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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Release: Health Provider Unions call on government for transparency, accountability & support for provincial lab system

(Saskatchewan) SGEU, SEIU-West and CUPE – three Saskatchewan unions representing health care providers – are reminding Premier Scott Moe and the Saskatchewan Health Authority (SHA) about their unfulfilled promise made in August 2020 to recruit 73 positions in the provincial lab system for added capacity to assist with the ongoing strains of COVID.

“We have a recent memo authored by Lenore Howey, Executive Director of the provincial lab system, that sets out inflated recruitment numbers within the SHA provincial lab system over the last year,” said Barb Cape, SEIU-West President. “Howey indicates 88 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions have been recruited within 4 classifications to implement COVID diagnostics; yet when asked to provide the breakdown, she refuses to do so. At the same time, we hear from our members who work in the provincial lab system that they cannot keep up with the increased workload because they do not have the resources needed to do so.”

Given the ongoing lack of information provided by the employer, the unions requested data year-to-year from the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO). The data confirms there are fewer paid hours in the Combined Lab & X-ray Tech classification provincially and fewer paid hours in the Medical Lab Tech II classification specific to Saskatoon, this year over last.

“Any significant increase is a result of the transfer of employees from the Roy Romanow Provincial Lab (RRPL) which involves approximately 38 FTEs in the Lab Scientist classifications that were transferred to the provincial lab system,” said Sandra Seitz, President of CUPE 5430. “We are all aware that the RRPL was previously and continues to be a resource within our provincial lab system – this transfer does not add new resources. It’s shocking that the SHA and the provincial government would try to manipulate data to make themselves look better, when in reality they did not add significant needed capacity to our provincial lab system.”

Lab personnel continue to report ongoing shortages of staff and delays to the processing of tests. This fact was confirmed by Health Minister Paul Merriman in the legislature during the Committee of Finance on December 9, 2020. Merriman noted that from December 1 to 9 (except 5 and 6) between 1,862 to as many as 4,601 tests remained unprocessed every day.

“What’s even more disheartening about this is that our government has introduced third party testing by a for-profit company, Quantum Genetix, rather than investing in our existing public lab service,” said Tracey Sauer, chair of the SGEU Health Providers Bargaining Committee. “We know there was an opportunity to recruit approximately 20 students at the end of December but we understand only 8 were offered positions. We continue to ask questions and get no meaningful reply to any of our inquiries about when the government will honour its commitment to increase staffing at the provincial lab. The SAHO data confirms that, at most, we have seen an increase of 35 positions within lab personnel – which is significantly less than the 73 promised.”

“It’s bad enough that there is an ongoing shortage of staff within the provincial lab system but the current situation is yet another example of how the government is failing to provide the necessary resources in the health care system to ensure everything possible is done to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in our communities,” said Cape.

Together, SGEU, SEIU-West and CUPE represent approximately 30,000 health care providers across Saskatchewan.

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