

Office of the Alberta
Health Advocates
2021-2022 Annual Report

Health Advocate
Mental Health Patient Advocate



Letter to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Mental Health and Addiction



The Honourable Jason Copping
Minister of Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB Canada T5K 2B6

The Honourable Nicholas Milliken
Minister of Mental Health and Addiction
132 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB Canada T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Copping and Minister Milliken,

On behalf of the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates (OAHA), I am pleased to present our 2021/2022 Annual Report. This report is submitted in accordance with the provisions of Section 47(1) of the *Mental Health Act* and Section 6(1) of the *Alberta Health Act* for your presentation to the Legislative Assembly.

The report provides an overview of the roles, activities and accomplishments of both the Mental Health Patient Advocate and the Health Advocate for the period of April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022. The work of the OAHA is done in collaboration with many health care system stakeholders. We aim to achieve our mission of helping Albertans gain the knowledge they need to fully access, navigate and advocate for themselves in the health care system in order to support the vision of the Health Charter and the rights of patients as outlined in the *Mental Health Act*.

The OAHA appreciates the ongoing support of staff from Alberta Health and Mental Health and Addiction and the close working relationship we have with all stakeholders in the health care system. Our collaboration and shared desire to help Albertans navigate the health system in our province ensures that our mission will continue to be achieved.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Catherine Douglas', located below the 'Respectfully submitted,' text.

Catherine Douglas
Health Advocate & Mental Health Patient Advocate



Message from the Health/Mental Health Patient Advocate

I was honoured to step into the role of Acting Health Advocate/Mental Health Patient Advocate with the departure of our former Health Advocate/Mental Health Patient Advocate, Janice Harrington, in July 2022. I want to thank Janice for her leadership and commitment to the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates (OAHA) during her time in the role and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the health care system at the centre of Albertans' lives and focus due to the pandemic and its impact on the system, the OAHA continued to field an increasingly complex array of questions, concerns and complaints in 2021-2022. This was done while continuing to enhance the role of our office and educate key health stakeholders and the public about our services.

We provided support, direction and education related to COVID-19 concerns as required, mainly related to the lifting of restrictions. Our office worked with clients and stakeholders to maintain a balanced approach, based on Chief Medical Officer of Health guidelines and the health needs of residents and families.

The OAHA uses the Alberta Health Charter and its focus on person-centred care to guide our daily interactions. We work with clients to help them understand that they are the health care experts when it comes to their own lives, families, values, lifestyles and financial situations – that they are partners in their health care team. We reinforce the same message in our interactions with health care providers, ensuring that person-centred care is the guiding principle in every aspect of care delivery.

In 2021-2022, the OAHA continued collaborating with related offices and other stakeholders in an ongoing effort to ensure our role is understood and the patient

perspective is considered in their operations and planning. Highlights of this work included:

- contributing to a steering committee to develop a mental health program supporting rural agricultural populations
- enhancing our working relationships with social work and nursing programs, and developing a new relationship with the University of Alberta School of Public Health
- participating in the Child and Youth Well-Being Round Table
- contributing to the development of innovative models of transitions in care for those with spinal cord injuries.

Our unique role in providing the critical patient perspective and our relationships within the Ministries of Health and Mental Health and Addiction was the basis of the OAHA's participation in the development and implementation of the *Mental Health Amendment Act* and *Continuing Care Act* in 2021-2022. Our office continues to support the rollout of both pieces of legislation.

When I reflect on the tremendous amount and breadth of work the OAHA accomplished in 2021-2022, with a lot of that related to and impacted by the pandemic, I am grateful for the working relationship we have with all our partners within the health system.

None of our accomplishments and contributions would be possible without the dedication and hard work of the OAHA staff. Together, we completed and implemented a return-to-work plan and hybrid work arrangements that began in April 2022. I commend all staff for their flexibility and unwavering commitment to helping Albertans navigate our health care system.

Catherine Douglas

Our Vision

To ensure the patient voice is equally included in the planning and operation of Alberta's health care system.

Our Mission

We help Albertans gain the knowledge they need to fully access, navigate and advocate for themselves in the health care system in order to support the vision of the Health Charter and the rights of patients as outlined in the *Mental Health Act*.

Our Value Proposition

We directly collaborate with the entire health care system to provide patient and family feedback on policy and operations to facilitate quality improvement.

Staff: Office of the Alberta Health Advocates

Executive Administrator - Kelly Blenkin-Church

Manager - Ryan Bielby

Advocate Representatives - Jennifer Ward,

Brightina Opoku-Yeboah, Carolina Ventura,

Marjory Buerger, Eunice Abekah,

Beverly Slusarchuk, Robin McClung,

Eva von Buchenroder

Office Administrator - Lorraine DSylva

ADVOCATING FOR SENIORS

A senior was transferred from acute care to continuing care. Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a change in visitation guidelines. The senior could no longer receive in-person visitors. The family contacted the OAHA to inquire about the policies and guidelines related to the decision. The Advocate Representative explained that the policies and guidelines were a result of a public health order, and in follow-up conversations, was able to continue to update the family on changing guidelines and how they would impact their family member. Additionally, advice and aggregate data on the challenges facing visitation in continuing care were sent to Alberta Health for review.



2021-22 Highlights

- A significant number of the inquiries addressed by the OAHA were related to COVID-19, including:
 - immunization requirements
 - changes in public health restrictions
 - implications of cancelled surgeries and transplants
 - protests outside hospitals impeding visitor access
 - continuing care sites needing clarification on Chief Medical Officer of Health required orders, such as those for visitation/essential caregivers.
- Provided input from a resident and family perspective for the Facility-Based Continuing Care Review and on the development of regulations for the *Continuing Care Act*, which was proclaimed in May 2022.
- Continued to support the Government of Alberta's rollout of the *Mental Health Amendment Act*, particularly the provision of forms and rights information. The implementation of the Act contributed to an improvement in the timely access for patients to rights information and support from our office.
- Participated in the development of Alberta Health's Indigenous Anti-Racism Strategy. The OAHA provided information on our navigation processes to the AHS Indigenous Patient Concerns Working Group and Wellness Core to help establish goals for further process development for addressing Indigenous concerns.
- Contributed to initial discussions with the Health Quality Council of Alberta on a review of the Health Charter.
- Collaborated with the Calgary Mental Health Review Panel on a mock review panel hearing, the first of its kind. The mock hearing was held to help increase understanding of the review panel process for OAHA staff and Alberta Health and Mental Health and Addiction.
- Developed an updated communications plan for the OAHA with the goal of expanding the profile of the office and reaching specific stakeholders, as well as promoting the Health Charter.



Health Advocate Statistics

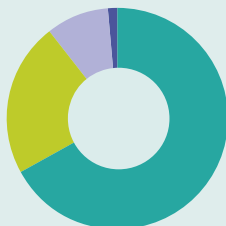
2021-2022



of individuals who were provided support by Advocate Representatives

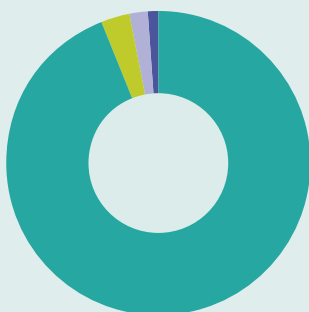


of issues managed by Health Advocate Representatives



Method of Contact

- Phone
- Email
- Website
- Other (letter, fax)



Core Services*

- Coach/Navigate/Refer
- Advocate/Educate
- Investigate/Review
- Rights Information

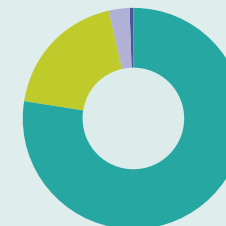
2020-2021



of individuals who were provided support by Advocate Representatives

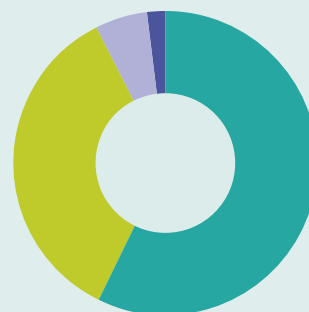


of issues managed by Health Advocate Representatives



Method of Contact

- Phone
- Email
- Website
- Other (letter, in-person, text)



Core Functions

- Navigation Services
- Referrals (to other complaint mechanisms)
- Education/Explanation
- Investigations/Reviews

*Previously reported core functions are now being reported as core services which better represents the support provided by the OAHA. Previous categories have been combined to reflect how the statistics are tracked. The most frequently provided services are noted for 2021-2022 and will be used going forward.

Mental Health Patient Advocate Statistics

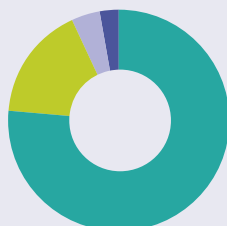
2021-2022



of individuals who were provided support by Advocate Representatives



of issues managed by Health Advocate Representatives



Method of Contact

- Phone
- Fax
- Email
- Other (website, letter)



Core Services*

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- Advocate/Educate
- Investigate/Review
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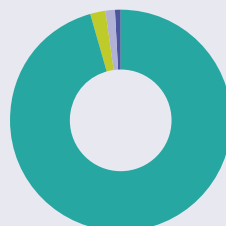
2020-2021



of individuals who were provided support by Advocate Representatives

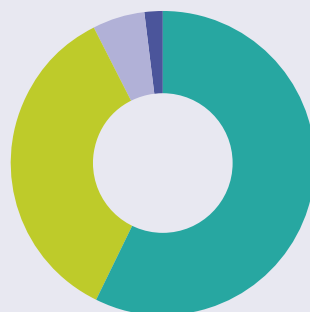


of issues managed by Health Advocate Representatives



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Core Functions

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ADVOCATING FOR MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS

A grandmother called the OAHA concerned about her grandson who had a history of unaddressed serious mental health needs, was deteriorating and had gone missing. She did not know what action to take and was unsure if it was considered an emergency. The Advocate Representative suggested the grandmother could apply for a warrant for apprehension under the *Mental Health Act*, based on the presenting facts, and guided the grandmother through the process. The warrant for apprehension was issued, and police located and apprehended the grandson, bringing him to hospital where he was examined and admitted. The Advocate Representative also provided rights information and education to both the family and patient while in hospital, assisting in a smooth transition through the treatment process.

Role of the Alberta Health Advocates



Overview: Office of the Alberta Health Advocates

The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates (OAHA) strives to empower Albertans to be effective advocates for their own health and care. We support and advocate for a health care system that is responsive and accountable to the people it serves.

Established in 2014, the OAHA is comprised of the Mental Health Patient Advocate and the Health Advocate. It has a reporting relationship to the Ministers of Health and Mental Health and Addiction.

Providing a single point of access for Albertans, the OAHA listens to the health service-related concerns of those who contact our office and helps them resolve their concerns. We refer people to the appropriate programs and services to address their complaints. The OAHA also conducts investigations into or reviews of specific complaints related to mental health patient

rights and the Alberta Health Charter. As well, our office provides education to Albertans about mental health patient rights set out in the *Mental Health Act* and the expectations of the Health Charter.

Seniors Health Issues

A significant number of individuals who contact the OAHA are Alberta seniors. While our office is mandated to support seniors around health and mental health issues, we also receive many out-of-scope inquiries on topics like housing, transportation and finances. To prevent confusion and the need for seniors to contact multiple agencies or offices, the OAHA ensures these inquiries are referred to the appropriate support.

ADVOCATING FOR SENIORS

A woman trying to move her parents from one health zone to another in Alberta, to be closer to family, contacted the OAHA due to barriers the family was encountering and to better understand their options. The OAHA Advocate Representative collaborated with the health authority and contacts in both health zones to explore the options and helped develop a solution for the planned move of the parents closer to their daughter.

Alberta Health Charter



Alberta's Health Charter sets out the key values, expectations and responsibilities of patients and providers within the health system. The Health Charter, required by legislation, was adopted in March 2014. It is intended to guide the actions of health service organizations, providers, patients and government in the broader health system, for both publicly funded services and those purchased through insurance or directly.

The OAHA uses the Health Charter as a lens to consider concerns and complaints brought to our attention by Albertans. We also provide education about the Health Charter and how it applies to Alberta's health care system.

Alberta Health Advocate

The Health Advocate's authority is established in the *Alberta Health Act* and the Health Advocate Regulation. The Act was proclaimed 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 receives and responds to concerns and inquiries from Albertans about their experiences with health care programs and services as it relates to the expectations set out in the Health Charter. The services provided by the Health Advocate go beyond receiving and reviewing complaints. Our Advocate Representatives promote self-advocacy and support Albertans in dealing with their concerns about health services by:

- listening to Albertans' concerns and supporting them in finding ways to resolve their concerns
- referring Albertans to the appropriate complaints resolution process
- reviewing or investigating complaints under the *Alberta Health Act*
- providing information about health care services and programs and successful ways to function within the system
- providing information on the role of the Health Charter in guiding expectations of the Alberta health care system
- reporting to the Minister of Health on the Health Advocate's activities.

Essentially, the role of the Health Advocate is to assist, help navigate, review, educate and inform. The Health Advocate provides a patient-centred view in the ongoing governance and operation of the health care system.

ADVOCATING FOR ALBERTANS

A homebound man reported that he had been hospitalized several times in the last few years because of his unmanaged chronic illness. He did not have a family doctor, and each time he experienced serious symptoms he was taken to the emergency department and would stay in the hospital until the symptoms were under control. An Advocate Representative discussed the value of a "Health Home" and provided ideas on how to locate a family physician who was part of a Primary Care Network. Through well-monitored clinical support services, the client was able to reduce his hospital visits and significantly improve his quality of life.

Mental Health Patient Advocate

The Mental Health Patient Advocate (MHPA) was established in 1990 and helps Albertans understand and exercise their rights under the *Mental Health Act*. Patient rights provide important checks and balances to ensure mental health patients are not wrongfully detained and, when detained, are treated fairly.

The MHPA is legislated to assist mental health patients who are being, or have been, detained in hospital under admission or renewal certificates and people who are under community treatment orders, as well as those acting on the patient's behalf.

The MHPA conducts impartial investigations into complaints and provides information and education about patient rights to patients, families, community organizations and the public. The role also involves making recommendations to improve patient care and the mental health system.

The protection of rights exists within the value of patient-centred care and treating patients with respect and dignity. It is critical when a patient loses their liberty, due to detainment or other restrictions, that they feel they are respected and have some control over their situation. To support this vulnerable population, the MHPA works collaboratively with health care providers and others to strengthen awareness and understanding of the importance of upholding patient rights.

The Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate cannot:

- represent an individual in court or at tribunals
- reverse a clinical or administrative decision
 - take disciplinary action against any health service provider
 - order fines or other penalties
- investigate complaints involving federal or municipal governments, police, universities, schools, or other non-health related companies

ADVOCATING FOR MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS

A client detained under the *Mental Health Act* had a Review Panel hearing and as of the day before the hearing, had not been given access to medical records to prepare. After contacting the Mental Health Patient Advocate, the client was provided with access to medical records one hour prior to the hearing. Subsequently, it was identified that hospital staff may need more training around mental health patient rights. After connecting with staff and the Board Education Team, the OAHA was able to help connect the Unit Manager with training for her staff.

Our Goals

Each year the OAHA develops an operational plan that guides our activities and helps ensure our work is focused on our vision and mission. The operational, legislative, awareness and stakeholder relations goals guide the services and programs we offer, all of which are carried out in collaboration with our many partners in government, health care agencies and similar offices representing Albertans in an advocacy capacity.

1. **Operations:** Albertans are able to receive effective, high-quality support for their health care concerns.
2. **Legislation:** Effective review and implementation of legislation for the Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate. Ensure integration with related legislation.
3. **Awareness and Education:** Ensure that Albertans have access to information about the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates and the services provided by the Office.
4. **Stakeholder Relations:** Maintain relationships with key stakeholders across the health sector to ensure the currency of shared information and that the patient perspective is considered in planning and operation.



ADVOCATING FOR ALBERTANS

The Office of the Alberta Health Advocates was contacted by an Albertan concerned about the lack of coverage for a cancer-treatment drug. The individual was having difficulty obtaining public contact information for the program that reviews coverage for drugs in Alberta that are not normally covered. The OAHA connected him with the proper mechanisms to share his feedback and concerns.



Progress on Goals in 2021-2022:



1. Operations

- Provided monthly reports with key metrics and tracking to the Ministers of Health and Mental Health and Addiction on client contacts and emerging trends.
- Updated the database to ensure the effectiveness, quality and consistency of information used to track and report on client issues and trends. This also allowed for implementation of enhanced quality assurance processes.
- Continued the refinement of the Policy and Procedures Manual.
- Built staff capacity with an updated training and education program that included: orientation, investigations, an electronic training manual, complete policy suite project development and case/employee specialization.

2. Legislation

- Supported the implementation of the *Mental Health Amendment Act* and Regulation. The OAHA began receiving faxes directly from staff at designated facilities regarding patients who wished to be provided with their rights and support from an Advocate Representative.
- Began developing the process to review the Alberta Health Charter.
- Completed the 2020-21 Annual Report which was tabled in the Legislative Assembly by the Minister of Health in December 2021 and posted on the OAHA website.
- Continued the development of collaborative relationships and role clarity around legislative responsibilities with related offices (e.g., Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities, Office of the Public Guardian, Protection of Persons in Care).

3. Awareness and Education

- Developed a communications plan and tools for the OAHA to increase awareness of and access to information about our role and the Health Charter.
- Integrated the Health Charter and informal reviews into client work and stakeholder engagement.
- Made numerous presentations to and held meetings with client and community groups, stakeholders, colleges and universities on the OAHA and to ensure the patient voice was represented in community initiatives.
- Continued development of a site visitation plan for all designated facilities in Alberta; continuing care and acute care facilities; community groups; and community health and mental health programs.

4. Stakeholder Relations

- Met regularly with Alberta Health and Mental Health and Addiction senior executives and other senior government officials to inform them of emerging trends and issues experienced by patients and their families, and to maintain OAHA awareness of and input into relevant initiatives undertaken by the Ministry.
- Established a regular meeting schedule with the Addiction and Mental Health Branch (now the Ministry of Mental Health and Addiction), Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services to help maintain awareness of key mental health initiatives and provide joint training opportunities.
- Continued participation in stakeholder groups and committees, increasing outreach and expanding the patient voice (e.g., CMHAP, iKNOW Health, Continuing Care Collaborative).
- Continued collaboration with community stakeholders to identify shared areas of interest and opportunities for partnership.





Financial Summary

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

	2021-2022 Budget	2021-2022 Actual	2020-2021 Budget	2020-2021 Actual
Salaries and employee benefits	\$1,289,000	\$1,329,478	\$1,926,000	\$1,448,034
Travel and accommodations	\$17,000	\$124	\$17,000	\$0
General and administrative services	\$623,000	\$28,136	\$33,000	\$46,676
Total	\$1,929,000	\$1,357,738	\$1,976,000	\$1,494,710

*Note: Some dollar values under salaries and employee benefits in 2020-2021 budget year were recorded under an alternate budget line in the 2021-2022 budget. Total financial information is accurately displayed.

Contact Information

Office hours: Monday through Friday
8:15 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Visit our website at: www.albertahealthadvocates.ca

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10055-106 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 2Y2

In Edmonton: 780.422.1812
Toll-Free: 310.0000

If calling after hours, please leave a message on our confidential voicemail service.

Fax: 780.422.0695
E-mail: info@albertahealthadvocates.ca



