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eFACTS, a summary of current newsworthy facts and effects, is made available by the Alberta Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association to people who have a continuing interest in mental health reform in Alberta. We thought you should know:

1. The Federal government is back in legislative session and the Throne Speech of September 30 made a renewed commitment to a “social agenda,” including new health care dollars. While no specific mention of mental health services was made in the speech, new dollars for the provinces could translate into improved resources and services in provincial mental health programs.
2. The Alberta Legislature goes into a fall sitting on November 19. The announced “highlights” of the sitting include issues around taxation and security. Any form of social agenda has not been reported, however decisions regarding low income benefits (Item #3) and legislative changes to address devolution of the Alberta Mental Health Board (AMHB) seem likely.
3. Our last edition of eFACTS reported a “hope” that the Alberta Government’s Low Income Review would result in the announcement of increased benefits for disabled and poor people by fall. Since that time, CMHA has participated in coalitions with the Alberta Disability Forum and the Alberta College of Social Workers to press for an early decision. At a Standing Policy Committee Presentation on September 24, the Minister, Clint Dunford, and other members of the committee, expressed personal support for an increase. Chances that SFI and AISH rates will be increased, along with implementation of the other recommendations in the Low Income Review Report, are looking more promising daily. In fact, at least one of the recommendations will be implemented in November. Parents who leave SFI (Supports for Independence or “welfare”) for employment will be eligible for the same health, dental and prescription drug benefits that were available for while receiving SFI payments. The program is being integrated with the Alberta Child Health Benefit (ACHB). Information on all support programs is available at www.gov.ab.ca/hre

4. The ACHB program is not well known in Alberta. The benefit provides low income families with free dental, prescription, eye wear, emergency ambulance and diabetes supplies. Information is available at achb@gov.ab.ca or by phoning 1-877-4-MY-KIDS.
5. The last edition of eFACTS reported the potential for federal government reform of the rules regarding disability benefits. However, the Department of Finance has derailed this initiative. The Department has recently responded to a parliamentary sub-committee that this spring tabled the report "Getting It Right for Canadians – The Disability Tax Credit". The Report called for a complete overhaul of the program with the Finance Department and the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency consulting with disability groups and professional organizations to discuss further amendments to the Act to make it more inclusive. Instead, at the end of August, in a move that outraged the chair of the subcommittee, MP Carolyn Bennett, the Government, independent of any consultations, responded to the Report by proposing amendments that would require much stricter eligibility criteria. The wording in the Act will be modified to have far narrower meaning. The disability community is mounting a campaign to have the Government reverse its position. The Report can be found at www.parl.gc.ca/disability and the Government's response at the Department of Finance's website.
6. The Government's work on devolution of the AMHB appears to be on schedule. For example: The services planning task group is actively working on a framework for the requirements, standards and reporting relationships within the RHAs once they take over services. The province-wide service task group is finalizing recommendations on "what, if any" province wide services should exist following devolution. The research task group is preparing "information binders" to profile current regional services to be used as a baseline for future "measurement." The human resources group is addressing labour issues, opportunities for AMHB staff following devolution and the mechanisms for communicating change. Some employees will be offered early retirement. The finance task group has developed funding principles, a "template" for divesting assets and liabilities and arranged with the Provincial Auditor General to review information. The information systems group has prepared an inventory of "hard and soft-ware" and a list of issues and strategies for dealing with them. The capital assets group is reviewing all major capital projects and which should be continued. It is also developing the specific plans to transfer those assets to the Regional Health Authorities. Finally, the legal task group has reviewed contracts and leases and have concluded that most are transferable. A report on the conclusions of all the work groups will be "rolled" into a report for the Health and Wellness Minister in a little over a month's time.

7. The Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health (AAMIMH) has maintained regular contact with the government's transition team in order to receive information and provide advice. A meeting to review the task group's recommendations with the transition team will be held October 29. The full AAMIMH membership met on October 7 to address short- and long-term goals. The Alliance's Director of the Secretariat, Dr. Haroon Nasir, has resigned his position for health reasons and he has been replaced effective October 1 by Mr. Peter Portlock. The AAMIMH Chair and former CMHA Divisional President, Dennis Anderson, last year received a National CMHA award for his work in forming the AAMIMH coalition and advocating for change. On August 30, the results of his efforts were reported in an Edmonton Journal special entitled, "Edmonton Inside and Out." The following week he was awarded a Medal of Honour by the Alberta Medical Association (AMA). The prestigious award recognizes the contributions of non-physicians to advancing health care in the province. A second recipient, nurse Lou Winthers of Calgary, a former CMHA volunteer, was also recognized for her efforts in the mental health field.
8. Dr. Larry Ohlhauser, the chair of the government's "Mazankowski" implementation team, has publicly expressed concern about "what mental health services will look like after devolution." He has arranged an invitational consultation meeting with about 20 key stakeholders planned for the evening of October 17. The AAMIMH will send two representatives.
9. The March 6-7, 2003 interdisciplinary and intersectoral conference of the AAMIMH is taking form. Detail will be available in a future edition of eFACTS, but protect the dates. The location is Edmonton's Fantasyland Hotel.
10. CMHA National's nationwide survey and consultation to develop a recommended mental health policy for the Government of Canada will be done in partnership with Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and PEI. The four provincial associations will facilitate contact with the remaining provinces and territories. More detail on the project will be provided in future editions of eFACTS.
11. In July, the Minister of Community Development, Gene Zwosdesky, wrote CMHA thanking the Association for its participation in the development of the new Alberta Brain Injury Network. The program will include new information systems, educational materials, outreach teams to connect families with services and the beginning of prevention initiatives. Seven contracted agencies (including CMHA in Red Deer) are providing a range of services across Alberta. A new "Brain Injury Survival Guide" was released this week and more specific information is available at 780-415-2747. The initiative is a good start and Minister Zwosdesky deserves credit for championing the cause.

12. The Alberta Government plans to review the Protection of Persons in Care Act. The legislation which was designed in 1998 to try to protect people in publicly funded programs like “nursing homes” from abuse; by requiring any abuse to be reported. The Act has several limitations and CMHA is actively involved in the review process. A policy paper is intended to be presented to CMHA’s Divisional Board October 19 and that document will serve as the basis for CMHA’s submission to government.
13. The Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (Romanow Commission) will be publishing some 40 research and discussion papers on various facets of health care reform. Written by academics, there are currently 24 available and, while none relate directly to mental health issues, many are relevant, i.e. financing and public participation. The papers are expected to influence the thinking of the Commission and are available to the public on the Commission’s web site at www.healthcarecommission.ca
14. Two new reports from CMHA National are very worthwhile getting. The first, “Working Well, An Employers Guide to Hiring and Retaining People with Mental Illness” and the second, “Creating a Culturally Inclusive Organization – A Resource Action Guide,” contain good research and practical measures. Contact a local office or the National Association through www.cmha.ab.ca
15. A reminder of the annual National CMHA conference to be held in Ottawa on November 16-19. Program information is available through any CMHA office or the National web site at www.cmha.ca
16. The CMHA Alberta Division’s Annual General Meeting, education session and awards ceremony are planned in conjunction with the South Region of CMHA for October 18 at the Lethbridge Lodge. The education forum will feature a panel discussion on how to influence government. Panellists include Cabinet Minister Clint Dunford, Opposition Leader Dr. Ken Nicol, and former Cabinet Minister Dennis Anderson. More information is available through any office of CMHA. The public meetings will be followed by meetings of the Division’s Board of Directors.
17. The CMHA’s promotion of criminal justice “diversion” programs to move people with mental illnesses who have committed minor crimes from criminal justice to the health system has gained some momentum due to the support and advocacy of the Edmonton Police Commission. The Commission has endorsed lobbying the Alberta Government for an Edmonton based program and has carried successful resolutions promoting Alberta and Canada-wide programs to the Alberta and Canadian Association of Police Boards. Lawyer Aleck Trawick continues to represent CMHA on a provincial steering group and will try to use that medium to press for government budget support for the next fiscal year.

18. The CMHA's opposition to policies of the Alberta Mental Health Board regarding release of confidential client records appears to have been successful. Pressure on Regional CMHA Boards has stopped and the imminent transfer of programs to the Regional Health Authorities will produce a whole new relationship. Initial CMHA concerns with some of the perceived limits in the legislation will be reintroduced to government during the 2003 review of the legislation. CMHA partners in opposing some of the Acts provisions, the Alberta Medical Association and the United Nurses of Alberta, will also participate in that process.
19. The Alberta Division of CMHA has joined a partnership of the University of Alberta, the Schizophrenia Society of Alberta and the Self Help Network in submitting a research proposal on Stigma and Discrimination to the Alberta Heritage Foundation for medical research. More information is available from CMHA.
20. The \$51 million Community Lottery Board Program eliminated in the last provincial Budget was replaced in part by the new \$30 million Community Initiative Program. The Program will support smaller, project-based initiatives in areas such as community services, seniors' services, libraries, arts and culture, sports, education, health and recreation. The maximum grant will be \$75,000 per project per year, and applications can be submitted anytime throughout the year. For more information, go to Alberta Gaming at www.gaming.gov.ab.ca
21. A recent study by University of Alberta's exercise gerontologist, Professor Sandy Cousins, concludes that Bingo offers important recreational and social benefits for seniors. The interaction with others and excitement probably adds to longevity according to the study.
22. The CMHA Executive Director's new book, "Political Asylums," has received unprecedented demand and sales according to the Muttart Foundation's distributor at Grant MacEwan College. Provincial media coverage has continued, universities and colleges are considering it for course materials and Ron LaJeunesse was a keynote speaker at the 2002 Schizophrenia Conference in Edmonton. The presentation was followed by a workshop on understanding and influencing government. Calgary Herald's Catherine Ford described the book as "one of the best-written, most insightful and even thrilling books to be published this year."
23. If the hypothesis is true, that people who have experienced adversity, illness and disability tend to be more sensitive to the ill and disabled, Alberta's Premier Ralph Klein could be an important ally in advancing the CMHA agenda. In a new "authorized biography" by columnist Don Martin, entitled "King Ralph: The Political Life and Success of Ralph Klein," Martin reports a very difficult upbringing for the Premier, characterized by alcoholism, abuse and a hospitalization for an emotional breakdown.

24. A new study published by Health Canada, "A Report on Mental Illness in Canada" was released October 3. This is the first national survey of "mental health," but unfortunately tends to focus on disorder and facilities. The national snapshot, developed by a broad coalition of health professionals, is available at the CMHA's National web site www.cmha.ca
25. Albertans are some of the world's most compassionate people towards sufferers of schizophrenia, as suggested by new research by Dr. Gus Thompson at the University of Alberta. The study concluded that Albertans have a much higher level of understanding about the illness, and 60 percent of Albertans said they would support increasing taxes to pay for progress for mentally ill people. More information is available from CMHA, Alberta Division.

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