

Open Letter to The Honourable Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of Health

July 27, 2009

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The Honourable Leona Aglukkaq, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Health
House of Commons
Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ont.
K1A 0A6

Dear Minister:

As the flu season approaches, the federal government must lead and coordinate a comprehensive national plan to protect Canadians from an outbreak of the H1N1 virus, including a strategy to keep critical front-line workers safe and on the job. I urge you to call a federal/provincial/territorial meeting of ministers responsible for health at the earliest opportunity to design and implement such a plan.

As you know, pandemics do not respect borders, so effective pandemic preparedness requires international and national coordination and the engagement of all orders of government – federal, provincial/territorial and municipal.

Canada must not limit itself to a patchwork of regional pandemic responses. Cities and communities from St. John's to Whitehorse must be assured that their citizens, and the essential services they rely on, will be protected by an effective national strategy that meets national standards. Only the federal government can provide the leadership and coordination required to achieve this objective.

FCM recognizes the important steps already taken by the federal government to protect Canadians against a pandemic. A national plan to protect the health sector appears to have strengthened federal-provincial/territorial coordination in this area. Actions to increase the national antiviral stockpile are also positive.

However, the global outbreak of the H1N1 flu virus has exposed a serious gap in the federal government's overall pandemic preparedness strategy. Currently, there is neither a national plan, nor guidelines in place, to help cities and communities protect critical front-line workers such as police, firefighters, public transit operators, water and wastewater workers and municipal public health professionals. This puts at risk the critical services that provide the foundation for effective pandemic response measures.

As a country we must safeguard the health of the men and women who will be on the front lines during an outbreak, responsible for keeping our cities and communities running and protecting the public. A serious disruption in critical services would put Canada's pandemic response plan on life-support, and bring our cities and communities to a grinding halt.

Municipalities are taking action to manage the H1N1 outbreak, but local governments cannot do it alone. To keep cities and communities functioning during a pandemic, critical front-line workers need access to federal vaccines and antiviral stockpiles.

In 2008, a task force of the Public Health Agency of Canada recommended that the agency work with all orders of government to identify "critical infrastructure workers" and ensure they "have access to rapid assessment and early treatment." More

recently, federal officials have publicly stated that critical workers should receive priority access to an H1N1 vaccine.

The challenge now is to put words into action, and to do so quickly. Cities and communities are ready to help federal, provincial and territorial governments identify and protect our front-line staff. With the flu season approaching, there is still time to fix this problem, but there is no time to waste.

On behalf of communities large and small, I thank you for your attention to this critically important issue and I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Basil L. Stewart
President of FCM
Mayor, City of Summerside
Prince Edward Island
Canada

c: The Honourable John Baird, Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities