill 124 ultimately contributes to decreased quality of care provided to patients and increased adverse effects to the health of patients.
 - Bill 124 adversely affects the education of future healthcare providers.
 - **The Ontario Medical Students Association calls for the repeal of Bill 124.**
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Dear Hon. Doug Ford, Hon. Christine Elliott, Hon. Rod Phillips, and Hon. Prabmeet Sarkaria,

Bill 124 is a wage-suppressive legislation that limits wage increases for registered nurses, nurse practitioners, and other public sector healthcare workers to a maximum of 1% total compensation over 3 years. This 1% amount is not enough to match inflation, let alone reflect the vital work nurses have done, and continue to do, during an ongoing global pandemic. With ever-increasing demands being placed on already overburdened nurses, simply calling them “healthcare heroes” is not enough.

Bill 124 continues to have devastating effects on Ontario’s nurses, our healthcare system, medical education, and the wage gap in various ways:

Nurses

Each subsequent wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has re-demonstrated the essential work of our nursing colleagues, and the imperative role they play in maintaining the integrity of Ontario’s hospitals and the healthcare system. **Nonetheless, in the last five years, nursing vacancies have more than quadrupled, with a more than a 50% increase in vacancies in**

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the first half of 2021 alone. This shortage has increased the workload of remaining nurses, and exacerbated burnout in poor working conditions. As long as Bill 124 is mandated, it continues to undervalue our already overwhelmed nursing force.

As in all fields, wages play an important role in job recruitment and retention. A wage-increase cap gives rise to anxiety, uncertainty, and decreased morale in the context of an unpredictable economy and ongoing global pandemic. **Not only are nurses being asked to work longer hours with larger patient loads, they are told they must do so without adequate wage increases.** This problem is exacerbated for new graduates, who face the additional burden of student debt upon graduation while simultaneously being ineligible for seniority-based raises.

Healthcare System

Bill 124 is especially disastrous given the fragile state of our healthcare system, which has been experiencing hospital bed shortages for decades prior. The COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with Bill 124 has exacerbated this bed shortage significantly. With a decreasing and unsafe nurse-to-patient ratio, particularly evident with each wave of increasing hospitalizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses have to care for more patients than ever before, leading to a reduced ability to provide specialised attention and care to individual patients. In addition, nursing staffing shortages play a role in the limited capacity of ward and ICU beds, and the pause on elective surgeries. As such, **the nursing shortage worsened by Bill 124 ultimately decreases the quality of care provided to patients and increases adverse effects on the health of patients.** The repeal of Bill 124 is an important step towards creating a health system that values excellent healthcare for patients across Ontario.

Medical Education

As the representative body of Ontario medical students, OMSA would like to acknowledge the adverse effects on medical student education that comes with the continued implementation of Bill 124. Nurses play an essential role in the training of medical students, providing invaluable learning and guidance to future physicians. **The current climate and Bill 124 reduces learning opportunities for all those training to be healthcare providers.**

Wage Gap

In addition to the more recent impact Bill 124 has on the healthcare system and nursing workforce, Bill 124 will exacerbate the wage gap observed between nurses and physicians, as well as the gender wage gap. Due to the significant strain on healthcare human resources, hospitals in Ontario have been emergently calling upon physicians and medical students to

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volunteer in nursing roles. While this may serve as temporary relief to hospitals facing nursing shortages, physicians are often offered significantly more pay than even full-time senior nurses for these roles. This discrepancy can also be seen in vaccine clinics and COVID-19 testing centres. **Offering physicians significantly more money to perform nursing duties – which they are not trained for – continues to undervalue the important work that nurses do and detracts from healthcare providers maintaining their scope of expertise. This issue contributes to the gender wage gap**, as 91% of the nursing workforce identified as female as of 2019. The physician workforce composition on the other hand is still male-dominated, as is the police force – a public sector that has been granted exemption from the wage-suppression that comes with Bill 124.

Summary

Bill 124 is an Ontario legislation that limits wage increases for nurses and actively contributes to the current nursing staffing crisis by exacerbating burnout, decreasing morale, and undervaluing the essential role that nurses play in our healthcare system. In doing so, Bill 124 threatens the quality of healthcare provided to patients across the province, and negatively impacts the training of future medical professionals. **The strain Bill 124 has placed on the healthcare system will have adverse effects at all levels of care, for years to come.**

The Ontario Medical Students Association stands with nurses in the call to immediately repeal Bill 124.

In solidarity with our nursing colleagues,

Ushma Purohit
President

Angie Salomon
President-Elect

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*On behalf of the Ontario Medical Students Association (OMSA) & OMA Section of Medical Students.
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