

# Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Annual Report 2018-19



**Note to Readers:**

Copies of the annual report are available on the Alberta Open Government Portal website [www.alberta.ca](http://www.alberta.ca)

**Community and Social Services, Government of Alberta**

**Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Letter to the Minister of Community and Social Services</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Message from the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Tony Flores, Advocate for Persons with Disabilities</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Mandate</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Definition of Disability</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>What does the OAPD do?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Inquiries to the Office of the Advocate .....	9
Concern Resolution .....	11
How the Office of the Advocate helps to resolve individual concerns.....	12
Percentage of Total Inquiries by Concern Resolution.....	12
Informing Systemic Change.....	13
How the Office of the Advocate informs systemic change .....	13
Public Education and Information .....	14
How the Office of the Advocate educates and builds awareness .....	14
<b>Community Outreach Tour</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Learnings .....	15
<b>Financial Summary</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Moving Forward</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Staff at the OAPD</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>Contact Information</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>25</b>

# Letter to the Minister of Community and Social Services

The Honourable Rajan Sawhney  
Minister of Community and Social Services  
Legislature Building  
10800 97 Avenue NW  
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Sawhney,

It is an honour to submit to you the first annual report of the Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities for 2018-19.

This annual report was prepared in accordance with Section 4 (1) of the *Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act* to summarize the activities of the Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities for the period October 30, 2018 to March 31, 2019.

Respectfully yours,

[Original signed by]

Tony Flores  
Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

# Message from the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

It has been my honour to serve as Alberta's first Advocate for Persons with Disabilities since October 30, 2018.

The Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities (OAPD) helps people with disabilities find and get access to the supports and services available to them and that they have equal opportunities to participate and contribute to community. We also work with community members to understand and identify systemic issues in the disability community. By reaching out to the community, our office has a better understanding of the issues people with disabilities face on a daily basis: what is unique to the community, what is working, and what is not.

By providing more information and giving people with disabilities the opportunity to share their stories openly – share their challenges, aspirations, and successes – we hope to break down stigma, assumptions, and erroneous beliefs about disability.

Our office works with community leaders, business leaders, and the government on the importance of inclusion and accessibility. We recognize Albertans with disabilities are valued participants and positive contributors in our society and our work will help to inform improvements in programs and policies. Through education and community connections, our office works to empower Albertans with disabilities to find the resources and tools they need to live with dignity and respect, and have easier access to the pathways for their success.

This first annual report will outline what the OAPD has heard so far from the Alberta disability community. I look forward to documenting more stories of Albertans with disabilities from across Alberta.

Respectfully yours,

[Original signed by]

Tony Flores  
Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

# Tony Flores, Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

Tony Flores is Alberta's first Advocate for Persons with Disabilities. He has a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics and political science with extensive personal and professional experience working with people with disabilities, their support networks, and stakeholders.

As the Advocate, Tony meets with and discusses concerns with disability community members, identifies issues, and makes recommendations to government to address challenges faced by the disability community.

As a self-advocate who believes strongly in empowering people with disabilities to reach their full potential, Tony Flores is proud to be part of a team that focuses on improving quality of life for people with disabilities. Tony is an accomplished athlete, has extensive experience working with a non-profit organization and has volunteered – both locally and internationally – mentoring and coaching athletes with disabilities.



# Mandate

The OAPD is mandated under the [Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act](#). The Act was granted Royal Assent on June 7, 2017 and proclaimed on October 30, 2018. The office is part of the Ministry of Community and Social Services and reports to that Minister.

The role of the Advocate is to represent the rights, interests, and viewpoints of persons with disabilities. In carrying out this role, the Advocate may:

- Identify and studying issues of concern to persons with disabilities
- Review programs and policies affecting persons with disabilities
- Participate in consultations in which systemic decisions are made about persons with disabilities
- Deliver public education that promotes the rights, interests, and well-being of persons with disabilities
- Provide information to the Government regarding Albertans with disabilities
- Provide education as needed to ensure individuals having difficulty accessing programs and services are aware of appropriate resources, persons, and organizations.

Albertans with disabilities deserve equal respect, dignity and the right to opportunities that improve quality of life. Canada ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010. The OAPD aligns to its principles of ensuring and promoting “the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability.”<sup>1</sup>

The convention states signatory countries, including Canada, should involve persons with disabilities in the development and implementation of relevant legislation and activities. The Advocate works to increase accessibility and include persons with disabilities in decisions impacting their lives and the community. Advocate representatives work one-on-one with individuals with disabilities to determine how the Advocate can bring attention to or educate about systemic issues.

The OAPD acts as a point of contact between Albertans with disabilities and the government. The Advocate provides guidance and referrals to services and programs. Values that help to define the OAPD include self-advocacy, self-determination, human rights, well-being, social inclusion, raised awareness, and systemic change. As it carries out its duties and responsibilities, the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 4 – General Obligations

OAPD helps support Albertans with disabilities to live full lives with dignity and equal opportunities.

**Vision:** Overcoming adversity, reaching our full potential, and living fulfilling lives.

**Mission:** To help Albertans with disabilities get access to available supports and help them live with dignity and equal opportunities.

**Values:** Self-advocacy, self-determination, human rights, well-being, social inclusion, awareness, education.

## Definition of Disability

The term disability has not been defined in the legislation. As such, the Advocate represents the rights, interests and viewpoints of all children, youth, adult, and senior Albertans with disabilities. This scope aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others...<sup>2</sup>

This idea places the focus on the individual and not their disability. It recognizes the values and rights of persons with disabilities as an integral part of our society.

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Preamble, 5.

# What does the OAPD do?

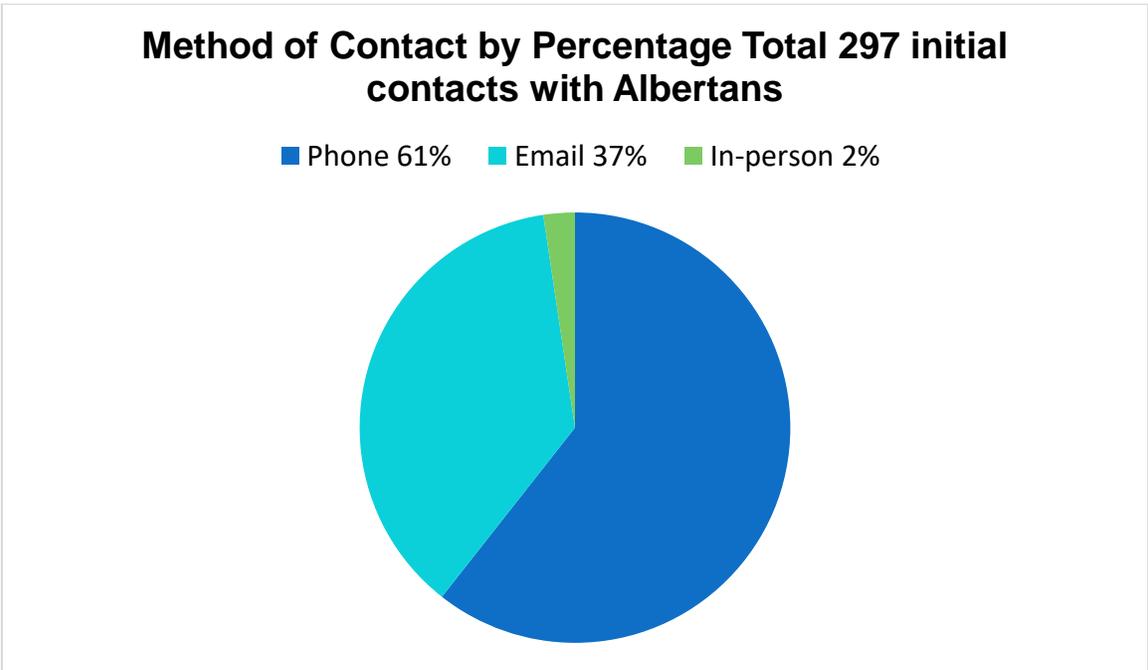
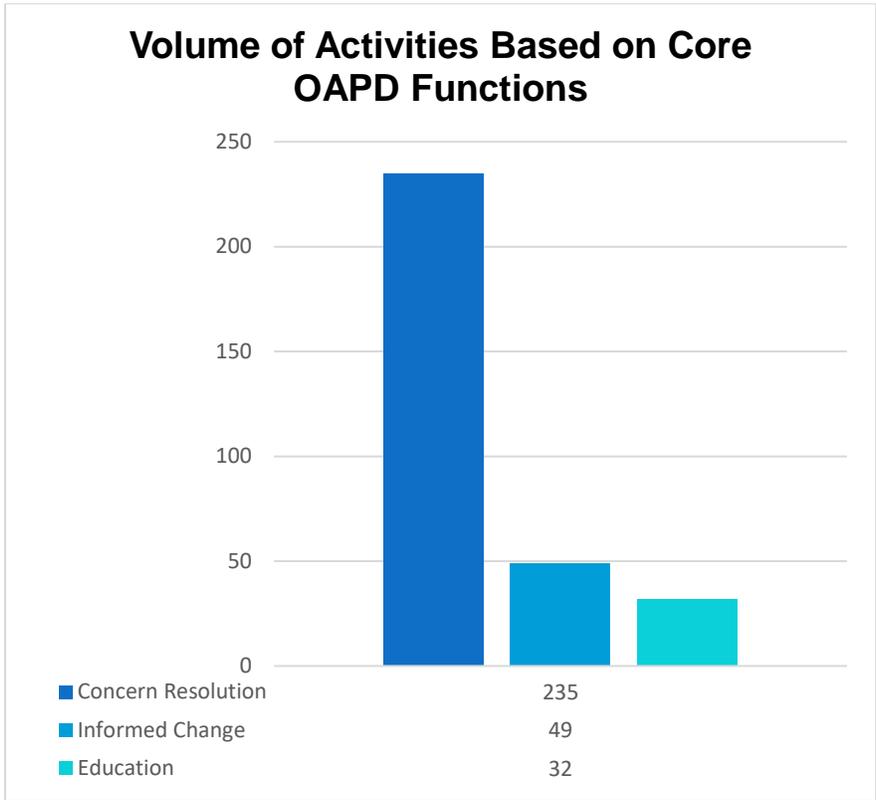
The OAPD represents the rights, interests and viewpoints of persons with disabilities in Alberta. The OAPD accomplishes its work through information and resolution support, public education, and undertaking activities to inform systemic change. The office builds critical relationships and engages diverse stakeholders within the disability community to inform and address issues affecting persons with disabilities in Alberta.

Concern Resolution	Inform Change	Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide concern resolution support by assisting children, youth, adults, seniors, their family members, and caregivers in navigating disability programs and services in an effective manner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build partnerships to understand issues and inform change.</li> <li>• Participate in consultations.</li> <li>• Deliver expert advice to Senior Ministry Leadership.</li> <li>• Collaborate with other provincial Advocates and advisory agencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote the rights, interests and well-being of persons with disabilities, in alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, through education, presentations with community, organizing professional development opportunities, and social media.</li> </ul>

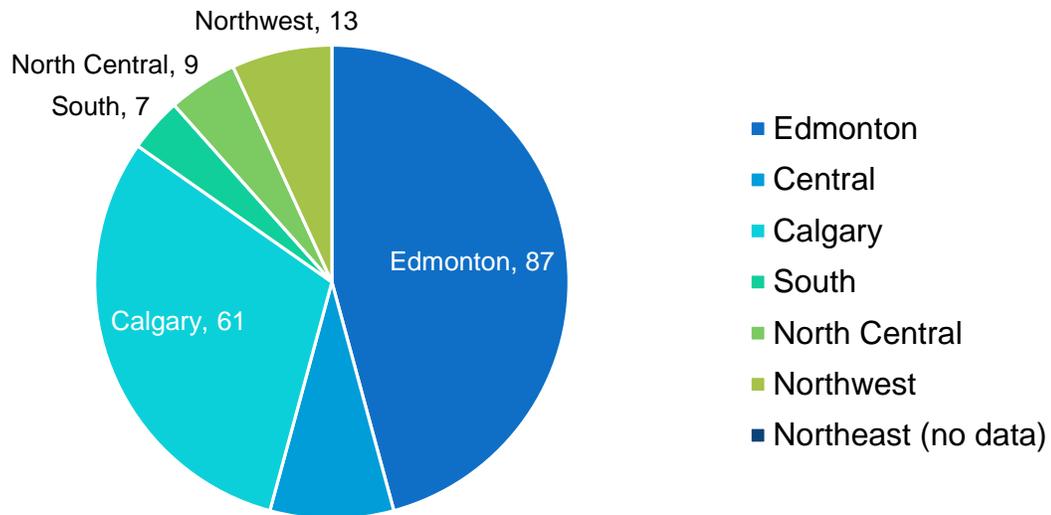
These three main work objectives are the key business processes for the OAPD and show where the most time and effort is spent by staff in addressing Albertans' concerns.

## Inquiries to the Office of the Advocate

The OAPD receives inquiries from Albertans in a number of ways. Receiving an inquiry consists of, but is not limited to, receiving a phone call, e-mail, physical mail, and an in-person inquiry from children, youths, adults, or seniors with a disability, their family members, or caregivers. Advocate representatives maintain contact with individuals following their initial inquiry. From October 30, 2018 to March 31, 2019, the OAPD received a total of 297 inquiries from Albertans. Volume and method of inquiry are detailed in the graphs below.



## Contacts by Region



Advocate representatives speak to people from across Alberta. The above graph shows the number of contacts from each region in Alberta within the first five months of operation. These regional separations are based on the Community and Social Services Ministry Service Delivery Regions. The majority of contacts have been in the Edmonton and Calgary regions.

### Contacts by Region:

- Edmonton: 87
- Calgary: 61
- Central: 16
- Northwest: 13
- North Central: 9

From November 21, 2018 to March 31, 2019, OAPD's website received more than 3,500 page views. Web users are located throughout Alberta, across Canada, and international.

## Concern Resolution

Any Albertan with a disability, their family, or caregiver can contact the OAPD to request assistance in resolving concerns. Although concern resolution assistance is a distinct function within the OAPD, the OAPD does not provide decision-making assistance, counselling, mediation or representation services, or case management support.

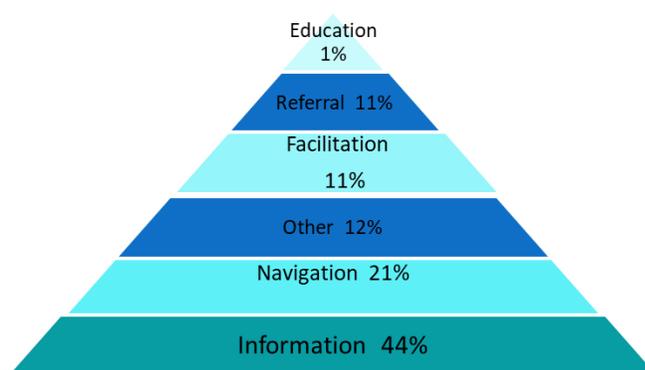
Action is taken to resolve concerns, including providing information, navigation, facilitation and referrals.

## How the Office of the Advocate helps to resolve individual concerns

The OAPD supports individuals, families, and caregivers to navigate supports, services, programs, and resources by providing current and relevant information, as well as providing referrals or working together with other Advocate offices, when appropriate. Specific activities include:

- **Facilitation:** includes bringing people together to discuss the issue and explore possible solutions.
- **Navigation:** service systems can be very complex and difficult to understand, particularly for those who are vulnerable. Navigation includes assisting individuals to find their way to the appropriate services, programs, and/or resources to meet their expressed needs, including helping people navigate existing dispute resolution and appeal processes.
- **Education:** Responding to requests for basic contact information about available supports and services.
- **Information:** Responding to individual concerns by providing information to people about their human rights, including accessing existing dispute resolution and appeal processes.
- **Referral:** Advocate representatives will provide support so individuals can act on their own behalf as much as possible when a referral is made to another complaint process, program, or service.

## Percentage of Total Inquiries by Concern Resolution



## Informing Systemic Change

Several activities related to informing systemic change are identified in section (2) subsection (1) of the *Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act*, including:

- Identifying and studying issues of concern to persons with disabilities and recommending action where appropriate;
- Reviewing programs and policies affecting persons with disabilities;
- Participating in consultations in which systemic decisions are made about persons with disabilities; and,
- Providing information and advice to the Government with respect to any matter relating to the rights, interests and well-being of persons with disabilities.

Through the survey process, Albertans advised the Advocate to connect with and leverage the work of the many organizations that support children, youth, adults, and seniors with disabilities through meeting face to face, sharing information, and networking.

The OAPD is building partnerships with individuals, families, and disability sector leaders to understand issues and help inform changes to programs and services, legislation, and regulations that impact persons with disabilities.

### How the Office of the Advocate informs systemic change

The OAPD maintains up-to-date knowledge and awareness of leading practices, systems, and programs that impact persons with disabilities locally and globally, including awareness of and alignment with the UNCRPD.

The OAPD has begun to develop initial processes to identify issues through a number of mechanisms, including reporting and analysis of individual concerns and the development of formal advice to government.



Examples of activities undertaken to inform systemic change:

- Tracking potential systemic issues based on individual concerns brought forward to the OAPD.
- Building partnerships in the disability sector.
- Regularly attending the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities meetings to share information on emerging and endemic issues.
- Attending the Persons with Developmental Disabilities program review.
- Travelling throughout Alberta and speaking directly to community members.

## Public Education and Information

The OAPD works to support persons with disabilities through education, community presentations, organizing professional development opportunities, social media, and delivering relevant information to the public.

### **How the Office of the Advocate educates and builds awareness**

Educating Albertans about the rights, interests and well-being of persons with disabilities, in alignment with the UNCRPD, is key to the activities and goals of the Advocate and the OAPD. This is accomplished through the Advocate's meetings with community groups, agencies, and individuals throughout Alberta and learning first-hand from persons with disabilities about their goals and needs. OAPD Advocate representatives also work collaboratively with other sectors, such as municipal, federal, indigenous, business, and social sectors to promote inclusion and accessibility.

# Community Outreach

Since appointment on October 30, 2018 the Advocate held in-person meetings with four Alberta communities to introduce himself and to inform Albertans about his role; to inform persons with disabilities of the resources available to them; and to learn and understand about the realities they face in their communities.

The Advocate has held 55 meetings with persons with disabilities, their families, caregivers, advocate groups, and stakeholders. He has travelled to Calgary, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, and Edmonton.

The Advocate encourages Albertans with disabilities, their families, and friends to contact the office if they need information on how to access supports and resolve issues or concerns.



## Learnings

The OAPD has spoken with over 250 individual Albertans, as well as with numerous community organizations and advocacy groups. Although the office has only been open a short time, what has been conveyed to the Advocate by Albertans with disabilities and their allies during this period is based on their lifelong experiences.

The office identifies systemic issues through documenting and reviewing individual concerns brought forward to the office by individual Albertans, as well as community organizations and government agencies. The OAPD defines systemic issues as those that:

- Affect numerous individuals and/or the issue jeopardizes the health, safety and well-being of Albertans with disabilities;
- If not addressed, will re-occur; and

“Thanks again for listening and being in our corner.”

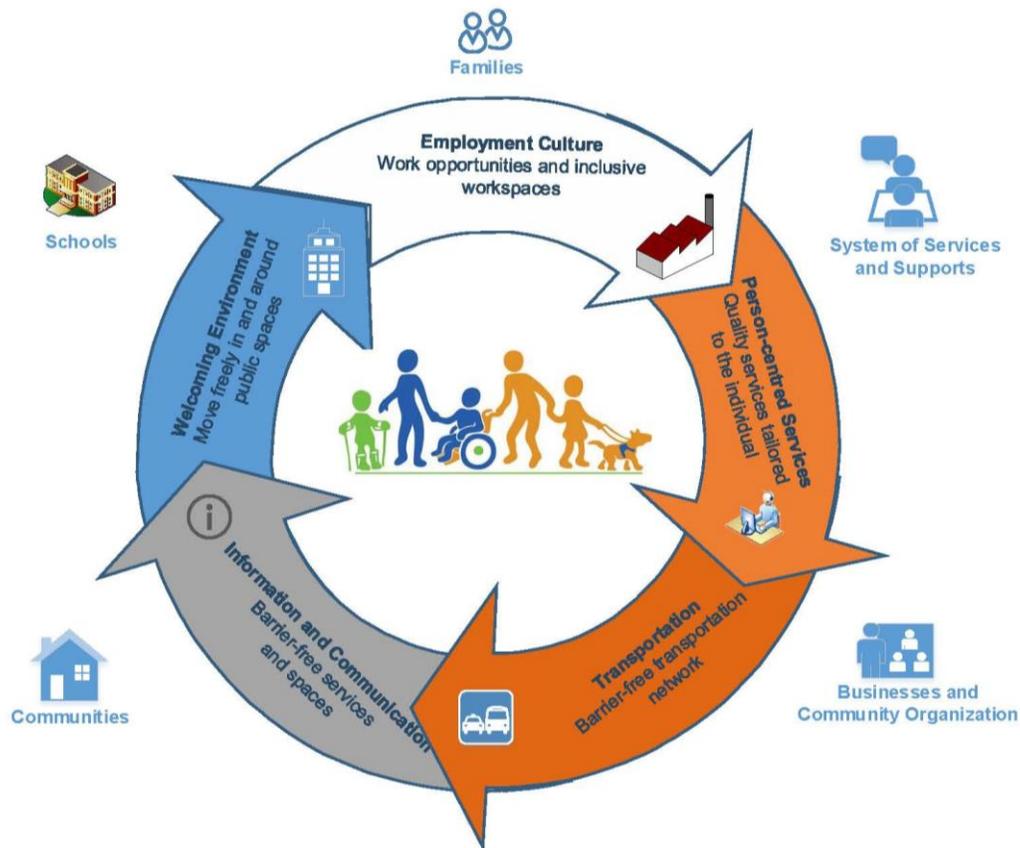
“I appreciate you listening and caring.”

“You were finally a ray of light for him during his frustration.”

“Thank you for being an empathetic ear.”

- Result from issues inherent in the overall system, which could be solved through a change to the structure, organization, or policies.

Over the previous five months, many Albertans have contacted the office with individual concerns that relate to the broader systemic issue of accessibility. We have broken down this issue into five dimensions: built environment, transportation, employment, information and communication, and person-centered services.



Adapted from Accessible Canada Act

**Welcoming Environments** – Albertans experience challenges due to a lack of accommodation, including housing, parks, shopping centres, social centres, health care facilities, workplaces, and schools.

Accessibility challenges for people with disabilities include: not being able to easily access homes because residences are not accessible; not being able to freely and independently access communities; limited employment options; and, in some circumstances, relying on others for activities they could otherwise complete for themselves.

- *A senior contacted the OAPD saying they are unable to leave their care facility because the building is not accessible to wheelchairs. An Advocate representative contacted the care facility's management asking if a ramp could be installed. Facility management said ramp installation was not on the maintenance list of priorities, but after being contacted by OAPD this will be a formal request in their facility's annual report for capital maintenance.*
- *An individual living in an affordable housing complex could not easily open the door to their apartment suite or leave the building, as the main door to the apartment was not accessible. This stress was causing intense health issues for the individual.*

**Employment Culture** – Albertans have identified the need for more inclusive and innovative work environments. Although there are employment supports available for individuals with disabilities, many people have experienced challenges in accessing these supports. Challenges include complicated eligibility requirements; arbitrary time restrictions for submitted documentation; lack of accessible training and education opportunities; and application processes that create unnecessary barriers.

- *Albertans have expressed concerns and challenges navigating the complex process of accessing employment supports available from both federal and provincial programs.*
- *A young Albertan wished to attend post-secondary school, but required several supports to be in place in advance. Through adequate planning, they felt confident supports would be in place to ensure success. Other Albertans have requested improved access to education and accommodation for learning disabilities and other disabilities.*

**Person-centred services** – To have meaningful access to and participation in the community, available supports and services should fit an individual's or families' needs and circumstances, and be delivered in a way that respects their strengths, needs, and dignity. Many Albertans have highlighted the challenges they face in communicating their unique needs and the lack of understanding and respect they have experienced.

- *A number of Albertans have contacted the office with concerns accessing services when their unique and complex needs do not "fit" existing program criteria. Numerous families report struggling to provide and care for their loved one, including having to take time off from their work resulting in a loss of income and ability to support their families.*
- *Albertans have contacted the OAPD to identify the unintended consequences that occur when supports and services are delivered through an array of fragmented programs and are not informed by the individual's overall quality of life.*

**Transportation** – A barrier-free transportation network helps individuals live independently and participate fully in their communities. Albertans with disabilities contacting the OAPD have communicated challenges related to accessible transportation, particularly during winter months.

- *During the period of November to March, several Albertans contacted OAPD saying they cannot safely leave their homes in winter because their wheelchairs, scooters, and walkers cannot withstand snow-filled streets and sidewalks. With frequently harsh winters, this is a significant barrier for many Albertans with mobility challenges.*
- *Other Albertans have identified challenges covering the cost of fees for basic needs, such as attending required medical appointments.*

**Information and Communication** – Albertans have identified the importance of services and infrastructure that enable access to digital content, resources, and technologies in their homes and in the community, such as public libraries, schools, and public online platforms.

- *Albertans with disabilities cannot easily access information on the accessibility features of public buildings. Often, individuals do not know whether they can gain access to a store, building, or medical facility until they arrive at their destination. This makes it difficult to plan ahead and/or participate in events, activities, meetings, and more.*
- *Albertans have been experiencing challenges deciphering information about eligibility criteria and complex application and adjudication processes. There have also been challenges communicating about unclear and confusing correspondence, particularly regarding status of application, eligibility, and service level decisions. This leads to increased uncertainty and anxiety when individuals do not know how to access critical services and/or are perpetually waiting for decisions regarding their eligibility to receive supports.*

In this reporting period, the Advocate has worked with the PCSPD, the FSCD Provincial Parent Advisory Committee, community-based organizations, self-advocacy groups, and other organizations to identify and make future recommendations to address systemic issues, such as accessibility.

# Financial Summary

OAPD funding falls under the Ministry of Community and Social Services and is included in the Community and Social Services Annual Report at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2371-9184>.

# Moving Forward

Going forward in 2019, the OAPD will:

- Continue to serve the disability community in the most effective and efficient way possible.
- Continue the community outreach across the province to learn about peoples' experiences in their respective communities. To learn about their challenges, aspirations, and successes. To find opportunities to support what is working in their respective communities.
- Evaluate the capacity of the office to ensure it is fully equipped to provide the best possible service to the disability community.
- Section 6(1) of the *Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act* refers to the two-year evaluation of the effectiveness of the act. The office will start to formulate a plan to evaluate the act by fall of 2019.
- Continue working with government (provincial, federal, and municipal), business, indigenous, and social sectors to address disability issues and to promote inclusion and accessibility.
- Analyze the information learned from the disability community and start working with leaders to inform change.

## Staff at the OAPD

OAPD staff are eager to assist any Albertans with questions, issues or concerns about disabilities in the province, accessing services, or participating in the community. They are working hard to bring systemic change across government ministries and in communities in Alberta.

Our staff have graduate and undergraduate degrees and skills in social work, education, rehabilitation and social sciences, along with several years' experience in government disability services and social programs. The OAPD understands it can be challenging finding the right supports and they are here to navigate the process with Albertans.



*Staff names, left to right:*

*Laura Winwood, Researcher; Marilyn Konyer, Administrative Assistant; Jesse Orjasaeter, Advocate Representative; Devon F Winters, Advocate Representative; Alejandra Llewellyn, Acting Advocate Representative; Colin Saby, Acting Senior Advocate Representative; Arlene Ehl, Manager; Tony Flores, Advocate*

# Acknowledgements

The OAPD wishes to thank the many organizations, advocacy groups, and individuals who responded to the online survey and since then have participated in meetings with the Advocate. This feedback helped establish the goals of the OAPD. While we are unable to acknowledge each and every Albertan we have spoken to, we offer a special thank you to the following:

- Alberta Council of Disability Services
- Albertans Advocating for Change Together
- Alberta Disability Workers Association
- Alberta Health and Mental Health Advocate
- Alberta Health Services
- Alberta Motor Vehicle Industry Council
- Alberta Service Dog community
- Autism Society of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo
- Anne Hughson, PhD, University of Calgary
- Between Friends
- Blue Heron Support Services Association
- Buffalo Trail Public School Division
- Calgary Ability Network
- Camrose Women's Shelter
- Canadian Hard of Hearing
- Cerebral Palsy Association in Alberta
- City of Calgary, Issues Strategies, Access & Disability
- Connections Counselling and Consulting Foundation
- DDRC: Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary
- Edmonton Public Schools
- Excel Society
- Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)
- Family Supports for Children with Disabilities Provincial Parent Advisory Committee (FSCD PPAC)
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Family Advisory Committee
- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Network (Calgary, Northwest & Northeast Regions)
- Foster parents in Alberta
- Grande Prairie Friendship Centre
- Inclusion Alberta
- Legal Aid Alberta
- March of Dimes
- Medicine Hat John Howard Society
- McMann Youth, Family and Community Services Association
- MS Society of Canada
- Nistawoyou Friendship Centre
- Northwest Primary Care Network
- Office of the Seniors Advocate Alberta
- Office of the Child and Youth Advocate
- On Site Placement
- Osteoporosis Canada

- Paralympic Sports Association
- Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) Review Panel
- Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities (PCSPD)
- Spinal Cord Injury Alberta
- Vegreville Association for Living with Dignity
- Voice of Albertans with Disabilities (VAD)
- Wolverines Wheelchair Sports Association

# Contact Information

Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities  
Suite 1110, 10055 106 Street  
Edmonton, Alberta T5J 2Y2

Hours: 8:15 am to 4:30 pm (open Monday to Friday, closed statutory holidays)  
Phone: 1-800-272-8841

Email: [advocate.disability@gov.ab.ca](mailto:advocate.disability@gov.ab.ca)

# References

Accessible Canada Act <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/accessible-people-disabilities/act-infographic.html#2>

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Rick Hansen Foundation blog <https://www.rickhansen.com/news-stories/blog/accessibility-and-attitudes-about-disability-canada>