

MEMBER UPDATE



ALBERTA HEALTH SERVICES RESTRUCTURING

A Message from AUPE Executive

The recent announcement regarding the restructuring and dissolution of AHS raised immediate concerns amongst AUPE, other unions and all healthcare workers. Despite the government rhetoric of improving services, protecting jobs and creating greater efficiencies, we all need to be alert to the potential for further privatization and contracting out as a result of these announced changes.

This announcement took everyone by surprise. AUPE, along with other unions was called into a meeting with the deputy minister of health two hours before the actual announcement was made. AUPE, and the other unions, slammed the secrecy and lack of any meaningful notice, let alone any prior meaningful consultation. We demanded that we must not only be heard; but listened to and respected in our roles to protect jobs and services. Consequently AUPE, and other unions, will be meeting with the Health Minister on November 16 where we intend to find out more details of the restructuring, how it may impact jobs and what needs to be done to protect those jobs. We will also make it clear that meaningful discussions must continue and be ongoing.

Regardless of how productive these discussions are, and despite the fact that the restructuring will take up to two years, we must focus all of our attention on the upcoming rounds of collective bargaining starting early 2024. This is where we can fight for protection in our collective agreements. This is when we can show our combined strength and solidarity to force government to respect the hard-working Albertans who are the backbone of the healthcare system.

As you are aware we have been preparing for this bargaining for a long time. And the preparations continue as we build up AUPE member strength and solidarity to take whatever action is necessary to be successful in bargaining.

Never before have we been provided with such an opportunity to combine forces within AUPE, and with other unions, to seriously confront any government attempts to cut jobs and services. It is incumbent upon us all to be part of this fight.

In Solidarity,
AUPE Executive Committee

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Further Analysis and Opinion

During a press conference on November 8, Danielle Smith and her cabinet had no choice but to unveil their plan to dismantle AHS directly to the media, after slides of the so-called restructuring were leaked online. Under this new plan, Alberta Health Services will be broken up into four separate organizations, yet somehow maintain a “deeply-integrated” and “streamlined” level of care.

There is no evidence that union leaders, healthcare workers, or support staff responsible for the day-to-day operations of healthcare in Alberta were consulted prior to this announcement. Using very specific language, Danielle Smith offered a promise that this would not impact those jobs which involve “direct patient care” but failed to reassure the thousands of hard-working AUPE members in crucial roles within AHS that would be at risk. She also insisted that the services will remain “publicly funded.”

There are major problems with this plan, not the least of which is the assertion that more complexity and more levels of management will result in better outcomes for patients. While offering no substantive details, Minister of Health Adrianna LaGrange insisted that dismantling AHS has nothing to do with privatization, but rather to offer more “whole system policy/oversight” and better allocation of resources through the Procurement and System Optimization secretariat.

Under the plan, AHS is to be broken up into 4 organizations – Acute Care, Continuing Care, Primary Care and Mental Health and Addictions. This transition is expected to cost **at least** \$85 million over the next 2 years and impact over 250,000 healthcare workers. A staggering \$35 million is earmarked for labour relations battles alone.

Alberta Health will essentially become the central launch pad of privatization, with each sector being cut up and sold off to a for-profit bidder, using taxpayer dollars. A significant amount of time, money and legal action is expected around issues of collective bargaining, pension plans, job classifications and seniority. However, AUPE is firmly positioned to defend bargaining rights under Sections 46 and 48 of the Alberta Labour Relations Code, which covers scenarios where businesses are sold, or when public sector bodies are reorganized. This is likely to start in the new Continuing Care organization, as their only clear mandate will be to oversee the delivery of patient standards, alluding to the privatization of the two remaining seniors care facilities under AHS – Capital Care and Care West.

The AHS or “Alberta Health” brand and corporate identity will become more associated with acute care (emergency rooms) and less with supporting services like ambulatory and lab testing. The highest levels of decision-making power and oversight will reside with the Minister of Health. This is in direct contradiction to their claims that their goals are to “empower” the frontline staff and reduce red tape. In typical UCP fashion, decisions will occur behind closed doors and with less oversight.

Healthcare workers are facing unprecedented levels of burn out and inflation, and there is no short- or medium-term fix in sight, with Minister of Health Adrianna LaGrange admitting that this is a “slow, methodical, thoughtful journey that we’re taking everyone on.”

AUPE believes that this overhauled AHS plan will ultimately create worse outcomes for patients, silence the grassroots providers who stand to lose the most in this deal. Instead of regional autonomy, workers will now face even more layers of management and for-profit operators who will demand higher profit margins at the expense of patient care.