

# NEWS RELEASE



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## Nurses condemn VIHA healthcare cuts

*“Ill-conceived, short-sighted, harmful to seniors, to vulnerable members of the public and to the nurses who provide their care”*

Nurses today condemned healthcare cuts announced by Vancouver Island Health Authority as ill-conceived, shortsighted and harmful to seniors, to vulnerable members of the public and to the nurses who provide their care.

“VIHA should be ashamed of itself for these cuts that reduce or eliminate services for seniors, the mentally ill, and for those needing elective surgery and diagnostic procedures,” said Debra McPherson, president of the BC Nurses’ Union. “But the provincial government should be even more ashamed for forcing its health authorities to cut services because they’re not allowed to go into the red, while the province, itself, is running a large deficit.”

“The fact is, healthcare cuts are hurting patients and communities. In tough economic times governments should be improving healthcare and other services, because people need them more than ever.”

McPherson says the cancellation of hundreds of elective surgeries and diagnostic procedures like MRIs will only increase pressure for more private, for-profit healthcare.

She’s especially concerned about the elimination of the only nurse-practitioner position at the James Bay Community Project, a model of not-for-profit, community-driven primary healthcare which could bring efficiencies and cost savings if it was emulated across the province.

“By cutting the nurse practitioner at James Bay, VIHA is showing it just doesn’t understand the importance of what nurses bring to primary healthcare. To make matters worse VIHA is claiming James Bay is ‘privately owned’ when it is, in fact, one of the best examples of team-based community-controlled primary healthcare in the province.”

Ronni McCallum, a nurse at Victoria General Hospital who is co-chair for BCNU’s South Islands region says nurses are especially concerned about the impact on seniors and vulnerable citizens from cuts to volunteer support programs, Meals on Wheels, crisis lines, counseling and peer support, drop-ins, music and art therapy for the mentally ill and rehabilitation services in Victoria.

“VIHA is justifying many of these cuts on the grounds that Victoria has a higher level of service than the rest of the Island. So instead of bringing the rest of the Island up to a higher standard, VIHA is equalizing standards downward. These are services that help keep people healthy but VIHA is claiming they aren’t ‘core’ healthcare. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Holly Anderson from Campbell River, acting BCNU Pacific Rim Region chair, said instead of bringing Victoria down to a lesser standard of service, VIHA should be increasing service in the central and north Island. "Playing divide and conquer or robbing Peter to pay Paul is no way to run a healthcare system".

South Islands co-chair Jill Karleen, a long term care nurse, says nurses at long term care facilities slated for closure, such as Mount Tolmie Hospital, are in a state of shock because they've been told the facility will be closing in one year.

"VIHA and the government are saying these are changes, not cuts, but in fact, they are cuts. And change is never good when it comes under the pressure of demands to eliminate deficits and cut budgets.

Karleen says the cuts are causing great dislocation and upset among nurses and other health care workers. While all the details aren't in, it appears the cuts will lead to the elimination of more than 40 nursing positions, a serious erosion of patient care.

McPherson says the provincial government could have avoided the chaos and dislocation the cuts are causing on the front lines of healthcare by covering health authority deficits without increasing the provincial deficit beyond what would normally be expected in a significant economic downturn.

"That's what the federal government has done - stimulating the economy and providing services even if it means increasing the deficit.

At the same time, McPherson says if health authorities are seeking more efficiencies they should look to nurses for solutions. "They need to consult with and involve front line nurses in the process of change if they hope to improve services for the public.

**British Columbia Nurses' Union**

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