

SPEAKING NOTES
HONOURABLE RON LIEPERT
Minister of Alberta Health and Wellness

**CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION AGM
AND AWARDS PRESENTATION**

SATURDAY, SEPT. 27 '08
2:30 P.M.

HOTEL ARTS
119-12 AVE. SW
CALGARY, AB

Check against delivery

Thank you very much Tom.

I enjoyed meeting the delegation from the Canadian Mental Health Association, Alberta Division this summer; it was a wonderful opportunity to get to know one another and share thoughts on the direction of mental health in Alberta.

I salute you for your work in promoting mental health and supporting the resilience and recovery of those experiencing mental illness.

In today's world, the stresses on children, youth, adults and families are very real. So addressing mental health problems today is vital to preventing ongoing issues tomorrow – issues including crime and homelessness.

Your work to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness through public education and awareness activities is going a long way to bring this issue out into the open.

Reducing the stigma attached to mental illness is so very important. Last month the Canadian Medical Association said the stigma is so pervasive it is the “final frontier of socially acceptable discrimination”.

When almost half of Canadians think the term ‘mental illness’ is used as an excuse for bad behaviour, we know there is much work to do.

The good news is that almost three-quarters of the CMA poll respondents agreed that funding to treat mental illness should be on par with funding for physical illnesses such as cancer.

That is something I agree with, as I know personally that the work mental health professionals do day in and day out is very, very important.

Mental health has a very special place in my heart.

Many days and evenings were spent as a parent dealing with this issue and fortunately treatment was available.

With the recent governance changes that have occurred by moving to one health authority, you may be wondering where mental health fits in to the picture.

So first and foremost today, I want to assure you that the Government of Alberta remains very much committed to advancing mental health and ensuring quality mental health services continue to be delivered in this province.

One of the three advisory councils to be established alongside Alberta Health Services will focus on mental health.

Another advisory council will focus on addiction services. Given that mental health and addiction issues are often closely linked, efforts will continue to improve services for individuals who live with concurrent disorders.

Funding for mental health service delivery in Alberta has risen from approximately \$531 million in 2005-06 to \$647 million this year.

And as we move to better align services and make the health system more patient-focused through the Health Action Plan, mental health will continue to be a significant priority.

We should be proud that Alberta is recognized as a leader in mental health.

This province is home to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, chaired by the Honourable Michael Kirby.

We are one of few jurisdictions with a comprehensive, province-wide mental health plan... focusing on risk reduction, capacity building and support and treatment for those with mental health problems.

Mental health work going on throughout the province is co-ordinated with this provincial mental health plan.

The Provincial Mental Health Plan was a major step in setting a new direction for the future of mental health services in Alberta and it has resulted in many positive mental health initiatives.

Yet while there have been enhancements to mental health services, to legislation, and significant new investments in Alberta, opportunities for improvements still remain.

I believe that mental health is an area of health care that has not been given enough attention.

Being healthy and well isn't merely about one's physical health, but the health of our entire being – including mind, body, spirit and emotions.

So treating mental health issues should have the same priority as any other illness.

To do that, we must break down silos in the system that prevent individuals with mental illness from receiving seamless care.

Whether it is more multi-disciplinary teams where mental health professionals play an integral role, or co-locating services so mental health services can be more easily accessed, the linkages between health-care services need to be improved.

I think another area that needs attention is looking for innovative approaches to ease bed pressures and to effectively transition and support individuals with mental illness in the community.

Perhaps investing in more short-stay mental health beds and other community-based treatment alternatives to alleviate the strain on psychiatric and acute care hospitals is something we need to look at.

Children's mental health is also a top concern for our government.

We recently announced \$50.5 million to implement 23 actions in the Children's Mental Health Three Year Action Plan.

The announcement was part of our Health Action Plan to increase access and efficiencies in Alberta's health system.

The plan aims to optimize the mental health and well-being of infants, children and youth up to 24 years of age, as well as their families.

Initiatives will build on work already underway and will support new programs that meet the unique needs of local communities.

Over the next three years, children all across the province – including rural and remote areas - will receive improved access to mental health services.

The needs of children and youth at risk will be addressed, and new wait time standards will be put in place.

These standards will mean that children and youth in crisis receive services within 24-hours.... children and youth with serious symptoms that are not imminently life-threatening will receive services within two weeks.... and children and youth with mental health needs that are not urgent will receive services within 30 days for scheduled visits.

We know it is critical for children and youth with mental health problems to receive help as early as possible in their young lives, so that is our goal as we work with other government partners to implement this new plan.

Another initiative on the horizon is the implementation of the *Mental Health Amendment Act*.

As we work toward implementation of the new legislation, Alberta Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services will be examining the adequacy of existing community supports and determining ways to address gaps and improve services.

There will also be funding for implementation of the *Mental Health Amendment Act* and Community Treatment Orders. These details are being worked out between Health and Wellness and Alberta Health Services.

We must make sure community-based supports have the capacity to adequately meet client needs in order to end the ‘revolving door’ treatment cycle.

So I want to ensure appropriate community supports are in place for individuals with mental illness before I proclaim the legislation. Ultimately, the success of Community Treatment Orders through the legislation will depend on the availability of effective assertive outreach and community supports.

Mental health advancements in Alberta will also continue through initiatives such as the Mental Health Innovation fund. The fund has provided \$75 million over the past three years to 36 projects that are improving mental health services in Alberta.

The projects range from outreach programs and day treatment to crisis intervention services.

The funding will now be annualized to allow these innovative pilot projects to be sustained.

Mental health projects for children, youth, families and communities are still underway through the \$38.9 million over three years that was announced in 2006.

Projects are dealing with suicide prevention, community capacity building and mental health first-aid training for school staff.

There is a myriad of other mental health initiatives going on throughout the province from suicide prevention and advancing mental health research to enhancing Aboriginal mental health. We will continue building on all of this work.

And in the months ahead we will continue fulfilling the promises laid out in our Health Action Plan.

Everything in the plan is aimed at improving access to services, making the health system patient-focused, and keeping it sustainable.

The plan is not a cost-cutting measure, but rather will ensure we get better value for our money as part of a health system that is more efficient and effective.

In the months ahead I will also continue pushing for health policy that puts patients first.... As I believe strongly that patients are the number one priority and everything we do must be targeted to them.

And I will continue advocating for better service alignment in the health system. It is ridiculous that patients experience referral run-around or are on separate wait lists for the same test when they have multiple medical conditions.

As I conclude, I just want to reiterate that through the newly established Alberta Health Services Board, advancing mental health will be a high priority in our province.

I have always been a believer that there is nobody who knows how to do a job better than the person doing the job.

So I anticipate the Alberta Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association will continue playing an essential role in the planning and implementation of a more collaborative and integrated mental health system in Alberta.

Voluntary and non-profit agencies have been - and will continue to be - important providers of mental health services.

Ultimately, our new approach to health governance will mean greater client access to mental health services and better coordination of those services across the province.

Once again, thank you for all you do and thank you for having me here today. I look forward to your questions.