Improving Access to Health Care in Rural and Northern Saskatchewan

1. Student Loan Forgiveness for New Doctors, Nurses and Nurse Practitioners who Work in Underserved Rural and Northern Communities

A re-elected Saskatchewan Party government will forgive up to $120,000 of Saskatchewan Student Loans for new physicians who choose to practice in underserved rural and remote communities in Saskatchewan.

A re-elected Saskatchewan Party government will also provide up to $20,000 in Saskatchewan student loan forgiveness for new nurses and nurse practitioners who serve in underserved rural and remote communities.

New physicians, nurses and nurse practitioners must serve for a period of five years to be eligible for the maximum amount of Saskatchewan student loan forgiveness.

The initiative is designed to attract doctors, nurses and nurse practitioners to smaller communities with populations of approximately 10,000 or less that are experiencing difficulties attracting health care professionals and/or are experiencing chronic vacancies. A re-elected Saskatchewan Party government will work with local communities, Regional Health Authorities, the Physician Recruitment Agency and health care professional organizations in the implementation of the program and will consider expanding the incentive to health care vacancies in larger centres that have proven difficult to fill.

A Saskatchewan Party government will also continue to ensure that graduates completing their physician residency maintain interest-free status on their student loans throughout their residency.

Combined with a similar student loan forgiveness program announced by the Government of Canada, doctors would be eligible to receive up to $160,000 in combined Canada-Saskatchewan student loan forgiveness, while nurses and nurse practitioners would be eligible to receive $40,000 in combined Canada-Saskatchewan Student Loan forgiveness.
2. Increase the number of training seats for Nurse Practitioners from 30 seats to 50 per year

20 new training seats will be created to train nurse practitioners and the government will work to expand their scope of practice to keep more hospital facilities open in rural communities.

3. 20 New Doctor Rural Locum Pool

Building a rural locum pool of 20 new doctors will provide relief for rural physicians, assist in attracting and retaining doctors in rural Saskatchewan and provide relief for extended periods (up to a number of months if required) in addition to the current locum pool which focuses on very short relief periods (days to weeks) to underserved rural communities. The government will work with the SMA and the Physician Recruitment Agency in the establishment of the rural locum pool.

4. Expand pilot projects currently underway to better utilize emergency health service providers in the delivery of health care within communities

A pilot project in south-west Saskatchewan is currently providing Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) coverage seven days a week to residents of Eastend and area. The government will expand this pilot project to increase the use of EMTs and mobile health service personnel in health facilities and the community while ensuring EMT compensation is competitive across the province.

5. Launch the STARS emergency medical helicopter program

As previously announced by the government, the new Shock Trauma Air Rescue Society (STARS) emergency medical helicopter program will be launched in 2012, with an estimated cost of $10 million annually (incremental $5 million annually over 2011-12 budget).

Cost:

Total incremental new costs for these initiatives are:

Year 1: $8.5M  
Year 2: $9.3M  
Year 3: $10.0M  
Year 4: $10.8M

Costs include $5M annually for STARS, $2M annually for rural doctor locum pool, and $700K annually for new nurse practitioner seats. The cost of student loan forgiveness assumes 20 new doctors and 75 new nurses and nurse practitioners access the program annually.
The Saskatchewan Party Health Care Record

Reducing Surgical Wait Times

A Saskatchewan Party government will continue to deliver on its commitment to reduce surgical wait times to no more than three months by 2014.

Today, the overall provincial surgical wait list is at its lowest level since the current data measurement system was put in place in 2004. Significant progress has been made in reducing surgical wait times. As of June 2011 compared to December 2007:

• The total number of patients waiting for surgery is down 11 per cent;
• The number of patients waiting three months or longer is down 27 per cent;
• The number of patients waiting six months or longer is down 41 per cent;
• The number of patients waiting 12 months or longer is down 56 per cent; and
• The number of patients waiting 18 months or longer is down 75 per cent.

Overall, 85 per cent of patients have received their surgery within six months and 94 per cent received it within a year. By spring 2012, the goal is to reduce all surgical wait times to less than 12 months.

Adding More Doctors and Nurses

New investments made by the Saskatchewan Party government have increased the number of nurses and doctors being trained in Saskatchewan. Through the new undergraduate and residency seats created over the last four years, the creation of the Physician Recruitment Agency and a new made-in-Saskatchewan assessment process for internationally trained physicians, Saskatchewan will benefit from more doctors and nurses over the next four years.

This year, there are 900 new nurses working in Saskatchewan, exceeding the provincial government’s election commitment to hire 800 more registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses, while 300 new nursing training seats have been created.

Saskatchewan has over 200 more doctors working in the province compared to four years ago and enrollment has increased at the College of Medicine. The provincial government is on track to create 40 new physician undergraduate seats and 60 new residency positions. This represents a 65 per cent increase in undergraduate seats and 100 per cent increase in residency positions since 2007.
Investing in Health Care Infrastructure

The Saskatchewan Party government has invested almost $732 million in capital funding for health care infrastructure while reducing the community contribution for health facilities from 35 per cent to 20 per cent, significantly reducing the financial burden on communities needing new health facilities.

Major health care infrastructure projects completed or under development include:

- A new Children’s Hospital of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon
- The Academic Health Sciences Centre at the University of Saskatchewan
- A new Humboldt Hospital
- A new Saskatchewan Hospital for psychiatric rehabilitation in North Battleford
- A new Moose Jaw Hospital
- Improvements to emergency and local mammography services at the Lloydminster Hospital
- A new Mother Baby Unit at the Regina General Hospital
- The new Irene and Les Dube Centre for Mental Health in Saskatoon

Lower Prescription Drug Costs

The Saskatchewan Party government fulfilled its 2007 campaign promise to cap the cost of prescriptions for seniors with annual incomes below $64,000 and children age 14 and under. Approximately 113,000 seniors and 46,000 children have benefited from the $15 per prescription cap.

The provincial government is also implementing a plan to lower generic drug prices in Saskatchewan, which will result in savings to Saskatchewan residents and the provincial drug plan.

Promoting Healthier Lifestyles

Since 2007 the Saskatchewan Party government has taken action to reduce smoking and tobacco use. Two smoking cessation prescription drugs — Champix and Zyban — are now covered under the provincial drug plan and new legislation has made it illegal to smoke in vehicles when children under the age of 16 are present. Tobacco sales are also now prohibited in pharmacies.

The Saskatchewan Party government has also taken action to promote physical activity and healthy food choices for children. The Healthy Kids School Challenge has encouraged more than 700 students from 83 schools across Saskatchewan to get active and make healthy food choices. Students involved in the challenge reported close to 309,000 healthy food choices and more than 55,000 hours of physical activity.
Investing in Better Care for Seniors

The Saskatchewan Party government has allocated funding for new long-term care beds. Since 2007:

- $152 million has been committed for 13 new long-term care facilities to replace outdated facilities throughout Saskatchewan. More than 600 long-term care beds will be created through this investment.
- A new pilot project, Samaritan Place, will bring 100 new long-term care beds to Saskatoon. Samaritan Place is a unique approach that includes plans for up to 20 suites that will accommodate couples and includes a model for “aging in place”, where the needs of seniors are met over time within the facility resulting in dignity and stability for the residents.

Cancer Care

Funding to the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency has increased by 55 per cent - or over $43 million - under the Saskatchewan Party.

The Saskatchewan Party government now covers the colorectal cancer drug Avastin and vaccinations for HPV (Human Papillomavirus) to prevent cervical cancer.

Saskatchewan recently became the first province to license a blood test for colorectal cancer risk.

Autism

When the Saskatchewan Party government first took office, funding for Autism services through the Ministry of Health totaled about $500,000. Today, funding levels have been increased to nearly $6.5 million - an increase of 1,200 per cent.

The Saskatchewan Party government has launched a three-year pilot project to enhance supports and services for children and their families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder. These supports include more respite care for parents and expanded seasonal programming like summer camps for children with ASD.

Spinal Cord Injury

Saskatchewan is taking a leadership role in research and funding for spinal cord injuries with a recent investment of more than $4.3 million for a comprehensive five-year Saskatchewan-based initiative, in partnership with the national Rick Hansen Institute.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)

Saskatchewan was the first province in Canada to commit funding toward MS clinical trials for liberation treatment. Saskatchewan will provide funding for MS patients in our province to participate in an upcoming clinical trial in Albany, New York.
Healthy Communities

The Saskatchewan Party government provided a grant of $250,000 to help the Saskatoon Community Clinic cover costs associated with the relocation and expansion of its Westside Clinic location. This funding will help inner-city Saskatoon residents access health and dental services.

Addictions Treatment and Beds

The Saskatchewan Party government is dedicating $57 million to alcohol and drug services this year. This funding builds on other investments which include:

- A 45-bed detoxification facility in Regina
- Six youth stabilization beds at Saskatoon’s Calder Centre
- A 14-bed detox facility in Prince Albert

Two additional facilities in Prince Albert (an eight-bed family treatment facility and, in co-operation with Prince Albert Grand Council, a 15-bed youth inpatient treatment centre).

Suicide Prevention Initiatives for Northern Youth

Work is underway between the Saskatchewan Party government and the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan to develop a youth suicide prevention project in the North. The project will place three health promotion coordinators in Cumberland House, Ile-a-la-Crosse and Buffalo Narrows.

Greater Accountability and Efficiency in Health Care

Under the leadership of the Saskatchewan Party government, health regions are taking steps to reduce costs and find greater efficiencies -- freeing up more money and time to provide better care to patients. Health care costs were reduced by $35 million last year through general program and administrative efficiencies.

Releasing Time to Care was launched by the Saskatchewan Party government with a goal to increase the time health care providers spend on direct patient care. Health regions have been asked to implement Releasing Time to Care in all medical and surgical wards in the province by 2012, and the initiative is already producing impressive results:

- The Pasqua Hospital’s orthopedics unit decreased staff injuries by more than 50 per cent within six months. The hospital’s oncology unit increased the amount of time nurses spend on direct patient care during a shift from 26 to 41 per cent.

- An estimated 270 hours of nursing time will be saved by improving access to rooms on the surgical ward of Prince Albert’s Victoria Hospital.

- The Regina Qu’Appelle Health Region reduced the number of cancelled MRIs from 12 per week to one per week. The region was able to perform an additional 650 scans per year using existing resources.