

Toronto Public Health's Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy

Date: May 15, 2026

To: Board of Health

From: Medical Officer of Health

Wards: All

REASON FOR CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

This report contains information about labour relations or employee negotiations.

SUMMARY

Nurses represent the largest regulated health professional workforce at Toronto Public Health. They work to advance the organization's mandate to improve the health and well-being of Torontonians and advance population health outcomes. Toronto Public Health employs Public Health Nurses (PHNs) and Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) who are integral to the successful delivery of programs and services within communities across the city. In addition to designated nursing classifications, nurses are employed in a range of roles and positions throughout the division, working collaboratively with multidisciplinary colleagues across the organization to deliver a range of public health interventions.

This report provides an overview of the nursing workforce at Toronto Public Health, the current trends that inform workforce planning, as well as a summary of Toronto Public Health's Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy. Toronto Public Health continues to monitor and act on public health workforce trends, including nurse recruitment and retention, and remains focused on staff engagement efforts and nurturing a positive workplace culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medical Officer of Health recommends that:

1. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to continue ongoing efforts to support Toronto Public Health nurses in their delivery of programs and services mandated by the Ontario Public Health Standards.
2. The Board of Health request the Medical Officer of Health to report to the Board of Health with an update on the Toronto Public Health nursing workforce in Q2 2027.
3. The Board of Health direct that the confidential information contained in Confidential Attachment 1 remain confidential in its entirety, as it contains information about labour relations or employee negotiations.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial impacts associated with the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

On September 15, 2025, the Board of Health requested the Medical Officer of Health to report back to the Board of Health in the third quarter of 2026 with findings and recommendations to strengthen Toronto Public Health's nursing retention strategy.
<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.HL27.1>

COMMENTS

Nurses are the largest regulated health professional workforce at Toronto Public Health (TPH) and are central to improving the health of Toronto's residents. Working closely with multidisciplinary colleagues, nurses are foundational to the delivery of local public health programs and services, including health promotion, health protection and the prevention of disease and injury.

Nurses at TPH practise across the population health continuum, from primordial to primary and secondary prevention. This includes individual client services, such as sexual health clinic services, as well as working with families and communities providing programs and services that promote health and well-being and protect against diseases, with a focus on reducing inequities. In collaboration with multidisciplinary staff, community organizations and other orders of governments, nurses help to create conditions that improve health outcomes and reduce inequities. Nurses also play an important role in TPH's emergency response initiatives and provide surge capacity to help the organization respond to urgent and emerging public health threats.

All nurses at TPH are regulated health professionals who practise in accordance with provincial legislation and the standards set by the College of Nurses of Ontario. Nurses are also required to maintain ongoing professional competence and participate in quality improvement activities. Nursing practice at Toronto Public Health is supported by a Chief Nursing Officer (CNO), as required by the 2021 Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS). The CNO provides senior leadership and accountability for nursing practice and supports safe, evidence based and legislatively compliant nursing care across the organization.

Public Health Nurse (PHN) positions at TPH are held by registered nurses (RNs) who have a minimum baccalaureate degree in nursing and meet the legislated requirements to use the title. The PHNs practise with a high level of professional responsibility and are skilled in adapting to complex and changing environments. Their roles include assessing individual, community and population health needs, planning and delivering high quality public health programs. Public Health Nurses are currently employed across the following programs at TPH:

- Control of Infectious Diseases
- Harm Reduction & Clinical Services
- Healthy Aging Across the Lifespan
- Health Informatics
- Healthy Babies Healthy Children
- Reproductive & Early Years
- School Health
- Tuberculosis

Registered Practical Nurses (RPNs) are also licensed and regulated in Ontario and make important contributions to public health service delivery. The RPNs practise within a defined scope of practice that is appropriate for stable and predictable care needs, with consultation or collaboration with RNs as complexity increases. At TPH, RPNs are currently employed in clinical programs including Vaccine Preventable Disease and Tuberculosis.

In addition to direct service delivery roles, nurses at TPH also contribute to a range of specialized and leadership positions across the organization. Nurses are employed as Health Promotion Specialists, Quality Improvement Specialists, Education Coordinators and in leadership roles such as Supervisors, Managers, Directors, and other independent contributor positions. These roles support program planning, performance improvement, staff development, and strategic leadership, reflecting the breadth of nursing practice beyond clinical and program delivery functions.

Nurses are integral to delivering programs and services required under the OPHS, and the way nurses carry out their work is fundamental to achieving positive individual, community and population-level health outcomes. In addition, the practice of nursing in Public Health is supported by National Public Health Core Competencies (PHCC). These competencies were recently revised to include population focussed assessment, culturally safe public health practice, collaboration and partnership, policy development, advocacy, and evidence informed decision-making to improve community health outcomes. These competencies also emphasize health equity, anti-racism and anti-

oppression; the use of epidemiology; community health assessment; community engagement, addressing misinformation, leadership at all levels, systems thinking, advancing interprofessional collaboration, emergency preparedness and response, and continuous learning. When implemented, the impact of these competencies is comprehensive and localized, evidence-informed public health interventions that are equity-focused, relevant and sustainable.

To support nursing practice and continuous improvement, TPH convenes two groups: a Nursing Practice Council (NPC) and a Nurse Manager Practice Advisory Group (NMPAG). The NPC is comprised of frontline staff who come together to address nursing practice issues, advance evidence-based practice, promote professional development and strengthen alignment between nursing practice and organizational objectives. The NMPAG advise on strategies that build and support a highly skilled and engaged nursing workforce at TPH as well as advance a strong professional nursing practice environment that aligns with the Toronto Public Health's Strategic Plan.

Recent Action to Support Nurses at Toronto Public Health

Over the last six months, a range of observations and concerns have been shared with senior leadership and the Board of Health. This relates to nursing workforce recruitment and retention, compensation, service access and quality, and the impact these concerns may have on public health resilience and preparedness and the provision of public health services in Toronto.

As these concerns have been raised, TPH has created space for public health leadership and staff to continue a dialogue around these important topics, including discussions on internal recruitment and retention data and on service delivery outcomes data. In addition to these ongoing discussions, TPH has demonstrated action through a variety of initiatives meant to strengthen the nursing workforce and improve engagement, including:

- Invested significant resources to support recruitment of nursing resulting in 107 nursing hires in 2025, with additional positions being recruited in 2026;
- Filled 69 permanent nursing positions in 2025, with additional permanent positions being filled in 2026;
- Developed new onboarding and mentoring initiatives;
- Invested in professional development opportunities to strengthen scope of nursing practice (e.g. trauma informed care training);
- Invested in career development opportunities for nurses to move into promotional positions; and,
- Initiated projects to improve technologies and reduce administrative burden for nurses.

Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy

The Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy builds upon existing initiatives that support professional growth and development and prepare nurses for nursing positions across the organization, future specialist and leadership opportunities. Some of the initiatives included in the strategy are:

- Preparing quarterly nursing workforce reports highlighting metrics (e.g., recruitment, exit rates, and staff movements by program area);
- Promoting public health nursing as a career option to nursing students;
- Standardizing job postings and assessment tools to improve hiring efficiency;
- Annual reviews and improvement of onboarding and orientation programs;
- Active monitoring of changes to nursing practice standards and guidelines to increase awareness and ensure implementation amongst nursing staff (e.g., College of Nurses Virtual Care Guideline); and,
- Continued designation of Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO) Best Practice Spotlight Organization (BPSO), ensuring effective implementation of best practices for public health interventions.

Toronto Public Health continues to explore opportunities to expand its Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy to also include a range of new initiatives, such as improved onboarding and orientation activities, identifying opportunities to cross-train nurses to respond to emergencies and expand scope of practice (e.g. immunization clinics and case and contact management), improving internal communication pathways, and strengthening strategic partnerships with a range of nursing organizations and nursing schools.

Many of these strategies and approaches build upon organization-wide initiatives, such as the TPH Employee Engagement Strategy. Together, they help foster a positive workplace culture for all TPH employees, including Public Health Inspectors, Dietitians, Epidemiologists, Dental Hygienists, Social Workers, Physicians and Dentists.

The Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy is organized across the following six pillars:

1. Monitoring the Nursing Workforce

As of December 31, 2025, (latest data available) the total nursing workforce at Toronto Public Health (individuals with active nursing licenses) was 585, in the following positions:

- 376 Public Health Nurses
- 94 Registered Practical Nurses
- 54 Specialists
- 61 Staff with nursing licenses (Associate/Director, Manager, Supervisor or Independent Contributors)

Successfully hiring new nurses

Recruitment of nurses at TPH is strong. In 2025, TPH job postings resulted in 953 internal and 1470 external applications and the hiring of 69 qualified permanent nurses and 38 temporary nurses. The 2025 recruitment efforts have continued through 2026 where additional vacancies are anticipated to be filled in Q2. While the organization continues recruitment efforts to support current vacancies, plans are underway to maintain an active nursing candidate pool to fill future vacancies effectively. Although applicant volumes remain high, the city's recruitment process requires multiple steps that extend timelines for larger scale recruitments.

Recent recruitment efforts have strengthened service delivery across key programs, enabling the elimination of waitlists at some locations and meaningful reductions in others, including within the Healthy Babies Healthy Children (HBHC) program. These recruitments have also expanded access to care for families and clients across Toronto, including:

- Opening two new breastfeeding clinics in 2025, a TPH operated clinic at Ancestral Hands Midwifery in Scarborough and a partnership clinic at Humber River Hospital;
- Introducing an after hours HBHC team extending service into evenings and weekends; and,
- Resuming sexual health clinic services at the North York Civic Centre following strategically planned renovations to improve service delivery and accessibility for clients.

Based on the most recent recruitment experience, recruitment challenges are limited to bilingual (French) nurses, which is a broader province-wide challenge and not unique to TPH. Toronto Public Health is focusing efforts on attracting French speaking nurses by exploring potential partnerships with various bilingual institutes. In addition to these focused efforts to increase French speaking nurse recruitment, the organization is also reviewing opportunities to offer French-language training for current PHNs to support professional development and strengthen organizational capacity to serve the Francophone community.

Workforce data also shows continued internal movement of nurses within TPH, which includes employee-initiated transfers between programs, appointments to permanent positions, and promotional opportunities. In 2024, 27 PHNs and 14 RPNs moved internally while 2025 saw 88 PHNs and 16 RPNs shift internally with; 10 nurses shifting into promotional permanent or acting opportunities. This data reflects the experience of nurses who move between programs and who fill roles across TPH programs and in promotional capacities. Internal opportunities support retention and career growth, while newly negotiated time in role requirements for both unionized and non-union staff have also supported workforce stabilization at TPH.

Preparing for retirements

Toronto Public Health currently employs a number of nurses eligible for retirement within the next five years. This trend is consistent with sector norms and other disciplines. There are approximately 73 PHNs eligible to retire within the next five years (16.3 per cent) and there are roughly 15 RPNs also eligible to retire over this period (19.7 per cent). As a part of its Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy, TPH is anticipating these retirements and working towards maintaining staffing levels throughout the transition. In preparation for this, work is underway to establish active nursing candidate pools that can be leveraged to replace vacancies as they occur. Efforts are also underway to strengthen relationships with Schools of Nursing to promote public health nursing as a profession of choice.

Retaining existing nurses

Overall, nursing turnover at TPH has stabilized following the pandemic and is below the City of Toronto external exit rate of 10.4 per cent for 2025. The turnover rate for PHNs in 2024 was 9.8 per cent and 8.7 per cent 2025. For RPNs, the turnover rate was 27 per cent in 2024 and 3.4 per cent in 2025. In 2025, 56 per cent of PHN exits were the result of retirements. While the organization saw an increased number of nursing exits post pandemic, exits have stabilized through 2024 and 2025.

In anticipation of upcoming retirements and to strengthen retention of institutional knowledge, People Leaders are beginning to implement knowledge transfer processes that can include mentorship pairings between outgoing employees and peers, detailed documentation of key processes, and creating opportunities to transfer key community partnerships and relationships.

2. Promoting Public Health Nursing to Future Nursing Professionals

Toronto Public Health promotes Public Health Nursing to students in both undergraduate and graduate nursing programs. In partnership with post secondary institutions, TPH offers opportunities for student learning through various nursing placements and attends courses as guest speakers to share more information about what a career in public health nursing would look like at TPH.

Toronto Public Health is also actively working to increase community nursing student placements at TPH and will continue working alongside universities and collaborative university and college programs to increase consolidation opportunities for nursing students in their final year. Consolidation is a process that includes an intensive clinical placement where students work alongside a preceptor to transition from student to independent practitioner, helping them transition successfully to the workforce.

Finally, TPH is exploring opportunities to promote public health nursing as a career profession to high school students considering post secondary.

3. Recruiting Nurses to Toronto Public Health

Toronto Public Health continues to monitor and strengthen efforts related to the recruitment of nurses, especially in the context of nursing workforce pressures experienced within the broader health care system. Currently the organization is actively recruiting for both permanent and temporary nursing positions. Given the strong application rate, TPH is well-positioned to build a robust candidate pool for future vacancies. Toronto Public Health also actively participates in job fairs in both community and post secondary settings to continue strengthening interest in working in public health.

4. Onboarding, Mentorship and Professional Development

In addition to corporate onboarding, TPH has a new employee orientation initiative that provides supports and guidance to new staff. In addition, program areas have been updating program-based onboarding programs. Program onboarding can include mentorship, facilitated or online training, individual and team based onboarding

meetings and frequent check-ins. Toronto Public Health continues to work on strengthening onboarding and orientation programs across the division and is working toward a formalized division-wide mentorship program to complement existing supports and respond to changing community health needs.

Toronto Public Health's Employee Engagement Action Plan supports nurses through initiatives that foster a positive workplace culture, professional growth and enhance engagement across the organization. To further nurture a positive workplace culture that fosters innovation, continuous improvement and learning, nurses are required to participate in professional development, mentorship programs, conferences, reflective practice, and building an individualized learning plan to ensure safe, ethical and quality care. In 2025, TPH made significant investment in nursing professional development including TPH nursing representation at the following conferences and workshops: Community Health Nurses of Canada, RNAO, the Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders and RNAO BPSO Global Summit. As part of being a BPSO, staff are trained to become champions for the Best Practice Guidelines (BPGs) being implemented within their organization. Currently TPH is implementing 12 Best Practice Guidelines with 275 champions of which 236 are nurses.

5. Recognition and Celebration

Recognition and celebration is an ongoing practice at TPH, and staff are routinely acknowledged through a range of formal and informal mechanisms, such as the regular recognition of nursing work in the Medical Officer of Health weekly message, and other communication opportunities.

Toronto Public Health also offers an employee recognition program that celebrates and recognizes staff in various initiatives, including Cheers to Peers, Employee Shoutouts, service milestone celebrations and the Above and Beyond recognition program.

Nurses are also celebrated annually during Nursing Week providing leadership and front-line nurses an opportunity to come together to celebrate the achievements of nursing staff across the organization.

6. Strengthening Strategic Partnerships

Toronto Public Health is a leader in public health nursing practice. Toronto Public Health is recognized as a Registered Nurses Association of Ontario Best Practice Spotlight Organization and has held this internationally recognized designation since 2009.

Toronto Public Health is one of only five public health units that holds this designation, recognizing the organization's commitment to implementing best practices and optimizing health outcomes at the individual, organizational and health system levels.

In addition to delivering their day-to-day responsibilities, nurses employed at TPH are also leaders of system change at local, provincial, and national tables. Public Health leadership within the organization is represented at a range of organizations, including the Ontario Association of Public Health Nursing Leaders (OPHNL), Community Health Nursing Association of Canada (CHNC), the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), and the Registered Nurses Association Ontario. The Chief Nursing Officers and managers

from teams across the organization frequently share and receive information on the provincial and national landscape of public health nursing to inform internal policies and nursing workforce strategies.

Collective bargaining and compensation

Toronto Public Health recognizes the importance of fair and competitive compensation for all its employees. Toronto Public Health Nursing wage rates are established through the City of Toronto's collective bargaining process. In the recently concluded round of collective bargaining, the City made substantial investments in compensation, including increases to base salary rates, special market adjustments and higher staff premiums. Public Health Nurses received a 6.14% wage increase in 2025, compared to a municipal average of approximately 2.95%. Beyond wages, the City also recently agreed to enhanced paramedical benefits, and for the first time, dedicated funds for family building and gender affirming care. Over the life of the four-year collective agreement (beginning in 2025), PHNs will see a 17.9% increase to their base salary rate.

Conclusion

Nurses - and the work they do - are vital to advancing public health initiatives and TPH will continue to invest in ongoing recruitment and retention activities to ensure the workforce is supported, and programs continue to be delivered. Toronto Public Health values and respects its nursing workforce and is committed to the continuous implementation of the Nursing Retention and Recruitment Strategy to better support nurses as they continue to support communities.

Toronto Public Health will continue to monitor and evaluate the impact and outcomes of the Nursing Retention and Recruitment Strategy over the next year, which will also allow additional time to implement the newer initiatives included in the strategy that respond directly to some of the recent concerns raised.

Toronto Public Health Strategic Impact

This report includes an overview of the current nursing workforce at TPH, trends that influence workforce planning and decision-making, as well as a summary of Toronto Public Health's Nursing Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

This report advances the following priority of the Toronto Public Health Strategic Plan 2024-2028:

5. Nurturing a positive workplace culture.

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SIGNATURE

Dr. Michelle Murti
Medical Officer of Health

ATTACHMENTS

Confidential Attachment 1