

alberta liberal caucus

# **Fixing Health Care**

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**A Phased Approach**



## Health is a Matter of Principles

When properly managed, publicly funded and publicly delivered health care is the most effective and efficient approach. The Alberta Liberal Caucus is fundamentally committed to the principles of the Canada Health Act: accessibility, universality, portability, public administration, and comprehensiveness. An Alberta Liberal government would not only follow the letter of the Act, but the spirit of it; as one of the richest jurisdictions in the world, we have the ability to provide the very best health care.

We want Alberta to have the lowest infant mortality rate in the country. The highest life expectancy. The lowest rates of transmissible diseases. The lowest workplace injury and car crash rates. The highest per capita organ donations. The lowest rates of cancer, asthma and heart disease. The best mental health outcomes. The lowest obesity levels and smoking rates. The healthiest health care workers. And a cost-effective public health care system, one that's sustainable for the long term.

All this is possible. But it won't – it can't – happen overnight. An Alberta Liberal government would take a phased, step-by-step approach to dramatically improve access, quality and cost-effectiveness of public health care in Alberta.

## Introduction

Everyone wants to be healthy. Everyone wants their loved ones to be healthy. Albertans want to feel confident that their public health care system will be there when they need it.

Right now, that confidence is being sorely tested by long wait times in emergency rooms and for elective surgery, a shortage of doctors and nurses, and stories about neglect of seniors in extended care.

A province as prosperous as ours shouldn't have problems like these. It should have one of the best health care systems in the world.

But years of mismanagement have left public health care in disarray. Before Alberta's health care system can reach its true potential, we have to return to basics. Health care can be revitalized if we:

1. Return control of delivery of health care to the regional level.
2. Ensure everyone has access to a family doctor.
3. Ensure public delivery of quality, affordable continuing/long-term care.
4. Revitalize prevention programs for healthier citizens and long-term cost savings.

This document outlines a common-sense, realistic plan to accomplish those four initial goals and lay the foundation of a restored and revitalized public health care system – one that finally works for all Albertans. We'll take carefully measured steps to immediately address the worst problems facing the system while preparing for more sweeping improvements in the medium to long term. We'll make steady but significant improvements in the five major facets of health care: **how the system works, hospitals and clinics, access, doctors and nurses, and keeping you healthy.**

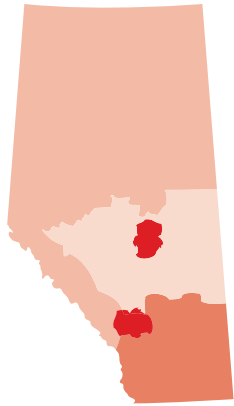


## How the System Works

Albertans who have tried to use the health care system since the Alberta Health Services Board (AHSB) was created know that it doesn't respond to the local needs of their communities. Attempting to run services ranging from remote nursing stations to heart transplants to pharmaceuticals to electronic health records out of one centralized body has proven an administrative nightmare.

That's why an Alberta Liberal government would, in consultation with frontline health care professionals and the public, transition from AHS to five new health care delivery zones: Northern Alberta, Southern Alberta, Central Alberta, Edmonton, and Calgary. The five health care delivery zones will be governed by their own boards, with half of the board members appointed and half elected. This division ensures that health care experts will provide the necessary expertise to direct health care delivery, while the elected board members will return democracy and accountability to the public health care system.

This plan will maintain some of the benefits of centralization: central management of policies, standards, data collection, and financial monitoring. These tasks will be handled by the Ministry of Health and Wellness, so that health care professionals in the field can focus on patients, not paperwork.



### The Health Quality Council of Alberta

The Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA), which plays an important role in promoting patient safety and quality delivery of health services, will also have a greater role to play in the health care system under an Alberta Liberal government. Currently the council can only investigate matters of patient safety and the quality of health service delivery at the request of either the Minister of Health or Alberta Health Services. This leaves the process vulnerable to political interference, so an Alberta Liberal government would expand the powers of the HQCA.

### Types of Hospitals (and other medical services)

Primary: Hospitals and Primary Care Networks (PCNs) that offer primary, urgent and emergent care, routine checkups, vaccinations, health education, maintenance for chronic conditions, normal maternal-child care and referral to secondary or tertiary hospitals

Secondary: acute care facilities that offer specialized treatments such as complex surgery, cardiology, urology, dermatology, occupational therapy and so on

Tertiary: hospitals with advanced facilities such as specialized surgery, transplants, cancer clinics and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scanners, often linked to post-secondary institutions

## Phase One

- Define Alberta Health and Wellness roles and responsibilities and shift delivery of services from AHSB to five new health care delivery zones: Northern Alberta, Southern Alberta, Central Alberta, Edmonton, and Calgary.
- Direct the Health Quality Council of Alberta to monitor access, quality and cost-effectiveness during this transition.
- Reinstate the Alberta Cancer Board and the Alberta Mental Health Board (including Addictions). Establish their roles and responsibilities relative to the new zonal boards and Alberta Health and Wellness.
- Expand the powers of the Health Quality Council of Alberta, giving them the authority and the funding to investigate issues relating to safety and quality of health services. Make them a more independent body, reporting to the Alberta Legislature rather than the Minister of Health.
- Transition to local health care delivery in northern and southern Alberta first – communities with primary and secondary hospitals. Monitor the transition to ensure that health care delivery isn't disrupted, before continuing the process in larger centres.
- Establish a budget monitoring and accountability process for the new zonal boards.

## Phase Two

- Complete the transition to zonal health care delivery in Calgary, Edmonton and central Alberta, home to most of Alberta's complex tertiary hospitals. Continue monitoring the transition.
- Review hospital budgets to improve efficiency, managing costs while ensuring equitable health care delivery across Alberta.

## Phase Three

- Continue strategic planning for the future of the public health care system, including prevention and wellness promotion.
- Perform a cost-benefit analysis to determine the merits of a universal pharmacare program and advocate for national bulk purchasing of pharmaceuticals, bringing costs down for both patients and government.



## Hospitals and Clinics

### The Need by the Numbers

Hospitals in Edmonton and Calgary are operating near or over 100% capacity. That means that there are more patients in the hospitals than there are beds available, the result of years of rollercoaster funding, bed cuts, and mismanagement.

### Acute Care Beds by the Numbers

Because the Tories blew up or sold off several hospitals, Alberta lags about 25 percent behind the national average when it comes to per-capita acute care beds.

Alberta has 2.1 beds per 1,000 people; the Canadian average is 2.7 beds per 1,000 people.

Hospitals work best when somewhere between 85-90 percent of beds are filled. This prevents emergency departments from clogging up with patients, reduces mistakes and staff burnout, and protects patient dignity. It also leaves room for hospitals to deal with larger emergencies such as disease epidemics or natural disasters.

Why are our emergency rooms and hospitals so overcrowded? The answer is simple: we don't have enough hospital beds, primary care clinics, home care and long-term care facilities. Hospitals are clogged with patients who shouldn't be in hospitals, but in publicly funded, publicly delivered long-term care facilities. Alberta must build new facilities to meet our growing population.

But which communities need new or expanded hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities? An Alberta Liberal government will create a transparent process with health service experts to ensure that communities that need health care facilities get them in a timely manner, without political games.

An Alberta Liberal government would perform an immediate audit to determine community needs and then take the necessary steps to provide that capacity. When performing this audit, we will take into consideration the approximately 700 acute care beds throughout the province that are occupied by those waiting for continuing care. It's far more cost-effective to serve long-term care patients in dedicated long-term care facilities. It's also better for the patient!

On top of the demand for long-term care by people who are waiting in hospital beds, there are currently over 1000 people in the community waiting for long-term care.

An Alberta Liberal government would immediately commit to creating the needed long-term care spaces as quickly as possible across the province, ensuring that everyone in the province can stay reasonably close to home even after moving to long-term care.

In 1989 Alberta had a total of 13,300 acute care beds. Two decades later, we have only 7,800 acute care beds, while the population has increased by approximately 700,000 people.

### Primary Care Networks

Primary Care Networks offer first-level care services, public health services, mental health and addictions treatment, and some have a day-time emergency service. An Alberta Liberal government would commit to increasing the number of PCNs across the province, where the need is greatest. Such centres will increase the number of Albertans with a family doctor and serve as the first stop for people with everyday health issues.

### The High Cost of Alberta's Lack of Long-Term Care Facilities

Every day, over 700 acute care hospital beds are occupied by people waiting for long-term care. This is like losing an entire major acute care hospital. The average cost of operating an acute care bed for one year is \$150,000. The average cost of a nursing home bed per year is \$57,000. Every year, Alberta wastes \$105 million because people who should be in long-term care have no place to stay, and must therefore be cared for in hospitals. By providing these Albertans with publicly delivered long-term care, we would save over \$65 million per year.

### Specialized Surgical Centres

Publicly funded and publicly delivered specialized clinics focus on specific medical procedures delivering superior quality treatment with reduced administrative costs. The Alberta Bone and Joint Institute's hip and knee replacement pilot project reduced surgery wait times by 90 percent and consultation wait times by 80 percent. This method could also be applied to other surgery, including eye and abdominal surgery. A network of specialized clinics to handle the most common and/or most challenging or expensive procedures would reduce costs and provide far better patient outcomes.

## Phase One

- Determine the needs of the hundreds of Albertans currently being treated in hospitals while waiting for long-term and continuing care. Identify existing alternate spaces and construct long-term care capacity to provide for the Albertans who are currently waiting in acute care beds.
- Open more Primary Care Networks in communities with the greatest need for primary health care and community based services.
- Establish palliative care as a core health service throughout Alberta.

## Phase Two

- Build specialized surgical centres (for bone and joint surgery, for example) to reduce administrative costs and deliver superior treatment.

## Phase Three

- Continue to either expand hospitals or build new ones where they're needed most.
- Continue building long-term facilities to reduce the number of seniors who are waiting in acute care hospitals for long-term care.
- Support PCNs and specialized surgical centers to address the most pressing needs.
- Restore stable funding and long-term planning to mental health care, including a renewed emphasis on income, employment and housing supports, crisis response and community-based treatment, in addition to revitalized institutional care.

## Access

When you're sick or injured, the last thing you want to do is wait hours, weeks or even months for treatment. While most Albertans are pleased by the quality of treatment at our clinics and hospitals once admitted, timely access to this treatment has become our number one concern. If we take the necessary measures now, it won't be long before Albertans enjoy much faster access to health care, with fewer complications and lower cost!

Furthermore, an Alberta Liberal government would stand by this principle: that regardless of income or influence, all Albertans must have equal access to medically necessary laboratory tests and imaging, including MRI or CT scans. No one should go broke paying for a potentially life-saving scan.



### **Bed Management Coordinators**

Bed management coordinators manage the distribution of available beds to ease some of the backlog while waiting for new beds to be created. An Alberta Liberal administration would expand the use of bed management coordinators so that the patient flow into and out of hospital is made as seamless as possible. The advantage to the patient is better continuity of care, and the advantage to the system is a more efficient use of capacity.

### **Phase One**

- Organize and fund enough procedures to clear the current backlog of elective surgeries (including heart surgery, cataract surgery and hip and knee replacements), reducing costs to the system and, more importantly, helping thousands of Albertans live better lives.
- Expand the use of bed management coordinators to facilitate the patient flow into and out of hospital.
- Increase funding for home care, allowing patients to leave acute care hospitals sooner (or stay in their homes longer), reducing costs and improving patient outcomes.
- Restore pastoral care services.

### **Phase Two**

- Ensure equal access to diagnostic scans by expanding hours of service.



**750,000**

**Albertans** - approximately 20 percent of us –  
**don't have** access to **a family doctor.**

## **Doctors and Nurses and Allied Health Professionals**

Every Albertan deserves a family doctor and a primary care team. But a chronic shortage of health care professionals has made that increasingly difficult. The family doctor acts as the point of entry to the health care system, and family doctors play an important role in ensuring that Albertans stay healthy and manage their chronic illnesses. This will also ensure the most efficient use of hospitals and medical services.

The shortage of health care professionals has also created long wait times for emergency care and surgeries. It has driven overworked professionals into retirement or away from Alberta. And it has created undue levels of stress and anxiety within the health care profession, resulting in inevitable degradation of care. We will rely on consultation with our universities and medical, nursing and allied professional associations to ensure appropriate planning. We'll provide the necessary funding for post-secondary institutions to expand their programs and train more doctors, nurses, lab technicians and other professionals.

## Primary Care Networks

A primary care network is composed of family doctors who work with a team of other health professionals such as nurse practitioners, midwives, nurses, social workers, dietitians, and psychiatric professionals to improve quality of care, manage chronic illness and increase access for primary care.

We would ensure that any expansion of post-secondary medical programs is accompanied by a corresponding increase in residency and practicum positions. Educating young Albertans who want to enter a health profession but failing to provide them with a place to finish their training just drives them out of the province. Recruiting professionals is one part of our task; keeping them is another equally important facet of sustainable health care planning.

## Phase One

- Establish a manpower planning group to ensure proper consultation and planning to create an accurate projection of how many health care professionals we need over the next 25 years, and how much we can reasonably expand post-secondary institutions to train these professionals.
- Support creative programs such as flex time, on-site child care and alternate payment models to improve workplace health and morale and keep health care professionals working in Alberta.
- Increase post-secondary education spaces for medical, nursing and other health care professions.
- Offer comprehensive incentives to attract family physicians and other health professionals to rural Alberta.
- Add more residencies and training for international medical graduates, including the hundreds already living in Alberta.
- Promote Alternate Relationship Plans (ARP) as a form of physician compensation and explore other innovative ways of paying physicians that satisfy both physicians and the public.
- Promote health care to high school students as a viable career option.

## Phase Two

- Monitor the impact of medical school expansion on the current and projected demand for health care professionals, and ensure that the supply of residency and practicum positions is matched with the number of educational positions.
- Consider tuition reimbursement to new Alberta-trained doctors and nurses who agree to serve four years in regions that have the greatest need for these professionals.

## Phase Three

- Continue planning and monitoring the number of professionals to meet present and future needs.



## Keeping You Healthy

### Health Impact Assessments

All major government policy and funding decisions will undergo a Health Impact Assessment to examine a policy's effect on a wide range of factors (such as income, poverty, education, and environment) that influence the health of our society. Such assessments would require the government to keep health issues at the forefront of decision-making. It's more sensible to encourage healthy public policy than to deal with the problems created by side effects that weren't considered when public policy was being developed.

### School Nutrition

Undernourished children – and there are tens of thousands of them in Alberta – are more likely to get sick, have shorter attention spans than normal and don't perform as well as they could in the classroom. Hunger increases health care costs, because poor nutrition is linked to a wide range of preventable health problems. For a tiny fraction of Alberta's budget – about \$2 per student per day – an Alberta Liberal government would provide lunch for all children at risk of malnutrition in Alberta.

It's the oldest cliché in medicine: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Education, income and employment have a profound influence on human health. Governments have an important role in ensuring these basic elements are in place to give children and adults their best chance at a long and healthy life.

In addition, health education and regulations that ensure safe environments, such as measures to reduce accidents, keep people healthy and save millions of dollars. An Alberta Liberal administration would restore and expand the prevention and health promotion programs previous governments have allowed to stagnate.

### Phase One

- Establish a Prevention and Health Promotion Council with other government and non-government organizations such as the Alberta Public Health Association and poverty groups to review, implement and monitor best practices for health of the entire population.
- Ban trans-fats to reduce chronic health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer and liver disease.
- Improve access for people with mental illnesses (**see sidebar**).

## Access to Mental Health Care

Mental illness will affect one in five Canadians in their lifetime. New knowledge about early intervention and prevention of mental illness can save much suffering and costly health services later. Pre-natal nutrition, counselling, proper management of individual and family crisis helps the whole community.

Albertans who need mental health treatment often end up in hospitals because there is no other place for them. And people with mental illness are more likely to be readmitted to hospital, because their first stay wasn't long enough to stabilize a serious mental illness. This puts an additional strain on our already crowded hospitals.

Alberta lacks both community mental health care and inpatient treatment capacity. An Alberta Liberal government will consult with community stakeholders, patients and service groups in the best position to help government address mental health concerns more efficiently and identify which areas need more space and staff to address the needs of the population. We will also reinstate the Alberta Mental Health Board, improving our planning and capacity for early identification and treatment of those with mental illnesses to improve outcomes and reduce costs.

Proper supports for mental health extend beyond the health care system. The Ministry of Health and Wellness will cooperate with other government departments to ensure that housing, employment, nutrition and other supports are available to help Albertans cope with their illnesses.

Through education programs that target both school children and the adult population, an Alberta Liberal administration will raise awareness of the reality of mental illness.

Some Albertans have lifelong mental illnesses and need lifelong support. But there are transitional moments in life – childhood to adolescence, adolescence to adulthood – when gaps in support appear. Sometimes people fall through the cracks during these times of transition because the hoops they need to jump through to retain support are too confusing or complicated to deal with. And sometimes support is cut off for arbitrary reasons. An Alberta Liberal government will ensure that mentally ill Albertans get the help they need, whatever transitions they're going through.

Supports provided to Albertans with mental illnesses will be tailored to their needs and experiences. For example, supports tailored to the aboriginal experience provide avenues to recovery that recognize aboriginal culture and new Canadians. And using the latest technology, tele-mental health services ensure that patients can access supports at a distance from specialists.

- Promote the importance of vaccinations. Vaccinations are a cost-effective means of dealing with many illnesses.
- Continue to support the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research and propose injury prevention laws. For example, require ATV riders and bicyclists of all ages to wear helmets; reduce workplace injuries, motor vehicle collisions, children's injuries and domestic abuse.
- Improve access to health care services by Albertans of limited means or mobility by either providing mobile services (such as mobile dialysis units or MRI scanners) or by designing an affordable, efficient transportation.

## Phase Two

- Review evidence and make appropriate changes where evidence indicates further cost-effective policies.
- Provide reduced-cost access to recreation for low-income families.
- Ban smoking in vehicles carrying children.
- Establish a provincial school nutrition program to provide meals for all children at risk in Alberta.

## Phase Three

- Use tax revenue from tobacco sales to create a \$200 million Community Wellness Fund supporting wellness initiatives and quit-smoking programs.

## Beyond Phase Three

The plan outlined here represents only the beginning of health care reform and revitalization in Alberta. Once these initial steps are complete and results are analyzed, the people of Alberta will have the tools to hold the revitalized public health care system and the new Alberta Liberal government accountable. When they see the improvements we've made, we're confident that we'll be able to move forward with more ambitious reforms. Such reforms might include:

## Stable Funding for the Long Term

Since 1993, the biggest problem disrupting public health care has been unstable budgets. Shifting political winds have caused health care funding to bounce up and down with oil prices. An Alberta Liberal government would craft legislation setting minimum and maximum GDP percentages for health care budgets, giving politicians and health boards some predictability and ample time and knowledge to plan for the long term.

## Dignity for the Dying

Coverage for palliative care varies across the province; in some areas it's covered, while in others dying patients or their families pay huge costs. When a person needs palliative care, what they need is a consistent, compassionate system, not bureaucratic hurdles. The funding of services can often change as someone transitions from an acute care setting to assisted living or home care. An Alberta Liberal government will consider palliative care a core health service, provided without cost to the patient.

## The Road to a Public Health Care System That Works

Alberta has the people, the resources and the tools to build a public health care system, publically funded and publically delivered, that works for all Albertans. The election of a more responsible government, one that understands the importance of an effective and efficiently functioning public health system, is only the first step on that road. The first four years of an Alberta Liberal government will see us taking the next steps. ER wait times will come down. Access to elective surgery and important diagnostics will improve. Costs will come down...and most importantly, Albertans will get healthier.

It's a journey that we can – and must – make together. There's a better way.

## More to Come

This document is one in a series of new policies from the Alberta Liberal Caucus. *Revitalizing Oil and Gas, Clean Air, Clean Land, Clean Water, Cutting Carbon: Restoring and Protecting our Environment* and *The Clean Government Initiative* are available now at [www.albertaliberalcaucus.com](http://www.albertaliberalcaucus.com).

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