



# Rural Health Care

## Handle with Care

How will we fix what's ailing our health care system?



### Issue

Rural communities across Alberta are experiencing an unprecedented health workforce crisis that is forcing rural physicians to take on even more or reduce services provided in their communities. Poor work-life balance and shrinking services make it even harder to attract new physicians to rural and remote communities.

- Health human resource shortages have led to intermittent closures of emergency departments, acute care beds and other services in rural communities.
- In some instances entire programs, such as obstetrics, have permanently shut down.
- Rural AHS facilities are relying increasingly on locum physicians to staff emergency departments, even though the physician locum program was intended to offer rural physicians much-needed respite for vacations or illnesses.
- Physician burnout is causing some physicians to change their practices, move away or retire early.
- The loss of rural physicians not only reduces the availability of health care for people who live and work in rural communities, but also impacts the economic sustainability of those communities. When choosing a location to live or work, access to clinic and hospital services is an important factor.
- Lost physician capacity impacts the amount of medical student and residency training that can occur in the community. The first round CaRMS (residency) match had an unprecedented number of unfilled seats in rural Alberta programs.
- The province has taken some actions that will factor into eventual solutions. These include:
  - > Funding for additional training options in smaller centers.
  - > Support for the RhPAP/Rural Education Supplement and Integrated Doctors Experience (RESIDE) program, a pilot intended to help rural recruitment through return to service incentives.
  - > The Modernizing Alberta's Primary Health Care System (MAPS) initiative is considering short and long-term approaches to build up primary care in urban and rural medicine.

### KEY QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES & PARTIES SHOULD THEY WIN THE PROVINCIAL ELECTION

- How will your government ensure rural Albertans get the care they need, when they need it, in their own communities?
- What specifically will your government do to retain physicians in rural and remote areas?
- What specifically will your government do to recruit physicians to rural and remote areas?