

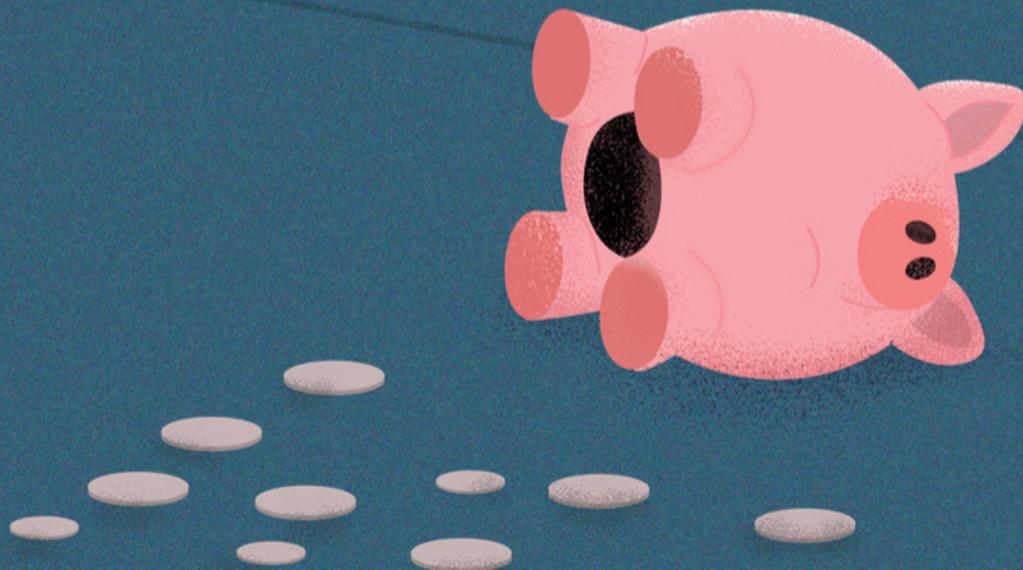


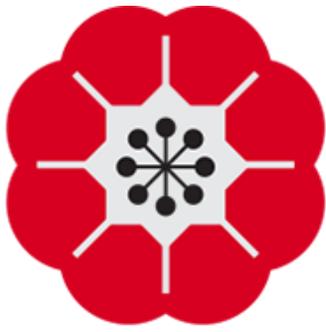
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The Advocate

We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter. It is intended to be a space to share stories and ideas for advocacy. The Advocate is published three times a year.

Who We Are

Public Interest Alberta is a province-wide organization focused on providing advocacy and education on public interest issues. Founded in 2004, PIA exists to foster an understanding of the importance of public services, institutions, and spaces in Albertans' lives, and to build a network of organizations and individuals committed to advancing the public interest.

We believe the primary responsibility of government is to advance the collective interest of the citizens of Alberta. This entails a commitment to accessibility, equity, inclusion, and democracy in our communities, institutions, and society.

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Share Your Thoughts

Submit letters, articles, and contributions (which may be edited) for the next issue of The Advocate:

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If you want to receive The Advocate online, please contact our office.

February 12, 2020

THE PEOPLE'S BUS

A one-day, round-trip bus from Edmonton to Calgary, with a stop in Red Deer.

Join us and our allies for a one-day canvassing blitz in Calgary to protest the government's cuts in seniors' care and health care

More info & register at: www.pialberta.org/peoplesbus

Renew Your Membership Today!

You can renew your membership online at pialberta.org or fill out the information below and mail to:

Public Interest Alberta

604, 12323 Stony Plain Road NW, Edmonton, AB T5N 3Y5

1. ANNUAL INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP

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Our office will be in touch to discuss options

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Credit Card Cheque Cash

Credit card number _____

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DONATE

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\$25 \$50 \$100 Other

Seniors Drug Plan Under Attack Again

Noel Somerville & Terry Price, Public Interest Alberta's Seniors' Task Force

Seniors have worked their entire lives to contribute to Alberta. They deserve to know they have access to the care they need as they age. The Alberta Seniors Drug Plan was one way to government provided assurance that if a senior became ill and needed medication, they'd be able to affordably access it.

The Alberta Seniors Drug Benefit Program was initially established in 1970 to provide universal prescription drug coverage (as well as free ambulance services and accidental dental care) for all Albertans aged 65 or older and their spouses or partners. This plan provides coverage for all drugs listed in the Alberta Drug Benefit List with a co-payment of 30% of cost to a maximum of \$25 per prescription.

Just prior to Christmas 2008, Ron Liepert, then Minister of Health, launched the first attack on the Plan. In his Pharmaceutical Strategy, the proposal would have eliminated universality and linked the deductible to a percentage of income, with a maximum deductible of \$7,500 per year.

Seniors, and the many organizations representing them, quickly reacted with protests and anger. In response, Minister Liepert released revisions to the proposal in April 2009 that sought to minimize the impact on middle income seniors.

If adopted, this revised proposal, which would be optional for seniors, would reduce co-payments to 20% of cost to a maximum of \$15 per prescription, and introduce an escalating monthly premium for individuals with annual incomes in excess of \$24,000, and families with annual incomes in excess of \$48,000.

Needless to say, the revised plan did little to quell the concerns of seniors who pointed out that the government was trying to off-load its costs onto vulnerable people who were old enough and sick enough to require prescription drugs.

This impasse continued until March 2010, at which time the newly appointed Minister of Health, Gene Zwozdesky, reinstated the original Seniors Drug Plan.

The second attack on the Seniors Drug Plan came in the provincial budget of Premier Alison Redford in September 2013 by Minister of Health, Fred Horne. Again, the proposal was to eliminate the universality of the Seniors Drug Plan replacing it with a means-tested plan, though no details were given.

Frustrated by the fact that both the Premier and Minister



Horne had made an election promise to retain the plan, and further frustrated by repeated, unsuccessful efforts to obtain a meeting with either the Minister or the Premier, the Seniors' Task Force of Public Interest Alberta occupied Minister Horne's constituency office in January 2014 and refused to leave.

The adverse public attention this generated for government, and actions by other seniors' groups, finally led to a meeting with Minister Horne at which he acknowledged the concerns and subsequently withdrew the second set of proposed changes to the Seniors Drug Plan. This was quickly followed by Premier Redford's resignation in March, 2014.

Governments weren't done yet! A similar proposal emerged from the office of Minister Sarah Hoffman in the NDP government of Rachel Notley in the fall of 2016. Means-testing and a \$25 co-pay were back on the table.

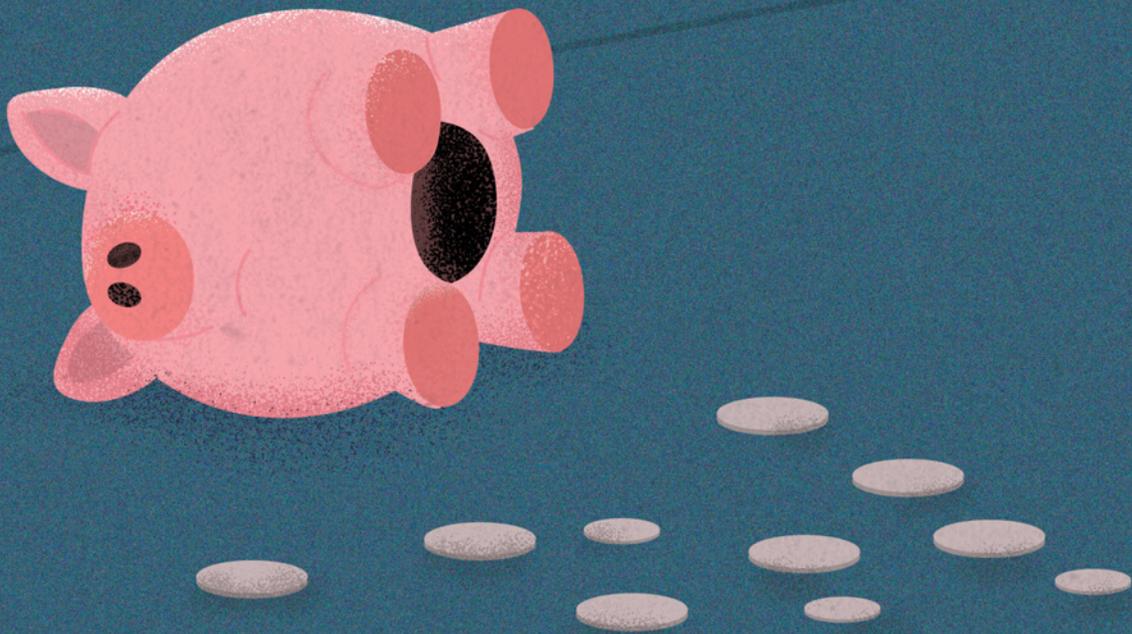
Again, seniors and their advocates sent a letter to the Minister and were successful in staving off this third attempt to penalize seniors who are wrestling with ill-health.

Apparently, we are not done fighting! Not only is the Kenney government exploring income testing for the seniors drug plan, they have eliminated drug coverage for dependents who are under the age of 65. These dependents could be spouses, partners, children – some of whom may have disabilities or debilitating illnesses.

Fair? We think not! Income testing for prescription drug coverage is a form of surtax that falls on people not because they are old, but because they are sick and require medications. When did it become acceptable public policy to tax people because they are sick?

Seniors and their advocates will be required to fight again. Alberta seniors deserve better!

The government's cuts are hurting the poorest and most vulnerable in Alberta.



Balancing the budget on the backs of the poor is shameful.

The provincial government has released its first budget, and it is easy for those of us defending public services to be overwhelmed by the number of attacks coming our way. While the government is happy to hand over billions in tax cuts to their friends in the wealthiest corporations, they are slashing the services that all Albertans need and rely on.

We all know cuts hurt.

We see it in our children's overcrowded classrooms, nurses stretched thin and overworked, cutting into their ability to connect with and care for their patients, and the thousands of announced layoffs across the public sector. That means pain for our economy, as well as for the quality of our public services.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing turns is the government's laser focus on cutting the programs, services, and policies that the most vulnerable in our society rely on: the poor, the working poor, and Albertans with disabilities.

Even before the government released the budget, they froze the minimum wage for the first time since 2010. While failing to increase the wage by inflation this year may be a small pay cut now, if it continues over time, it will result in a big pay cut to the lowest wage workers who are already struggling, and in many cases earning less than a living wage. The vast majority—over three-quarters—of Albertans earning minimum wage are over the age of 20. These are not teens looking for extra spending money—these are adults looking to support themselves and their families.

In addition to this freeze, the government has frozen Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), an essential support for people living with disabilities to afford the basic necessities of food and shelter. Folks who already struggle in a world not built to accommodate them having their purchasing power cut is an outrage.

Alberta already has the lowest rates of social assistance in Canada, and the government froze income support like Alberta Works and the Alberta Seniors' Benefit Program.

As a cost-cutting measure, the government has announced it will lower the age that young adults are cut off from provincial foster care support by two years, from age 24 to age 22. This is a developmentally critical time, and the transition to young adulthood is critical for future success. Six young people died in 2018 while transitioning out of care. Lowering the age will only make the problem worse, and we need to support these vulnerable young people.

While the government threatens women's rights by introducing legislation that would restrict access to their reproductive health care, funding is being slashed to social programming. Domestic violence is higher in Alberta than in the rest of Canada, and shelters are reporting that they are stretched thin. There has been a huge surge in women being violently assaulted by their partners. Shelters have had to turn away over 20,000 seeking refuge, some of whom are at extreme risk of being killed. There are over 10,000 women, children, and seniors in shelters, and cuts to social spending will make this number even worse.

We need to take a stand and resist these cruel and heartless cuts at every opportunity. These are the most vulnerable in our communities and we must all stand together in solidarity to ensure people are living lives of dignity and getting the support they need.

Cuts to post-secondary education hurt all Albertans

Sadiya Nazir, Chair of Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) and Vice-President External for University of Calgary Students' Union

The current Government of Alberta, through Budget 2019, has taken aim at our post-secondary institutions and students. The impacts will limit the number of students able and willing to pursue higher education. In Budget 2019, base grant funding was reduced by about 10 percent across the board, tuition can be increased by 22.5% over three years, institutional accountability has decreased, and the interest on student loans will be increased. All of these lead to increased costs for students and increased debt for students and their families.

While the government continues to call for all agencies, boards, and committees to 'find efficiencies' they fail to realize what cost savings options are actually available and the effect they will have. The largest expenditure of a post-secondary institution (PSI) is staff. Not just professors but people that staff services students need like libraries and writing centers - things that help students succeed in their studies and improve their employability by developing and strengthening supplementary skills needed to be a good engineer, teacher, or entrepreneur. These services are now at risk as universities start to tighten their belts and decide what is now unnecessary spending.

With a billion dollars, and counting, of deferred maintenance at our campuses, the roofs that need to be fixed will be delayed, and that laboratory you may have studied in 40 years ago will just have to be good enough for students for the next few years. Educational quality is already at risk, and it is only going to get worse with these cuts. Students are expecting the worst: reduction in hours for libraries, student supports to be canceled or drastically reduced, larger class sizes as fewer contract professors are hired, and cost increases well beyond the consumer price index (CPI).

With the thawing of the current tuition freeze, the 2006 tuition policy of Ralph Klein (or CPI) would come back into effect seeing increases around two percent or so. Students back then fought long and hard for this policy as they were tired of seeing large increases, near 10%, year after year. Students now possibly face three years of 7% increases, or 22.5% combined. This means in 2022/23 students will be paying on average almost \$1300 more than students now just in tuition. That is a total of \$7071 for just one-year tuition, not counting fees. According to Stats Can, Alberta currently already has some of the highest non-academic fees in Canada, placing Alberta at the top of the combined tuition and fees comparison. While base grants to our universities are decreasing, costs for students will skyrocket. While quality suffers, students and their families will pay more.



The government repeats that Alberta has the most generous student financial aid program in the country. As long as one only counts the amount of money going out they are correct; however, if you examine the split between non-repayable aid and loans, Alberta is far less generous.

Alberta's aid system is not means-tested, and will virtually always grant loans to students. From 2005 to 2015, Statistics Canada reports the average debt load from government sources increased by 42% to \$30,000. Just as students pay more at the university cashier, we will also pay 1% more for student loans; and so will you if you still haven't paid them off. Assuming it takes the full ten years to pay off, a \$30,000 provincial student loan will cost \$1,722 more just in interest. As the rate of tuition increases, CAUS expects student debt levels to also increase, which again increases the total students and their families pay for post-secondary education.

As Alberta's young adults start to enter the workforce and look to establish themselves within the economy, student loans dangle like a scimitar overhead limiting every action. A \$300 minimum payment each month for a student loan drastically eats up the paycheck. Also, as any mortgage specialist will tell you, high monthly payments for loans also decrease one's ability to get a mortgage let alone save for the down-payment.

Students are not calling for more. Students are simply calling for the same thing, an affordable, accessible post-secondary education.

CAUS represents over 100,000 undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, and MacEwan University.

Clear alternative to budget cuts is fixing our tax revenue shortage

Joel French, Public Interest Alberta Executive Director

If there is a common theme in the United Conservative Party (UCP) government's first budget, it is pain. Cuts hurt, and there is no area of public services in the budget that was left unscathed. Although that approach was expected by many, particularly in the wake of the report from the Blue Ribbon Panel on Alberta's Finances, the degree of the cuts and their impact on Albertans was more difficult to predict until budget day. The budget's overall problem was similar to that of the Panel: it focused squarely on significant cuts to public services, rather than on addressing Alberta's severe shortage of tax revenue.

The cuts are numerous and range widely. They will have major negative impacts on Albertans in the areas of health care, seniors, post-secondary education, and K-12 education, as well as climate change and programs that support our most vulnerable residents.

In health care, the government is clearly moving to offload costs from the public system onto Albertans and their families, while boosting the profits of those looking to make money off those in need of care, whether it be seniors' care in a facility, surgeries, or diagnostic tests. These cuts to front-line health care services are at odds with Premier Kenney's "Public Health Guarantee" announcement he made during his election campaign, where he promised front-line services would be protected from any cuts. Our allies at Friends of Medicare (friendsofmedicare.org) have been doing excellent work to inform Albertans about the cuts and the impact they will have on all of us.

Schools in our province had already been suffering from years of neglect before the UCP government took over. Class sizes under successive governments were already far too large; analysis by the Edmonton Journal in 2018 showed that in six of the province's largest school districts, between 78 and 91 percent of K-3 classes exceeded the province's own guidelines for class size. And as class sizes have grown, the needs of children have also become more complex, and classroom supports for those needs have not seen any significant new investment in a long time.

Instead of addressing these problems the UCP government inherited, they decided to make them worse by cutting an additional \$275 million out of the education budget province-wide. As school boards struggle to deal with that cut, fees for things like bussing are skyrocketing, while teachers, educational assistants, and custodial and maintenance staff are being laid off. Our under-resourced education systems are going to have it even worse, and those most affected will be families and the kids whose futures are at stake.

The budget also contained significant cuts to programs supporting some of Albertans most vulnerable populations.



Several income support programs had their indexation cut, which means the amounts people receive will not longer keep pace with inflation every year. Included in those cuts was Income Support, Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), and the Alberta Seniors' Benefit. These cuts are cruel and shameful; our government should not be balancing its budget on the back of Alberta's most vulnerable residents.

While it is not explicitly mentioned in the budget, the government's own documents point to a clear alternative to these widespread cuts. They show that if we had the same tax system as any other province in the country, the minimum amount of additional revenue we would raise every year is \$13.4 billion. For context, the government estimates the budget deficit this year to be \$8.7 billion. The clear path forward is to fix our tax revenue shortage and invest more, not less, in our public services.

Instead, the government is heading in the opposite direction with a four percent cut to the corporate tax, which is paid by large corporations on their profits. Over four years, the government estimates these corporations will pay \$4.7 billion less in taxes.

Budgets are always about choices and trade-offs, and the choice this government has made is clear. This government believes large corporations should be making far more profit than they already are, and the money will come from cuts to public services and to programs supporting our most vulnerable. This budget is extremely unpopular among Albertans. Now is the time for all of us to advocate for the clear alternative; fixing our tax system to protect and strengthen our public services.

14th Annual Advocacy Conference



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