

Community Action Team Tool Kit

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1. About this Tool Kit and Organizer Contact

Thank you very much for your interest and involvement!

Use your tool kit to help you get started. In your kit are the tools needed to get your team organized.

This kit is a work in progress and any input or suggestions you have to improve it is always appreciated! I'll update the Teams as improvements are made!

Please keep in mind that when you are meeting with MLAs, writing letters to the editor, or speaking up at town halls, you are a constituent. Your voice is strongest in this role. We can all work side by side to make our voices stronger, but no organization speaks more loudly than votes.

I've been putting together portions of the "how-to-s" from activist websites that I've cited in the References and Sources section. You can also find a list of excellent books and website references that I highly recommend.

Please contact me with copies of letters you send, results or descriptions of phone calls, or any other action you take that could help us figure out what is most effective.

If you need help, clarification, forward along your suggestions, please contact me: Della Drury, Campaigner for Friends of Medicare at fomcampaign@gmail.com or 780 423 4581

2. Community Action Team Goals

Our goal is to put pressure on local MLAs to protect our health care system.

The Teams work together in their constituencies to target their own MLAs. In constituencies with Liberal or NDP MLAs, we will focus our attention on Mr Liepert, Dr. Duckett and Mr. Stelmach. At times larger activities may require the teams to get together and coordinate efforts.

It is important that we tell elected officials where we stand on issues!

We have a new Superboard ready to welcome in private health clinics, and a new Health Minister who is eager to arbitrarily delist more services. We need to let them know that this is not an acceptable system. We need to let them know that as citizens, we want a say! Together our voices are stronger!

Join with friends and neighbours in your local Community Action Team to circulate petitions, lobby our MLAs, write letters to the editor and spread the word!

Our Action Teams know their communities best and I need to hear from you as to what would work best within your community.

A primary contact or contacts in each constituency will be required. My goal is that together we will set up your team, and work together over the next few months, keeping in touch on a weekly basis.

This is your campaign, you are the citizens and in order for us to defend public Medicare this must be a citizen driven campaign! Together we can make a difference and keep Medicare Public!

3. List of Actions you can do today!

Below is a list of some actions you can take. A lot of the things you may already have started doing on your own could be in this list. The difference in working as a Team is that together our voices are stronger!

The top priority actions are: writing letters to your MLA, phoning them, or meeting them in person.

- Write letters to the editor, student papers, and websites!
- Conduct letter writing campaigns to your MLA
- Go get signatures on the petition!

- Speak up at public hearings and community halls.
- Set up an appointment to sit down with your MLA
- Come on down to the Friends of Medicare office and volunteer!
- Sign up friends, neighbours, family, and coworkers to become Friends of Medicare!
- Donate and have your friends donate!
- Coordinate with your local Chapter to effectively target certain issues.
- Forward stories, pictures, essays, videos, etc on to your local Chapter or to the Campaigner
- Brainstorm: send us your suggestions on how to fight current issues, and come up with constructive ways to get involved! Be creative!
- Stay informed.
- Send copies of your letters to the Friends of Medicare Campaigner.
- Let the Campaigner know how phone calls or meetings went.

4. How to Contact Your MLA

www.electionsalberta.ab.ca

Go to: “Who’s my MLA?” icon

After you have chosen your method of determining your MLA, select their name, and it will bring you to their contact information page.

No internet access? No problem! Call toll free:
Province of Alberta: 310 0000

Either method will provide your MLA’s contact information.

5. Practical Tips on How to Lobby your Elected Official

a. Establish your agenda and goals.

Know what subject you are going to address. Don’t overload yourself with issues - - stick to no more than two or three. Decide what you would like to gain from the visit, i.e., a commitment to vote for your issue, leadership on the issue, or you may decide the visit is simply informational. Allow time for small talk at the outset, but not too much. Remember, it’s your visit. If it is a group visit, decide who will start the discussion and put your agenda on the table.

b. Listen well.

Much of lobbying is listening, looking for indications of the elected official's views, and finding opportunities to provide good information. If you are meeting with a "silent type," draw her/him out by asking questions. If you are confronted with a "long-winded type," look for openings to bring her/him back to the point.

c. Be prepared, but don't feel that you need to be an expert.

Most elected officials are generalists, like many of us. Do your homework, but don't feel that you need to know every little detail of an issue. Air personal feelings and experiences where appropriate. Relate the concerns of your friends and members of the community. Know when to admit "I don't know," and offer to follow up later with the information. Be open to counter-arguments, but don't get stuck on them. Don't be argumentative or confrontational.

d. Don't stay too long.

Try to get closure on your issue. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank her/him, even if disappointed, and say so. Leave room to continue the discussion at another time.

e. Remember you are there to build a relationship.

If the elected official has supported your position in the past, be sure to voice your appreciation during the course of the visit. If the opposite is true, think of the phrase, "No permanent friends, no permanent enemies." Some day, on some issue of importance to you, s/he may come through. In the meantime, your visit may prevent the official from being an active opponent. In other words, you may help to turn down the heat on the other side.

f. Follow-up is important.

Be sure to send a thank-you note after the visit. If commitments were made in the meeting, repeat your understanding of them. If staff members were present, write to them too. They can often be important allies.

6. Tips on Writing a Persuasive Letter

Writing a powerful letter is vital to getting our message heard and thought about. I've included tips on writing to elected officials and on writing a letter to the editor. Along with this Tool Kit is a sample letter to help if you have writer's block. *(Note: This letter is a good starting point, but needs editing for length, and needs specifics to your situation added in)*

Personal letters are much more effective lobbying efforts than postcards, petitions or even phone calls because they show more effort! The more personal the message, the harder it is for the government to ignore it.

Writing to elected officials

It is important that we tell elected officials where we stand on issues. Our input help shape the way our representatives create and implement social policy.

Emails, postcards, and phone calls are good communication tools, but letters and faxes are the most effective and persuasive way of communicating our views to elected officials.

These tips will help you write a persuasive letter:

- Keep it short.
- Limit your letter to one page and one issue.
- Identify yourself and the issue.
- In the first paragraph of your letter state who you are and what issue you are writing about.
If you are referring to a specific bill, identify it by number (e.g. Bill 32).
- Focus on your main points.
- Choose the three strongest points to support your argument and develop them clearly. Too much information can distract from your position.
- Make it personal.
- Tell your legislator why the issue matters to you and how it affects you, your family, and your community. Make a connection to the legislator. Did you vote for her? Did you contribute to the campaign?
- Ask for a reply.
- Include your name and address on both your letter and envelope.
- Trust your voice.
- Be polite and take a firm position in your letter. Be confident in your understanding of the issue and remember that the legislator may know less than you. Thank elected officials when they vote the way you want.

Remember to send a copy to the Friends of Medicare!

A better letter to the editor

Letters to the Editor are one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper and reach a large audience. They allow community members to comment on the way issues are being addressed in the media and to influence what topics the local paper covers. Elected officials often monitor this section of the newspaper and take notice of constituents' opinions.

Due to strict space limitations in newspapers, not all letters will be published, but the more letters the newspaper receives on a certain topic, the more likely they are to run at least one letter on the

topic. Check the letter guidelines in your local paper and use these tips to write an effective letter to the editor:

- Keep it short and focused.
- Many newspapers have strict length limits and edit letters for space. A concise, single-issue letter has a better chance of retaining its salient points and keeping the reader's interest.
- Make specific references.
- While some newspapers will print general commentary letters, most prefer letters that respond to a specific article. Here are some ways to refer to an article:
- "I was impressed by the comprehensive logging solution outlined in the May 5th article, 'Sustainable Logging on a Roll.'"
- "I strongly disagree with Senator Baker's position against increased fuel economy standards 'To be or SUV' June 22)."
- Be factual and highlight aspects of the issue that haven't been previously addressed.
- Include your contact information.
- Many newspapers will only publish a letter to the editor after verifying the author's contact information. When printed, the letter will usually only include your name and city.
- Type your letter and sign it.
- Send letters to smaller newspapers.
- Small newspapers are more likely to print your letter and the letter can then spark local community action.

Remember to send a copy to the Friends of Medicare!

7. Tips for Effective Activism

Letter, Fax, Phone, or Email?

A typed or handwritten letter carries the most weight with any recipient. If you have the time, you can't beat it for effectiveness.

A personal, hand-written letter is the most effective way to reach your MLA. But any communication is better than silence, so phone, fax or email them. Better yet, do it all! Your message doesn't have to be long, just let them know you oppose private insurance and private health care. Be sure to tell them that you expect a response.

Write a Powerful Letter

Find useful tips on how to write a persuasive letter in Section 6.

Speak up at public hearings and community meetings

Public hearings provide an opportunity for public comments on a particular project or vote. This kind of community involvement can make a strong statement.

Some tips:

- Time is limited at public hearings, so arrive early to sign up for a slot to speak.
- When you speak, focus on your main points. You will often be able to submit written statements which will allow you to address additional concerns.
- Be polite and respect other community members' ideas. A hearing is a forum for the exchange of ideas, not a neighborhood contest.

Now's your chance: meeting with elected officials

Meeting with elected officials in person is an opportunity to make personal contact with decision-makers and convey your position in a persuasive and animated manner. A lobby visit allows you to tell your Senator or Representative what you think about a certain issue or bill and ask her/him to take positive action.

Here are some suggestions for a successful lobby visit:

Before the Meeting

- Request a meeting in writing with specific times and dates. Follow up with a call to the scheduler or secretary to confirm the meeting.
- Make sure to convey what issue or bill you would like to discuss.
- Decide on talking points to express your most important ideas.
- Set a goal for the meeting. Do you want the Representative to vote for or against a bill or introduce legislation?

During the Meeting

- Be prompt.
- Keep it short and stick to your talking points.
- Take the time to thank the elected official for past votes in support of your issues.
- Provide personal and local examples of the impact of the legislation.
- Be honest and don't claim to know more than you do about an issue. You don't have to be the expert, just a committed and active constituent.
- Set a deadline or timeline for response.

After the Meeting

- Write a thank you letter to the legislator.
- Send any materials and information you offered.

- Follow up on deadlines and if they are not met, set up others. Be persistent.

8. Privatization Backgrounder

This is a brief overview of the threat of privatization in Alberta. More information can be found in book or website form in the References and Sources section at the end of this document.

A common assumption among many Canadians and business organizations is that public health care is in crisis and that partial or full privatization is the only cure for our ailing system.

The promoters of for-profit health care have been doing their best to convince people that the only way to improve Canada's health care system is to open it to private, for-profit interests. They argue that letting people buy medical services from private clinics will reduce wait times across the country by removing patients from the public system.

Federal and provincial politicians have also jumped into the fray by suggesting that public health care expenditures are increasing at an unsustainable pace in order to justify policies that favour greater reliance on the for-profit sector.

But most of these arguments are based on myths, or on very inaccurate interpretations of the facts.

Here in Alberta we have had several attempts to dismantle our health care system in Alberta. Former Premier Ralph Klein tried to introduce private, for-profit health care into our Medicare system with Bill 37, Bill 11, the Mazankowski Report, and The Third Way. Each time Albertans told him "NO!" Now with our new Premier and our new Health Minister, our Health Regions have been dismantled without the public being given a chance to have a say.

The way the new Superboard is withholding information on the nature of their plans for our health care system is similar to the way the government behaved during the Third Way threat. However, their actions quite clearly indicate the direction they are headed.

They want to continue:

- Eliminating the commitment to uphold the Canada Health Act
- Permitting doctors to work both in the public and private systems
- Allowing foreign ownership of newly legalized for-profit hospitals
- Creating a new private, for-profit insurance system
- De-listing more services
- Increasing out-of-pocket payments for average Albertans.

Their plans will shred the Medicare umbrella. And they hope to do it quickly and quietly. They are hoping to implement their reforms before Albertans know what is happening. They want to take away Medicare when no one is looking.

The government talks about “more choice” in health care. Sounds good, but what does it mean? For average Albertans, this will mean longer waiting lists and paying out of pocket for health procedures that should be covered by Medicare.

1. Private health insurance

The government wants to put insurance companies in charge of providing your health care. Access to needed procedures will depend upon the approval of your insurance company, much like what happens in the United States. Your access to health care will depend on whether you have proper coverage. Do you trust your health in the hands of the same people who provide your car insurance?

2. Double Dipping Doctors

Allowing doctors to work in the public and private health systems at the same time will lead to longer waiting lists for most Albertans, while those with money get preferential treatment. Experience in England has shown that doctors devote more time to their more lucrative private patients, leaving fewer doctors available for the public system. This increases waiting lists.

3. Abandoning the Canada Health Act

The Canada Health Act is the central basis of our public Medicare system. If the Alberta government decides to contravene the Act, it will open the door to American-style private, for-profit health care. This will cost more money (to pay for corporate profits) and lead to lower quality health care for the rest of us. The government intends to implement their plan as quickly as possible.

Some Frequently Asked Questions:

Why is the government proceeding with their plan?

The government says that health care costs are out of control, and these reforms will curtail costs. However, there is no evidence that private health care will reduce health costs. In fact, it will increase costs for you and your family. The real motivation may be to open the door to more private, American-style health care. The government has tried repeatedly to expand private health care. This is just their latest attempt.

Will the government plan contravene the Canada Health Act?

Yes. The Canada Health Act prohibits a number of things the government wants to do. Allowing doctors to work in both the private and public health systems and legalizing for-profit hospitals both break the Canada Health Act. Expanding private health insurance may also contravene the Act.

Will I have to pay for medical services directly out of my pocket?

Probably. The government intends to establish a private insurance system to pay for many medical services. You will either pay for insurance premiums, or have to pay directly for some services. We do not know which services yet, but the government has indicated that some services will be included in the new insurance scheme. You may also have the option of paying for doctor's services directly in a new private health system.

What about people who aren't able to afford private health care insurance?

They may have to either pay directly or go without the service. It appears emergency services will continue to be covered by Medicare, and therefore accessible to all, but many services may require insurance coverage.

Will everyone be guaranteed private health care insurance coverage?

No. Insurance companies are notorious for denying coverage to certain categories of people – those with pre-existing conditions, many people with disabilities, older residents, etc. Many Albertans may be ineligible for private insurance.

Why would the Alberta government want to do this?

The Conservatives have attempted to introduce private health care many times before. They tried with Bill 37, with Bill 11 and with the Mazankowski Report. This is just their latest attempt to introduce elements of American-style health care to Alberta.

Isn't this just about giving people more choice?

The government claims it is about choice. The real choice they are offering is between paying out-of-pocket for certain health services or going without the service. Those with money will receive fast-tracked, top-quality health care. Average Albertans will face longer waiting times and possibly exclusion from private insurance coverage.

Aren't health care costs out of control?

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) per capita public health care spending has been relatively stable. However, private health care expenditures (e.g. prescription drugs) have been increasing rapidly. The only out of control costs are in private health care. A plan that expands private health care will escalate costs, not reduce them.

Won't the government's plan make waiting lists for surgery shorter?

The government's plan will likely increase waiting times for average Albertans. By allowing doctors to work more in the private system, and allowing more resources to be re-directed to private, for-profit health care, this will reduce available doctors and beds in the public system. This will lead to longer waiting lists.

How will that impact me?

The government indicates it will allow doctors to work in both the public and private systems. This means the current supply of doctors will split their time between the two systems. Experience in Britain shows that doctors prefer the more lucrative private patients, and public patients end up waiting longer for health services. For most Albertans, this will mean longer waiting lists.

Will people be able to “jump the line” with the government plan?

Yes. People willing to pay privately for health services will be able to sidestep the public system and get faster treatment for many services.

Will the government plan mean private, for-profit hospitals are able to operate in Alberta?

Yes. The government is planning to repeal the ban on private, for-profit hospitals. This will allow corporations to set up American-style for-profit hospitals in Alberta. The government is also planning on allowing these hospitals to be foreign-owned, which means Albertans may see the entry of American health care companies into Alberta.

9. Suggested Talking Points

Make Yourself Heard!

The government has backed down before in the face of public pressure. Premier Stelmach, the Minister of Health and Wellness Ron Leipter, and your MLA need to hear from you that you don't support private insurance and private health care.

Some points you may want to include, in your own words:

- Delisting services puts more people at risk to have to choose between getting a medical procedure and paying the bills as well as increasing wait times
- “No nursing shortage”? whole units that have been closed because of the shortage of nurses in hospitals across the province are NOT being re-opened
- “new” Seniors Pharmaceutical Strategy is not affordable for Alberta seniors. Again, seniors will have to choose between necessary medicine or paying the bills.
- Private insurance companies are more concerned about making profits than about paying for medical services people need.
- Private health care is more expensive for families than publicly funded health care.
- Creating private, for-profit “choices” will take resources away from the public system, making waiting times worse.

10. Petition, Forms and Resources

This section includes a list of useful forms, useful contacts and websites.
Please find the forms listed included as separate documents on the webpage.

Forms

Petition

Sample letter

Membership/ Donation form

Rural Alberta hospital closure map (currently found on the back of current FOM Guardian)

Contact Numbers

Toll Free Province of Alberta 310 - 0000

Your Local Chapter Contact: Coming Soon!

Friends of Medicare 780 - 423 - 4581

Links

Canada Health Act

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/C-6/>

Health Canada

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hcs-sss/medi-assur/index-eng.php

Alberta Health and Wellness

www.health.alberta.ca/

Friends of Medicare Site

www.friendsofmedicare.org

Friends of Medicare Blog

<http://blog.friendsofmedicare.org>

MLA Locator Tool

www.electionsalberta.ab.ca

11. References and Sources

Caron, G. The Council of Canadians. 2008. *Best Kept Secret: Canada's health care competitive advantage.*

Gibson D., Fuller C. NeWest Press/Parkland Institute. 2006. *The Bottom Line: The truth behind private health insurance in Canada*

History of Privatization in Alberta:

www.cpa.org.au/garchive/941can.htm

www.ualberta.ca/PARKLAND/post/Vol-III-No2/10dascavich.html

www.law.ualberta.ca/centres/hli/pdfs/hlr/v9_1/bill11frm.pdf

www.keepmedicarepublic.ca/mazankowski

www.mapleleafweb.com/features/2002-mazankowski-report-health-care-alberta

Online Activist Sources:

Canada Health Coalition

www.healthcoalition.ca/

Sierra Club of Canada

www.sierraclub.org/takeaction/toolkit/letters.asp

former CAT page, no longer in use

www.keepmedicarepublic.ca/medicare/cat.shtml

Council of Canadians

www.canadians.org