



## ED news – February 2023

It seems 2022 has been a bit of a blur... I realized my last ED news was in April 2021. I want to thank all of you for your dedication to the children, youth and their families that you work with. Everyone has worked hard through very difficult times to get to today.

There have been a few casualties. Through the pandemic, staffing has been very difficult, funds have not increased, the number of children coming into care haven't diminished significantly across the province, and inflation is at an all time high.

*An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Children, Youth and Families*, which came into force January 1, 2020. In Mid 2021, despite this truth being something communities knew for decades, it took the use of scientific methods to locate potential unmarked graves of children buried near the former Kamloops Indian Residential School to garner the attention of non-Indigenous people, both in Canada and globally. "Every Child Matters" has become a rallying cry and reminder for all of us that Indigenous children died or went missing from Indian Residential Schools and similar institutions. As practitioners and caregivers, it is very important that people understand the difficult journey survivors and communities must take in order to find justice and healing. At this time, there are more than 4,000 children's graves that have been identified. This is a stark reminder of why child welfare and child wellbeing services have to reform the way we work with Indigenous children and families.

Throughout all of this, ALIGN has been doing our best to ensure communication bulletins are out to the everyone, posted and available whenever they are needed. We have focused on our Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework (ICUF) which we unveiled in October and will work further with everyone in the fiscal new year. It is our hope that the ICUF is a tool for conversation. Agencies and Indigenous Governing Bodies will need to build relationships and new processes in order to provide the best care possible for Children. We began some of that relationship-building on November 4 with our ***Walking the Children Home Summit***. Part 2 of ***Walking the Children Home*** will be May 29. Stay tuned for the information on where and what times.

In the last year, we have also been working on the **Wellbeing Project**. We have landed on a multi-dimensional definition. With support of elders, knowledge keepers, people with lived experience and our agency leaders, PolicyWise has been able to pull together a document and an illustration of the dimensions of wellbeing. This will be discussed further at our members meeting April 21, 2023. We encourage you to come, listen and participate in the focus groups to develop tools for evaluating how well the sector is doing.

Our ALIGN team is busily trying to develop some COVID resiliency/recovery activities. These include some events focused on staff mental health, wellness, leadership and Occupational Health and Safety. Concurrently, we are trying to figure out how to develop a safety partner and address the increasing costs of WCB and insurance. As we develop the strategy and find funding to support it we will update everyone.

## **Government Relations**

In the last 6 months, our priority has been and continues to be financial advocacy. We are trying to get government commitment to increasing wages and supporting costs of inflation pressures. ALIGN has worked to develop resources and materials to empower agencies, their Boards and staff, providing information and data to navigate the everchanging political landscape in Alberta.

Our counterparts Alberta Council of Disability Services (ACDS) and some of the disability workers groups have been successful in influencing the Ministry of Senior and Community Support Services and Minister Nixon. He recently wrote a letter with his commitment to that sector <https://alignab.ca/align-shares-update-on-social-service-sector-worker-wage-increase-from-jeremy-nixon-minister-of-css-feb-2-2023/>.

In November 2022, ALIGN wrote a briefing to Minister Amery <https://alignab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Government-Briefing-Nov-2022.pdf>. We outlined the issues and the significant challenges right now:

- Chronically underpaid workforce (no increases in group care since 2014)
- Severe fatigue by pandemic demands
  - This leads to a staffing crisis at the frontline. Managers and executives are burnt out adapting, adjusting, and leading through a pandemic crisis. Staff report significant mental health challenges, and turnover rates are significant. Foster and

kinship families absorbed the costs throughout the pandemic in areas of food, child care, and time off due to the needs of isolation.

- Shortfalls in funding
  - The expiration of federal subsidies, decrease in provincial support, drops in donor support, decreased ability to fundraise. Some agencies have foundations that cover shortfalls but those are eroding.
- 30-year peak in inflation
  - Escalating cost of living, administration, indirect service costs like insurance, utilities, workers compensation. These are hard costs that service providers are unable to absorb given the cost cannot be passed on to those we serve.

This is an unsustainable state for service providers, and an unmaintainable situation for vulnerable Albertans who rely on these services. Maintaining quality supports with funding shortfalls and workforce struggles is impossible. Children and staff are at risk. Agencies are at tipping points with many moving into deficit positions due to the increased costs over the last 10 + years.

The full briefing to the Minister, data on the wage differences and the costs of operating expenses that were provided to the Minister is on our website <https://alignab.ca/alberta-budget-election-engagement/>. We also have an updated toolkit provided by Alberta Council available there.

The ASK that our President and Vice President made of the Minister on December 22, 2022, was:

- An immediate 10% increase for wages to CS contracts;
- 25% increase to administrative portion of CS contracts;
- Immediate investment to foster/kinship parents of \$200.00 per child in their home before the end of the year to offset the costs of utilities, food and the pandemic; and
- A commitment to equitable wages and cost of living increase in 2023 budget.

## **What you can do?**

Now we need you to develop your engagement approach. This needs to be a pre-election meeting with your local MLA's. Agencies should reach out to their local MLA's and ask for meetings, if possible have them visit your space. Provide these key messages and ASKs during the meeting.

Tell them your story and how you fit within the messages. You can also share any of the documents on our website that have been created by ALIGN. (wage comparator, costs of living, fact sheet etc.). Make your own ask, even if it is to have your local MLA support the requests going forward - financially support the sector.

The budget will likely be presented on February 29, when the legislature resumes sitting. The next Provincial General Election is scheduled to be held on May 29, 2023 unless the election is called earlier. *The Election Act* fixes the election to a three- month period between March 1 and May 31. This is the critical time to get the attention of your local politicians.

Your agencies can develop your own social media campaigns with these messages and your stories. If you aren't social media savvy then just follow and share ALIGNs messages (starting March, 2023)

You can also follow candidates on social media, attend local candidate debates, and support and attend forums in your area. ALIGN will be hosting some events in your areas, and you will get more details on those as we confirm the times and places.

During the election campaign you can also ask your employees to reach out to candidates or follow them on social media where they can ask questions and give the same key messages. ALIGN will host two advocacy 101 online workshops for staff on March 8<sup>th</sup> – 9 – 10:30 AM and March 9<sup>th</sup> - 3 – 4:30 PM. Our goal here is to prepare staff to approach and influence politicians.

ALIGN will also be reaching out to the UCP and NDP parties to request their positions on supporting the sector.

We are hopeful that budget 2023 has some support for the sector, but that needs to be sustainable and flexible moving forward. Let's create a movement and see if we can get some action!

I would like to thank all the agencies that recently made a voluntary donation to our Government Relations activities. If you would like to donate please feel free. You can send your cheques to our office or contact [CarmenM@alignab.ca](mailto:CarmenM@alignab.ca) to discuss other ways of providing support.

Also, to note is next month you will receive your membership renewal. We have a few new categories of membership so please have a look and see where you fit. We have a lower category for agencies that have less overall budgets, a new individual membership for retirees and



students, and a higher category for agencies that are very large. Stay tuned for that in March and we thank you for your continued support of ALIGN. We are truly better together!

If you have any other suggestions, or any questions at all please do not hesitate to reach out to me, [RhondaB@alignab.ca](mailto:RhondaB@alignab.ca).