

## Manitoba's health-care recruitment mission hits snag

Licensing, immigration issues delay Tory government plan to hire Filipino nurses, aides

### DANIELLE DA SILVA

THE Manitoba government's plan to bolster the burned-out healthcare workforce with more than 300 Filipino nurses and aides could face delays as immigration negotiations drag on and a promised fast-track to license foreign nurses stalls.

Two months after the province launched a recruitment mission in the Philippines, the two governments have yet to approve a framework to facilitate the departure of the 300 nurses and aides offered jobs in Manitoba hospitals and nursing homes.

Shared Health, the provincial health authority overseeing the recruitment drive, said Manitoba government officials are working with their counterparts in the Philippines to accelerate the "finalization and approval" of formal offers of employment.

"Once these are approved by the Philippines government, specific letters will be issued to each individual candidate to enable the Canadian immigration process through our provincial nominee pathways," the spokesman said.

Ongoing negotiations to bring the desperately needed professionals to the province came to light after the *Free Press* asked Manitoba Labour and Immigration to release the number of work permit support letters issued to recruits through the provincial nominee program.

The provincially issued work permit support letters are needed to apply to Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada. It issues a work permit, which is required by the Philippine government to approve exit visas for nationals who live and work abroad.

Manitoba health organizations offered jobs to 190 registered nurses, 110 health-care aides and 50 licensed practical nurse equivalents during a five-day recruitment drive in Manila, Cebu and Iloilo in late February.

Labour Minister Jon Reyes was part of the delegation that travelled to the Philippines.

He declared the mission a success after returning from the trip. Health Minister Audrey Gordon said the recruits could start arriving by the summer and start working shortly thereafter.

Manitoba Labour and Immigration did not respond to the *Free Press* request. Instead, Shared Health provided a statement that did not include the requested statistics.

No recruits offered jobs in Manitoba had started the immigration process as of Wednesday.

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## RECRUITMENT

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Winnipeg immigration lawyer Kenneth Zaifman said the Manitoba and Philippine governments have well-established agreements that support the emigration of temporary foreign workers, including a memorandum of understanding from 2010.

Several bridging courses required for licensure — as determined by the CCA — were to be completed online prior to the nurses' arrival. The new process was estimated to cut total application processing time by three months.

Despite the regulatory changes, recruited nurses will complete most of the requirements once they arrive in Manitoba, according to Shared Health.

Nursing college spokesman Martin Lussier said it supports making it possible for nurses to complete parts of the licensing process abroad, but

His firm keeps an office in the Philippines and regularly works with private-sector clients that recruit employees from the country. The Philippine government's requirement for exit clearance is routine, Zaifman said.

Under the existing processes, the Philippine Department of Migrant Workers and its offices often issue exit clearances within three to six weeks to people who have a valid Canadian work permit, he said.

"The visa office in the Philippines is a very efficient office and they process work permits very quickly, so the process to bring nurses here based on my experience in other occupations is not a long process," Zaifman said.

It's not a surprise the two governments want to fine-tune the emigration framework, he said. Manitoba may be looking to establish a process for expedited or ongoing recruitment from the country, he said.

"It's a well-regulated movement and I think this is just a gloss over the existing programs which we've used for many years, but maybe there's something particular to nurses that they want to address in some way."

A framework for the Philippine government to pre-approve the essential terms of each candidate's offer of employment letter is necessary before the recruit can apply to the Manitoba provincial nominee program, a senior government official said.

Speaking on background, the official said there would be no advantage to starting the Canadian immigration process until talks with the Philippine government have been completed, and Manitoba always intended to begin discussions after interviewing recruits.

The province is not critical of the Philippine government, and other provinces must go through the same process, he emphasized.

"We are respectfully and diligently working through the expected processes with the Philippine government approvals. We're doing so constructively and collaboratively and we're making excellent progress," the official said.

While recruits wait for the green light to start the immigration process, most newcomer nurses will not be able to take advantage of a new licensing process designed specifically to get them on the job faster.

implementation relies on commitments from the province and other partners.

The college continues to request information from government officials about the status of a virtual CCA developed by the University of Manitoba, he said.

"We will continue to offer applicants recruited through this initiative the opportunity to access the expedited pathway we announced in February," Lussier said, while acknowledging the CCA and bridging courses will likely be done in Manitoba.

"As this was not foreseen during the planning stages of this recruitment initiative, we are now working to understand any impacts this may have."

The college had yet to receive applications from nurses recruited from the Philippines, Lussier said.

The summer arrival timeline still stands, Gordon said, but acknowledged setbacks to the licensing program. The U of M has been working diligently with Philippine officials to set up the online CCA, but the process is not complete yet she said.

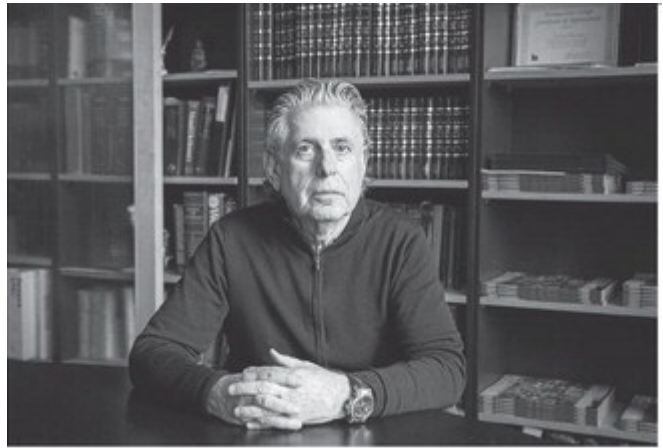
"A lot of work needs to be done. We have to ensure that the standards are upheld, it's (information technology) as well, and it's making sure that both jurisdictions are doing the same thing, and that the test that is done here is the exact same test that is being done in the Philippines," Gordon said.

"What we're looking for is for those individuals to be able to immediately, as quickly as possible, go into practise in Manitoba."

NDP critic Malaya Marcelino said the government seems to have neglected important aspects of the recruitment program, including immigration and licensing processes. It must do more to license internationally educated nurses who live in Manitoba, she said.

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In February, Gordon and the College of Registered Nurses of Manitoba announced changes to allow nurses to complete their clinical competency assessment (CCA) and open an application to the National Nursing Assessment Service simultaneously while overseas.



**Lawyer Kenneth Zaifman calls it reasonable for immigration procedures to be fine-tuned.**

**JESSICA LEE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS**

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