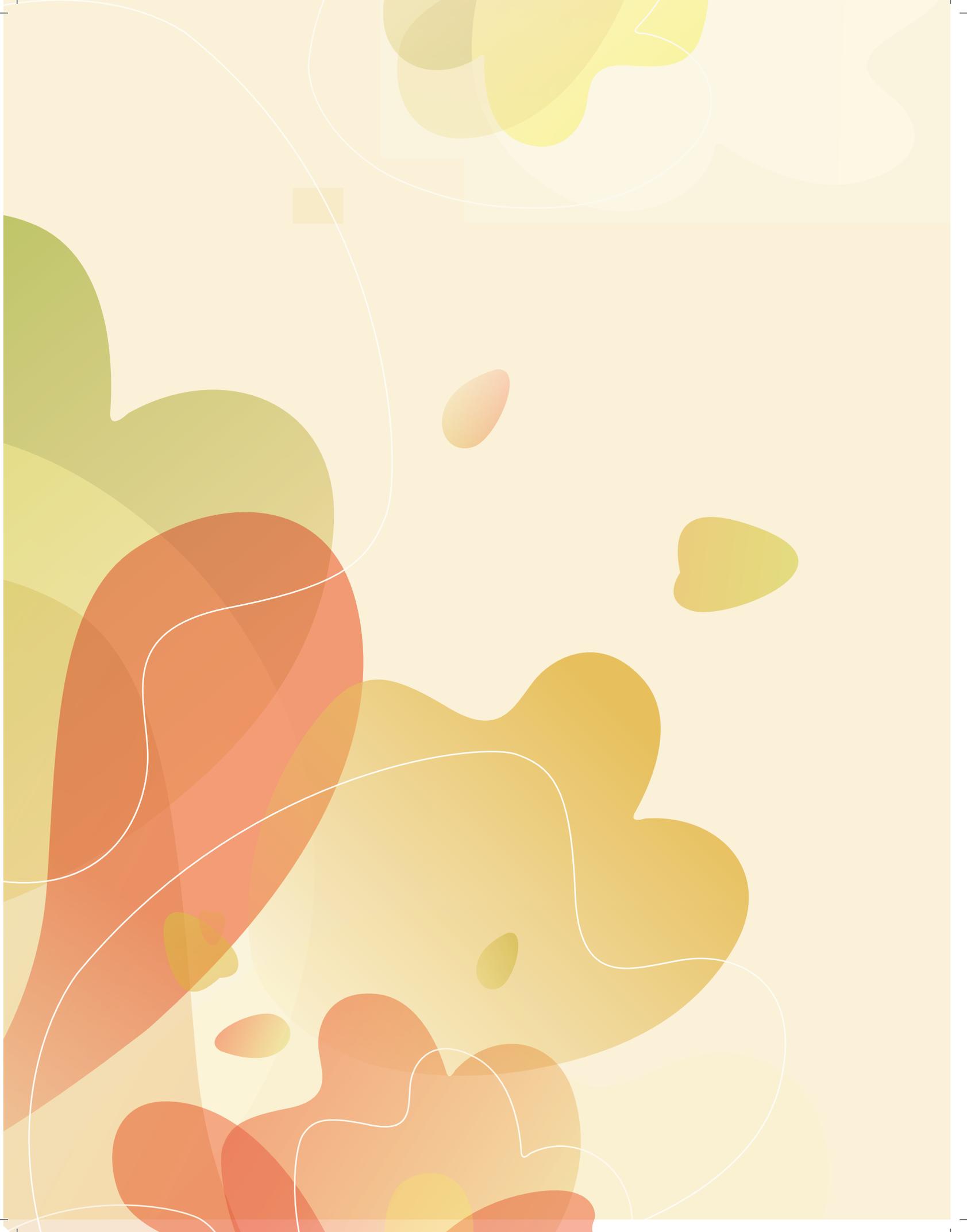




# Alberta Health Advocate

2018/19 Annual Report







## Letter to the Minister of Health

The Honorable 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 2018\19.

This report summarizes the activities of the 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 the Health Advocate

It has been an honour and pleasure to serve as Health Advocate since July 2018. The main focus of the Office of the Health Advocate is to work with patients and families members to address concerns that may arise as they navigate their way through the health system.

This year we saw an increase in Albertans contacting the office for support and assistance. We also are noting increasing complexity in cases and an increased number of individuals seeking guidance to navigate the system or request assistance to resolve concerns that affect both physical and mental health.

While referral and support is an important part of our work, the Advocate office was also pleased to participate in providing input to legislation, reports and documents, bringing forward the patient voice to strengthen and improve health systems in Alberta. Consistent themes from patients and their families continues to center around how to advocate effectively for their health and services, and the need for coordinating services among many jurisdictions for the best possible outcomes and continuity of care.

Much of our work would not be possible without the support and assistance from the remarkable staff at Alberta Health, Alberta Health Services, Patient Relations Department, as well as the many regulatory colleges, agencies, stakeholders and other Advocate offices who assisted. I am grateful and thankful to the staff of the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates for their compassion and dedication to Albertans, and finally to the patients and family members who trusted us with their stories and an opportunity to provide guidance and assistance.

### 2018/19 Staff

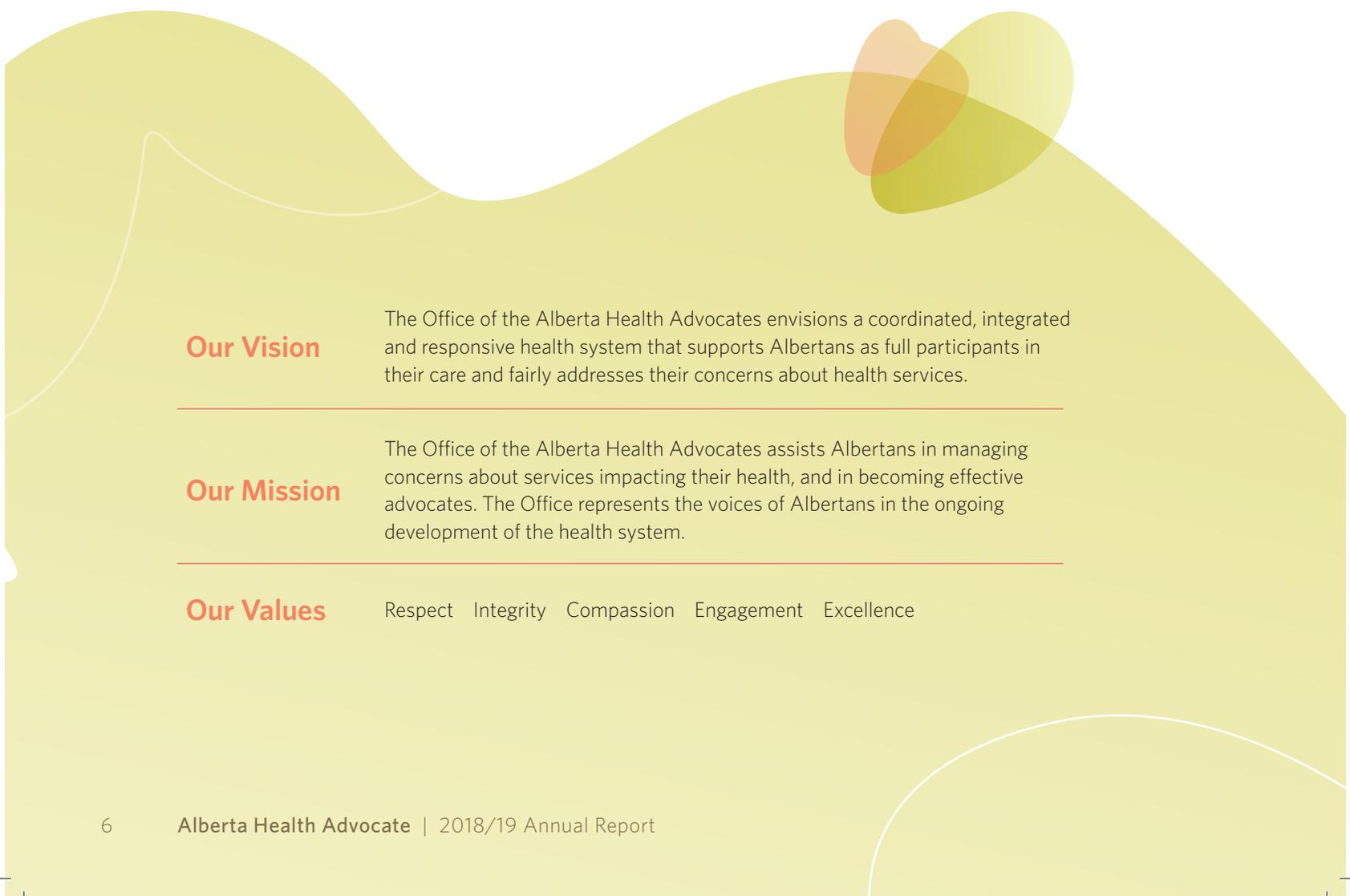
Eunice Abekah, Wendy Armstrong, Ryan Bielby, Kelly Blenkin-Church, Ashley Cormack, Catherine Douglas, Lorraine D'Sylva, Jody-Lee Farrah, Susan Fernandes, Than Gunabalasingam, Robin McClung, Brightina Opoku-Yeboah, Tim Osborne, Deborah Prowse, Beverly Slusarchuk



## Office of the Alberta Health Advocates

Established in 2014, the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates is comprised of the Mental Health Patient Advocate and the Health Advocate. Together, providing a single 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 complaints; they have the ability to conduct investigations or reviews into specific complaints related to mental health patient rights and the Alberta *Health Charter*. The Advocates provide education to Albertans about the mental health patient rights set out in the Mental Health Act and the expectations of the Alberta *Health Charter*.

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, Alberta's first Health Advocate was appointed 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

## 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

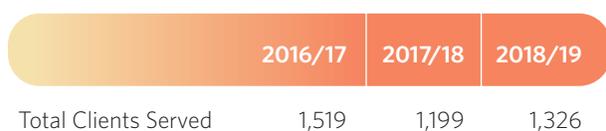
## As I work to be a healthy citizen within Alberta, I expect that:

- 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 fifth year of operations, the Health Advocate provided client services to **1,326** Albertans. This is a slight increase in the number served in the previous year. Each file represents time spent working with an individual to understand and support them in their health care journey.



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 nearly 40 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.

While this report focuses on the work of the Health Advocate, our staff work within an integrated model allowing them to respond to concerns that fall under the mandate of the Health Advocate as well as the 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 their legislated mandates.

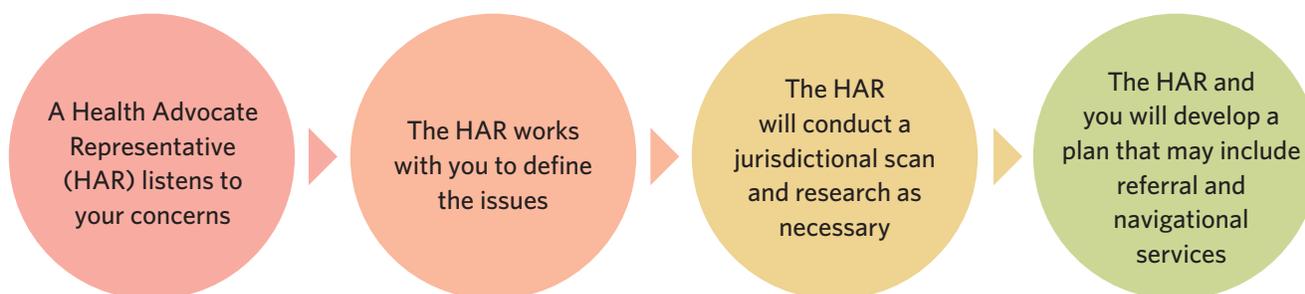
## How We Work to Resolve Concerns

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 2018/19, the Health Advocate connected with 1,326 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



Contact Type	Percentage
Email	12%
Telephone	85%
Website	2%
Other	1%

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. These numbers are based on cases where a specific age was known. However, in the majority of our client interactions, a specific age of the client is not known.

## Client Services Profile by Age (when disclosed)



Age	Percentage
Under 18	11%
Ages 18-24	11%
Ages 25-50	27%
Ages 51-64	10%
Ages 65+	41%

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, 60 per cent of the complaints and inquiries were received directly from clients, while 30 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, MLAs, and others.

## Client Service Profile by Referral Source



Referral Source	Percentage
Family	25%
Friend	5%
Self (client)	60%
Service Providers	6%
Other	4%



## 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 1,326 case files opened in 2018/19, there were 1,723 issues identified that relate to the *Health Charter*. Of these 1,723 issues, 1,512 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.

## 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*.



## 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.

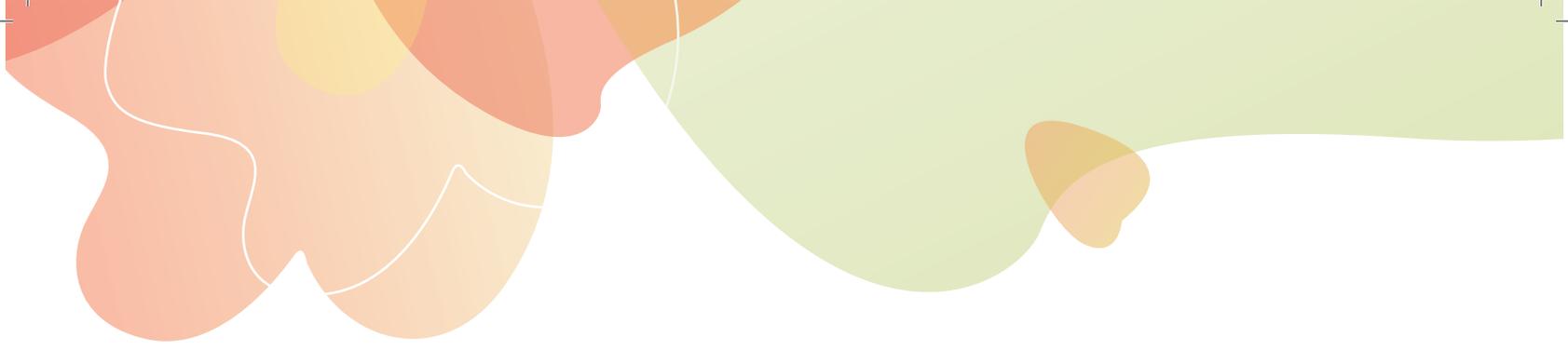
When the Health Advocate receives a complaint and determines that it falls within the jurisdiction of another complaints resolution process, person or organization, the Health Advocate must refer the complaint to the appropriate organization that has authority to address it.

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 2018/19, from the **1,326 case files** opened by the Health Advocate, **554 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.

The following is a list of where our clients were referred to in 2018/19 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.)
- Legal Services
- Non-government organizations
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)
- Financial Programs
- Oversight bodies
- Protection for People in Care
- Alberta Health Insurance
- Office of the Seniors Advocate
- Elected Officials



## 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 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.

## 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 nearly 40 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, guardianship and advance care planning. 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.

# Health Advocate Financial Summary

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

	2018/19 Budget	2018/19 Actual	2017/18 Budget	2017/18 Actual
Salaries and Employee Benefits	\$ 1,636,000	\$ 1,215,093	\$ 1,484,000	\$ 1,241,077
Travel and Accommodations	\$ 27,000	\$ 6,589	\$ 27,000	\$ 6,487
General and Administrative Services	\$ 241,000	\$ 70,729	\$ 393,000	\$ 79,945
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 1,904,000</b>	<b>\$ 1,292,410</b>	<b>\$ 1,904,000</b>	<b>\$ 1,327,509</b>

## Contact Information

Office of the Alberta Health Advocates  
106th Street Tower - 9th Floor  
10055 - 106 Street NW  
Edmonton, AB T5J 3E1

In Edmonton: 780.422.1812  
Toll-Free: 310.0000 then dial 780.422.1812  
Fax: 780.422.0695

E-mail: [info@albertahealthadvocates.ca](mailto:info@albertahealthadvocates.ca)

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](http://www.albertahealthadvocates.ca)



