

Alberta Health Advocate

2017/18 Annual Report



Letter to the Minister of Health

The Honourable Tyler Shandro
Minister of Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB Canada T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Shandro:

It is my responsibility and honour to present the Alberta Health Advocate Annual Report for 2017/18.

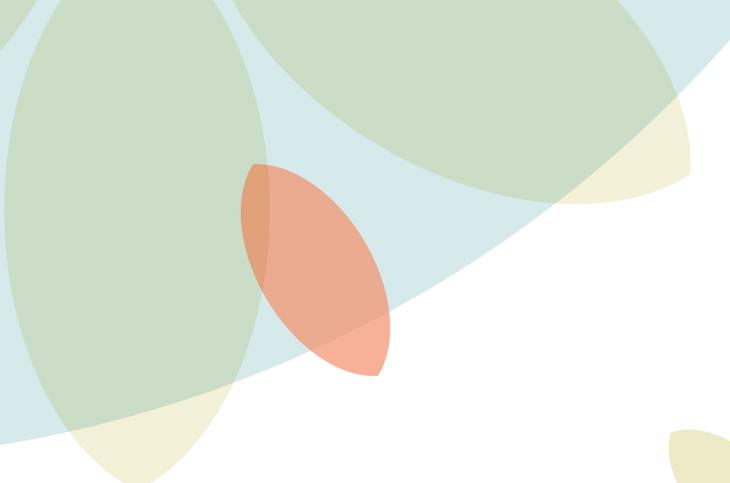
This report is submitted on behalf of the former Health Advocate and represents the period prior to my appointment as Health Advocate in July 2018. This report summarizes the activities of the Alberta Health Advocate in supporting Albertans to address and resolve concerns about health services, to navigate the health system, and to provide education to Albertans about the Alberta *Health Charter*.

This report is submitted in accordance with the provisions of section 6(1) of the *Alberta Health Act* for your presentation to the Legislative Assembly.

Respectfully submitted,

(Original signed by Kathleen Ness)

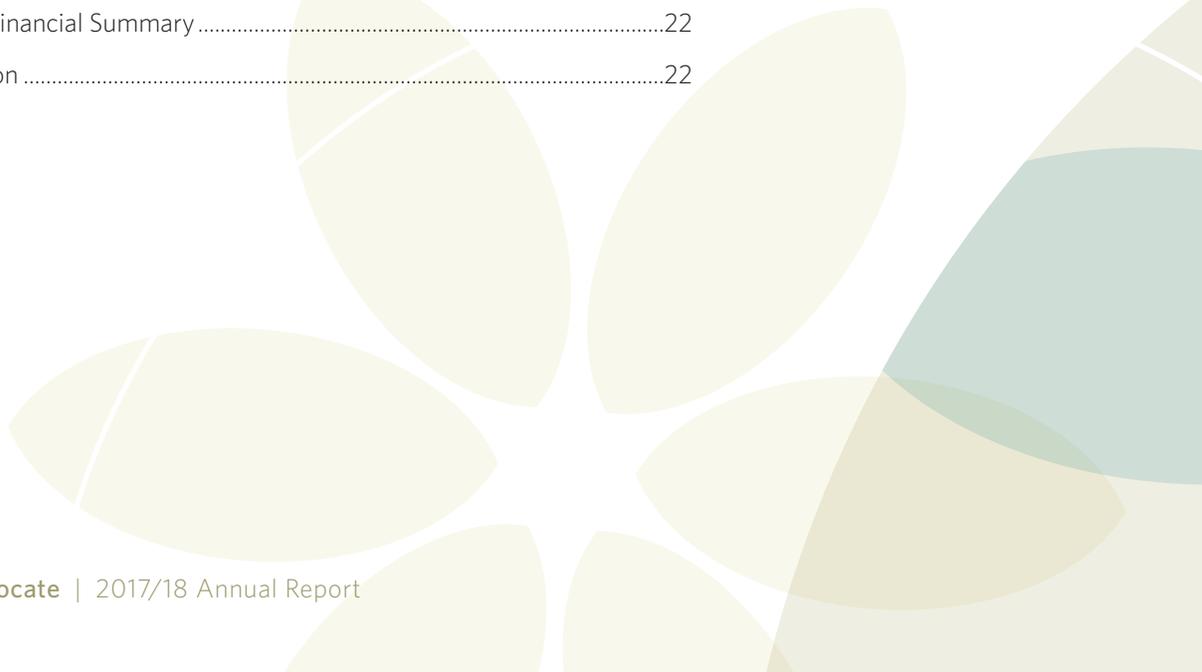
Kathleen Ness
Alberta Health Advocate



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Message from Alberta Health Advocate (2014-2018)

On July 1, 2014 I was honoured to be appointed as the first Health Advocate for the Province of Alberta. It was a new role defined in the *Alberta Health Act*. The role of the Health Advocate and the duty to implement the *Health Charter* came about following an extensive consultation with Albertans from all parts of the province.

While fulfilling the role of Health Advocate, I have delegated legislative authority to staff, so that they may respond to Albertans who have contacted the office with a complaint about their health care experience. Upon receipt of a complaint, the staff complete a triage process to determine how best to assist with addressing the complaint. In assisting Albertans, we can make a referral to the appropriate dispute mechanism for resolution or navigate them to the appropriate resources; provide education on the *Health Charter*, which sets out expectations between patients and families, health care professions and health service organizations; or, conduct investigations or reviews.

The triage process includes an early resolution phase, which reflects an approach which has been well established as being collaborative rather than adversarial. We seek to work together with health system providers, programs, services and organizations to find solutions to questions, challenges, concerns and complaints brought forward by patients, families and caregivers. Our work has focused on facilitating solutions to any unsatisfactory personal experiences encountered while interacting with the health care system.



2017/18 Staff:

Top (L to R): Beverly Slusarchuk, Susan Fernandes, Deborah Prowse, Lorraine D'Sylva, Kelly Blenkin-Church, Ryan Bielby

Bottom (L to R): Jody-Lee Farrah, Ashley Cormack, Brightina Opoku-Yeboah, Deborah Prowse, Wendy Armstrong, Catherine Douglas, Than Gunabalasingam



Throughout my term as Health Advocate, I have heard a few overwhelming themes arising from the experiences shared with me by Albertans. First, Albertans have shared that there is still a perceived culture within many parts of the health care system where it is felt that it is not safe for patients or families to raise concerns, to ask questions, or to be heard without fear of retribution. We have worked hard to raise the voice of those who are most vulnerable while supporting a health system culture change towards one that is truly patient/family focused and promotes patient safety. Second, patients and families contact the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates to share their stories of health care experiences. Their hope is that by sharing their health care experiences, system improvements will be in place for Albertans in similar circumstances. I have heard that people want to be treated with respect and compassion, to be seen as a whole person and not just the illness or condition. They want what matters to them personally, to be the focus of their care and treatment. An example of this is when older Albertans wish to remain in their own homes as they age, but require supportive care and treatment in order to do so. Approaching situations like this from the perspective of patient-family centered care with open communication about available community resources and coordination of services can empower Albertans to make decisions about their care that intimately impacts their life and well-being.

For us, every experience shared with our office matters, and voicing complaints can help identify the bigger issues that exist in parts of a complex system. By raising these issues with health system leaders, organizations and stakeholders, we hope to ensure that negative experience does not simply repeat itself, and that health system quality can improve from the lived experiences of patients and families.

It has been my duty and pleasure to lead the development of the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates. Over the last four years, I have worked to build an office that I am truly proud of. The staff are compassionate and committed to working for patients and families by providing service of the highest quality. To demonstrate our commitment to enriching communication and conflict management processes within the health system, the office provided a forty-hour conflict management course for organizations across the health system that respond to complaints. The office has worked hard to bridge collaboration between organizations and acknowledge all perspectives aimed at improving the health care experiences for Albertans.

As my term as Health Advocate ends, I am grateful to all Albertans who have called our office and shared their stories with us. I want to thank all of the stakeholders of the Alberta health care system who have enthusiastically worked with us and the various government departments with whom we have worked and who have provided us with support. I am especially grateful to the staff of the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates who have daily risen to the challenge of our work and all of my ideas!

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah E. Prowse, Q.C.

Health Advocate, 2014-2018



The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates

Established in 2014, the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates is comprised of the Health Advocate and the Mental Health Patient Advocate (the Advocates). Together providing a point of access for Albertans, the Advocates help people by listening to health-service -related concerns and assisting them in finding ways to resolve those concerns. The Advocates refer people to the appropriate programs and services to address their issues; they have the ability to conduct reviews or investigations into specific concerns related to Alberta's *Health Charter* and mental health patient rights. The Advocates provide education to Albertans about the expectations of the *Health Charter* and mental health patient rights set out in the *Mental Health Act*.

The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates strives to empower Albertans to be effective advocates in their own health and health care; supporting and advocating for a health care system that is responsive and accountable to the people being served.

Our Vision The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates envisions a coordinated, integrated and responsive health system that supports Albertans as full participants in their care and fairly addresses their concerns about health services.

Our Mission The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates assists Albertans in managing concerns about services impacting their health, and in becoming effective advocates. The Office represents the voices of Albertans in the ongoing development of the health system.

Our Values Respect Integrity Compassion Engagement Excellence



About the Alberta Health Advocate

The *Alberta Health Act* was proclaimed in force on January 1, 2014. It set out the appointment of a Health Advocate and established Alberta's *Health Charter*. Following the proclamation, Deborah Prowse was appointed as Alberta's first Health Advocate in July 2014. The Health Advocate's authority is set out in the *Alberta Health Act* and the Health Advocate Regulation.

The Health Advocate helps Albertans by receiving and responding to concerns and inquiries arising from experiences with health care programs and services. The services provided by the Health Advocate exceed those of a complaint or information telephone service in that the professional Advocate Representatives are able to make successful connections between clients and health services, promote self-advocacy and support Albertans in addressing and resolving their concerns by:

- Listening to Albertans, assisting them in clearly identifying their concerns, looking into their experience and supporting them in finding ways to resolve concerns;
- Referring Albertans to the appropriate complaints resolution processes with information and a plan;
- Reviewing or investigating issues falling within the *Alberta Health Act*;
- Finding and providing appropriate information about health care services and programs;
- Providing education on the role of the *Health Charter* in guiding expectations of the Alberta health system; and
- Reporting to the Minister of Health on the Health Advocate's activities.



The Alberta *Health Charter*

Alberta's *Health Charter* sets out key values, expectations and responsibilities within the health system. It is intended to guide the actions of the regional health authority (Alberta Health Services), provincial health boards, operators, health providers, professional colleges, and Albertans. It covers both publicly funded health services and those purchased through insurance or directly by individuals.

The Health Advocate is guided by the *Health Charter*, which strives to enable Albertans to have access to appropriate, accurate and meaningful information that provides assistance, offers support and resolves concerns arising from health care experiences.

The Advocate uses the first component of the *Health Charter*, entitled "When I interact with the health system" as a lens to consider concerns and complaints brought forward by Albertans for review.

The second component of the *Health Charter* entitled, "Taking my circumstances into account" addresses the importance of patients being fully engaged to achieve optimal health outcomes.

The last component of the *Health Charter* recognizes the importance of the social determinants of health. This is a reminder that economic, fiscal and social policies developed by government are intricately connected to health and wellness.

The *Health Charter* is a living document. As we continue to gain experience implementing the *Health Charter*, we expect to learn how the charter will support patients, providers, and government in understanding expectations and responsibilities within the health system.

Alberta's Health Charter

March 2014

When I interact with the health system, I expect that I will:

- Have my health status, social and economic circumstances, and personal beliefs and values acknowledged
- Be treated with respect and dignity
- Have access to team-based primary care services
- Have the confidentiality and privacy of my health information respected
- Be informed in ways that I understand so that I may make informed decisions about my health, health care and treatment
- Be able to participate fully in my health and health care
- Be supported through my care journey and helped to find and access the health services and care that I require
- Receive information on the health system and education about healthy living and wellness
- Have timely and reasonable access to safe, high quality health services and care
- Have timely and reasonable access to my personal health information
- Have the opportunity to raise concerns and receive a timely response to my concerns, without fear of retribution or an impact on my health services and care

Taking my circumstances into account and to the best of my abilities, when I interact with the health system, I understand that I will be asked to:

- Respect the rights of other patients and health providers
- Ask questions and work with providers to understand the information I am being provided
- Demonstrate that I, or my guardian and/or caregivers, understand the care plan we have developed together and that steps are being taken to follow the plan
- Treat health services as a valuable public resource
- Learn how to better access health services
- Make healthy choices in my life

As I work to be a healthy citizen within Alberta, I expect that:

- When economic, fiscal and social policies are being developed by the Alberta government, the impact of those policies on public health, wellness and prevention will be considered and steps taken to ensure that public policy is healthy policy

Our Achievements: Connecting and Building



Each year, hundreds of thousands of Albertans as patients and family members interact within our health care system. For most Albertans, their experiences are positive, reflecting high quality care; but for some Albertans, their experiences have not met expectations. The Health Advocate has an important role in connecting with patients and families, helping them to navigate their way through the healthcare system while remaining impartial in the complaint resolution process.

In our fourth year of operations, the Health Advocate provided client services to **1,199** Albertans. This shows a decrease in the number served in the previous year, however, this decline is in part a result of a change in the system used to track client interactions so direct comparisons in this reporting year are not possible. Moving forward, more accurate year-over-year comparisons will be available as the result of an integrated data tracking system.

In our pursuit to champion the *Health Charter*, with a purpose to create a shared understanding about what we should expect of others and ourselves in the health system, the Health Advocate provided **20 educational presentations** to groups of patients, families, health service providers and other stakeholders. These presentations are an excellent opportunity to facilitate valuable discussions regarding the role of the Health Advocate and how Albertans can be active partners and advocates for their care within the health system.

Over the past year, the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates moved toward a fully integrated model whereby staff are able to respond to all issues - regardless of whether they fall under the mandate of the Health Advocate or Mental Health Patient Advocate. This integrated approach ensures that services are provided to Albertans in the most efficient, effective and seamless manner, and support both Advocates and staff in fulfilling the legislated mandates.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Total Clients Served	823	1,519	1,199



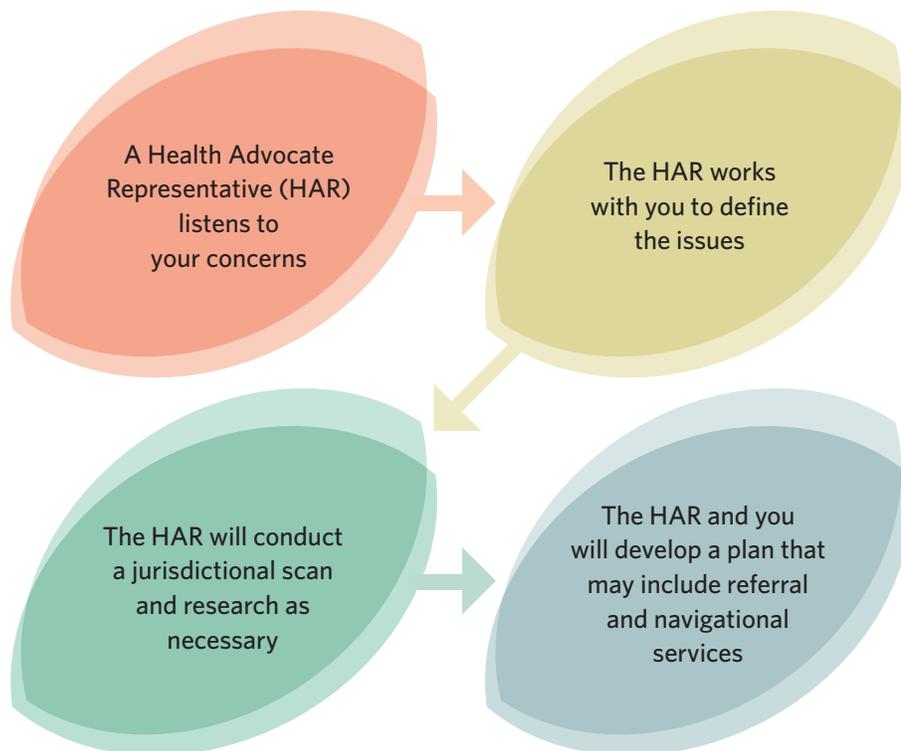
How We Work to Resolve Concerns

Our goal with every client is to provide assistance and support in resolving their concern. When clients contact our office, they will speak with a Health Advocate Representative, who will actively listen to the story of their health care experience. Together, the staff member and client will define the issue(s) arising from the health care experience and begin working on solutions, a process referred to as early resolution.

The Health Advocate Representative will work with the client to: develop a plan; provide information; connect the client to the right person to address their concern; empower the client to advocate on their own behalf;

provide support to navigate the health system; or, facilitate a referral to the appropriate complaint resolution process, person or organization.

The early resolution process used by the Health Advocate allows staff to respect and value the health care experiences of Albertans, and gather and analyze important information that can resolve concerns. Viewed through the lens of the *Health Charter*, early resolution supports valuable insights into Alberta's health system and its impact on the health care experience of Albertans.



Summary of Core Activities



The Health Advocate and staff carried out activities to fulfill the core functions of **review, referral, navigation, and education**. These activities are represented through data collected from clients, families, caregivers and health service providers throughout Alberta when concerns, information inquiries and education requests were received. A primary goal of the Health Advocate is to ensure that Albertans have access to appropriate, accurate and meaningful information that provides assistance, offers support and resolves concerns or questions arising from health care experiences. The Health Advocate core functions are described as:

- **Review function** refers to activities carried out in accordance with section 4 of the *Alberta Health Act*, in cases when no other dispute resolution process exists, the Health Advocate may carry out a review, with or without a complaint, into situations where someone is believed to have failed to act in a manner consistent with Alberta's *Health Charter*.
- **Referral function** refers to activities carried out to assist individuals in resolving a health-service related concern by referring them to the appropriate complaint resolution process, person or organization with jurisdiction to address their health-service complaint.

- **Navigation function** refers to activities carried out to assist individuals who are having difficulty accessing various health services and programs by providing information and connecting them to the appropriate resource, person or organization that may be able to help them.
- **Education function** refers to educational activities including presentations, consultations and other types of speaking engagements.

The following data is representative of the total number of individuals who received service from the Office of the Health Advocate. It is not unusual for clients to contact the Health Advocate several times throughout the reporting year. Clients may return to the Health Advocate for service and support if a new complaint or concern has arisen from a current or past health experience; or, if they have not been satisfied with the outcome or resolution of an ongoing concern. Upon closing a file, the Health Advocate leaves a standing invitation to clients to contact the office again should they need support in the future.

Client Services

In 2017/18, the Health Advocate connected with 1,199 Albertans. As these individuals reached out to our office, the Health Advocate listened to understand patient experiences and helped to make those experiences matter.

Throughout this past year, people from all parts of Alberta contacted the Health Advocate. In some cases, family members living outside of Alberta contacted the Health Advocate requesting assistance for their loved ones who reside in Alberta.

The majority of connections with clients occurred by telephone. The Health Advocate and staff also met with clients and families in-person in our Edmonton office and at various health facilities.

Client Services Profile by Contact Type

Percentage of Client Services Files	
Contact Type	
Email	8%
Telephone	87%
Website	5%

Based on the data from those who disclosed their age, clients served by the Health Advocate were primarily older adults. A small number of clients were children, adolescents and young adults, ranging in age from under 18 to 24 years. Approximately 72 per cent of clients who accessed services chose not to disclose age.

Client Services Profile by Contact Type

Percentage of Client Services Files	
Age	
Under 18	2%
Ages 18-24	2%
Ages 25-50	4%
Ages 51-64	3%
Ages 65+	17%
Undisclosed	72%

The Health Advocate received complaints and inquiries from a variety of sources including patients, family members, caregivers and health service providers. From the data collected in this reporting year, 65 per cent of the complaints and inquiries were received directly from clients, while 29 per cent of referrals were from family members and friends. The remaining referrals to the Health Advocate were from health service providers, Alberta Health Services, Government of Alberta officials, MLA officials, the Alberta Ombudsman and others.

Client Service Profile by Referral Source

Percentage of Client Services Files	
Referral Source	
Family	25%
Friend	4%
Self (client)	65%
Service Providers	3%
Other	3%
Undisclosed	72%

Connecting Issues to the Alberta *Health Charter*



The Health Advocate has the unique opportunity to connect directly with Albertans and hear the stories of their experiences as they interact with all aspects of the health system, and to think about those experiences from the perspective of the *Health Charter*. When connecting the *Health Charter* to concerns, the principles of participation, information, respect, confidentiality, quality and safety, and freedom to comment are identifiable. Considering concerns from the perspective of the *Health Charter* allows the staff to determine if the health care experiences of patients and families are in keeping with the expectations set out in the *Health Charter*. Further, it helps the Health Advocate to determine if the concern is a complaint that a person has failed to act in a manner consistent with the *Health Charter*.

From the 1,199 case files opened in 2017/18, there were 1,400 issues identified that relate to the *Health Charter*. Of these 1,400 issues, 1,295 were addressed through the referral and navigation functions of the Health Advocate.

The primary *Health Charter* issue concerning Albertans is related to the resolution of concerns, or as stated in the *Health Charter*, “to have the opportunity to raise concerns and receive a timely response to my concerns without fear of retribution or an impact on my health services and care.” The ability to raise a concern without fear of retribution is an issue often expressed to our office by Albertans. The Health Advocate will continue to work with other complaint resolution processes, health service providers, patients and families to support a culture in which Albertans feel safe to express their concerns and deem that their issue was resolved in a meaningful way.

Scenario:

Concern:

A mother called expressing considerable frustration with the lack of care that her adolescent child was receiving. The son was in hospital as a result of mental health issues. While numerous service providers and agencies were involved, the child was about to be discharged from the hospital and it seemed that no coordinated plan was in place to provide treatment post-discharge. The parents felt “out of the loop” and were concerned that communication between agencies was not effectively occurring. The parents had become frustrated to the point of ceasing communication with the agencies involved.

How the Health Advocate Helped:

With the consent of the family, staff from the Health Advocate Office contacted several of the stakeholders responsible for the youth’s care. With the apparent lack of coordination that was occurring, our office was able to become a single point of contact between the various organizations and the family to improve communication. Our office helped the agencies to identify the appropriate group who could take the lead in the development and monitoring of a treatment plan for the youth upon release. As the appropriate treatment professionals came together and began to coordinate care, the staff encouraged the parents to return to the collaborative process. Once the system and the parents were united in their care planning for the youth, our office was able to step back while letting the family know that they were able to call us again should they need further assistance.

Review Function

In accordance with section 4 of the *Alberta Health Act*, a person may make a complaint to the Health Advocate. The Health Advocate may carry out a review or investigative process, with or without a complaint, into situations wherein someone is believed to have failed to act in a manner consistent with Alberta's *Health Charter*. In this reporting year, the Health Advocate completed one *Health Charter* review which was ultimately referred on to Alberta Health Services as the complaint related to a matter within their jurisdiction and was best managed through their resolution process.

Referral Function

Throughout Alberta's health system, there are several established complaints resolution processes, delivered through individuals and organizations. These organizations are responsible to address complaints within their scope, such as health service delivery, health professional conduct, abuse and neglect, and compliance with provincial health service standards.

When the Health Advocate receives a complaint and determines that it falls within the jurisdiction of another complaints resolution process, person or organization, the Health Advocate must refer the complaint to the appropriate organization that has authority to address it.

In some instances, to address the complaint, referrals to several organizations are necessary to review the complete nature of the identified issues. These multijurisdictional cases require an integrated approach that connects the patient to the right people and coordinates multiple complaint processes that operate uniquely within their own legislation and scope of practice.

In 2017/18, from the **1,199 case files** opened by the Health Advocate, **551 issues** required a referral. In some cases, we found that Albertans contacted the Health Advocate, not to make a complaint or inquiry, but to share their experiences as a learning for others and an important step in their own self-advocacy.

Referral Function (cont'd)

The following is a list of where our clients were referred to in 2017/18 in order of frequency:

- Alberta Health Services/Covenant Health
- Individual health provider (e.g. family physician)
- Other government offices
- Colleges (e.g. College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, etc.)
- Financial programs
- Non-government organizations
- Legal services
- Alberta Health Insurance
- Seniors Advocate
- Oversight body
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)
- Mental Health Patient Advocate
- Protection for Persons in Care
- Federal Government
- Out-of-country/Out-of-province services

Scenario:

Concern:

An individual called to express their frustration regarding the level of care they received while in hospital. They felt that they were not provided with enough information about the tests that were conducted and had concerns about the level of care that they had received. They were left with many questions and did not know what to do. They were very frustrated and wanted to do whatever they could to avoid a similar experience happening to anyone else.

How the Health Advocate Helped:

The Advocate Representative listened to the individual's concerns and explained some of the normal practices that take place on a hospital unit. The Advocate Representative also provided information about how an interdisciplinary team works and which team members usually perform certain tasks. The Representative spent time with the caller to prepare them for how to have an effective conversation with their family physician, who would serve as their main coordinator of care moving forward, regarding their medical situation and to ensure they were prepared with a list of questions that they would need answered to feel more comfortable about their care. Once it was determined that the client wished to lodge a complaint, the Advocate Representative explained the process for making a complaint through the appropriate complaint resolution process.

Navigation Function

The Health Advocate has a role in helping Albertans access and navigate through the many health services and health-related community support programs available throughout the province. The program and service areas range from specific health services and programs, such as mental health services, to medical benefits programs, legal services, financial support programs, housing programs and others that impact a person's overall health.

Albertans have contacted the Health Advocate when seeking information and connection with one or several health services and/or health-related community support programs. Advocate Representative staff listen to underlying issues and needs of the clients and work to connect them to the most appropriate programs and resources.

In some cases, the pathway to services may not be straightforward. The Advocate Representatives will complete research and reach out to organizations and program areas to make the right connection. Issues identified under the navigation function were often addressed through early resolution. Meaning, when we connected with Albertans, we learned that they had found the appropriate health service or health-related community support program they were seeking and that the Health Advocates services were no longer needed. Despite best efforts, in some cases the Advocate Representatives were unable to connect to clients when calls or emails were not returned.

Scenario:

Concern:

An Albertan contacted our office with questions about how to get in to see a specialist. They did not have a family physician but they had very specific concerns and felt they knew the type of specialist who could address their needs. The client had called the specialist's office on several occasions and did not understand why the receptionist would not book an appointment for them. They did not understand why they could not just go directly to a specialist for care.

How the Health Advocate Helped:

The Advocate Representative listened to the individual to understand the health issues they were dealing with and the outcome that they were hoping to achieve. The staff provided the individual with information on how to find a family physician, the key role of the family physician and what to subsequently expect with regard to the referral process to a medical specialist.



Education Services

The Health Advocate has a mandate to provide education on the *Health Charter* including how it applies to Alberta's health care system. The Health Advocate aims to use every interaction between health care providers, leaders and Albertans as an opportunity to educate people on roles, responsibilities and expectations as outlined in the *Health Charter*.

The Health Advocate made formal presentations, participated in expert panels, consulted with groups and educated individual Albertans on the role of the Health Advocate, and educated people about the application of the *Health Charter*.

The Health Advocate delivered **20 educational presentations** across the province, including local and provincial audiences, health leaders, health service providers, and Government of Alberta officials.



Strategic Relationships and Committees

The Health Advocate is a respected leader and advisor on complaints and concerns management in Alberta's health system. Building strong and respected relationships, contributing to discussions on current health-service issues and mapping out conflict resolution pathways is key to successfully fulfilling the role of the Health Advocate.

In this reporting year, the Health Advocate has completed numerous consultations with individuals, physicians, health leaders, health providers and policy makers on such issues as mental health, long term and continuing care, personal health information and patient safety. The Health Advocate has participated in a range of working groups and committees that are committed to initiatives or projects aimed to support health system improvement.



The Health Advocate contributes to these initiatives by educating persons about the *Health Charter*, doing so by representing the client experience and sharing the valuable lessons learned from patient and family experiences within the Alberta health care system. Through our daily connection with hearing the experience of Albertans and their interactions with the health system, and our relationship with stakeholders, we are in a unique position to link what is happening on the ground with policy decisions and new initiatives being undertaken by health providers. The working groups and committees are focused on a range of issues including continuing care, long term care, data management, patient safety, dispute resolution and mental health.

Health Advocate Financial Summary

The following represents the combined budgets for the Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate.

	2017/18 Budget	2017/18 Actual	2016/17 Budget	2016/17 Actual
Salaries and Employee Benefits	\$ 1,484,000	\$ 1,241,077	\$ 1,484,000	\$ 1,359,028
Travel and Accommodation	\$ 27,000	\$ 6,487	\$ 27,000	\$ 17,973
General and Administrative Services	\$ 393,000	\$ 79,945	\$ 382,000	\$ 106,811
Total	\$ 1,904,000	\$ 1,327,509	\$ 1,893,00	\$ 1,483,812

Contact Information

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We are available to assist you during regular office hours, 8:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (closed from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.) Monday through Friday. If you telephone after hours, a confidential voicemail is available to take your message.

Visit our website at www.albertahealthadvocates.ca



