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Nurses call for pandemic preparations

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Nurses across Canada are calling on the Canadian premiers and territorial leaders meeting in Regina this week to put health care, which is critical in any pandemic planning, on their agenda.

The Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN) and the **Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions** (CFNU) hosted a drop-in health clinic in Wascana Centre Wednesday to highlight the need for Canada's health system to undergo a checkup.

Premiers need to agree on a common framework with targets for implementation to protect health-care workers during a pandemic, said CFNU president **Linda Silas**.

SUN president Rosalee Longmoore said Saskatchewan has made some headway in hiring more nurses, but there is a systemic problem.

"The major thing that we are facing today in the health-care system is the shortage of (long-term and acute-care) beds as well as a shortage of health providers," Longmoore said.

She is predicting that the first health-human resource challenge Canada's health-care system will face is finding the nurses to conduct mass H1N1 immunization clinics this fall at a time when staff are already busy doing regular immunization for seasonal influenza.

"We know that our public health nurses are tapped heavily during influenza vaccination season and now they have another (vaccination program) on top of it," Longmoore said.

Silas suggested the health ministers look at utilizing retired nurses, student nurses and nurses who work in offices to help with the massive H1N1 vaccination program.

"We can't have a health-care system working on overtime because if we have a system that does not have a plan, we will have a crisis. How do you deal with a crisis? It's with overtime and then our members get sick and can't show up for work."

The nurses' unions want a commitment from the premiers this week that their concerns will be addressed and will be requesting follow-up meetings with the provincial health ministers prior to September's Health Ministers Council meeting.

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