To the public of PEI and our partners in healthcare across the Island,

On January 11th, 2024, our medical staff association unanimously endorsed that an emergency exists regarding critical and acute care services at Prince County Hospital. Our challenges include the ongoing lack of capacity for local internal medicine and critical care, and the impending loss of 24/7 in-house respiratory therapy coverage. We write this letter as physician leaders with 17 months of experience of decreased critical care capacity at PCH; over that time, our staff have struggled to continue to provide essential care in a safe fashion in the face of crippling human resource gaps.

The medical staff do not represent Health PEI or the Department of Health and Wellness. Our goal is to encourage urgent action and collaboration from our political and medical leaders in pursuit of sustainable solutions. We note that Health PEI established an Emergency Operations Committee this week to address this crisis. We hope our staff association members and hospital leaders can remain active partners in that process.

At present, without permanent sustainable solutions to maintain critical care services at PCH, no ICU-level medicine will be available west of Charlottetown. Impacts and reductions will be felt in all services at PCH. We are concerned that these reduced services will become the “new normal.” Residents in our region will face:

- Increased wait times and congestion in the emergency department;
- Delays in transfer of critically ill patients;
- Increased need for transfer of obstetrical and neonatal patients;
- Increased potential for transfer of sick pediatric patients;
- Reductions in surgical services for urgent and more complex surgery;
- Decreased capacity for admitted inpatients who become increasingly ill to access more advanced care locally.

The root cause of this problem is a staffing shortage of physicians, respiratory therapists, and nurses. Our group is dismayed that despite our health leadership acknowledging these staffing shortages, there have been few tangible actions visible to us. There has been failure to effectively plan and recruit physicians for retirements and known gaps in coverage. Remaining staff struggle with burnout and overwhelming on-call demands, risking further loss of doctors. Loss of ICU services in the past year has also created further departures of highly experienced nursing and other critical care professionals.
Nearly one year after PCH lost two internal medicine physicians, on the heels of three long-planned retirements, we are exposed to an ongoing crisis which impacts every department at the hospital. No permanent solutions have evolved; our colleagues in hospital medicine have taken on heavy workloads and have been exhausted trying to continue critical care services at PCH.

Centralizing all critical care services to QEIH and relying on transfer of our sickest patients poses a challenge that invites poor patient outcomes. Our colleagues at QEIH face their own pressures, so timely acceptance and transfer of all critically ill or at risk patients is an unrealistic expectation. Increased transfer demands will strain an already overburdened EMS system. There will be additional impacts on patients in communities west of Summerside. We as a medical staff have growing concerns about equal access to health care across the Island, especially for our more vulnerable populations.

If Prince Edward Island is to support a medical school as well as an increasing population, supporting this hospital and its staff is crucial. Loss of critical and acute care capacity for the western half of this province cannot be a safe or acceptable strategy. We call upon leaders to explore and communicate an urgent response with sustained and concrete actions for these challenges. We want to support our colleagues across professions, prevent the loss of physicians and staff, and continue to provide care to those we serve at PCH. We hope to move forward as a group to work with healthcare leadership and government to support a “One Island, One Health Care System” ideal.

In that spirit, recruitment and retention continue to be pressing issues. Our medical staff association has revitalized a physician recruitment committee which is available to partner with Health PEI in helping to boost recruitment efforts for our staffing shortages. We have goal-directed community partners including the City of Summerside and the PCH Foundation. Many of our medical staff are early career physicians who have the potential to serve healthcare in PEI for decades to come. With the right support and partnership from healthcare and provincial leaders, PCH and our surrounding communities can overcome these challenges.

In closing, we urge all stakeholders to work towards a shared goal of returning critical care services to PCH, thereby stabilizing all other hospital departments, within 6 months. This is an incredible hospital with phenomenal staff. We feel privileged to serve our patients and community.

Sincerely, Members of the East Prince Medical Staff Association