



Office of The Alberta
Health Advocates
2019/20 Annual Report

Health Advocate
Mental Health Patient Advocate



Letter to Minister

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 Health Advocates Annual Report for 2019/20.

This report summarizes the activities of the Mental Health Patient Advocate to support patients receiving care under the *Mental Health Act* to understand and exercise their rights and to investigate complaints from or related to patients who are under Admission Certificates, Renewal Certificates, or Community Treatment Orders. Additionally, the 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 47(1) of the *Mental Health Act* and Section 6(1) of the *Alberta Health Act* for your presentation to the Legislative Assembly.

Respectfully submitted,

(Original signed by Janice Harrington)
Janice Harrington
Alberta Health Advocate & Mental Health Patient Advocate





Letter From Health Advocate/ Mental Health Patient Advocate

As we write this annual report for 2019, we are deep in the midst of a global pandemic creating uncertainty and upheaval in both Alberta's health care system and our daily lives. As the role of the Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate is to support Albertans' rights in their interaction with the province's health care system and to identify systematic opportunities for improvement, the Office of the Health Advocates has never been busier.

But while the times are unusual, the work has remained much the same. The job of the Health Advocate is to support Albertans in navigating the health care system, provide information and resources in helping them become effective self-advocates, refer complaints to existing complaint mechanisms and, where no other appropriate investigative mechanism exists, undertake an investigation of our own.

Our mission has been to work collaboratively with stakeholders in Alberta's health care system, ensuring patient voices are heard and affecting change supporting improving the system. Since its inception, the office has responded to thousands of Albertans, helping them understand their rights within the system, how the system operates and, most importantly, ensuring patient voices are fundamental in healthcare operations and policy development by sharing stories illustrating the patient experience.

While our main role is to support patients, we work collaboratively with the health-care system, sometimes being able to provide solutions others have not thought of. It is always encouraging to see how committed

health-care providers are to patient care and the people they serve and their eagerness to continually learn and improve.

Patient-centred care has a wide variety of definitions. Our philosophy is the patient is a full partner in their care, remembering that while some patients are effective self-advocates who only need a bit of information and advice in order to resolve their issues, others are unable to speak up for numerous reasons.

*"Many stories matter.
Stories have been used to
dispossess and to malign.
But stories can also be used to
empower, and to humanize. Stories
can break the dignity of a people.
But stories can also repair that
broken dignity."*

- Chimamanda Adichie

Health care advocates are still relatively rare in Canada and Alberta has a role to play in helping patient-centred care become more of a focus nationally. We also have further to go in educating Albertans and Alberta health care providers about the province's *Health Charter*, the rights of mental health patients and the role of the Health Advocates. We look forward to continuing that work in the year ahead.

Overview of Office

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

2019/20 Staff

Eunice Abekah, Ryan Bielby,
Kelly Blenkin-Church,
Marjory Buerger, Catherine Douglas,
Lorraine D'Sylva, Janice Harrington,
Robin McClung, Margaret Mupanguri,
Kathleen Ness, Brightina Opoku-Yeboah,
Tim Osborne, Beverly Slusarchuk,
Carolina Ventura, Jennifer Ward,
Sanna Westermann

About the 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*. Mental health patient rights exist to help people who are or have been detained in hospital under one or two Admission Certificates, Renewal Certificates, or are subject to Community Treatment Orders (CTO). The MHPA provides assistance to patients and others (including those acting on the patients' behalf) by conducting investigations into complaints and providing information and education about patient rights. Information and education is also provided to families, community organizations and the general public.

Patient rights provide important checks and balances to ensure mental health patients are not wrongfully detained and, when detained, are treated fairly. The role of the MHPA is to protect mental health patient rights, investigate complaints impartially, resolve them where possible, and to make 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, they feel they have some respect and control in 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. Together we play a key role in helping patients and persons acting on their behalf to understand and exercise those rights.



Patient F is ready for discharge and no longer detainable under the Mental Health Act, however no secure community placement is available and F remained certified until discharged to a non-secured placement leading to homelessness and readmission. MHPA worked with the patient, treatment teams and services providers across jurisdictions leading to the creation of secure placement in community.

About the Alberta Health Advocate

The *Alberta Health 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'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 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.



2019/20 Highlights

In 2019/20, the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates provided service to 1,353 individuals under the jurisdiction of the Health Advocate and 828 individuals under the jurisdiction of the Mental Health Patient Advocate. This represents a slight increase over the numbers from the previous year.

In September 2019, Kathleen Ness retired as the Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate. Her dedication to improving the health care system in Alberta will be greatly missed. In November 2019, Janice Harrington was appointed as the new Health Advocate and Mental Health Patient Advocate.

In January 2020, staff from the Office of the Seniors Advocate were amalgamated into the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates. While our office has always provided service to seniors, the addition of these staff members brings an increased level of expertise to the team. Beyond the traditional health issues our office deals with, we also provided assistance to seniors in the areas of housing, financial and social supports.

In July 2019, the *JH vs. Alberta Health Services* decision found that portions of the *Mental Health Act* were deemed to be in violation of the Charter of Rights. As a result of this decision, we anticipate changes to the

Mental Health Act to ensure patients have better access to legal representation and information on their rights under the *Mental Health Act*. Our office will continue to be an important resource for patients and family members seeking information about their rights and we look forward to implementing the changes resulting from the JH decision.

Ensuring the *Mental Health Act* is applied appropriately continues to be an important priority for our office. To that end, staff from our office had the opportunity to provide training on the *Mental Health Act* and the role of the Mental Health Patient Advocate in a number of settings across the province in 2019/20. This training arose, in part, as a result of investigations conducted by our staff illustrating the need for enhanced training around the *Mental Health Act*, particularly in settings where the *Mental Health Act* may not be applied as regularly as it is in designated mental health facilities.

In early March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in Alberta. Like many Albertans, our office was forced to adapt to a new way of working as social distancing began. Thankfully, we were able to seamlessly continue providing service to Albertans. The early days of the pandemic saw an increased volume of calls to our office, a trend we anticipate will continue into 2020/21. Our staff will continue to be here to assist Albertans as they navigate through these uncertain times.

2019/20 Statistics – Health Advocate

The following infographics reflect the numbers served under the jurisdiction of the Health Advocate.

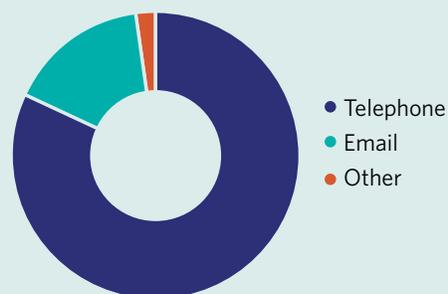


of individuals who were provided support by Health Advocate Representatives

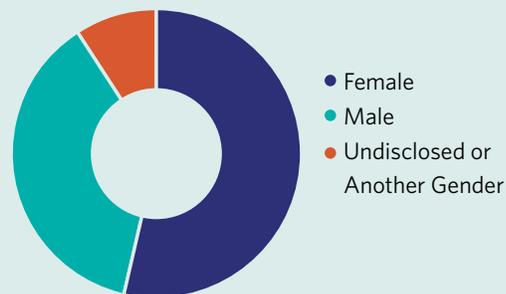


of issues managed by Health Advocate Representatives

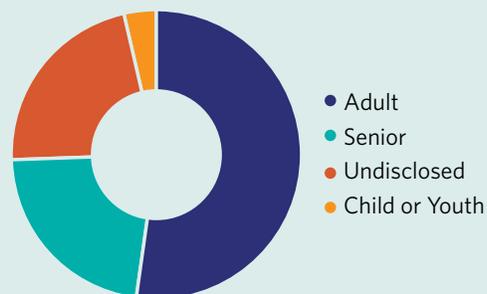
Method of Contact



Gender



Age



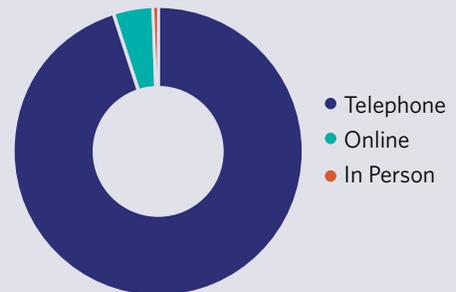
2019/20 Statistics - Mental Health Patient Advocate

The following infographics reflect the numbers served under the jurisdiction of the Mental Health Patient Advocate.

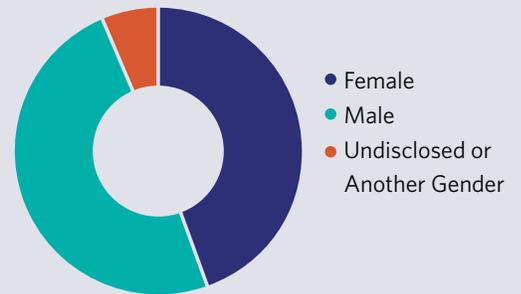


of individuals who were provided support by Mental Health Patient Advocate Representatives

Method of Contact

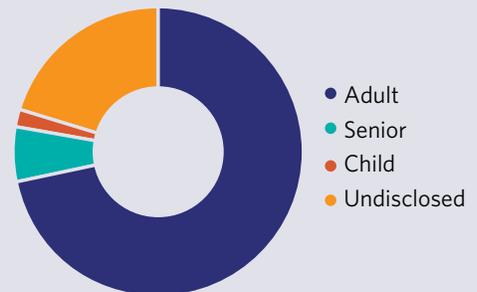


Gender



of issues case managed by Mental Health Patient Advocate Representatives

Age



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. As described in this section of the *Health Charter*, patients have a right to be treated with respect in the health system and to fully participate in their own care. While the majority of interactions within the health system are positive, when things do not go as they ideally should, our office is here to guide Albertans to the appropriate mechanism for support.

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. Our Advocate Representatives work with our clients to empower them to advocate for their own care through active engagement in their health care journey.

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. An important role of our office is to share the learnings from our clients with decision-makers so that the patient voice is front and centre as policies are developed.

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.



Patient B received successful treatment in care, however the length of stay in care created financial hardship and loss of employment and put B's housing at risk. B contacted the office and we facilitated communication between the patient and the hospital to ensure a review of potential funding was done prior to discharge. Eviction was prevented.

Alberta 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

Case Study

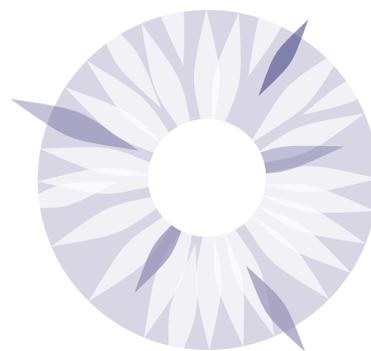
A woman reached out to our office for support dealing with an issue related continuing care. She is a single mother with a full-time job and two teenagers living at home. The client's parents live in a Supportive Living setting and she wants to support them as best she can. The mother is her own decision maker, but has looked to the daughter for support with some ongoing issues related to her care.

The client expressed that she was not looking to make a complaint, but rather seeking guidance on how to best advocate for her mother. While the client has not had good interactions with the Site Manager, her interactions with frontline staff have been excellent.

The condition of the client's father has deteriorated and he is possibly in need of Long Term Care according to staff. The client does not understand why he can't stay where he is. The client and her mother have been invited to a case conference with the Case Manager and Transition Worker. Client wants to support her mother and also do what is best for her father. The client's father previously managed all of the decisions related to his and his wife's care when they entered continuing care. The client is concerned because she doesn't know what care will look like in a Long Term Care setting. The client's mother is worried her husband won't get the care he needs in a new setting.

The Health Advocate Representative was able to explain the differences between Supportive Living and Long Term Care. The Advocate Representative provided information on the Continuing Care Health Service Standards to outline the expectations for publicly funded sites providing Designated Supportive Living and Long Term Care. The Advocate Representative also provided information about the assessment process that would occur with her father and the steps involved in placing him in Long Term Care, including possible choices of sites and an explanation of how the wait list works.

The Advocate Representative provided coaching regarding how to approach the case planning meeting including how best to share her concerns, how to articulate her father's care needs and the types of questions she should consider asking. The client and her mother attended the meeting and reached out to share that it had gone well and they were pleased with the outcome.



Financial Summary

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

	2019/20 Budget	2019/20 Actual	2018/19 Budget	2018/19 Actual
Salaries and Employee Benefits	\$1,636,000	\$1,133,916	\$1,636,000	\$1,215,093
Travel and Accommodations	\$17,000	\$3,289	\$27,000	\$6,589
General and Administrative Services	\$33,000	\$10,663	\$241,000	\$70,729
Total	\$1,686,000	\$1,147,868	\$1,904,000	\$1,292,410

Patient N was told that she must take medication voluntarily and if she did not, security would be called and she would be forcibly injected. Patient N called the office and was informed of her rights under the Mental Health Act, the situations under which medication could be forced and the process of consent. N was able to make more informed decisions regarding her treatment.



Contact Information

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.

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