



Public Interest Alberta

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INTRODUCTION

This document has been developed by the Seniors Task Force of Public Interest Alberta. It is addressed to all those who share our concern with the current state of seniors care in Alberta, and who want to do something about it.

The change in government in the May 5, 2015 election represents an important opportunity to bring about improved seniors care in our province. But even with a new government, improvement will only come about through determined advocacy by people who care deeply about promoting the necessary changes and who are prepared to take action to make sure those changes happen.

What we would like you to do, either individually or preferably in small groups, is to seek a meeting with your own MLA, regardless of party affiliation, and express your concerns with the state of seniors care in this province and advocate for better policies and approaches. We have prepared the following background information to assist you in talking to your MLA.

MEETING WITH YOUR MLA TO ADVOCATE FOR SENIORS CARE

Setting up the meeting

When the Legislature is in session, it usually meets from Monday to Thursday. Accordingly, most MLAs schedule meetings with constituents in their constituency offices on Fridays. If your MLA is also a cabinet minister, you may have to book a few weeks in advance, so please keep that in mind.

Ideally, take two or three other constituents with you, one of whom can be designated to take notes of the meeting. It is helpful if members of your team have had some direct experience with the seniors care system or stories of family or friends with direct experiences.

You can obtain contact information for your MLA by phoning 3100000 or on the www.elections.ab.ca website. Clicking on your MLA's name will bring up the contact information for both the legislature and constituency office locations. Phone your MLA's constituency office and arrange a convenient time to meet with your MLA. Your MLA's scheduler will want to know who will be present at the meeting and what issue you want to discuss. Most MLAs will schedule a 30-minute meeting.

Preparing for the meeting

Ideally, take two or three other constituents with you, one of whom can be designated to take notes of the meeting. It is helpful if members of your team have had some direct experience with the seniors care system or stories of family or friends with direct experiences.

The attached Briefing Notes were prepared by the Seniors Task Force of Public Interest Alberta and are provided to assist you and your team, but remember that you are meeting with your MLA as a constituent expressing the things you are concerned about, not as a representative of any organization.

It is important that you and your team establish beforehand a clear idea of what it is that you want to talk about and achieve at this meeting.

You and your group need to meet ahead of time to decide what you want to talk about and who will introduce the topic. There is no need to tackle all of the issues outlined in the attached Briefing Notes in a single meeting. You may decide to raise only one or two topics, preferably related to an issue with which you or a member of your team has had some experience.

Elected representatives, like most of us, are generalists who may have very little experience with Alberta's continuing care system. Part of the objective of this campaign is to educate them about the problems outlined in the attached Briefing Notes related to underfunding, privatization of delivery, and inadequate standards for and monitoring of seniors care. There is no expectation that you are an expert on these issues and, if a question arises to which you do not know the answer, say so, but undertake to find the answer by contacting the PIA office.

During the meeting

The first goal of any meeting with an MLA should be to establish a cordial but professional working relationship between you, as an interested and engaged constituent, and your elected representative. Inevitably, there will be things you can and cannot agree upon; that is why listening is just as important as speaking. What matters is that both parties come away with a clear understanding of the other's position

Your MLA is a very busy individual and it is important that you wrap-up the meeting in the time assigned. You can leave a copy of the attached Briefing Notes with your MLA whether or not all of the entire document has been discussed, but indicate that you would like your MLA's thoughts on the document at your next meeting. Conclude the meeting by reiterating your understanding of the actions you and your MLA will take before your next meeting and try to establish a target date for the next meeting.

After the meeting

Following the meeting, you and your team should meet to share observations and, based on your notes, designate someone to draft a brief report on the issues discussed and the MLA's responses to these issues. This report should also outline any additional

information or clarification required for a future MLA meeting and sent by email to Noel Somerville, Chair of the PIA Seniors Task Force at noel@littleguymedia.com

BRIEFING NOTES FOR MLA MEETINGS ON SENIORS ISSUES

Alberta's continuing care system is supposed to provide the homecare, drug coverage and institutional care required by seniors suffering from cognitive impairment, chronic conditions, or the inevitable frailty of old age. When seniors and their families find that:

- they cannot access the quality and amount of homecare they require,
- the seniors drug program does not cover many of the medications they need,
- long-term care beds have huge waiting lists, and
- the care facilities offered by corporate interests are not meaningfully regulated, or are too expensive and out of reach,

... **then clearly the system is not working**

The continuing care system's failure is based on several factors:

- Chronic underfunding of seniors care
- Reliance on delivery of care by private, for-profit corporations as care providers
- Lack of monitoring mechanisms to ensure seniors are receiving care from a sufficient number of properly qualified staff, and that seniors can live without concern for their own security, safety and wellbeing.

1. Under-funding of Seniors Care in Alberta

The current Alberta government inherited a seniors' care system that is significantly underfunded compared with other provinces. The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) points out that in the category of *Other Institutions* (which includes nursing homes and residential care facilities) health expenditures have been increasing steadily over several decades¹. By 2014, the report said the Canadian average for health expenditures for *Other Institutions* would be \$625 per capita while Alberta's would be a full 19% **below** that at \$506.

The same study notes that Alberta's spending on health care is 18.6% **above** the Canadian average. A small part of this huge spread between the funding of health care and seniors care is accounted for by the fact that Alberta has a somewhat smaller senior population than the Canadian average. However, a portion of Alberta's higher expenditures on healthcare may in fact be due to the under-funding of seniors care, as seniors languish in hospitals awaiting placement in more appropriate and less expensive settings. What is clear is that the under-funding of seniors care is systemic and has been deliberately engineered by decisions of the former government to:

- abdicate its responsibility to corporate interests,
- artificially cap the number of long-term care beds²,
- limit the availability of home care³ and,
- restrict the scope of medications covered under the seniors' drug plan⁴

While the new Alberta government has committed to building 2,000 long-term care spaces over the next four years, that only addresses part of the problem. Addressing the

¹ The Canadian Institute for Health Information, "National Health Expenditure Trends 1975 – 2014" www.cihi.ca/en/nhex_2014_report_en.pdf Tables 5 & 6

² PIA Seniors Task Force Position Papers on Long-term Care, Home Care & Pharmacare (<http://pialberta.org/action-areas/seniors>)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

systemic and growing under-funding of seniors' care is going to require reform of Alberta's taxation system to generate the revenue required. Public Interest Alberta will be developing specific proposals on reforming Alberta's government revenue in order to ensure that valued public services are paid for through fair taxation rather than relying on volatile revenue from non-renewable resources. We encourage you to watch for these PIA proposals and make them part of a future meeting with your MLA.

Underfunding has led to gaps in the system that could be addressed by increasing investment in:

- Building the number of long-term care beds actually needed for our growing seniors population
- Providing home care as a comprehensive, fully integrated service that is publicly delivered and universally available on the basis of assessed need
- Ensuring that all medications prescribed by a doctor are fully covered by the seniors drug plan

Ask your MLA's position on the issues of under-funding, and advocate for the above changes.

2. Private, for-profit delivery of seniors care

The fiduciary responsibility of any corporation is to ensure adequate shareholder return on investment. This is inconsistent with the primary responsibility of homecare and facility care, which should be to ensure the adequacy and safety of care. A recent study by the Parkland Institute⁵ documents the de-skilling of staff positions and the reduction in hours of care that staff are able to provide each resident, both of which result from the corporation's need to generate profit.

Additionally, private corporations operate behind the screen of their proprietary interests, which makes public accountability difficult. For instance, there is no restraint on private, for-profit operators who evict residents whose care requirements become too great. Often, the operator calls an ambulance which takes the resident to a hospital to be cared for in the public system, and later denies their re-admission to the facility.

A further problem with privately operated facilities (both for-profit and non-profit) is their propensity to use their status as 'landlord' to ban a family member from visiting their loved ones if the family member is critical of the care provided.

All licensed privately operated facilities, both for-profit and non-profit, should be regulated and inspected in the same way as publicly operated facilities.

The steps we see as necessary to address this privatization are:

- Phase out private, for-profit delivery of seniors care
- Deliver seniors care publicly, in the same way that health care for other Albertans is delivered

Ask your MLA's position on the issue of privatization, and advocate for the above changes.

⁵ Parkland Institute "From Bad to Worse Residential Elder Care in Alberta"
www.parklandinstitute.ca/from_bad_to_worse_residential_elder_care_in_alberta

3. Regulating and monitoring seniors care.

The current Continuing Care Accommodation and Health Service Standards established by Alberta Health in the past are nowhere near comprehensive enough to ensure safe, adequate care in seniors facilities. Past practice has been to provide facilities with eight weeks' advance notice of inspections, which makes the entire inspection system virtually meaningless.

The steps we see as necessary to address regulating and monitoring seniors care are:

- Develop comprehensive and enforceable care and accommodation standards to ensure enough adequately trained staff to deliver the high quality care and safety of seniors requiring care.
- Implement regular and un-announced inspections of all care facilities to enforce compliance with these standards.
- Empower all seniors in care and their families by establishing meaningful Family Councils in all seniors care facilities.
- Make the Seniors Advocate an Officer of the Legislature with expanded powers to investigate and report to the legislature on unsatisfactory or unsafe situations in home or facility care.

Ask your MLA's position on the regulating and monitoring of seniors care services, and advocate for the above change.

Advise your MLA that you look forward to further meetings in the months ahead, because you are committed to seeing improvements on these crucial issues.