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No problem solved with travel nurses, but headaches created

By Josh Lewis
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Western Hospital is the most prominent example of how travel nurses are used to keep rural facilities open, as Health PEI's reliance on private agencies continues to grow exponentially, says PEI Nurses Union president Barbara Brookins.

In the last six months the Alberton hospital was kept open thanks to 20 contracts for active agency nurses, many for upwards of 400 days of work, she said.

"It's supposedly a Band-Aid solution, but they're not fixing the problem because obviously the holes aren't getting filled and (Health PEI) is still using them," the union leader said.

Between Alberton and O'Leary, 41.5 per cent of RN positions were filled by agencies as of September 30, Health PEI says. That's the highest number on the Island.

For community hospitals, Brookins said travel nurses are largely used at Western and Kings County Memorial Hospital.

It's not just rural settings where agencies have become a fixture in staffing, however. Prince County Hospital has the second-highest rate at 28.3 per cent, followed by KCMH and Souris combined at 17.3 per cent and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital at 10.3 per cent.



Barbara Brookins is president of the PEI Nurses Union. Submitted photo

A money pit with no end in sight

Health PEI spending on staffing agencies has skyrocketed, going from $9,620.90 in 2020-21 to at least $25.25 million funnelled to six agencies in 2024-25. Most of that increase came in a single year. Last year a comparatively modest $5.8 million was spent, according to data obtained by the Graphic via Freedom of Information and analyzed using artificial intelligence.

Of the total, almost $15 million has gone to Ottawa-based Goodwill Staffing and Recruitment. Others used include Solutions Staffing Inc ($7.19 million), EZCare Nursing Agency ($5.89 million), Northern Medical Connections Inc ($2.16 million), CareCor Health Services Ltd ($1.92 million) and Augury Healthcare Inc ($563,527). This may not represent an exhaustive account of spending on agencies.

Brookins said it's obvious this practice is not improving the public nursing shortage but perpetually filling a hole.

"If government is not able to show that by using this highly paid resource, they're fixing the problem, then they need to look somewhere else," she said.

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Gov't must regulate travel nursing agencies

By Josh Lewis
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THE COST OF CARE
Where PEI's Health Dollars Go
- Second in a Series -

Joan Almost's biggest concern with private staffing agencies is their wild west nature, with little or no regulation, little transparency and drastically differing rates between agencies, including to different health authorities in the same province.

"It's really this black box where the public money's is being poured into this area with very little oversight or reporting," said the Queens University nursing professor. "How do we monitor a situation like this when there's no data? How do we even compare one province to another? You can't."

Despite numerous access to information requests, she doesn't think her 2024 report on agencies captures the full picture.

The lack of information means it's very difficult to determine how much of a contract amount is going to the nurse as opposed to the agency.

Some agencies pay for such things as travel costs, accommodation, parking and orientation, but in many cases the health authority must, said Almost.

They need to be regulated across the country, she said.

"Governments need to get a handle on who the agencies are, what are they doing and how can they regulate that," Almost said.

The number of agencies being used has exploded along with the amounts being spent. For example, one Quebec health authority used at least 262 agencies in 2023-24, according to the report.

While competitiveness is a good thing, Almost said it's reached the point where almost anyone can start an agency because of the opportunity for profit.

In PEI, both the PEI Nurses Union (PEINU) and Union of Public Sector Employees (UPSE) have struggled to get enough information and proper consultation on use of the agencies, such as not providing access to the same spreadsheets it uses.

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Batter up

Dillon Doucette of the Peakes Bombers awaiting a pitch in game 5 of the 2025 KCBL finals at Walter Bradley Memorial Field in Morell. Doucette led the league in RBIs, doubles and home runs during the regular season. Duncan Picketts was the Morell Chevies catcher behind the plate. The Bombers took the 2025 championship in game six last Monday. See more on page 15. Kyle Cotton photo

Myers retires after 14 years in government

By Pratik Bhattarai
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After 14 years as an MLA former PEI Progressive Conservative politician Steven Myers has retired from politics.

It was something the Burnt Point resident, who has held many positions over his tenure, has been thinking about for some time.

"Like I always said, politicians shouldn't stay for long periods of time. There should be new blood coming in it all the time," he said.

Myers was first elected in 2011 and re-elected in 2015 representing Georgetown-St Peters and 2019 and 2023 representing Georgetown-Pownal. He was in opposition for eight years and once the PCs formed government spent time as Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, Environment and Climate Action Minister and most recently Minister of Housing, Land and Communities before retiring.

Initially, he was planning on being in politics for 12 years and in the last couple of years he was seeking a change and wanted to spend more time with his family, he said.

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From page 1 - No problem solved

It's also a blow to morale for public nurses, who are paid as much as three times less than their privately sourced co-workers. This disparity hurts retention efforts required to phase out the use of agencies.

"We can't say, 'Listen, it's only going to be for a couple of months.' The numbers keep going up, so that's not what's happening," Brookins said.

She stressed the union is not questioning the quality of the agency nurses, or the need to keep services open.

In its pre-budget submission last fall, the union suggested signing short-term contracts with Health PEI casual nurses as a more permanent commitment that would factor in time off or vacations. Brookins said getting 10 months of the year from a casual nurse would save money compared to agency nurses.

"But we got absolutely no response on that," she said.

As of June, 48 per cent of nurse practitioner positions and 28 per cent of RN positions in the public system were vacant, according to data compiled by the union which counts both permanent and temporary vacancies, as well as approved leaves. That includes 208 vacant jobs out of 258 posted via flex hiring.

It's not just registered nurses

Although travel nurses is an oft-used phrase to describe the practice, PEI's spending is not limited to RNs or even nursing.

Karen Jackson, president of the PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (UPSE), said their most recent data shows 27 travel LPNs are currently working on the Island. They were first used in 2023.

More recently UPSE learned from its own members, not from Health PEI, that four resident care workers (RCWs) at Colville Manor and two personal care workers (PCWs) at Souris Hospital have been hired through agencies.

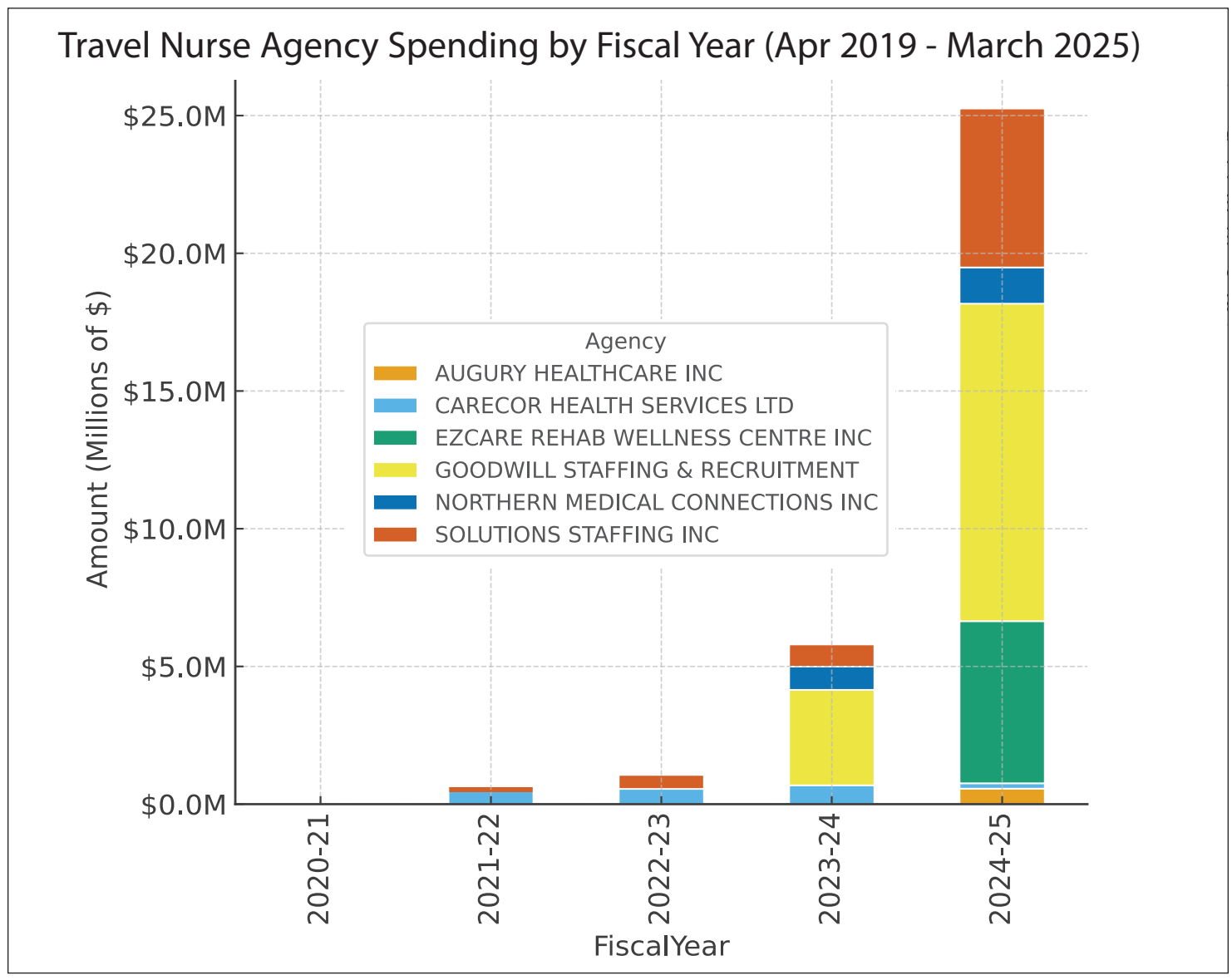
"I would've liked to have been consulted on the plans to use these agencies and then sit down and have the conversation around incentives or initiatives we could've put in place for our public workers already on staff," Jackson said.

The union's understanding is no RFP was posted for the RCW positions, which means Health PEI violated its own procurement processes.

UPSE filed a grievance against the use of travel LPNs and arbitration has been ongoing since July.

"I'm concerned about the direction and where Health PEI's going with the use of privatization," Jackson said. "Paying three times as much is just not sustainable given our modest tax base."

Other questionable decisions have also contributed to the lack of stability in health care staffing, which extends to non-medical positions.



This chart shows the explosive increase in Health PEI's use of private agencies to staff positions in the public system, particularly for RNs, according to documents obtained in a Freedom of Information request. In 2020-21 Health PEI paid $9,620.90 to one agency. By 2024-25 the total spend was at least $25.25 million to six agencies. This may not be an exhaustive list of all agencies used.

In 2023 Health PEI began providing incentives for part-time and casual work, which have been extended several times since. It led to a surge of full-time workers switching to part-time roles where they could make more money by working full-time equivalent (FTE) hours.

Jackson gave the example of a part-time LPN working FTE hours who could make $18,000 more than a full-time LPN.

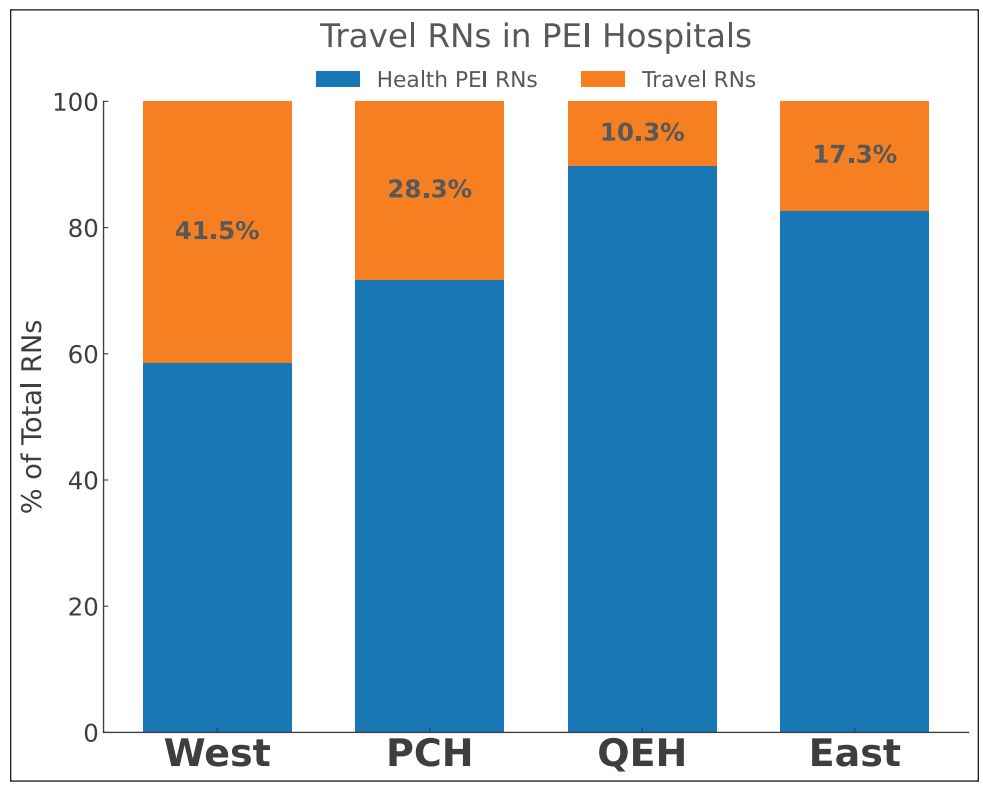
"Then they had to rely on hiring private agency nurses to fill in their mistakes in their decision-making. It's very costly for Island taxpayers."

In early 2025 Health PEI rolled out so-called flex hiring, where 500 positions were posted at once in an effort to achieve 100 per cent coverage of positions. After meeting with UPSE, it agreed to staff them pursuant to their collective agreement, but that didn't happen, Jackson said.

Recently the union learned flex hiring has been expanded to 1,600 positions.

Running a program to ensure 100 per cent staffing and simultaneously running one that incentivizes full-time workers to drop to part-time makes no sense, Jackson said.

"It's counterproductive and counterintuitive."



This chart shows the percentage of RN positions in PEI hospitals staffed by travel agencies as of September 30, according to data provided by Health PEI. "West" encompasses Western Hospital in Alberton and Community Hospital in O'Leary, while "East" includes Kings County Memorial Hospital in Montague and Souris Hospital.

A nationwide problem

PEI is far from unique in its use of private staffing agencies. Every province has relied on them to some extent in recent years, with Quebec reporting particularly high rates, according to Queens University nursing professor Joan Almost's 2024 report, "Opening the black box: Unpacking the use of nursing agencies in Canada" for the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions.

Such agencies have been around for decades, Almost told the Graphic, and were used primarily in remote and rural areas. But the pandemic, and the exodus of nurses from the profession that followed, was a catalyst for their explosion into the mainstream.

"Agencies stepped up and were obviously keen to do so at a cost," she said.

She feels it has now become an arrangement of convenience for governments, growing used to not needing a hiring process, despite the high cost.

Her report found $1.5 billion was spent on for-profit agencies across the country in 2023-24, and she doesn't think that covers everything given the lack of data.

She noted most agency nurses surveyed for her report love their work, citing better pay, work-life balance and the ability to travel among other benefits.

However, they often don't get much orientation, sometimes only shadowing another nurse for a day. The lack of continuity creates disruption in health care settings where rapport between co-workers is important, Almost said.

Better retention is a must before agencies can be phased out, and more money should be put toward that, she said. High turnover with agency nurses and the morale hit from the wage gap only make retention harder.

In particular, newly hired grads have a huge learning curve and need guidance for the initial two years, and that mentorship isn't happening if there's high turnover.

"It's a huge area of concern. If they're not learning the way they should be, they get frustrated and leave," she said.

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From page 1 - Gov't must

PEINU president Barbara Brookins called for the province to be more transparent in how it provides data to the union, such as not providing access to the same spreadsheets it uses. This is despite their collective bargaining agreement requiring Health PEI to provide statistical reports to the union in a timely manner on written request.

Goodwill Staffing and Recruitment, which has received the most money from Health PEI, did not provide someone for an interview on Monday. Northern Medical Connections did not respond to a request for comment.

Georgetown Port to offer grants



Turbine parts for the expansion of Eastern Kings wind farm began arriving at Georgetown Port May 8. The port, which is one of three heavy duty facilities in PEI, is offering community grants to not for profit organizations that will "enhance social, cultural, environmental or recreational initiatives" in the area. Graphic file photo

By Charlotte MacAulay
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The board of directors of the Port of Georgetown are reaching out into the broader community with a grant initiative.

President Tim Mair said while it is not typical for a port to be in the business of funding community projects the current board wanted to do the project based on their position as part of the community.

"We haven't been in this position before to give a little bit of money back to the community, but we feel we are there now," Mair said.

The grant application can be found on the Georgetown Port Inc. website.

"We are very fortunate to have a strong board and they are all very community minded," Mair said.

Since the time the board took over the port in 2012 they have been able to do major repairs and purchase land that is now leased by the Town of Three Rivers for the Visitor Information Centre.

The main mandate is to ensure the port is in good working order and they have plenty of business.

"Our biggest earner is gravel and gravel goes to the infrastructure of roads and construction," he said noting that spills over into the economy of the region and the entire Island.

He pointed to the PEI Energy Corporation wind turbine contract they had this summer for components destined for the Eastern Kings wind farm as another example.

Both mean there is no doubt operating the facility goes hand in hand with contributing to the community.

And providing the grants opens up another avenue of contribution.

"So with this outreach here we are reaching a different spot," he said. "We're not acting as a service industry but we are happy to (make this kind of contribution)."

Another aspect of being part of the community is the public access to the wharf.

It has always been the practice to allow the public to fish mackerel and bass when there is not any port activity going on.

"It's part of the public fabric to have this and sometimes there's 50 or more people on the wharf with rods over the side looking at each other on a Saturday morning," Mair said.

The board hasn't made a decision on whether the grant program will be a yearly event.

"We just want to make sure people realize we are trying this on and if it works out maybe we will do it again," Mair said.

Not for profit organizations are eligible to apply and the application deadline is November 30.

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No problem solved

Not enough is being done to stop the bleeding with better retention, says Ivy Bourgeault, a University of Ottawa professor who leads the Canadian Health Workforce Network.

Dedicated return policies to bring back those who previously burned out are needed, along with recruiting people from rural areas to train and work in their home community.

One example to emulate is the Nurse Practitioner Education Incentive in Nova Scotia, which covers the salary of registered nurses while they train to become an NP and then work in their own community or other smaller areas.

"There are lots of little pockets of promising practices, they just need to be paid attention to. There is an absolute need for much more mobilization of that type of knowledge."

From page 1 - # Myers retires



Studying Georgetown's energy usage in the hopes of turning it into a net-zero community was among former MLA Steven Myers' signature projects. After retiring from politics he wants to work in the clean tech field. Graphic file photo

Back when he started, it was because he wanted to get involved in politics to help rural communities develop.

"Rural schools were important to me, rural ball fields, rural rinks, allowing people to work here. Things like the public transit that I brought in helped because people can now choose to live out in these rural parts and travel to Charlottetown every day and vice versa," he added.

He's proud of the work he's done to tackle climate change. Things like PEI's net zero strategy, climate adaptation strategy and clean tax strategy were the pillars of it, he said.

"When I knocked on doors in 2019, there were about five places that had solar on the roof. And I said, we could have a solar program here that could be the best one in the country. We could build solar so that people can live affordably in their homes," he added.

"You can drive down to Georgetown to see the clean tech building that's being built. That industry will grow due to the opportunity that we created," he said.

Myers was also a big advocate for keeping the Georgetown Elementary School open in 2017, after it was recommended for closure by the PEI Public School Board.

"The government of the day was short-sighted because they were growing our population rather rapidly through the immigration streams and they never once looked at what the other pressures were going to be. And now you see we're building schools as the government because there's so many kids in the schools."

He said the school was something the people in the community cared deeply about and he felt like he had to fight to keep it open. It was a proud moment for him to work with the community members.

Stacey Toms, a Georgetown resident and PEI Home and School Federation representative said Myers was a strong advocate for keeping the school open in 2017.

"It was important for the school to be open because first of all, kids could walk to school, and the community as a whole is growing so new families can move in and they won't have to worry about sending their kids to school," Toms said.

She said Myers would attend meetings at any time or place. He always made time for the community members and would try to answer whatever question they had.

Colin LaVie, former Souris-Elmira MLA, said Myers was a "political machine" who was good at his job. They spent a few years in opposition together.

"People said he was blunt or harsh, but the opposition's job was to hold the government accountable, and people respected him. I'd say Steven brought down the government by himself," LaVie said.

Once he got into the government, he made decisions and he stuck with them, he added.

Myers and LaVie were both elected in 2011 and they worked together for 12 years.

Lavie said he learned a lot from him and used his debate and interview tactics himself.

"Steven always wanted to leave a better world for his children and the coming generation. He always had interest in environment and climate change and he did some good work," he added.

Myers said he's satisfied with his career in politics.

"I have a master's in energy and sustainability. I have a big interest in clean energy, clean tech, environmental issues and net zero issues. I'm going to probably try to work in those areas. So, stay tuned for that," he said.

He's not planning to rest on his laurels and wants to go back to work as soon as he can.

Man dies after collision

A 28-year-old Charlottetown man died at the scene of a two-vehicle collision in Commercial Cross on the afternoon of Thursday, October 2.

RCMP media relations officer Scott Ferris said the collision between a potato truck and a commercial van happened around 5:30 pm near the intersection of Commercial and St Mary's roads.

The driver of the van was pronounced dead at the scene and the driver of the truck was treated for minor injuries.

The road was closed for four hours and the investigation into the cause is ongoing.

Murray River Fire department and Island EMS were also on the scene.