UNITED NURSES OF ALBERTA

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH THE MEDIA

APRIL 2024

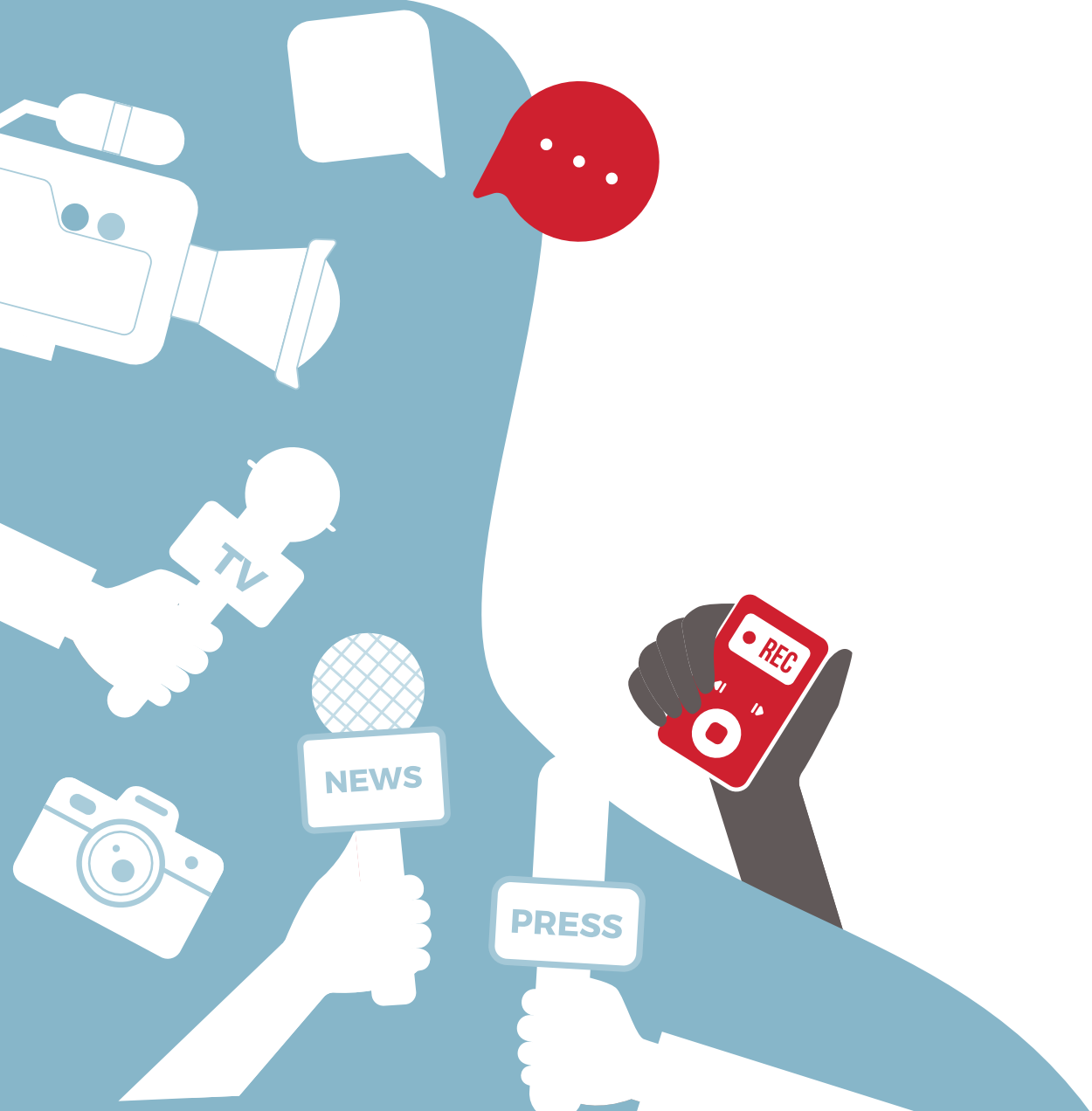

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Nurses:
a critical voice in society

Canadians need nurses' answers – so nurses need to speak up!

Albertans and Canadians need to hear from nurses.

Albertans hold the nursing profession in high regard. They listen to us when we speak about health care issues, and they assign a high level of credibility to what we say.

Albertans also look to their nurses to let them know when things are going wrong in health care. They want us to keep them informed, and we have a responsibility to meet this expectation.

Obviously, health care is a newsworthy topic. Public opinion surveys consistently list the state of the health-care system as a top-of-mind issue for a majority of Canadians. Media covers health care consistently.

So journalists want and need the perspective of nurses on the state of the Canadian health care system – and all Canadians deserve to hear from nurses, who have a uniquely knowledgeable perspective on health care issues.

As a result, nurses in leadership positions with United Nurses of Alberta must be ready to comment if they are asked for their opinions on health care. They need to be prepared to deal proactively with news media when health-care related stories are being covered in their communities.

If nurses are not in the news, an important point of view is not represented. If nurses don't put their views forward, citizens will only hear from politicians, bosses, and ideologically committed commentators.

But nurses' views won't be found in the media if nurses don't make the effort to think about and plan for successful media relations.

Reports in the media are among the most important ways citizens get information about the state of health care. So it is up to us, as nurses, to ensure that the information media receives is accurate and speaks for all stakeholders in the system, including nurses and their patients.

Look at it this way: Only nurses can speak effectively for nurses. And no one can speak more effectively for patients and their families than nurses.

This short manual aims to provide nurses with information and tips on how to develop a relationship with the news media that will help get nurses' stories out to all Albertans.

And remember, the staff of UNA's Communications Department is made up of communications professionals who can provide advice and assistance with your Local's communications needs.

If your UNA Local wants to reach out to local news outlets, please contact the UNA Communications Department for advice and support.

WHAT IS NEWS?

Let's start with the basics

All professional journalists have a mental list of qualities they think makes a story worth writing about. Most of these lists are similar, because journalists have been thinking about this for a long time.

Here are few things that turn up every time you ask a journalist, *What is "news"?*

- **It's new.** *If it's new, it's news.* Timeliness is probably the most important way to decide if a story is news. An ongoing issue like child poverty or health care understaffing is obviously very important, but a journalist will need to hear why it's important right now.
- **Consequences.** *If it has an impact, it's news.* No journalist who is doing their job will fail to report a story that will have an impact on their readers.
- **Close to home.** *If it's close, it's more likely to be news.* Whether it's what's for dinner in the hospital cafeteria or a riot in the town square, the closer an event is to home, the likelier it is to be big news. Of course, if your community's newspaper isn't daily, or there is no local media, news that is "close to home" can be difficult to sell to a larger city's mass media even if it's important to you.
- **Disagreement.** *Where there's conflict, there's news.* Whether it's a war abroad or a spat at city hall, journalists like reporting on conflict. We need to be careful with this one, and not to be talked into treating mild disagreement as if it's a major fight. But we also need to know that disagreement sells news.
- **Celebrity.** *If someone is famous, what they do is more likely to be news.* Plus, the more prominent the person, the bigger the news. If we can get a prominent spokesperson to help us, we can improve our chances of having our stories covered.
- **It's unusual.** *Novelty is newsworthy.* Something doesn't have to be weird to be news, but oddity can make an otherwise inconsequential story newsworthy.
- **Trends**. *If a trend is developing, it's news.* If crowded hospitals are having a growing impact on patients' health, journalists want to hear about it.
- **Need to know.** *Helpful or uplifting stories are sometimes defined as news too.* Working people can make inspirational or helpful stories work for them too – although these kinds of stories seldom end up on the front page.
- **Packaged content.** *If it's ready to go, it will move more easily.* In an age of shrinking newsrooms, doing as much of the work of the journalist as possible will increase the chances that your story will be covered.
- **The Internet.** *Social media can influence coverage.* Does your story have to do with Instagram? Can it be told on Facebook? Emerging online news sites love stories where gathering reaction can be done by screencapping a few tweets or Instagram posts.

WHAT MAKES MEDIA TICK?

Why does the media act the way it does?

History, tradition, technology and economics all drive media behaviour.

Newspapers became big business in a day when they were the latest technology – and were always first with the news. The emphasis on competition among newspapers and writing stories for tight deadlines started then and has only become stronger with the rise of broadcast and Internet outlets, which make it possible for journalists to file new stories at any hour of the day or night.

As more kinds of media developed and more people got their first news from TV and radio, competition for advertising revenue grew tougher, prompting media companies to cut the number of jobs for journalists.

Despite facing tougher challenges both from competition and in making a buck, media have remained highly influential, with a big impact on government and corporate policies – which is why it's important for nurses to talk to media.

When you think about why journalists act as they do, and why we need to work with them, remember these facts.

- **The business is highly competitive** – journalists and media companies compete aggressively for stories.
- **There's more news than there is room for news** – the "news hole" in the press and on the air is sharply limited.
- **Media is market driven** – media corporations and employees are all focused on building market share by covering stories they think people are interested in. This has led to the rise of "clickbait" stories.
- **It's influential** – media organizations set the agenda for powerful people in society and if we can get into the conversation we can enjoy some of that power.
- **It's impacted by cost-cutting** – cost cutting has meant job cutting and reduced the quality of reporting, but it's also created opportunities for those who know how to work with media. For example, with fewer resources available for research and investigative reporting, thorough pitches backed up by credible research can be appealing for media outlets.
- **It's in a hurry** – journalists have to file stories every day. If you want to talk to them, you need to think about their deadlines – which are almost always today, usually before 3 p.m. for broadcasters, before 5 p.m. for print journalists. Online news has changed the news cycle to be less predictable. Always ask when a journalist's deadline is. Sometimes, it might be within the hour.
- **Its ownership is getting more concentrated** – most Canadian daily newspapers and broadcast channels are owned by the same organization or corporation. You need to understand who owns what so you avoid pitching the same story to journalists who will be drawing their news from the same source already. Do a quick online search to be sure you understand who owns what in your community.

Tips for working with reporters

Now that we know more about how journalists work we can start to think about how to work with journalists.

The key? Tell them stories that meet their definition of what's news. And do it in a way that makes it easy for them to tell your stories.

Here are 10 tips for working with the media:

- **Be accessible** – be sure you name a knowledgeable and appropriate spokesperson, and make sure the media has that person's contact information. Ask them how they prefer to communicate (email, phone etc.).
- **Be quick** – always return reporters' phone calls promptly, even if you're only going to say you'll call back later. Remember their deadlines.
- **Tell the truth** – anything less is asking for trouble; if you can't speak about something, simply say so and explain why.
- **Know what you're talking about** – if you don't, it will show in what you say … and in what they report.
- **Think about journalists' needs** – write news releases the way they write their stories. Be prepared to provide photos and background they need.
- **Think visually** – broadcasters need sights and sounds to augment their stories. Help them find them.
- **Be helpful** – do what you can to help them complete their assignment.
- **Be reliable** – follow through on your commitments.
- **Think before you talk** – think about what you're going to say before you say it, and don't be afraid to ask for a chance to say something again more clearly.

DEALING WITH NEWS MEDIA

Unionized workers and journalists need to talk to each other

The prospect of talking to journalists makes many of us nervous. But there are plenty of reasons we should be ready to deal with the media.

Journalists help us tell our stories in a way that make them accessible to our own members, the public, and to decision-makers in society like politicians, senior public officials, business leaders and influential public figures.

The media wants to talk to us because unionized workers in all sectors are acknowledged experts in their fields. Nurses are experts when it comes to health care. UNA members are experts who also have a personal stake in the issues and can speak from their own experience.

We want to talk to the media to communicate our positions and to talk about more specific issues such as bargaining and organizing. Even though these kinds of encounters may make us nervous, we need to remember that it's normally in the media's interest to portray people whom they interview as smart and knowledgeable. It's important to their business that most of the people they talk to sound good.

This should give us confidence that on most stories and in most circumstances they're not "out to get us". Even in those rare cases where a reporter might be, we can easily learn the techniques we need to deal with them effectively.

Close encounters of the media kind

Sometimes the media will come to us because they are already interested in a story that for some reason our union is involved in.

Sometimes we will go to them because we have a story that we believe is important to tell.

In either case, we need to be prepared.

Find a spokesperson

Always look critically at who your union is putting forward as a spokesperson. Is this person representative of your membership? Can you boost the voices of racialized workers, or disabled workers in a story about your workplace? So try to keep diversity and the makeup of your local's workforce in mind when you're generating your list of potential members to be interviewed!

Dealing with media during bargaining

Most unions have to deal with the media during bargaining.

This can be frustrating, because labour relations is a complicated topic and journalists like to make things simple – sometimes too simple. For example, media will tend to describe anything involving a picket sign as "a strike."

So it's important for us to be patient and explain everything in plain language, and to communicate our positions.

Your bargaining committee needs to understand what strategy is best when dealing with journalists during contract negotiations. Most times, unions should not bargain through the press. But sometimes management forces unions to engage through journalists, and galvanizing public support becomes critical to a successful campaign.

Plan in advance: will you feed the beast (engage with journalists) or starve the beast (not engage with journalists)? Be flexible and strategic with the approach you choose.

You should always seek help if you're unsure what to do. Call UNA's Communications team for advice.

Spokespeople needed!

It's a good idea to identify a single spokesperson to state your union's position during bargaining. Usually this will be the union president or the local president. Sometimes, though, it pays to pick someone with time to devote to media relations to be the spokesperson.

It's also a good idea to have a backup spokesperson, because everyone can't be everywhere at once.

Sometimes when media show up at a picket line, they want to talk to rank-and-file members. Media will often leave as soon as they have recorded an interview, so it's always good to have a couple of members briefed on the union's talking points who are prepared to step up and be interviewed.

And remember, it's always best to step up early, not to wait even if you're feeling nervous. You don't want a talkative member with a bee in their bonnet about something unrelated to the event to step up first!

Sometimes, when news breaks that affects a particular group of workers, journalists will want a representative comment. For example, if something has happened that only affects young workers, or members of a particular worksite. So sometimes offering your president as a spokesperson isn't the best strategy. Follow the news and anticipate the kind of worker a journalist might want to interview.

Brief your spokesperson and practice

If your negotiations are long, having your main spokesperson buoyed by rank-and-file members who can talk to different experiences is important.

If you're asked to connect a journalist to a member with very specific traits (a young mother who has been working at the organization for less than two years, for example), do what you can to help them. It's useful to keep a list of people who have indicated they would talk to the media during a time of crisis.

But be careful. Try not to put someone in a spot that could get them in trouble.

Staying 'on message'

Having a designated spokesperson will help us stay "on message." That means making the same points, and being consistent about what we say.

It also means responding to unexpected questions in a way that refers back to the core arguments your union is trying to make. Politicians call this "staying in the message box."

To do this, local spokespeople need to stay informed on what union updates say during bargaining and on what the Negotiating Committee has to say. So all activists should read all relevant news releases, member updates, and bargaining updates and keep the key points in mind. Pay attention to any specific talking points the Negotiating Committee may distribute.

If you make a mistake, don't be afraid to admit it and ask for a chance to restate your position in a clearer way. Most reporters will co-operate with you if you need to do this.

TALKING WITH REPORTERS

When reporters talk to you about a story they're working on, they call this "**doing an interview**."

It's important for us to remember this when we're talking to reporters about stories they're working on. No matter how casual the conversation may seem, **you're being interviewed!**

This is because when journalists are working, they are listening carefully to what you say and thinking about where it might fit into the story.

Remember: even if the conversation becomes friendly, or if you know the journalist on a personal level, you're never just "chatting." Treat all conversations as **on-the-record interviews**.

It's always helpful to clarify what **kind** of interview your conversation might be. If it's an interview for background information, you can talk freely about your organization's message box. If the journalist is specifically looking for comment, you should cut your sentences to be as short and punchy as possible. If you're talking live to air (either actually live, or to be placed into the story later), you may have to make your point more concisely than if you're talking to a producer about an interview you will be doing in an hour.

But it's good advice to treat **everything you say as on the record** – that is, only say things that you can live with if they appear in a newspaper or on the air. While what you say might take a different form depending on the kind of interview, you are only ever "off the record" when this has been clearly established and agreed to by both parties before the interview starts.

Also remember that agreeing to an interview does not guarantee that the reporter will cover the story the way you think they should. But if they don't – **don't get mad! Get better!** Think about how to do better next time, and what you can learn from your mistakes.

Remember that while reporters have their agendas, you have yours too – and there's nothing wrong with sticking to it.

Think about what you want to say in advance. Don't get flustered if a reporter asks a question to which you don't know the answer – just say you'll look into it. Turn **their** questions back to **your** key points.

Remember: **a journalist can't quote what you don't say!**

Tips for being interviewed

- **Set goals for every interview** – think about your key messages, stay in the message box, and practice likely answers in advance.
- **You're the expert when it comes to your industry** – speak with confidence! Think about your main points in advance – come back to them when you're talking.
- **Return calls quickly** – remember, reporters only have a couple of hours to finish their stories, and if we won't talk to them, someone else will.
- **If you don't know an answer, say so** – don't fudge! You'll get busted!
- **Never say "no comment"** – that's only for the movies. It sounds silly in real life.
- **Off the record?** – anything you say to a journalist should be treated as if it's on the record.
- **Stay cool** – if a reporter annoys you, restate your points and don't get so mad you say something foolish.
- **If you need time, ask for it** – speak with your executives or communications staff before calling back.
- **Give your story the human touch** – do this by speaking about your personal experience but be careful not to divulge information you're not permitted to discuss, such as private information about patients.
- **Avoid jargon and acronyms** – ordinary readers and viewers won't understand what an LOU or and IEN is. Explain in plain language.
- **Avoid sarcasm** – it almost never comes across as sarcasm.
- **Stop when you've said enough** – don't fall for the silent treatment, it's an effective technique to get interview subjects to babble. When you've made your point, wait for the reporter to ask another question. If that makes you uncomfortable, smile to signal you've made your point.
- **You can ask questions too** – and buy some time to think about your responses.
- **Be careful after the interview** – the interview is never over, even if you're "just chatting."
- **Don't be intimidated by "scrums"** – crowds of reporters shoving microphones in your face. Stay calm. It helps to focus on one microphone.
- **Be careful on the phone** – when you're speaking to a reporter on the telephone, always assume you're being recorded. This is entirely legal in Canada, by the way, as long as one party to the conversation agrees.

Suggested responses

A confident, friendly tone will take you a long way with most media interviewers.

What's more, no matter what you've seen on American TV, most television reporters don't want to make you look bad when they interview you. Their employers' advertising revenue depends on the notion that they interview credible people who know what they're talking about.

This is why most news reporters will give you a second chance if you feel your response to a particular question wasn't as good as you would have liked it to be or contains an inaccuracy.

That said, sometimes on controversial stories, reporters will try to put words in your mouth, or press you to give answers you're not comfortable with. These are times when it's a good idea stay on message.

Here are some examples of difficult questions some reporters might ask, and calm, friendly responses that can get you off the hook...

When you're asked to speak for others ...

Why do you think the Minister of Health decided to do that?

"You'd have to ask him about that."

"I wouldn't know, but I suspect that..."

When you know the answer, but you're not allowed to say ...

How many patients were affected?

"I'm not allowed to disclose any information that might affect patients' privacy..."

"I'm afraid privacy legislation prevents me from discussing that."

You get an emotionally loaded question ...

Doesn't this amount to holding your patients hostage?

> *"We are very concerned about our patients, which is why we feel we have to do this..."*
>
> *"Not at all – that's why we're providing emergency services."*
>
> *"You should ask the employer about that – they're acting as the roadblock here."*

You feel boxed in ...

Are you going to return to work, or be found in contempt of court?

> *"We'll be returning to work as soon as we can, as soon as we reach a fair settlement."*

Are the nurses to blame for what happened, or the hospital?

> *"Right now, everyone is trying to find out exactly what happened."*

You get a hypothetical question ...

If you don't reach a deal, will you be going on strike?

> *"We're very confident we can reach a fair agreement in negotiations. Getting a deal is our priority here.*

No one expects a deal to be reached by your deadline – what will happen if one isn't?

> *"You're asking me to speculate. We have every reason to believe a deal will be reached."*

You keep getting the same question over and over ...

Remember, sometimes reporters are trying to get you frustrated when they use this interview technique. They hope you'll blurt out something dramatic. Other times they're just trying to help you ace your key-message sound bite, especially if it's being recorded for radio or TV. They need a coherent sound bite as much as you want to give them one! So, remember ...

Don't get mad. Be reasonable and repeat your key message. If it's a recorded interview, you can always stop yourself, pause for a few seconds and re-start your point. The journalist will know that you are giving the editor the chance to easily find the right take.

If you must, politely signal that you're not going to waver.

And remember, there are no off-the-record moments after an interview. Assume the camera or the tape recorder is always running.

Bridging

A key technique for successful interviews is known as "bridging."

That is, managing the transition from whatever it is the reporter wants to talk about to whatever it is that you want to talk about.

If you've thought about and practiced your key messages, bridging to them from wherever the interview has gone is a great way to regain control of an interview that seems to be getting away from you.

First answer the reporter's question, then transition to your message...

> *"Before we finish with this topic, there's one thing I'd like to add..."*
>
> *"However, it's important to remember that..."*

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT DIFFERENT MEDIA

Print

Print reporters tend to ask a lot of questions, even for minor stories.

They're often trying to put you at ease, so that you'll speak more frankly, or just to understand the story better. Because they're working in a written medium, they can sort out what you say later from their notes or electronic recording. But when they write their story, they'll be under pressure to keep it short.

Here are two pieces of advice about this tendency of print reports to speak with you for a long time:

- Remember that you should always assume you're on the record unless you've specifically agreed otherwise.
- Don't be disappointed if the reporter uses only a snippet from your long conversation with her.

Remember to do your homework as you would for any other interview.

Don't be afraid to set the ground rules at the start. Repeat what you've agreed to at the end to make sure everyone understands your agreement!

Radio

Radio news stories tend to be very short, so keep your comments brief as well.

You've heard about the 30-second sound bite – well, nowadays, most radio stations are editing those down to 15 seconds, or even to 10!

Don't worry about "ums," "ahs," and "ehs," though – they're sure to be edited out of your comments, unless there's background noise like music playing or rally chants. Avoid the use of large numbers and statistics, as they tend to confuse radio listeners. Name the sources you're referring to – this increases the credibility of your arguments.

Remember, you're in charge. If you don't like the way the interview is going, take charge and take it where you want to go by using the bridging technique.

Don't be afraid to set the ground rules at the start. Repeat what you've agreed to in order to make sure everyone is on the same page.

Television

Television interviews will be a lot easier if you remember that you can always ask for a second take. Just ignore the cameras and look at the interviewer. (Resist the temptation to watch yourself in the monitor – you'll be tempted to start primping!)

Be conscious of your body language. Stand comfortably or sit up straight with your feet flat on the floor, depending on the circumstances. Don't slouch or fidget. Look right at the interviewer, or at the camera if you've been asked to do that. If you're sitting at a table, keep your hands on top. Try to keep them still.

As with radio, remember that you're in charge. If you don't like the way the interview is going, take charge and use the bridging technique to move the topic to what you want to discuss.

Always assume that the camera is on. Never make inappropriate remarks, even if the camera has stopped rolling.

Don't be afraid to set the ground rules at the start. Repeat what you've agreed to in order to make sure everyone agrees.

Internet

The problem with the Internet is that anyone there can operate as if they are a legitimate journalist. Some are, some aren't. So while you don't want to appear overly distrustful, some caution is not misplaced.

There are "news" organizations that exist to push a particular ideological viewpoint – one not sympathetic to public health care or unions. In Alberta, these would include the Western Standard, Epoch Times, Rebel News and several others. Be cautious about interviews with their reporters.

As for interview techniques, the same suggestions as for print and broadcast interviews apply depending on the circumstances – conduct yourself as you would for a TV interview if the interview is taking place on Zoom or a similar online meeting application.

If you are asked to appear on a podcast – a digital audio file containing an interview or discussion usually related to a specific theme – you will normally be agreeing to talk a lot and in detail about a specific activity. Make sure you are familiar with all talking points and background information so that you are able to discuss the issues confidently.

Open-line call-in shows

Open-line shows are **not for beginners!**

It's best to avoid phone-in shows unless you're really comfortable with the topic and have given plenty of thought to what's in your "message box." Good advice from an old pro is to gain some experience with one-on-one interviews before trying this challenging format.

If you're on radio, you can write your key messages on index cards. You probably won't need them, but it's reassuring to know they're there if you do.

Line up friendly callers who agree with you to phone in and emphasize your points and arguments. If you don't, the only callers may be people who think ill of your union and unions in general.

Talk shows

Talk shows are another not-for-beginners format.

It's good advice to watch/listen to the show before you go to the studio. Ask the producer who the other guests are. This will help you prepare for their likely comments.

Ask how long the show will last and talk about the ground rules.

Since you'll never get the other guests to agree with you – in fact, you've likely been chosen because you disagree – concentrate on making your points directly to the audience.

Go with the flow, but don't let your basic good manners prevent you from making the points that need to be made.

The format encourages discord and a certain amount of interrupting. You're not being rude by speaking up forcefully and disagreeing when other speakers say something outrageous. You're speaking up for your co-workers!

WHEN THE MEDIA GETS IT WRONG

What should you do if you've been interviewed, and the reporter just plain gets it wrong?

Sometimes the reporter makes an honest mistake. Sometimes she twists what you've said to make a better story. Sometimes she gets it right but the headline writer gets it backwards – this happens more often than you imagine.

Since a news report can be edited by more than one person, mistakes can creep in at every stage. And remember, reporters for major news organizations seldom write the headlines on their own stories – so it's usually not their fault if the headline gets it wrong.

Technical distinctions that may be extremely important to you and others in your profession may not be at all meaningful or important to reporters and editors.

The first rule of responding to errors is not to get angry. If you get mad, and act abusive, chances are the reporter you're unhappy with will get defensive and dig into their position.

If you take the complaint up the line to a senior editor, you risk alienating the reporter. And never – never! – threaten to sue a reporter for libel. (This is good advice even if you do plan to sue.) All you'll do is alienate the journalist. What's more, you probably have no legal case anyway.

Most often, the best thing to do is phone the reporter directly, point out the error and act like it's no big deal. Ask politely if they can remember to avoid the mistake next time they report about you.

This approach pays dividends. When approached this way, a responsible reporter will ensure that a correction is added to the story. Even if she won't do that, she's much more likely to remember to get it right next time. And she'll know she owes you a favour!

If the error is significant enough, think of it as an opportunity to write a letter to the editor and politely make your points all over again.

Rarely will an error require an immediate change. If this does happen, your best approach is to call the journalist and explain, calmly, why the offending piece needs to be changed. Most journalists want to get a story right and will do what they can to have the story changed.

Remember: the way a reporter has framed a story doesn't count as being factually incorrect. Err on the side of not asking for a story to be changed.

Remember too that, more often than not, the things that make you mad don't make much difference to anyone else. Take a breath and try to put things in perspective.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR & THEIR PROACTIVE RESPONSES

Among the most effective tools available to members of the public to get their points across is the simple act of writing a letter to the editor of traditional newspapers.

Newspapers publish letters because readers love them. (They even love reading the ones they disagree with – it gives them that delicious feeling of knowing they're right and everyone else is wrong!) We write letters because they inform and influence the public, because they mobilize our own supporters and because they apply pressure to decision makers.

Unfortunately, media that accept letters are not as common as they used to be. Still, this remains a useful way to respond to issues anywhere a print newspaper still exists.

Writing a letter to an editor is not the same as writing a letter to a friend, or even a letter to a politician whom you'd like to influence.

When you write a letter to the editor, you're competing with many other letter writers for access to the same small space in a newspaper. This is especially true with major national papers like *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* – which have the choice of literally hundreds of letters on many topics any day of the week.

On the other hand, it may be pretty easy to get a letter published in a small community weekly.

Either way, the key to winning this competition and getting published is to write a better letter than all the other letter writers. Here are some letter-writing hints to keep in mind:

Always type it – handwritten letters are hard to read, and can't be scanned into a computer for editing.

- **Keep it short** – fewer than 100 words is best, don't write more than 200. Yes, this is hard, but it's worth the effort.
- **Write like you speak** – at least, don't sacrifice clarity to language rules.
- **Spell check** – since your first audience is made up of professional writers, typos and misspellings hurt your publication chances.
- **Be timely** – tie your letter to a fresh news story to make it more likely to be run.
- **Send it early by email** – by early afternoon, editors have usually selected the next day's letters.
- **Make one point** – and stick to it ruthlessly!
- **Don't get angry** – polite wit and coldly rational arguments work better every time.
- **Have a personal perspective** – facts are good, personal examples are often more persuasive.
- **Include your qualifications** – in many professions, your designation (like, for example, a Registered Nurse) counts for a lot with readers.
- **Find a "hook"** – tie your letter to a story in the last edition of the paper.
- **Use ordinary words** – avoid jargon and technical words readers may not understand.
- **Write a good email subject line** – catch the editor's attention with a subject line that sounds like a headline.
- **Include your name and contact** information – without these, no newspaper will publish your letter.

Once you've written a letter, you need to think about how to get it to the editor you want to publish it. Most newspapers require an address and a phone number, or an email address.

Some have an online form that you can use to submit your letter.

Remember that all newspapers retain the right to edit your letter – for length, grammar and spelling, and to eliminate offensive or defamatory material.

The best thing you can do to avoid too much editing is to follow the guidelines above. But if that doesn't work, and you object to the changes that have been made, the best thing you can do is use the opportunity to write another letter.

If you make threats, or complain, you are unlikely to achieve much except to ensure that future letters you send won't be used. If you feel you must, be polite – you'll catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!

Newspapers often gauge the popularity of a particular issue by how many letters a story has generated. Co-ordinated letter-writing can be a useful strategy to help hold the interest of your issue in the minds of the newspaper's editors. Even better, if they think that there's a broad consensus emerging to support workers, for example, it's likely that this frame will become the norm in future stories about your issue.

If your role in your union is to coordinate communications, reach out to the opinions editor at your local newspaper. Having a relationship with them will go a long way to ensuring your union's point of view is reflected in the pages of the paper.

News Releases

Another effective communications tool is the news release.

Note, though, that there can be a fairly steep learning curve to writing an effective release. For UNA members, if you need a news release, we recommend you bring your request to UNA's Communications team. We'll be happy to help. At the bottom of this section, we have also included a template for a "Media Advisory," a news release to alert local media about an upcoming event.

News releases – which are also often referred to as press releases or media releases – are short articles, usually written in the style of a standard newspaper story, that are sent to media with the objective of encouraging favourable coverage of the people, product or activity of the organization that published the release.

News releases have become one of the most important sources of news for most broadcasters and newspapers in Canada. Since it's impossible for unions to buy a favourable news report from mainstream newspapers and news broadcasters – and since many readers and viewers know it – it's easy to see why news releases are often a more effective tool than paid advertising.

But for news releases to be effective, they need to be written the right way, and they need to get to the right people.

While the purpose of a news release is quite different from that of a news story, it needs to be written in the same way. If you can write something that sounds like a standard news story, with a first paragraph (two sentences max., one is ideal) that sums up the main point of the story, it's much more likely to catch the attention of journalists. It is also more likely to be used as you wrote it.

If the writer's definition of what is newsworthy about the story is the same as a journalist's, your chances of getting coverage are even better.

That means you need to answer the same questions a journalist would – **Who? What? When? Where? Why? And, How?**

Plus you need to package it the same way a journalist would – including using ordinary terms readers can understand. And then you need to get it into the hands of journalists who can turn it into a real news story.

A good news release always also includes the following three elements:

- **The date at the top** – usually accompanied by the words "for immediate release" or the time at which the release is to be circulated.
- **A one-line headline** – to attract the attention of editors who may be considering dozens of news releases to follow up.
- **The name and numbers of a contact person** – journalists may have more questions, and broadcasters need someone to interview on the air.

Writing an effective news release can be quite difficult, and getting it where it needs to go requires a list of media contacts.

Use your headline to advance your position. Don't try to make it so newsy it simply repeats what is already in the news. "UNA Local 1 comments on new government announcement" is not going to turn as many heads as "Calgary nurses oppose new government policy."

Drafting a 'media advisory'

You can draft a media advisory to email or deliver to local media to announce an upcoming event you may think is of interest to media.

Here is a template for a short media advisory news release that you may send to local media if your Local is planning an event or information walk. If you are planning other activities, the wording can be modified to reflect what is planned.

If you choose to send a local release, you will need to type locally appropriate names and replace the sections marked in red. We suggest you leave the word END between the third paragraph of the release and the contact information, as that is standard practice in media.

You can then copy and paste the completed text into an email to send it to local media. You will need to look up your local media's contact information on their websites. Note that some media provide forms rather than email addresses, in which case you will have to copy and paste your completed text into the space provided on the website.

We suggest that if you plan to send a local release, you email it the day before the event.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call UNA's Communications Advisors in the Provincial Office.

TEMPLATE

MEDIA ADVISORY: **[DAY], [DATE], [YEAR]**

UNA members in [COMMUNITY NAME HERE] to hold [EVENT TITLE HERE]

Members of United Nurses of Alberta Local **[LOCAL NO. HERE]** at the **[FACILITY NAME HERE]** will hold a **[EVENT]** on **[DAY], [DATE], [YEAR]**, to show their support for publicly delivered health care in Alberta and the importance of nurses to the health care team.

Their message to Albertans: **[SHORT KEY MESSAGE].**

The **[EVENT]** will take place from **[START TIME]** to **[END TIME]** at **[FACILITY ADDRESS AND LOCATION DESCRIPTION],** in **[COMMUNITY NAME].**

For more information, visit una.ca or contact UNA's communications advisors at 1-800-252-9394.

For information about **[EVENT]**, contact Local **[LOCAL NO. HERE]** President **[LOCAL PRESIDENT OR OTHER DESIGNATED OFFICER NAME HERE]** at **[MOBILE PHONE NUMBER].**

News Conferences And Photo Ops

Some announcements also lend themselves to media events, such as news conferences, and photo opportunities. A news conference – also known as a press conference or a media conference – is a scheduled meeting between the media and the people who are making an announcement. News releases outlining the announcement and sometimes a media kit containing additional information and photos are usually handed out at the start of these events.

News conferences require detailed planning – including booking an accessible room where media can bring and use their equipment, preparing news releases and other materials, and sending out invitations. They need to be timed to take account of broadcast and newspaper deadlines. (The best time is about 10 a.m. on a weekday; avoid Fridays).

They're also risky in the sense that if a bigger story unexpectedly happens, the media won't turn up. Also, if these events are not carefully choreographed, journalists can ask questions that you'd rather not have other reporters hear!

UNA's Communications team does not recommend news conferences for individual locals.

Photo opportunities, commonly referred to by journalists as photo ops, are events at which media photographers and cameramen are allowed to take pictures, but no questions are entertained. These kinds of events really only work for national politicians and other very prominent people – and sometimes not even for them.

Media Events

Often more effective than news conferences are events designed to appeal to the need of media camera people for strong visuals.

Information pickets, street demonstrations, street theatre, classroom activities, or people demonstrating their skills and activities are all effective ways to spread your union's message. Journalists call these activities media events. It is often amazing how effective even a small information picket can be at attracting media attention. It will be even more effective if participants wear work-related clothing.

Media events provide a great backdrop to do the same things you'd do at a news conference – hand out news releases, make statements, conduct interviews – only with far better visuals. Think about it – if you were a photojournalist, which picture would you rather shoot, a union leader behind a podium in a dark hotel meeting room, or the same leader speaking to a crowd of working people outside their workplace?

While media events can be less expensive to organize than news conferences, they require the same meticulous planning and preparation. Since all media events are designed to provide striking visuals for the camera people that highlight your organization's membership, it is of paramount importance you ensure a good turnout of members.

You'll end up with egg on your face – and hurt your union – if you publicize an event and the media shows up but your own members don't.

Be strategic when you organize events: media want to talk to participants, so identify participants who are properly briefed to talk to media and make sure those people will step up right away to the media to be interviewed. Remember, if media don't talk to the right people at a public event, they will probably talk to the wrong people!

Make sure your designated spokespeople have a cell phone – and you have the numbers – so they can be summoned to where the media are. Find people who can stay on message.

FRAMING YOUR MESSAGE

Another important thing to think about when we consider writing for and talking with the media is the "frame" to put around your messages.

Framing is a popular term for depicting issues in a particular way that is more positive about a group and its goals.

Media and conservative politicians tend to frame unions, the working people they represent and the social causes they support in a particular way. We need to "re-frame" our unions, members and causes in ways that will increase our chances of achieving our goals.

Media and conservative groups are in the habit of framing unions and union issues as "special interests," made up of people who are lazy, hurt society and consumers, make things cost more and interfere with the "free market." They disrespectfully and inaccurately refer to democratically elected union leaders as "union bosses."

We have the opportunity, however, to re-frame our issues and activities as "social justice issues."

Here's the social justice frame on the same thing: "Everyone benefits from workplace justice." In other words, unions protect employees and ensure fair treatment in the workplace.

Unions also benefit society and consumers by campaigning to raise working conditions for all workers, and making significant social contributions through community work, taxes and consumer spending. Unions are led by democratically elected leaders.

The images you usually see in news stories about unions support the "special interest frame" – rich looking workers on picket lines, rudeness and conflict, bureaucratic union leaders, conferences in luxurious venues.

The images we can create to support the "social justice frame" might include illustrating members at work, poor working conditions, workplace or outdoor settings for interviews, ordinary homes and the communities we serve.

LEGAL ISSUES

A good starting place for a conversation about the legal issues surrounding your right to say what you think is that you have a right, guaranteed by Canada's constitution, to tell your story and present the facts as you believe them to be.

Still, you should be aware of some legal concerns that may temper what you are able to say.

Duty of fidelity

Every employee has a "duty of fidelity" to their employer. That is, what they say should not undercut or undermine their employer. So, blatant "trashing" of a facility or the reputation of the health service you work for could be grounds for discipline. Fair comment and fact-based criticism usually are not. Of course, it also looks bad for employers to be seen as shutting up their employees.

But some caution is appropriate, as is letting workers who hold union office and thereby are in a position to speak more forcefully to comment on your behalf.

Defamation

We've all heard the terms "libel," "slander" and "defamation." In Canada, for all practical purposes, they all mean the same thing.

Defamation is a statement that tends to lower a person's reputation in the eyes of others. Libel is a defamatory statement in written or otherwise permanent form, including video and audiotape. Slander is spoken defamation. Each province has its own laws governing defamation.

Unfortunately, Canadian law on defamation is not very good at doing what it's supposed to do – protecting the reputations of average people. But because it is a complicated area of law and therefore expensive, powerful people, corporations and other institutions often use it to try to silence media criticism. Confusing matters even more is the fact defamation law tends to be less severe in the United States than in Canada. Despite some high-profile cases, in the U.S., you can say pretty much whatever you want about a public figure. Here, that is not true – even if you believe what you are saying is true. So it's important to remember where you are when you speak in public.

There are several traditional defences, including truth, "fair comment" and privilege. But remember, to succeed at the defence of truth, you must be able to prove the truth of what you say in a court of law. A fair comment must be based on truth, which you must be able to prove in a court of law. When you are criticizing people, it is very helpful to present your arguments as **opinions** that are based on **facts**.

Contempt of court

In Canada, journalists and have no special rights to protect their sources.

So, if you give information confidentially to a journalist who is then asked to identify her source in court, she will have no choice but to name you or face the possibility of a fine or imprisonment for being in contempt of court.

If you are identified, then you too may be compelled to testify under oath in court.

Workers need to keep this in mind if they are thinking about giving information to a journalist who promises they will be able to remain anonymous. The journalist may not actually be able to deliver on this promise.

This kind of contempt of court case is very rare, and in Canada is unlikely to happen to you. But you need to be aware of the possibility.

Off the record and other promises

Journalists use terms like off the record, background and not for attribution interchangeably to describe conversations in which sources give them information and they promise not to reveal the source. Not all journalists even agree on the most common meanings of each of these terms.

"Off the record" is generally held to mean the journalist can use what you tell her for research, but not include it in the story. "Background" usually means they might use what you say in the story, but not indicate who said it. "Not for attribution" usually means that the journalist can report what you said, and even describe the type of person who said it, but not specifically identify you.

Workers should be very careful with all such agreements. First, as noted above, the journalist may not be able to keep her promise if compelled to testify by a court. Second, because the terms are imprecise, you may think you're agreeing to one thing while the journalist you're talking to thinks you're agreeing to something else. Finally, if for whatever reason a journalist attributes your name to something you thought was off the record, you have no legal recourse.

The best advice is to speak only for the record – and to say nothing you would be unhappy having your name associated with.

But if you agree to speak with a reporter on the condition you won't be quoted, take the time to ensure that you both fully understand what you are agreeing to!

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become an increasingly important medium for communicating union goals and activities – not just among members to traditional media organizations and journalists.

But it's important when communicating with any one overs social media sites like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or whatever the next new thing is, that UNA members consider carefully what they are saying, who might read it, and the impact it could have if viewed by an employer, a patient or a licensing body.

And remember, even platforms like Snapchat that supposedly make posts disappear after a period of time can have screenshots of them taken by anyone who comes upon your post on a computer or smartphone. So here are some suggestions to keep you out of hot water on social media.

Social media checklist

Don't share confidential information. Even an unnamed patient or person may be identifiable to colleagues or managers.

- Pay attention to policies and standards. Nurses need to be familiar with employer policies and professional standards relating to photos, social media, privacy and confidentially. You must ensure publicly shared information complies with these policies. If you disagree with a policy, do not ignore it! Contact UNA for assistance and advice.
- Use privacy setting. Consider making your personal profile private and accessible only to people you know and trust.
- Educate yourself. Learn about privacy settings and policies on social media networks. Check periodically because they change frequently.
- Keep your employer private. Consider whether you wish to name your employer or your professional designation in your social media profiles. If you include this information, readers may mistake your personal opinions for professional ones.
- Use strong passwords. Change them frequently, and keep them private.
- Expect leaks. Don't assume that even on a private forum someone else won't share your comment or opinion.
- Look professional. Present yourself in a professional manner in photos, videos and posts.
- Do not vent about work. Don't discuss work-related events in a public or semi-public forum.
- Be careful with negative comments. Avoid posting negative comments about colleagues, supervisors, and other health care professionals.
- Respect boundaries. Respect and enforce professional boundaries. Becoming a patient's digital "friend" or communicating with them through social media sites may exceed the scope of professional responsibility.
- Avoid professional advice. Refrain from offering health-related advice since that might be interpreted as unprofessional.
- Beware of imposters. Remember, on social media, people who may not be who they say they are.

GLOSSARY

It never hurts to know the technical language of the people you're communicating with. Knowing these common media terms will help you speak with the media. Here is a glossary of common media terms:

Ad – short for advertisement, a paid announcement or public notice in a newspaper, on the air or in any other medium.

Advertorial – advertisements made to look like normal newspaper copy.

Angle – how a reporter approaches a story, often a new way of coming at an old story.

Attribution – the point in a story at which the identity of a source of information is indicated.

Beat – a journalist's special area of responsibility, as in "the labour beat" or the "health care beat."

Byline – the line of type that says who wrote a newspaper or magazine story.

Canadian Press Style – the approved scheme of spelling, capitalization, punctuation, abbreviation and honorifics used by The Canadian Press, most Canadian newspapers, broadcasters and Internet news outlets employing professional journalists. Anyone who wants their news releases to be picked up by the media should try to adopt Canadian Press Style. The CP Stylebook and the organization's Caps & Spelling list can be purchased here: **https://www.thecanadianpress.com/writing-guides/canadian-press-caps-spelling/**

Clickbait – content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page.

Colour – the generous use of adjectives to describe people, places and situations.

Copy – the text of a reporter's story.

Copy editor – a journalist hired to fix errors of style and accuracy in copy, lay out pages and write headlines. Not many of these guys are employed any more, and it shows!

Cutline – the description below an image, a caption.

Deadline – the last moment at which a story may be submitted for publication.

Defamation – a libel or slander, a critical or untrue statement that is actionable in civil law.

Deck – Journalism speak for "sub-headline."

Editor – a journalist responsible for editing copy or supervising other journalists; also a management position in many news organizations.

Exclusive – a story that no one else has.

Feature – a longer, softer story, not necessarily pegged to a news event.

File – to submit one's story for editing.

Filler – stories so inconsequential they may be used any time to fill space.

Freelance writer – someone who writes on a piecework basis, instead of an employee.

'Graph – a common newsroom abbreviation for a paragraph.

Hard news – factual events requiring coverage that are happening right now.

Hook – something that grabs a reader's attention; something in the news that gives a journalist an excuse to write a story about a related issue –the "news hook."

Interview – a face-to-face or telephone conversation between a journalist and the person quoted in a story.

Inverse pyramid – a way of describing the traditional newspaper story structure, in which the five Ws and the key facts are concentrated near the start of the story, also called a summary lead.

Lead (also lede) – the first sentence or two of a news story that should describe what the story is about.

Leak – an unauthorized release of confidential information.

Legs – an issue that has many angles or details that it will continue to be written about over a period of several days or weeks. As in, "this story has legs."

Localizer – a local version of a national or international story.

Media – a popular collective noun for all newspapers, broadcasting and journalistic arguments. Some say you should write "media are…" not "media is…" but most Canadians are uncomfortable with that usage.

Mug shot – a head and shoulders photo.

News conference (also press conference, presser or newser) – an event called by a group or individual to make their views known to journalists.

News hole – the amount of space in a newspaper or on a broadcast for news, as opposed to advertising.

News peg – a timely event used to justify a broader story on a topic. The same as a news hook.

News release (or press release or media release) – a document containing information a group or individual wants to tell the media about, often framed in the style of a news story.

News judgment – the ability of a journalist to determine what is worth reporting, and what isn't.

Newsroom – a room in a newspaper or broadcasting office where journalists work. Now largely a thing of the past, alas.

Newsworthiness – the quality of being worth reporting in a journalistic medium.

Obit – an obituary, that is a news story about the life of someone who has died. Not to be confused with a death notice, placed for a fee by family or friends of the deceased.

Objectivity – the notion a news story should try to fairly present all side of an issue.

Photo opportunity – an event staged for the media at which questions are not allowed.

Placeline – the line of type that says where a story took place.

Play – the positioning of a story or photo in a newspaper or broadcast lineup relative to other stories.

Podcast – A downloadable digital audio file containing a recording of a recording on a topic in the style of a radio program; often published in short episodes on a related theme.

Quotes – statements in quotation marks directly attributed to a person mentioned in a news story.

Reaction – the opportunity traditionally given interested parties or subjects of criticism to make their views known in a news story.

Reporter – a journalist who reports on events by writing stories or making broadcasts.

Second-day lead – a news lead that tries to take a story farther than the initial accounts of an event.

Set up – writing an explanation that fully identifies every speaker and most important characters in a news story, a quote that doesn't properly identify the speaker has not been properly "set up."

Scoop – an exclusive story. Yes, this term is really used, even now.

Scrum – a Canadian term for an informal group of reporters seeking quotes in a public setting, after the rugby formation of the same name.

Sidebar – a secondary or subsidiary story.

Soft news – news that entertains and informs, not necessarily pegged to a particular news event.

Source – the person or document that provides a reporter's information.

Spike – to discard copy.

Spin – a self-serving interpretation of public events.

Streeter – a man-in-the-street interview.

Subject – not just the topic of a story, the term is also frequently used by journalists to describe the person they've been interviewing.

Tabloid – often abbreviated to tab, a small format newspaper like the Edmonton and Calgary **Suns** – and, by association, a sensationalistic approach to journalism.

Torque – a slang term for overstating the facts to make a news story seem more important than it is.

Typo – a typographical error

Web – not just the Internet's World Wide Web, but a common type of printing press used by newspapers once upon a time.

UNA
United Nurses of Alberta

CONTACTS

PROVINCIAL OFFICE
(Edmonton)

780-425-1025/1-800-252-9394

SOUTHERN ALBERTA
REGIONAL OFFICE
(Calgary)

403-237-2377/1-800-661-1802

nurses@una.ca

www.una.ca