

Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities



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Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Annual Report 2021-2022 | Seniors, Community and Social Services
© 2023 Government of Alberta | June 2023 | ISBN 978-1-4601-5836-4 | ISSN 2562-735X



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Letter to the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services

The Honourable Jeremy Nixon
Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services
Legislature Building
227 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue NW
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Nixon,

I am pleased to submit to you the annual report of the Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities (OAPD) for 2021-2022, highlighting the activities of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities (the Advocate) and the OAPD.

Notably, the year marked a significant milestone with the term of Alberta's first Advocate for Persons with Disabilities ending on October 28, 2021, and my appointment commencing on January 4, 2022.

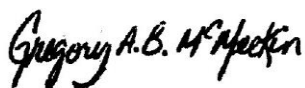
I would like to acknowledge the work undertaken under the leadership of Tony Flores, the province's first Advocate. Under Tony's leadership, the OAPD took significant steps toward creating the administrative foundation and organizational culture to receive and act upon the concerns of Albertans with disabilities with compassion, integrity and action focus. In addition, the OAPD educated stakeholders on the function of the Advocate, the OAPD and disability issues, while informing opportunities for systemic change through concerted, collaborative efforts with civil society and the public sector.

Serving nearly 1,300 Albertans in 2021-2022, with monthly intake numbers reaching new heights from January 4 to March 31, 2022, I am thrilled to introduce the expansion of the OAPD, with a second office located in my hometown of Calgary, Alberta. This expansion will allow us to address a higher volume of concerns, while maintaining service excellence. It is my commitment to foster a one-team approach to ensure a consistent experience for Albertans accessing support through the OAPD.

The information shared by Albertans and the disability community to the OAPD is invaluable, and I hope the information within provides a useful snapshot to understand work previously undertaken to represent the rights, viewpoints and interests of Albertans with disabilities. I also anticipate this report will highlight future efforts required to champion and promote a vision for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Alberta's social and economic fabric.

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 OAPD for the period April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022.

Warmest regards,



Greg McMeekin, JD

Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

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Message from Greg McMeekin, Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

My appointment to the role of Advocate for Persons with Disabilities is a tremendous honour. As a person with lived experience, I hope to bring to this role an intimate and first-hand understanding of some of the major issues experienced by Albertans with disabilities, such as finding and maintaining meaningful employment, accessing high-quality supports and services and affordable housing.

Each of these and other issues point toward the need to understand and address accessibility in Alberta. While we know that accessibility comes in many forms (e.g., supports and services, the built environment, health, education), we can show progress in supporting the full and effective participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in Alberta by strengthening accessibility. We can create the most accessible place to live not only in Canada, but in the world – an opportunity we must act on now to set the stage for accessibility for generations to come.

I look forward to engaging and collaborating with you to ensure the rights, interests and viewpoints of Albertans are heard and addressed.

The OAPD team



Greg McMeekin, Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

Greg has a Juris Doctorate from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Arts in mass communications from Carleton University. Despite many physical challenges, he made history when he was called to the Alberta Bar in 2016. McMeekin has extensive personal and professional experience working with people with disabilities, their support networks and other stakeholders. He believes strongly in empowering people with disabilities to reach their full potential.

He has worked at Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, Legal Aid Alberta and has volunteered on various councils, advisory committees and boards working to improve accessibility, most recently as chair of the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

OAPD staff

OAPD staff have years of frontline service delivery experience in human services, education, rehabilitation, and program policy, with educational backgrounds in social sciences, social work, business administration, education and law. This diversity of experience and education is an asset for the OAPD when working collectively to find solutions for Albertans.

The OAPD team consists of a manager, four advocate representatives and an administrative support.

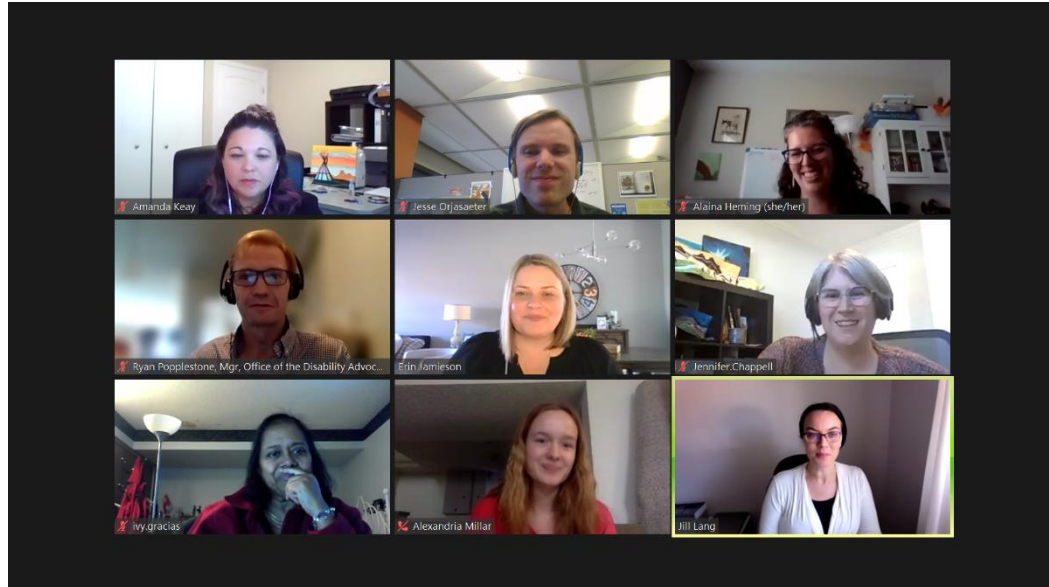


Top: Greg McMeekin; Middle row left-to-right: Jennifer Chappell, Ivy Gracias, Marilyn Konyer

Bottom row left-to-right: Jill Lang, Jesse Orjasaeter, Ryan Popplestone

The OAPD is looking forward to welcoming some new team members, with the opening of a Calgary office. The Edmonton and Calgary offices will be working together as one team to support people across the province.

In the fall of 2021, the OAPD was excited to welcome two practicum students. Alex Millar (Bachelor of Social Work, University of Calgary) and Alaina Heming (Disability Studies, Bow Valley College) contributed greatly to the team during their placements, and we look forward to witnessing their future leadership in supporting and advocating for people with disabilities. Congratulations to Alex for receiving a “Recognition of Excellence in Field Education” award from the University of Calgary for her work with the OAPD.



The OAPD team, along with our practicum students, engaged in an advocacy workshop led by our partners at the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate.

“I truly appreciate your notes and especially you facilitating the meeting. It was important and I am grateful that you reached out. It takes a community to help support others – the work you are providing is so valuable!”

- Supervisor in Community and Social Services

“Thank you so much for your time and assistance in coming to agreement on this matter. You were able to accomplish in this one call more than I have been able to in the last seven months. And for that I'm grateful. Thank you for your help again as I expect that with your intervention this company will honour their contract and their word.”

- Albertan with disabilities

Mission, vision and values

Mission: Help Albertans with disabilities access available supports and live with dignity and equal opportunities.

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

Values: The OAPD promotes the values of self-advocacy, self-determination, human rights, well-being, social inclusion, awareness and education. The OAPD is grounded in the lived experiences of Albertans with disabilities, their families and their support networks.

As per Section 3 of the *Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act*, the role of the Advocate is to represent the rights, interests and viewpoints of persons with disabilities, through:

- Identifying and studying issues of concern to people with disabilities.
- Reviewing programs and policies affecting people with disabilities.
- Participating in consultations in which decisions are made about people with disabilities
- promoting the rights, interests and well-being of people with disabilities through public education.
- Providing information and advice to the Government in any matter relating to the rights, interests and well-being of people with disabilities.
- Providing education, as needed, to ensure individuals having difficulty accessing programs and services are aware of appropriate resources.

The OAPD aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)¹, whose principles “protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity” (UN, “Article 1 – Purpose”) and identifies individuals with disabilities as people “with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society” (UN, “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”). Canada is a signatory to this international convention and is obligated to uphold and promote the rights and well-being of people with disabilities.

The OAPD does not have a fixed definition of “disability” and instead views it in broad terms and recognizes this may change throughout a person’s lifespan. It is important to note that people are often ‘disabled’ by barriers in their environment and in society, thus requiring advocacy toward structural and systemic change.

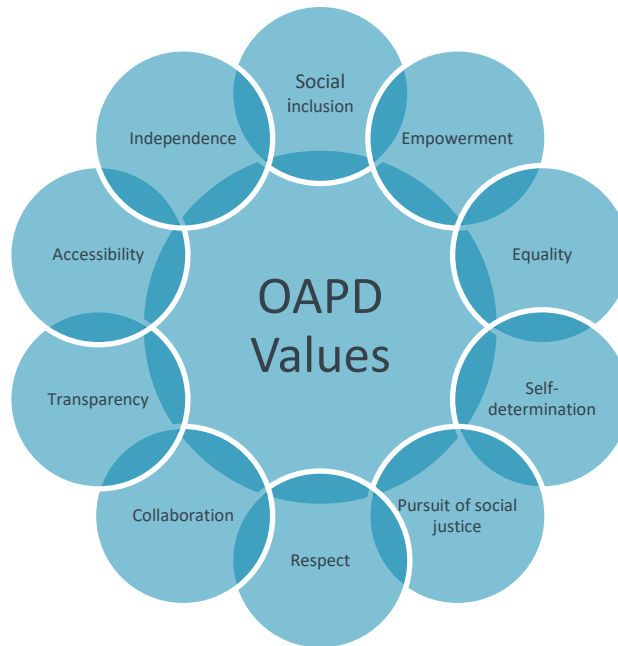
Did you know?
1 in 5 Canadians have a disability²

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>

² Statistics Canada (2018) <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>

Values

The OAPD works with individuals using a person-centered approach, recognizing the diversity of persons with disabilities. The OAPD team also realizes the potential complexity of each individual’s situation, being aware that trauma, poverty and disability intersect for many Albertans. During engagement with Albertans, the OAPD puts an emphasis on the individual’s self-determination and building opportunities for self-advocacy.



Values in practice

When an Albertan reaches out to the OAPD, they are put in contact with an advocate representative who supports the individual with their concern. The support provided can look differently depending on the nature of the concern and may include:

Facilitation	Navigation	Information and referral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> bringing people together to discuss the issue and explore possible solutions (i.e., bringing people together to the table) informally mediating between the individual and a third party collaborating with key people and agencies to explore a solution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking with individuals and families through systems and processes assisting individuals to find their way to the appropriate services, programs and/or resources to meet their expressed needs supporting and empowering individuals to be self-advocates providing guidance and brainstorming in order to work toward potential solutions coaching parents to more strongly advocate for their children’s best interests in school and with services supporting to clarify next steps for dispute resolution and appeal processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> researching information to provide to the individual with the aim of moving forward with next steps connecting the person to an appropriate agency, person or resource (and offering follow-up as needed to ensure connection is successful)

Highlights from 2021-2022

Term two of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities

October 2021 marked the completion of the first term of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities (2018-2021), with a 'First Term Reflections' report provided to summarize overall themes and priorities from the first term. Top overall concerns included a lack of consultation with the disability community, continued experiences of people with disabilities being de-valued and the continued need for systemic advocacy to tackle complex issues.

On January 4, 2022, Greg McMeekin, J.D., was appointed to fulfill the second term as the Advocate. Collaborative work on a Strategic Plan is underway and will inform the work of his three-year term from 2022-2025.

Commitment to diversity and inclusion

In working toward commitment to action on diversity and inclusion in the Alberta Public Service (APS), the OAPD engaged with the APS employment program for persons with disabilities in the summer of 2021. One staff member joined the OAPD as a result of the program, and since then staff have worked to improve future iterations of the hiring program and consult on APS engagement with employees with disabilities in general. As a result of this program, we have had staff representation as co-chair on the disability leaders community of practice, a group which aims to improve employment practices of people with disabilities in the APS. We also engaged public service leaders to provide feedback on the development of APS' disability awareness in the workplace training which will be available to all Government of Alberta employees.

Reviewing programs and policies

What we heard: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

The Prairie Central FASD Association approached the OAPD to collaborate on a project to address the lack of data on critical and systemic issues within the FASD community. The challenges and opportunities identified were similar to learnings from FASD networks and CanFASD. These themes included:

- significant risk of exploitation, abuse, drug use, hospitalization, homelessness, poverty and risk of incarceration faced by individuals with FASD
- need for increased family supports and challenges navigating multiple complex systems
- challenges accessing persons with developmental disabilities (PDD) program due to eligibility criteria and concerns of whether PDD supports provided meet individual's needs
- need for increased awareness and education around FASD

A 'what we heard' report was completed in July 2021 and shared with the FASD Networks to assist them informing their own reporting and data collection.

What we heard: accessibility in the built environment

The barrier-free sub-council in Municipal Affairs reached out to the OAPD to explore the understanding of issues related to accessibility in the built environment and opportunities to potentially affect systemic change through provincial legislation and policy.

The report was completed in June 2021 and highlighted the following themes:

- accessibility in physical settings – a common overarching theme in the report was the challenge that people experienced in making an existing space more accessible
- accessibility in housing – difficulty finding housing that is accessible, especially for affordable housing
- accessibility in communities

A ‘what we heard’ report was shared with the barrier-free sub-council for their consideration, with the potential for future collaboration with the OAPD.

Providing information and advice to the Government

Income Support

Throughout 2021, the OAPD received a number of phone calls from individuals involved with the Income Support program indicating their benefits were being cut back. The reductions were as a result of the review of files with specific benefits such as additional shelter and handicap benefits. As a result, some individuals were no longer able to afford their basic needs. The Advocate shared these concerns with the Income Support program and continues to monitor these concerns and engage in follow-up with the program and senior leadership.

Service dogs

In the fall of 2021, the OAPD was receiving a number of concerns related to service dogs, specifically challenges for Albertans who were trying to train their own dogs but not experiencing the same public access rights as people with registered service dogs. The Advocate brought forward these concerns to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Disability Services in efforts to inform and provide advice on next steps. The Advocate and his staff continue to monitor this as a systemic issue relating to the *Service Dogs Act* and to identify further opportunities for identifying this concern to the Government of Alberta.

Identifying and studying issues of concern

Update to Alberta Health Services (AHS) Critical Care Triage framework

In April 2021, the AHS framework entitled *Critical Care Triage During a Pandemic or Disaster – A Framework for Alberta* was updated to reflect COVID-19 hospitalizations. The Advocate, as well as Albertans reaching out to the OAPD, identified ethical implications with a potential for the updates to adversely impact the lives of people with disabilities. The Advocate, in collaboration with the Provincial Parent Advisory Committee (PPAC) and the Premier’s Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities (PCSPD) wrote a joint letter to the Minister of Health and the Chief Executive Officer of

AHS. Continued advocacy, awareness, education and consultation were seen as essential moving forward.

Changes to the standards for special education

The parent advocacy group, Hold My Hand Alberta, reached out to OAPD with concerns about the lack of consultation towards proposed changes to the Standards for Special Education (2004). In collaboration with PPAC and PCSPD, a joint letter was sent to the Minister of Education requesting the opportunity to consult on the proposed changes.

After following up with the Ministry of Education, the Advocate facilitated a meeting between the Ministry of Education Associate Deputy Minister and Hold my Hand Alberta in October 2021. The need for better engagement and consultation in updating the standards was discussed as well as key challenges in accessing supports for students with disabilities.

Promoting the rights, interests and well-being of persons with disabilities

Webinar on supported decision making

In November 2021, the OAPD was invited by the Autism and/or Intellectual Disability Knowledge Exchange Network to participate on a webinar panel entitled 'Deciding support needs for the future: An expert panel on supported decision making.' An advocate representative contributed to the panel, sharing challenges that can come up for people with disabilities when navigating concerns around guardianship and trusteeship.

Presentation to career coach team at High Prairie School Division

In January 2022, the OAPD presented to the High Prairie School Division's team of career coaches who were seeking support for youth with disabilities who were transitioning from high school into community and vocational opportunities. The OAPD facilitated a connection between the career coaches and their local Family Resource Centre run by Inclusion Alberta in Grande Prairie in order to raise awareness of the inclusive post-secondary resources available in the area.

Keynote speaker for Alberta Public Service's (APS) pride event

In April 2021, the Advocate at the time, Tony Flores, was honoured to be the keynote speaker for Alberta Public Service's pride event. The Advocate shared his personal journey of being an immigrant with disabilities, and his experience of working with APS when he opened up to colleagues regarding his sexual identity. He shared the key message that, regardless of a person's intersecting identities, "we are all in this together." He shared, "we must spend more time to listen, show compassion, and understand. We must show humanity."

“We are all in this together. We must spend more time to listen, show compassion and understand. We must show humanity.”

**- Tony Flores
Advocate, 2018-2021**

Engagement case example

In the spring of 2021, a parent advocacy group, Hold My Hand Alberta, reached out to the Advocate following an announcement from the Minister of Education regarding upcoming changes to the 2004 Standards for Special Education. Hold My Hand Alberta was concerned with a lack of consultation with families and individuals with disabilities and had not had success in setting up a meeting with the Ministry of Education. In response, the Advocate reached out to the Ministry of Education with the aim of facilitating a discussion to ensure the group's questions and concerns were heard.

In September 2021, a spokesperson from Hold My Hand Alberta provided a quote regarding their engagement with the OAPD:

“We were working with the disability advocate’s office on the issue of the standards for special education. We had met with him and he was encouraging the minister of education’s office, either herself or her deputy minister, to meet with us regarding it. And we do know that he wrote a letter asking for her to pause before she signs the order and do some further work on it – consultation with more professionals and parents.”³

**- Sarah Doll
Hold My Hand Alberta**

The Advocate facilitated a meeting between Hold My Hand Alberta and the Ministry of Education on October 8, 2021, assisting to ‘bridge’ community concerns to government decision makers. The Advocate also followed up from the meeting with Ministry contacts to encourage next steps toward meaningful consultation.

³ <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/alberta-hiring-new-disabilities-advocate-amid-fight-over-changes-to-special-education-standards>

“Thank you, that information helped greatly. It’s made me feel safe.
Thanks for all that you do for us.”

- Albertan with disabilities

“Thank you for your help, and this information! Having your support
and managing this situation so quickly is very encouraging. I am, as
others I’m sure, grateful for your immediate action.”

- Executive director of community agency

Key Partnerships



FSCD Provincial Parent
Advisory Committee
(PPAC)



CSS
Appeals
Secretariat

OAPD in Numbers

Who is contacting the OAPD?

In 2021-2022, the OAPD heard from 1,038 unique individuals who, by connecting with the office, generated 1,360 cases. This represents a 7.5% increase in the amount of cases from the previous year and a 26% increase in cases from the year before (2019-2020).

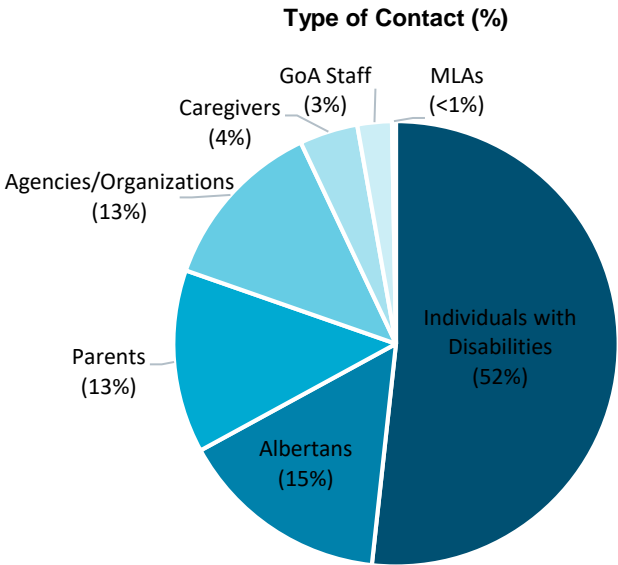
Individuals with disabilities continue to represent the most common people reaching out to our office (52%). The other half of people contacting the OAPD include parents, friends, family members and staff from both government and community agencies.

What is a case?

A case is a question or concern that has been brought forward to the OAPD.

A case can be related to:

- individual concerns
- systemic concerns
- education and presentation requests



People contacting the OAPD are from across Alberta, with about 66% of contacts from either Edmonton or Calgary. In the breakdown of regions below, Chart A outlines the geographical regions of Alberta and Chart B is organized to align with the north and south zones used by the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

Chart A: Geographical Regions (%)

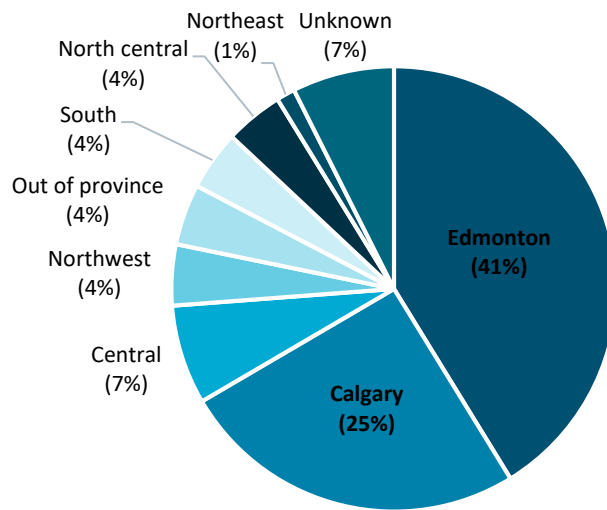
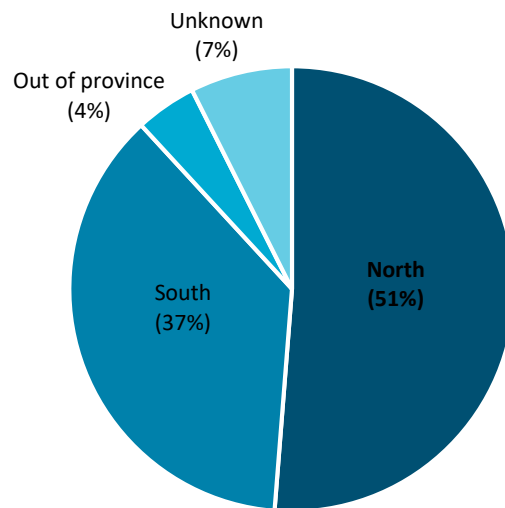


Chart B: CSS Regions (%)



How have Albertans contacted OAPD?

Individuals contacting OAPD do so by phone or email. With the lightening of COVID restrictions, contact is also in-person, made through appointment.. The majority of initial contact is by phone (78%) and email (22%), with some in-person meetings and appointments taking place as communication continues.

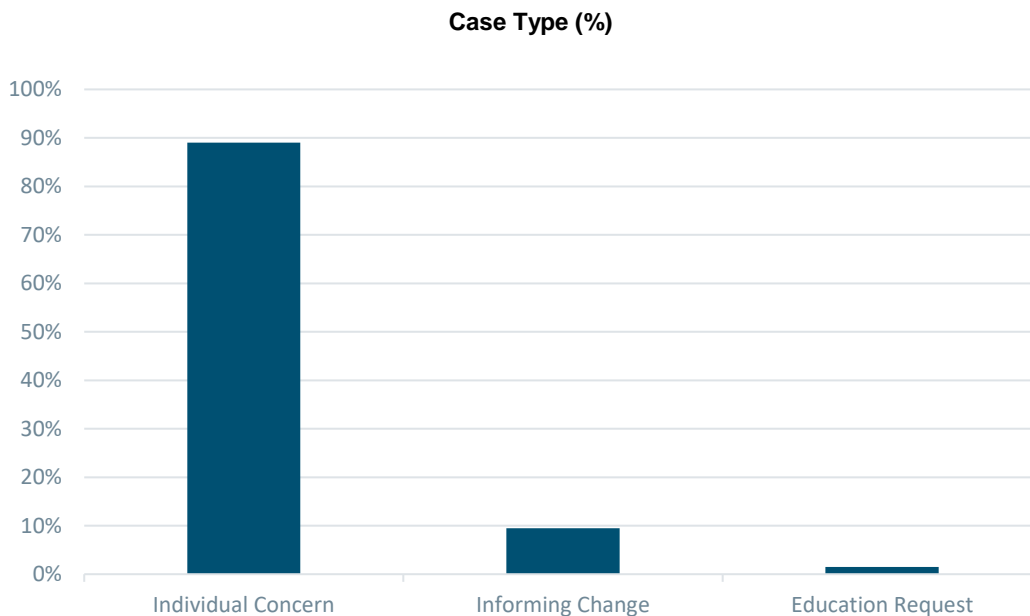
What are the reasons for people calling OAPD?

Of the 1,360 cases, 89% (1,211) were brought forward to OAPD from individuals seeking support with a specific challenge or question they, or someone in their life, were experiencing. Nine per cent (129 cases) were informing change cases, which are systemic issues raised with the OAPD and 1% (20) were education requests (requests for presentations).

These three case types (individual concern, informing change and education) represent the three core functions of our office as outlined in the *Advocate for Persons with Disabilities Act*.

Case Types

- Individual concern: People seeking support with a specific challenge or question
- Informing change: People raising a systemic issue with the OAPD
- Education request: People requesting a presentation from the OAPD



“I want to thank you for the quick response to my situation. I wish all persons in public service were as attentive to the needs of the people whose voices tend to be muffled, as you were with me.”

- Albertan with disabilities

How does OAPD engage with Albertans?



Key themes heard by the OAPD in 2021-2022

Disability is multi-faceted. There is no one experience with disability, as everyone's experience is unique and intersects with age, race, gender, culture, et cetera. Many issues brought to the OAPD were complex with multiple factors playing a role. These issues span individual and systemic levels and include both governmental and non-governmental sectors.

The OAPD logs individual concerns according to the Articles of the UNCRPD as a method to theme systemic issues impacting Albertans with disabilities. Key themes are outlined below relating to the following UNCRPD Articles that were most frequently reported in 2021-2022:

UNCRPD Articles	Count
Adequate standard of living and social protection (Article 28)	521
Living independently and being included in the community (Article 19)	164
Awareness raising (Article 8)	140
Health (Article 25)	108
Accessibility (Article 9)	103
Work and employment (Article 27)	69
Education (Article 24)	59
Equality and non-discrimination (Article 5)	59
Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 16)	56
Access to justice (Article 13)	43

The following section outlines key issues for each of the top 10 UNCRPD Articles linked to OAPD cases.

Adequate standard of living and social protection (Article 28)

An overall, substantial message shared with the OAPD was the challenge of living with a disability due to the experience of poverty and financial strain. Individuals reached out for support with issues of poverty, including:

- eviction
- homelessness
- food insecurity
- medication insecurity
- utility arrears

Individuals spoke of how their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter were not being met, often causing duress, exacerbating their health concerns, and thus impacting their ability to live a full and meaningful life. Part of these challenges included not knowing how to remedy the situation and where to turn for support.

Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH)

Relating to the AISH program, individuals shared concerns about the rising cost of living and the need for indexing of AISH benefits.

Deductions made by AISH, including receiving Canada Pension Plan Disability and Employment Insurance, were a common concern, seen as unfairly impacting financial security. Individuals also shared concerns of being ineligible for AISH due to a partner's income, leaving them financially dependent on their partner.

Income Support

Albertans with disabilities receiving Income Support expressed challenges with the amount of the benefit being inadequate for month-to-month expenses. As the program is designed as a temporary support, people with disabilities who are unable to work are experiencing challenges with needing to maintain Income Support from month-to-month indefinitely while often facing challenges transitioning to AISH.

Individuals shared experiences of having benefits removed unexpectedly, despite having received them for months previously, including the transportation, additional shelter and handicap benefits. This often caused a disruption in people's financial planning.

Public/affordable housing

Individuals expressed concerns about the lack of affordable housing that was also accessible. Some issues brought forward included the poor quality of housing and safety concerns with affordable housing. People shared experiences with the lack of available subsidized housing, as well as long wait times to access subsidies. Individuals also reported challenges with landlords, including concerns around discrimination for not wanting to rent to AISH or Income Support recipients.

The Advocate continued to partner and engage with the Housing for Health initiative, a collaboration between the University of Alberta and community organizations. The project aims to improve the health and well-being of community residents.

Living independently and being included in the community (Article 19)

Concerns were raised around a lack of residential and in-home supports that would empower individuals to live fulfilling lives. Individuals expressed concern over their ability to maintain autonomy in their housing choices and the barriers experienced when trying to access the type of housing they desired. Issues concerning a lack of resources and supports (including respite and staffing supports) in rural areas was also discussed. Additionally, individuals and families brought forward the need for more supports for family members with disabilities to be supported and included in the home and community – for example the challenges experienced with the Family Support for Children with Disabilities and Persons with Development Disabilities programs.

Home care (Alberta Health Services)

Individuals expressed that they would like to remain autonomous in an independent living arrangement. However, they shared challenges about accessing the amount of health supports required to reach this goal. Challenges included restrictions to how and when supports are provided. People also expressed challenges accessing supports where home care would not assist, including with house cleaning and un-scheduled care needs that would arise for people with mental illness.

Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD)

Family members, as well as individuals with disabilities receiving PDD, raised challenges experienced while accessing services through PDD, including:

- communication breakdown with service providers
- families attempting to advocate for becoming a paid caregiver through a Family Managed Service agreement

The OAPD developed a [What we Heard: PDD Report in 2020](#), capturing what had been learned up to that point in time. While many similar concerns continue to be reported to OAPD, it is encouraging to note that a recommendation from the report to increase access to [Family Resource Centres](#) was implemented, with 10 centres now supporting families across the province.

Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD)

Families brought forward challenges experienced while navigating services through FSCD, including:

- challenges accessing respite and out-of-home placements
- a lack of access to program support workers
- policy inconsistencies between regions
- wait times to access program
- communication challenges between workers and family

It was noted these challenges were exacerbated for families living in rural areas.

Service dogs

Albertans raised concerns about the lack of access to housing or programs and public spaces when they had a service dog in training. The current service dog legislation was seen as lacking in supporting the rights of people to access public spaces when they have animals in training.

In response to this issue being raised, the Advocate wrote a letter to the Assistant Deputy Minister of Disability Services to ensure the program has thorough understanding of the concern and for further discussion.

Awareness raising (Article 8)

A common concern often embedded within challenges being expressed was concern around a lack of consultation and a lack of understanding about people with disabilities. Some key issues brought forward included:

- a lack of understanding about disabilities by program workers, agents and officials, including the court and government programs
- a general lack of consultation with the disability community by programs when decisions are made that impact the lives of those with disabilities
- a lack of collaboration between programs and services (e.g., lack of collaboration between ministries)

OAPD staff continue to be represented at the disability leaders in practice group, which aims to improve employment practices of people with disabilities in the APS, as well as staff involvement in providing feedback regarding the development of the APS' Disability Awareness in the Workplace training.

During lead-up to the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021, OAPD staff met with an elementary school classroom in the Grande Prairie School Division. The teacher and students brought forward questions on how to best educate their peers about advocacy for people with disabilities.

Health (Article 25)

Disability and health are closely interrelated but people with disabilities experience additional challenges accessing and navigating healthcare systems. Albertans raised concerns regarding their access to quality health care, including challenges with hospital discharge and accessing non-approved medical supplies and prescriptions.

The Advocate continues to participate in the Concentric Project, a university-community partnership which aims to improve the experience of post-rehabilitation discharge for people with spinal cord injury.

Health benefits, Long Term Disability Insurance (LTDI) and Alberta Aids to Daily Living (AADL)

Individuals raised concerns about accessing coverage for medical supplies and supports through AISH as well as navigating the Health Benefits Exception Committee, LTDI and AADL.

Mental health

Albertans raised challenges in accessing mental health supports for both children and adults. Issues included the lack of free or affordable therapeutic or counselling services, long wait times for available services and challenges for families accessing emergency mental health supports when a child or youth was experiencing a mental health crisis.

Accessibility (Article 9)

Albertans shared experiences concerning accessibility to communication, information and built environments.

Communication and information

Individuals shared experiences of communication challenges with programs due to a lack of awareness and understanding of communication accommodations required due to mental illness, brain injury, autism and intellectual disability, among other disabilities.

Some individuals raised challenges regarding a lack of access to appropriate technology to support communication, including access to internet and challenges with program restrictions on how the public can engage (e.g., not by text or email, in-person only and/or written response only).

The OAPD engaged with the Digital Innovation Office (Service Alberta) to support enhanced accessibility to the new Traffic Tickets Digital Service.

The OAPD provided a What we Heard: Accessibility in the Built Environment Report upon request of the barrier-free sub-council in Municipal Affairs. This report aimed to support the council's understanding of issues raised by Albertans related to accessibility in the built environment.

Built environment

Albertans with disabilities raised concerns about inaccessible spaces, including a lack of operating elevators and usable universal parking stalls and a lack of accessible transportation between rural and urban areas.

The Advocate continues to engage with the Alberta Ability Network's human rights table toward advocacy for provincial accessibility legislation, as well as with the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities and Provincial Parent Advisory Committee.

Work and employment (Article 27)

Individuals with disabilities raised concerns regarding access to employment, including:

- challenges with workplace discrimination due to disability
- challenges accessing workplace accommodations
- challenges accessing training programs that would lead to meaningful and sustained employment

OAPD staff presented to the career coach team at High Prairie School Division toward supporting students with FASD and other disabilities as they transition out of high school.

Did you know?

Only 59% of adults (25-64) with disabilities are likely to be employed, compared to 80% of Canadians without disabilities¹

Education (Article 24)

Family members reached out with concerns related to their child's access to an inclusive education in the pre-school to Grade 12 system. As well, individuals with disabilities raised challenges they experienced while accessing post-secondary institutions. Issues raised included:

- parents concerned about barriers experienced for their child's access to an inclusive education
- communication challenges experienced between parents and schools, leading to strained relationships and a lack of trust
- challenges accessing reasonable accommodations in the classroom for post-secondary institutions

The OAPD presented a report on the Impact of COVID-19 on Education to the Education Collaborative Working Group (including PCSPD and PPAC). This report supported the group to understand what families have reported directly to OAPD and raise awareness of key challenges being experienced in education due to COVID-19 measures.

Equality and non-discrimination (Article 5)

Experiences of discrimination and the need for reasonable accommodation was raised across various contexts, including:

- workplaces
- post-secondary institutions
- transportation
- housing
- community programs
- businesses

Individuals also discussed the lack of recourse options when experiencing discrimination and the barriers to seeking recourse, including a lack of engagement by the respondent and the frequent imbalance of power and capacity between the complainant and the respondent.

Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 16)

Experiences of abuse were brought to the OAPD by individuals with disabilities, family members and staff members in congregate settings. Issues of verbal, emotional, physical, financial and sexual abuse were brought forward. Often those speaking out were unsure of who to contact or what recourse to take. Even when formal channels such as law enforcement were involved, Albertans still connected with OAPD as they felt unsure of next steps and the overall process.

The OAPD was approached by the Prevention of Family Violence and Abuse Branch (Preventive Programs and Strategic Partnerships) in CSS to better understand the experience of people with disabilities in regards to family violence. A data analysis was completed for further discussion and sharing of findings.

Access to justice (Article 13)

Challenges to accessing legal recourse and navigating the legal system continues to be a key issue brought forward to the OAPD. Individuals raised challenges with accessing legal support for judicial and quasi-judicial systems, including support with self-representation. Quasi-judicial supports were sought for a range of programs and systems, including AISH, Workers' Compensation Board and residential tenancy dispute resolution.

Additionally, the need for increased disability awareness and education within justice systems was communicated as needed, in relation to legal aid, policing authorities and court officials.

The OAPD has completed an initial data analysis of what we have heard in relation to issues around access to justice for people with disabilities in Alberta. The Advocate has identified this topic as a strategic priority for his term (2022-2025).

“I think your involvement really helped matters along. Albertans are lucky to have you on their side. I want to say thank you for your help because I’m not sure how long this would have sat in limbo without your help.”

- Caregiver of person with disabilities

“Thank you so very much. This letter I hope will open a door I feel is closed. Thank you so much for your support.”

- Albertan with disabilities



Looking ahead

Great efforts were undertaken by the OAPD in 2020-2021 to strengthen approaches and systems to effectively and efficiently represent the rights, interests and viewpoints of persons with disabilities in Alberta. The work will not stop there as we continue to find new ways to strengthen data collection and reporting. We will continue to work with Albertans both virtually and in-person to further understand the barriers they experience and identify recommendations to government to inform systemic change.

In particular, we will explore and work toward systemic change in five particular areas. These include:

1. Employability
2. Mental health
3. Accessibility
4. Access to justice
5. Affordable and accessible housing


Our approach to systemic change will continue to be rigorous and methodical and will include framing the issues and root causes as heard from persons with disabilities, the public, literature reviews and, in turn, using this information to report back and provide advice to government.


In addition to informing systemic change, we are excited to be expanding with an office located in Calgary. This will expand our capacity to support individual concerns resolution, using a one-team approach.

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