

July 27, 2022

Hon. Bruce Fitch
Minister of Health
Chancery Place
P.O. Box 6000
Fredericton, N.B. E3B 5H1

Via email: bruce.fitch@gnb.ca

Dear Minister Fitch,

Employers are currently facing an unprecedented labour shortage. Economists have long warned of the pending workforce crunch due to our aging demographic. The Government of Canada Job Bank stated that in 2021, people 55 years of age and older accounted for 45.2 per cent of New Brunswick's working-age population. That number is forecast to top 48 per cent by 2031. According to Statistics Canada, at the end of March there were 16,000 vacant jobs in New Brunswick. These numbers have grown worse with the scarcity of seasonal tourism employees. Increased immigration is touted as the solution to our labour force needs and New Brunswick has done relatively well in this regard as our provincial population topped 800,000 earlier this year.

The New Brunswick government made a progressive move on newcomer retention this spring by introducing the Fair Registration Practices in Regulated Professions Act. The legislation mandates the 50 regulatory bodies that govern professions ranging from physicians to funeral directors establish "transparent, objective, impartial and efficient application and registration processes". Whether the new legislation creates streamlined pathways to foreign credential recognition remains to be seen, but it is a start.

However, newcomers to our province are having to wait several months with no status updates to receive their New Brunswick Medicare cards, long past the applicable timeframes stated in the New Brunswick Medical Services Payment Act. Newly arrived immigrants and newcomers from other Canadian provinces have all had to face similarly long wait times. The long delay limits access to certain health-related services and causes undue stress, financial worry, and a reticence to seek much needed services.

By some quirk in provincial regulations, students who arrive to start their studies in January must wait until they can supply a Confirmation of Enrolment for both a winter and fall term before they qualify. This despite the fact the Medical Services Payment Act states full-time students with a study permit are entitled to services under Medicare "on the first day of classes."

The province has recently shown it can respond quickly on this issue and deliver a high level of service by providing Medicare access within days to recently arrived Ukrainians fleeing war. We need to increase processing capacity, so that this level of service becomes standard to all newcomers to New Brunswick, no matter the circumstance.

New Brunswick must attract people to our province to fill its job shortages and if our government is truly committed to this goal, we must do our best to remain attractive to newcomers. How we treat and service our newcomers affects not only our chances of the newly arriving people to stay permanently in New Brunswick, but also our potential to attract additional new and much needed people to our province.

The increase in the number of immigrants is no longer a valid reason to explain the delays. A myriad of organizations have been working on attracting newcomers, the province has stated that attraction of newcomers is a priority and now the province needs to urgently fix the medical limbo these newcomers find themselves in.

As the leading business voices in the province, we Chambers once again would like to add our voice to the growing concern regarding this issue and implore you, as Health Minister, to work towards promptly reducing these delays in the issue of Medicare cards for all newcomers to our province.

We remain available to discuss this issue and solutions at your convenience.

Sincerely,

John Wishart
CEO
Chamber of Commerce for Greater Moncton

Krista Ross
CEO
Fredericton Chamber of Commerce

David Duplisea
CEO
The Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce

Julie Pinette
General Director
Chaleur Chamber of Commerce

Cathy Pelletier
Executive Director
Edmundston Region Chamber of Commerce

Natalie Cormier
President
Cap-Pelé/Beaubassin-Est Chamber of Commerce

Gilles Beaulieu
CEO

Valley Chamber of Commerce

Cc: Hon. Blaine Higgs, Premier
Hon. Arlene Dunn, Minister of Economic Development and Small Business
Hon. Mary E. Wilson, Minister responsible for Service New Brunswick Wilson
Hon. Daniel Allain, Moncton East
Hon. Ernie Steeves, Moncton Northwest
Hon. Hugh J.A. Flemming, Rothesay
Hon. Dorothy Shephard, Saint John Lancaster
Hon. Mike Holland, Albert
Hon. Jill Green, Fredericton North
Hon. Trevor A. Holder, Portland-Simons
Hon. Dominic Cardy, Fredericton West-Hanwell
Hon. Tammy Scott-Wallace, Sussex-Fundy-St.Martins
Hon. Margaret Johnson, Carleton- Victoria
Hon. Gary Crossman, Hampton
Hon. Bill Oliver, Kings Centre
Hon. Glen Savoie, Saint John East
Hon. Roger Melanson, Interim Leader, Liberal Party of New Brunswick
Hon. David Coon, Leader, Green Party of New Brunswick
Greg Turner, Moncton South
Glen Savoie, Saint John East
Andrea Anderson-Mason, Saint John West
Réjean Savoie, Miramichi Bay-Neguac
Michelle Conroy, Miramichi
Jeff Carr, New-Maryland-Sunbury
Richard Ames, Carleton-York
Sherry Wilson, Moncton Southwest
Bill Hogan, Carleton
Ryan P. Cullins, Fredericton-York
Kathy Bockus, Saint Croix
Ross Wetmore, Gagetown-Petitcodiac
Kris Austin, Fredericton-Grand Lake
Nina Forbes, Director Medicare Operations