



Public Interest Alberta

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December 10, 2013

Hon. George VanderBurg
Chief Party Whip
Legislature Office
227 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB
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Dear Mr. VanderBurg:

Thank you for attending the forum on seniors care hosted by Public Interest Alberta, Friends of Medicare and Parkland Institute in Whitecourt on November 13, 2013.

In your response to the presentations made by Sandra Azocar, Executive Director of Friends of Medicare and myself, you made a number of comments and made a few commitments that we wish to follow up with you on. I know that as of December 6th, you are no longer the Minister of Seniors, but I feel it is important to follow up with you, the new Associate Minister of Seniors, Dave Quest and Minister of Health, Fred Horne, as we can only assume that on November 13th you were speaking publicly as a representative of the provincial cabinet.

As you know, we were filming the event, so all of your comments were recorded and are now posted on our video posting site <https://vimeo.com/79515300> for you and others to review.

At the start of your presentation, you confirm that the number of long-term care beds in Alberta “will stay stagnant at 14,500 for a while”. As we explained in the Parkland Institute report, “From Bad to Worse”, (http://parklandinstitute.ca/research/summary/from_bad_to_worse), the number of long-term care beds relative to the increase in number of seniors in Alberta over the age of 75, has decreased by 20%. Furthermore, you had just heard from some people in your town how they really need to have long-term care beds available locally. One woman described how her mother had to go to Mayerthorpe from Whitecourt to get into a long-term care facility and this has meant that none of her friends have been able to visit her in the past five years. I remind you again that the Progressive Conservative Party ran on an election platform to increase the number of “long-term care” beds by 1000 per year, not 1000 assisted living beds.

You then go on to say that you have never seen the Alberta Health Services capital plan and you know nothing about the document that shows them cutting close to 1700 long-term care beds over

the next 5 years. As I said at the time, we find this incredibly hard to believe that you “know nothing about this document” as it was reported on in the media and tabled in the legislature by the Wildrose party. As requested, here is a link to the Alberta Health Services document on the Wildrose website - <http://www.wildrose.ca/media/2013/05/FOIP-AHS-Capital-Submissions-LTC-Bed-Projections.pdf>. Given that Kerry Towle, the Seniors Critic for the Wildrose Party told me just last week that you have talked to her and exchanged e-mails about these cuts, we find your comments at this public forum disingenuous.

You then state in your point about expanding the number of assisted living spaces that “Private Care or Public Care, I’m not interested in who delivers the care”. You say this despite just hearing that the Parkland Institute report clearly shows that private for-profit facilities provide on average significantly less care in a day and that the staff providing that care has less training. Yes, we know that the MDS system and care plans are supposed to determine the level of care a person gets in a facility, but we would be interested to see if the government has ever studied the actual amount of care provided in private for-profit, not for profit and public assisted living and long-term care centres? If that report is available we would be interested in getting a copy. If that study has not been done, then it is hard for you to say that the quality of care provided to seniors in for-profit centres is the same as in public facilities.

We were happy to hear that you share our concerns that the “patient-based funding” model that resulted in many seniors care staff being laid off in facilities across the province was a concern to you and that you passed this concern on to Janet Davidson and Fred Horne. However, can you or the Health Minister confirm that the Alberta government is going to change this policy in the near future?

I also want to challenge your comments on the first available bed policy and the government’s reversal of the policy that would allow seniors to be moved up to 100 kilometers away from their home. As we discussed with you and people in your community, if the government is not going to increase the number of long-term care beds, then people who need the highest level of care will be forced to leave their communities and families will be driving long-distances just to see their loved ones. As you yourself said that night, this is particularly bad in rural Alberta where “some people are moved 200 kilometers away from their homes.”

In your presentation you say that all assisted living facilities that the government partners with are required to charge no more than \$1785 in rent, but that there are also companies that do not have contracts with AHS that charge market rates. However, later on in your talk you say that some private care facilities have received government funding that later decided to not continue the AHS contract and require all patients pay higher market-based rates or move out. While you said that you did not know if private seniors care homes that end their contract with AHS have to pay the millions in government funding back, you do say that all of these contracts are publicly available. We would therefore appreciate it if the government could share the contracts that it has with some of the private for-profit care providers. If it turns out you are not actually correct about these contracts being publicly available, we would appreciate knowing if there is a clause in the contracts that require all government subsidies to be returned to the government if the care facility is to be sold or the contract is ended. Specifically, we would like to see the contract with Symphony Care in Red Deer as this company cancelled their contract with AHS this past January forcing many seniors to pay extremely high rates or move out.

Finally, in our discussion about your decision to cut the “Seniors School Property Tax Assistance Program” and implement the “Senior’s Property Tax Deferral Program”, you say the previous program gave an average tax cut to seniors of only \$167. While, I agree with you that the tax cut benefited wealthy seniors who generally pay higher taxes for their more expensive homes, I do not agree that this justifies taking away a real tax break for low and middle income seniors. I appreciate the implication that we should have a more progressive tax system, but it appears that this government is not about to change the flat tax system to a progressive income tax, because of the incredible advantages to wealthy Albertans. So rather than keeping the property tax assistance program that did provide some real support to seniors, the new program merely defers taxes, creating greater debt for those seniors who choose to use the program. This is perhaps why only “hundreds” as you say, have chosen to participate in the program.

At the very end of your presentation you say that the government needs to control its spending before it looks at its revenue options. While we all want our tax dollars to be spent wisely and efficiently, the government seems to be making big cuts on the backs of sick seniors. The government’s contracting out to large homecare corporations was supposed to save \$18 million. The plan to cut the current seniors drug plan is supposed to save \$180 million by transferring those costs onto seniors who will be the first payer in an expensive to run means-tested system. The costs to seniors and their families are increasing as the government puts millions of public dollars into private for-profit seniors care system for poor quality care. The ending of the Seniors School Property Assistance program is clearly going to save the government money, while seniors pay more. None of the cuts would be necessary if the government implemented a simple 14% progressive income tax on everything earned over \$150,000, as this would bring in another \$700 million per year. So the frustrating thing is that the Redford government will not properly tax wealthy people in Alberta, while you try to justify cutting and privatizing the seniors care system that is clearly failing and hurting far too many Alberta seniors.

Sincerely,



Bill Moore-Kilgannon
Executive Director
Public Interest Alberta

CC
Hon. Minister Fred Horne, Minister of Health
Hon. Minister Dave Quest, Associate Minister of Seniors
Danielle Smith, Leader of the Wildrose Party
Brian Mason, Leader of the New Democratic Party
Raj Sherman, Leader of the Alberta Liberal Party
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