



Assistant Deputy Minister Newsletter

Indigenous Health Division
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Welcome to the New Year from your Assistant Deputy Minister



Happy New Year and welcome to the first 2026 issue of the Indigenous Health Division Assistant Deputy Minister newsletter! I am grateful for your collaboration in advancing health equity for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. We have made great progress together, and I look forward to building on that momentum.

This issue includes updates on key initiatives, engagement opportunities, and resources for culturally safe care. I am looking forward to continuing our work to support the health and well-being of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Alberta.

National Ribbon Skirt Day (January 4)

January 4th marks National Ribbon Skirt Day, a time to honour the strength, identity, and cultural pride carried within ribbon skirts across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. More than clothing, ribbon skirts represent resilience, womanhood, and connection to land, language, and tradition. This time is an opportunity to uplift the stories of Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people who wear their skirts with courage and pride. We also recognize the ongoing work to protect cultural expression and create spaces where Indigenous identity is respected and celebrated. We invite everyone to learn, reflect, and stand in solidarity as we celebrate the beauty and power of the ribbon skirt.



Indigenous health updates

Indigenous Modernizing Alberta's Primary Health Care System (MAPS) townhall

Thank you to everyone who joined us on December 2 for our first Indigenous MAPS Townhall. We're grateful for the strong turnout and the meaningful engagement throughout the session. A special thank you to Kim Simmons from [Primary Care Alberta](#) for joining us and contributing to an important discussion.

The Q&A portion was especially insightful, and we are exploring ways to further enhance conversation and interaction at future events. We appreciate all who completed the post-event survey, your feedback is invaluable as we work to improve future townhalls. Stay tuned for details about our next townhall!

Indigenous anti-racism

On March 12, 2024, we took an important step toward addressing racism and discrimination in Alberta's health system by approving the development of an Indigenous anti-racism in health care action plan. As part of building the action plan, we have engaged extensively with Indigenous communities across Alberta.

These engagements informed a draft *What We Heard* report, the themes and recommended actions of this report were presented on December 2, 2025, to the Indigenous Anti-Racism in Health Care working group members for validation. Feedback from the session is being applied to the *What We Heard* report along with its actions and recommendations to ensure its accuracy and alignment with the health needs of Indigenous peoples in Alberta.

The final *What We Heard* report, soon to be released, includes recommendations to address racism and discrimination experienced by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Alberta's health care system. These recommendations, along with the action plan, will guide opportunities to advance anti-racism efforts, such as culturally appropriate mental health supports, integration of traditional healing practices, improved cultural training for health care staff, and expanded translation services. These action items and efforts will advance commitments outlined in [Honouring Our Roots](#) and [The Way Forward](#).

Indigenous-led clinics

On December 3, 2025, we received Ministerial approval to begin exploring the foundational principles for Indigenous-led primary care clinics. This work advances the commitments outlined in [Honouring Our Roots](#) and [The Way Forward](#), and will guide the planning of future clinics aimed at improving access to culturally safe, respectful, and appropriate care for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit across Alberta

Honouring Indigenous connections

As part of our ongoing commitment to engage with Indigenous communities and ensure all voices are heard, Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) Lisa Higgerty travelled to Peerless Trout First Nation and Loon River First Nation in November with Primary Care Alberta CEO, Kim Simmonds. Jon Elliott, the Indigenous Health Programming Executive Director, visited Kikino Metis Settlement in October. These community visits provided vital knowledge and insights into areas of the health system where care could be enhanced. This understanding helps us ensure that all Albertans receive the highest quality care in a way that is culturally safe and respectful.

Thank you to everyone in **High Prairie** area who generously shared their time and insights during both **in-person and virtual engagement sessions**, your contributions are invaluable. These sessions brought together health leaders and staff from surrounding communities to discuss local health care priorities and challenges.

Work is well underway to prepare a comprehensive report of what we heard from the communities. The insights gathered are essential in shaping strategies to address the health care needs and improve health outcomes for people who live in northern Alberta.

In Peerless Trout First Nation, Lisa Higgerty had the honor of visiting with:

- Gilbert Okemow, Chief
- Julianne Noskiye, Councilor
- Corrine Alook, Councilor
- Paul Houle, Councilor
- Judy Sinclair, Councilor
- Vernon Alook, Executive Director
- Elen Moyo, Health Director
- Sheirra Noskiye, Executive Assistant

In Loon River First Nation, Lisa Higgerty had the honor of visiting with:

- Ivan Sawan, Chief
- Cody Letendre, Councilor
- Shayne Letendre, Councilor
- Heather McTaggart, Councilor
- Melva White, Councilor
- Savanna Shaw, Executive Director
- Brandon Trindle, Executive Assistant/Office Manager

In Kikino Metis Settlement our Executive Director had the honor of visiting with:

- Scott Cardinal, Chair
- David Thompson, Vice-Chair and Councilor
- Chad Cardinal, Councilor
- Lee Thom, Councilor
- Trent Pruden, Councilor
- Roger Littlechilds, Administrator
- Donna White, Education/Seniors Services Coordinator

The First Nations Health Directors Advisory Committee held its third meeting of 2025 on October 9. This Committee, which is made up of First Nation Health Directors and Indigenous health leaders from across Alberta, seeks input on health policies, programs and initiatives that the government is developing to ensure that First Nations health needs, cultural sensitivities and context are considered and incorporated.

- At the October 9 meeting, the advisory committee learned about the ongoing evaluation of Indigenous anti-racism tools for the health care system, as well as [Alberta's Alternative Relationship Plans](#), [Primary Care Physician Compensation Model](#), and [Nurse Practitioner Primary Care Program](#), and were able to provide feedback on these initiatives.
- If you are interested in taking part in this committee and are currently not receiving meeting invitations, please send an email to indigenouscommunityengagement@gov.ab.ca and provide your information so you can receive invitations.
- The next scheduled First Nations Health Director Advisory Committee meeting will be on January 30, 2026.

Strengthening Indigenous health services through training and partnerships

Starting this January, Indigenous Patient Navigators funded through provincial grant programs will receive specialized training to help Navigators provide stronger, more culturally safe support for Indigenous patients across all areas of care including primary care, acute care, continuing care, and mental health and addiction.

Patient Navigators funded by the Indigenous Patient Navigator and Bilateral Indigenous Patient Navigator grant programs will be joined by Navigators from organizations such as Covenant Health, Alberta Health Services, Assisted Living Alberta, and Recovery Alberta, creating a network of shared learning and collaboration.

The Community of Practice Assistant Deputy Minister's Steering Committee, which held its inaugural meeting on September 3, 2025, has been established. Additionally, a Working Group is being developed with the goal of informing and sharing knowledge, setting direction, and guiding strategic design.

To further improve the experience, work is underway to develop patient feedback tools and satisfaction surveys, ensuring voices are heard and services continue to improve. These efforts will help build a system where Indigenous patients feel supported, understood, and empowered throughout their health journey. The goal is simple: make it easier for Indigenous patients and families to access health care that respects their needs and traditions.

Ensuring the continuation of Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan coverage for parentless children

In the past, a child could be without their Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan (AHCIP) coverage if their parents passed away and legal guardianship was not promptly submitted. In response to concerns raised about formal guardianship sometimes taking longer to complete for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, I am pleased to share that Primary and Preventative Health Services has modified internal registration practices to ensure the continuation of AHCIP coverage for parentless children.

The new process allows parentless children to be set up on a new account until further information about guardianship is received, and enables relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings) to temporarily add children to their accounts without legal documentation, ensuring AHCIP coverage remains intact until formal guardianship is established.

This update reflects our ongoing efforts to align health care practices to the needs of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities in Alberta. If you or someone you know has been impacted by previous AHCIP coverage policies, you can contact hipreg@gov.ab.ca to reinstate coverage for children or initiate reimbursement for bills accrued while coverage was suspended.



Alberta health news

Respiratory Virus Season and Measles in Alberta

The respiratory virus season has begun. Alberta, like and other jurisdictions, is seeing increased cases of influenza with COVID-19 and RSV also circulating in communities. Measles remains an active issue in parts of Alberta, with new cases being identified. Early symptoms of measles can resemble other respiratory illnesses such as influenza and COVID-19, which can also be serious.

Getting immunized against influenza, COVID-19 and measles is one of the most effective and long-lasting ways to protect yourself, your family, and your community. This is also a good time to remind people of additional ways to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses, including staying home when sick, washing hands frequently, cleaning and disinfecting surfaces regularly, avoiding indoor gatherings when possible, and wearing a mask in public settings.

Vaccines are available through public health (both on and off reserve). To book a COVID-19 or influenza vaccine, you can [book online](#), or call Health Link at 811 or contact your community health centre in First Nation communities. Community pharmacies also offer influenza vaccine to individuals five years of age and older and most accept walk-in appointments.

For measles immunization, contact your local public health centre (both on and off reserve). For more information on COVID-19, visit [COVID-19 info for Albertans](#). Information on the respiratory virus season can be available on the

[Respiratory virus dashboard](#). For details on measles in Alberta, visit [Measles | Alberta.ca](#). Alberta Health Services [announces details of public measles exposures](#) as they are identified. For measles-related question, call the provincial measles hotline at **1-844-944-3434** (instead of 811).

Message from the Outgoing Interim Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Sunil Sookram, and Incoming Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Vivien Suttorp, sharing information and advice on how to protect you and your family during the current Respiratory Virus Season:

- [Influenza Is on the Rise | YourAlberta](#)
- For more information on immunizations, please call Health Link at 811 or visit [Influenza | Alberta](#).

Acute Care Action Plan

Alberta's government is taking action to strengthen emergency, surgical and inpatient care through the [Acute Care Action Plan](#), which focuses on increasing capacity and improving patient flow. These targeted investments will deliver immediate benefits for patients and build long-term stability in the health system.

Key initiatives include:

- Adding more than 1,000 new acute care beds in Edmonton and Calgary, including new bed towers at Grey Nuns, Misericordia and South Health Campus hospitals.
- Delivering 50,000 additional surgical procedures over the next three years by leveraging chartered surgical facilities to reduce wait times.
- Enhancing triage and patient flow at the Royal Alexandra Hospital to help patients move efficiently through the system.
- Increasing community care spaces, including 12 new psychiatric beds and making 30 temporary beds permanent, ensuring timely support for Albertans in crisis.
- Developing a provincial neonatal intensive care unit strategy to provide specialized care for the most vulnerable infants.

The plan also lays the foundation for future improvements through priorities such as modernizing emergency health services, improving discharge practices, supporting health care workers, expanding primary and virtual care, and creating a 50-year capital strategy. Click [here](#) for more information.

Alberta Recovery Model

In 2019, Alberta's government embarked on a transformative mission to change the way the province approached mental health and addiction care: from a focus on acute intervention meant to manage symptoms to a comprehensive continuum of care for prevention, treatment, intervention and recovery – where barriers to evidence-based treatment are being removed, and more people pursue recovery.

Four Key Outcomes:

- Making care available whenever and wherever it's needed
- Creating an integrated system for healthier lives
- Engaging individuals and families, and
- Positioning Alberta as a leader in recovery-oriented care.

Key Focus Areas:

- **Increasing access to treatment:** Bed-based addiction treatment capacity has grown by 55% since 2019, with standardized care requirements.
- **Removing barriers to care:** Daily user fees for treatment were eliminated in 2020.
- **Infrastructure:** 11 recovery communities (including five with Indigenous partners including Siksika Nation, Tsuut'ina First Nation, Enoch Cree Nation, Métis Nation of Alberta, and Blood Tribe) and two 150-bed compassionate

intervention centres are being built (one in Edmonton and one in Calgary), adding 700 beds to serve 2,000 people annually.

- **Making treatment immediately available:** The [Virtual Opioid Dependency Program \(VODP\)](#) offers same-day care and supported nearly 12,300 clients in 400 communities in 2024–25.
- **Building better futures:** We're prioritizing the mental health of young Albertans, expanding services in schools, communities and through specialized bed-based services.
- **Compassionate Intervention:** The Compassionate Intervention Act allows adult family members, guardians, healthcare professionals, police or peace officers to request a treatment order for those whose addiction or substance use has made them a danger to themselves or others.

The model is supported by two key partners — [Recovery Alberta](#) and the [Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence](#) — working alongside community, social, and Indigenous partners. Alberta's government has recently established the [Mental Health and Addiction Wisdom Council](#) as a critical step forward for the Alberta Recovery Model to better support Indigenous people in their pursuit of recovery. Learn more about the council [here](#).

Learn more about the Alberta Recovery Model and its progress by clicking [here](#).

Ask the advocate featuring Tony Cardinal – Holiday Greeting



Tony Cardinal: “As we enter the new year, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to the Indigenous community across Alberta. Thank you for entrusting me with the responsibility to advocate on your behalf. It is an honour to walk alongside you, listen to your experiences, and work together toward safer, more respectful, and culturally grounded care for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit community members.

I also want to acknowledge the many Indigenous-led and Indigenous-focused partners whose work strengthens and supports my role every day. My sincere thanks to the Indigenous Health Division, the Indigenous Wellness Core, our Indigenous Patient Navigators and Hospital Liaisons, the Alberta Indigenous Virtual Care Clinic (AIVCC), the Indigenous Help Line, and the Indigenous organizations, Nations, and health leaders who collaborate tirelessly to improve health experiences across the province.

Your guidance, leadership, and commitment make a profound difference. Together, we are creating pathways to safer care, stronger advocacy, and a health system that better reflects the voices and rights of Indigenous peoples. I would also like to offer a heartfelt thank you to the Office of the Alberta Health Advocates and its dedicated staff. Your guidance and partnership ensure that the voices of Indigenous community members are heard, respected, and acted upon.

Wishing you and your families a peaceful, restorative, and meaningful holiday season, and a new year filled with strength, wellness, and continued progress for our communities.”

Stay tuned for our next issue of Ask the Advocate! If you would like to ask Tony about his role, please submit your questions to IndigenousHealth@gov.ab.ca. Concerns regarding experiences in receiving health care can be submitted by emailing info@albertahealthadvocates.ca or by calling the Health Advocate line at [780-422-1812](tel:780-422-1812). You can read more about the Indigenous Patient Safety Investigator and Advocate on alberta.ca.

Partnerships through data sharing

On November 7, 2025, the Minister of Primary and Preventative Health Services (PPHS) sent letters of introduction to four pilot communities to initiate participation in the Data Sharing Agreements pilot project. The ministry committed to working with Indigenous community partners to improve access to health data and evidence-based programs.



Indigenous data access

Primary and Preventative Health Services works directly with First Nations and Métis partners to help them access health data on topics like illness rates, hospital visits and medication use. They also offer analytical support to help communities tell their own data stories, such as the [First Nation health status report](#).

For more information, email Health Analytics at health.analyticsrequests@gov.ab.ca.

Closing remarks

As we welcome the New Year, we remain committed to working alongside community partners to advance First Nations, Métis and Inuit health priorities and celebrate the diverse cultural perspectives that strengthen communities. Your engagement and collaboration are invaluable, and we appreciate the opportunity to share updates and progress with you. We look forward to continuing this journey together.



Contact Information

If there are any initiatives you would like to receive updates on, please reach out to us directly.

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