

## Council opts against asking government to repeal Bill 124 despite nursing shortages

**By Rob Paul**

After a delegation from Caledon residents and Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) senior executive of legal, Sharan K. Basran, Caledon Council has decided not to ask the provincial government to rescind Bill 124, but to review the nursing shortage instead.

The motion Council passed stated, "now therefore be it resolved that the Provincial government be requested to review the cause of the shortage of staff within the healthcare system when they meet with representatives from the ONA in February."

Brampton Town Council recently passed a motion supporting the repeal of Bill 124.

Bill 124 was enacted by the Ford government in 2019 which limits the increase in public sector compensation to one per cent per year over a three-year period, which surpasses wage increases for registered nurses, nurse practitioners, and healthcare professionals.

As a result, the Province is dealing with a shortage of nurses while still struggling through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Basran met with Council to plea that they fight to have the Bill repealed.

"I really think this deserves your careful attention," said Basran. "It doesn't just impact nurses, it impacts the community and the delivery of healthcare. In a nutshell, Bill 124 is wage restraint legislation. Just to give an example, our association has 55,000 nurses that work in the hospital sector and their moderation period, unfortunately, coincides with the worst pandemic we have ever seen in the last century? April 1, 2020, to March 31, 2023. It affects hospitals, not-for-profits, long-term care facilities, home care, primary care, and I think we can all relate that when we're in our time of need those are the places that we go to that are essential. What we're seeing today is quite troubling.

"It excludes municipalities and municipally-controlled bodies so that would mean a nursing home, for example, in the Region of Peel would not be impacted. One of the concerns ONA has raised is Bill 124 exempts male-dominated professions such as police, firefighters, and paramedics. Nurses strongly support the valuable contributions of first responders during the pandemic; however, it's hard when you're a registered nurse and also a first responder dealing with extremely dangerous circumstances. I cannot tell you the number of registered nurses who have contracted COVID. It's difficult when you have a registered nurse in a predominantly female profession who is looking at their male colleagues and saying, 'I'm making a comparable risk and doing this as a matter of dedication, as a matter of my obligations as a registered nurse yet we disproportionately face the impact.' Discrimination does not require intent, and this is strongly felt as a form of adverse effect on a predominantly female profession."

Basran explained that a major part of the problem with the shortages is due to working conditions with inadequate pay, which has led many to see no reason to stay in the public sector as private healthcare sectors demand for nurses increases.

"The first thing we're seeing is staffing shortages and there is a direct linkage to Bill 124," she said. "That nursing staffing shortage is causing a direct impact on the healthcare system. One nurse said on public record, 'Bill 124 has stripped the ability for nurse to bargain for fair and adequate wages for the work they're doing, there's no effort being made to retain nurses in the profession, nurses are working 12 hour shifts often with no breaks, their vacations are being denied, they're working excessive overtime, and they're constantly working short staffed and they have unsafe nurse to patient ratios.' A nurse recently told me that there was a unit where there had been so many nurses that had left that she had a ratio of one nurse to 15 patients on a medical ward. Nurses are in fairly dangerous circumstances. Nurses are also saying if you look at the extraordinary working conditions combined with low pay, the incentive to stay within certain facilities is just not there."

Prior to having her request to delegate for additional five minutes denied, Basran gave Council a close to home example, presenting

specific nursing numbers of William Osler Health System, the hospital that services the Caledon community.

?I personally spoke to registered nurses at William Osler in Orangeville because I think it's important you're informed on local conditions and what's happening,? she said. ?I was advised that there are currently 154 permanent full-time vacancies that are not filled, 188 part-time permanent vacancies?a total of 342 permanent vacancies. If you layer temporary vacancies on top of that, there's currently 86 full-time and 34 part-time temporary vacancies. You're creeping towards 500 vacancies; these are unprecedented levels. Last week, 100 patients were admitted to William Osler with no beds, that means patients came to the emergency department and they needed to be admitted to the hospital?they either didn't have a hospital bed or didn't have enough staff to take care of them. Nurses are going to the United States and other provinces where the wage increase is greater, and the cost of living is better.?

Councillor Annette Groves, who supports rescinding Bill 124, posted on social media her thoughts on Council's decision and the Bill.

?It was very disappointing to hear the comments from certain members of Council with all their excuses why they would not support rescinding Bill 124,? Groves posted. ?This is a Bill passed by Doug Ford and his cronies to suppress the wages of public sector employees at one per cent over three years. This Bill affects our nurses who have been working tirelessly only to be insulted by Doug Ford in freezing their wages at one per cent.?

After Council's decision, Basran told the Caledon Citizen that the motion to discuss staffing shortages was not enough and that lack of mention of Bill 124 in the motion is an issue.

?ONA's position is that Bill 124 needs to be rescinded,? she said. ?One of the key reasons that nurses are leaving the profession is poor pay due to wage caps imposed by Bill 124. The Town motion asked the Ford Government to meet with ONA to discuss the cause of the nursing shortage and makes no mention of Bill 124. Therefore, it is missing a crucial link driving this severe nursing crisis. We cannot retain experienced nurses who are leaving to work in the United States and other jurisdictions where there is better pay. We are not paying nurses? their market value. The only way out of that is to rescind Bill 124.?