

## Health

*Health care is a fundamental aspect of safe and healthy rural communities. Accessing quality health care in rural Alberta presents challenges for municipalities and their residents. The RMA believes that rural Albertans deserve a voice in determining how health care services are funded and provided in their communities.*

### What is the RMA's position on the importance of having a municipal perspective on health?

- ◆ Health care presents a huge cost to all Albertans, both rural and urban. Designing an innovative, patient-centered, cost-efficient health care system will support sustainable rural communities.
- ◆ The presence of hospitals, primary care facilities, and emergency services in rural communities provides not only health benefits, but broader community benefits. These include attracting new residents, stimulating economic growth, and providing opportunities to educate the new generation of health professionals.
- ◆ In many rural areas, municipalities have taken a direct financial role in attracting health professionals. As the provision of health care is a provincial responsibility, municipalities should not be forced to dedicate limited budgets toward health care recruitment and retention.

### What financial considerations do rural municipalities have with respect to health?

- ◆ Any changes to the funding of health services in Alberta must take into consideration the importance of full-service hospitals and accessibility to health services and their impact on the viability of rural communities. This includes the reconfiguration of the services provided by rural hospitals.
- ◆ Any service changes should account for potential effects on rural communities struggling to recruit and retain health care professionals and maintain health facilities.
- ◆ Municipalities in rural Alberta are often burdened with the costs to provide peripheral aspects of health care including the costs to attract and retain medical professionals, transportation to and from healthcare facilities, and costs associated with responding to emergencies on Crown land.
- ◆ Alberta's health funding mechanisms must evolve to support flexible health care delivery in rural Alberta. All health care providers, not only doctors, should have the ability to independently operate within their sphere of qualifications in rural municipalities.
- ◆ Primary care facilities play an important role in rural healthcare provision, including the services provided by nurse practitioners.
- ◆ The use of virtual health initiatives requires access to reliable and affordable highspeed internet in rural and remote communities. This access must be addressed before virtual health initiatives replace in-person services.
- ◆ Health care delivery in rural Alberta has unique characteristics, including the high volume of on-call services and the important role of part-time nurses, to name a few. Retaining these flexible positions supports access to adequate health care in rural areas.

## What collaborative relationships are essential to rural municipalities in health?

- ◆ The Government of Alberta should partner with RMA members to include a rural voice in decisions relating to health care issues (e.g. health professional recruitment and retention, seniors' care, rural ambulance service, air ambulance providers, and opioid use and production). This includes changes to healthcare legislation that may impact access to healthcare in rural Alberta.
- ◆ Effective emergency dispatch systems must optimize efficiency and encompass all rural first responders, including ambulance and fire services.
- ◆ It is essential that Alberta Health and Alberta Health Services (AHS) collaborate with municipalities on decisions related to health or emergency services, as many such decisions have unforeseen local economic, social, and quality of life impacts.
- ◆ Rural municipalities must continue to collaborate with relevant professional associations to recruit health care professionals to rural Alberta and provide joint advocacy (e.g. Alberta Health Services, Rural Health Professions Action Plan [RhPAP], Nurse Practitioners Association of Alberta [NPAA]).
- ◆ Hospice associations provide valuable end of life care in rural communities. RMA will continue to advocate for a standard system which links community hospice associations with Alberta Health Services.

## How does the work of the RMA support the sustainability of the health sector?

- ◆ The RMA champions the rural municipal perspective on health services through regular participation in several province-wide boards and committees such as the Rural Health Professions Action Plan (RhPAP) Board of Directors and the Cancer Strategic Clinical Network Core Committee.
- ◆ The RMA President co-chaired the Alberta Emergency Medical Services Provincial Advisory Committee (AEPAC), which was established to address the growing demand of EMS throughout the province. A report was created with 53 recommendations to improve access to health services across Alberta. It is essential that these recommendations are promptly and thoughtfully implemented.

## What current health related issues are impacting rural Alberta?

### Alberta Health Restructuring

- ◆ In November 2023, the Government of Alberta and Alberta Health announced a massive restructuring of the health care system in Alberta. The intent of this redesign is to create a four-pillar system consisting of acute care, continuing care, primary care, and mental health and addictions organizations.
- ◆ Any restructuring of the health care system must be done with careful consideration of the effects it will have on rural municipalities and access to care in rural communities.
- ◆ The Government of Alberta is creating twelve Regional Advisory Councils and an Indigenous Advisory Council to bring forward local priorities and give input on ways to improve the health care system. It is essential that these councils have adequate rural and municipal representation.
- ◆ The redesign must account for the continued challenges of recruitment and retention of frontline staff in order to be successful.
- ◆ The approach of this redesign may lead to an increase of privatized health care services, which may create service delivery risks, especially in rural areas.

- ◆ The redesign has proposed multiple levels of accountability, including ministers, managerial positions, councils, and boards. Although enhanced accountability within the health care system will be a welcomed change, having multiple forms of oversight can make it difficult for prompt decisions to be made, which can effect the efficiency of the health care system entirely.

### Medical Professional Recruitment and Retention

- ◆ Rural municipalities and the Government of Alberta should collaborate to design innovative initiatives such as rural internships and increased educational opportunities to attract and retain physicians and medical professionals in rural areas.
- ◆ Alberta’s current medical professional compensation model should be reviewed to ensure it supports the independent or collaborative provision of primary care services in rural Alberta from a range of medical professionals, such as licensed practical nurses.
- ◆ Municipalities may, at times, become directly involved in providing health care by hiring medical professionals.
- ◆ Recruitment of medical professionals should accommodate flexible positions, as these support access to adequate health care in rural areas.
- ◆ The Government of Alberta should expand the current number of eligible seats in programs such as the Combined Laboratory and X-Ray Technicians Program at NAIT and encourage post-secondaries to provide rural-specific training to students.
- ◆ Mental health practitioners who start a practice within rural and remote areas should be considered in the Canada Student Loan Forgiveness Program as a way to incentivize location of such practices in rural Alberta.

### Accessible Transportation

- ◆ For many rural residents with limited mobility, access to transportation is important not only to their health in times of need, but also to ensure they can continue to participate meaningfully in their community.
- ◆ Due to low population densities and large service areas, rural municipalities often collaborate with neighbouring municipalities and non-profit or service organizations to develop accessible transportation services that meet local needs.

### Seniors

- ◆ Increased operational support of seniors’ lodges and other programs is required at the provincial level to keep pace with the rising costs of providing quality care for seniors in rural and small municipalities.
- ◆ Aging in place and living independently are important strategies for providing seniors with an opportunity to age with dignity. Funding for home care, assisted living, and accessible transportation for seniors are all key components to supporting rural Alberta’s aging population.

### Air Ambulance Services

- ◆ In Fall 2023, the Government of Alberta conducted an air ambulance landing site review. The review will focus on performance, cost-benefit analysis for future upgrading, value for money, sustainability, operational policy and protocols for airplane and helicopter landing sites and provide clear guidance for municipalities responsible for maintaining the sites.

- ♦ Air ambulance service is critical to supporting access to medical services for those in rural areas. Any changes to the agreements between Alberta Health Services and air ambulance service providers must maintain base locations and service levels.
- ♦ Consultation with effected municipalities is essential for the success of air ambulance landing sites in Alberta.
- ♦ Any changes to air ambulance services must not proceed unless alternative service delivery options are in place that provide a comparable access to emergency services for rural communities.
- ♦ All areas of the province require equitable air ambulance service.
- ♦ As maintenance and upgrades are required of airports being used for air ambulance services, financial support should be provided to ensure continuity and safety of service.

### Emergency Medical Services

- ♦ Rural emergency medical services and ambulance service levels must reflect regional needs, particularly in light of the centralization of emergency dispatch services.
- ♦ Ambulances should be equipped with the necessary technology to communicate with other emergency services during significant emergency events.
- ♦ When appropriate, non-ambulance transportation vehicles should be used for clinically stable patients to allow ambulances to be reserved for emergencies. Further, ambulances based in rural areas should be required to return to their home community directly and not be diverted for calls outside of their region.
- ♦ As municipal first responders often responding to significant natural disasters or other traumatic events it is critical that the Government of Alberta ensure that quality clinical counselling and mental health support services are available for first responders throughout the province.
- ♦ Rural emergency medical services must be provided in a manner that supports the unique needs of rural areas.
- ♦ Rural municipalities often respond to emergencies on Crown land due to being the closest emergency responder available. The Government of Alberta must create a mechanism to compensate municipalities for Crown land emergency responses.

### Rural Hospitals

- ♦ Using narrow criteria such as in-take rates does not reflect the value of hospitals to rural communities. Hospitals must be viewed as having health, quality of life, and economic benefits for rural communities.
- ♦ Any decisions to close or change service levels in rural hospitals must be accompanied by community consultations and improve the overall quality of rural health care. This includes the current Alberta Health Services review of the configuration of small and medium sized hospitals.
- ♦ Hospitals with low intake rates should be used to provide specialized services such as day surgeries. This would relieve stress on highly used urban hospitals and reduce wait lists for procedures.
- ♦ Rural hospitals should be utilized in innovative ways, examples include providing specialized care for children and offering day surgeries.

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