
Chapter 4:

NAVIGATING THE ALBERTA GOVERNMENT

You can empower your nonprofit to engage with the Alberta Government by knowing more about the types of decisions it makes, and the services and programs it provides. Being aware of the appropriate avenues to address policy concerns is one of the first steps towards effective advocacy and engagement for your nonprofit. This knowledge can elevate your advocacy efforts by ensuring the actors targeted are well positioned to listen, consult, and provide actionable solutions to your concerns.

The Alberta Government is empowered to create legislation in areas that fall within provincial jurisdiction, from health and education, to family and social services. It has three important branches: the Legislative Assembly, the Cabinet (or Executive Council) and the Public Service. Each branch serves a different role in policy and decision-making, approving relevant legislation, and providing programs and services to citizens.

The Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Alberta is divided into 87 constituencies (or ridings), representing over 4 million Albertans. Each of these constituencies has one seat which is represented by an elected official known as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Together, each of these 87 representatives make up the Legislative Assembly of Alberta (also known as the Legislature or the "Leg").

MLAs are elected by Albertans through the 'first past the post style,' which means the candidate in each constituency who wins the highest number of votes becomes the MLA for that constituency. The Premier is the leader of the party forming the government. Provincial elections occur every four years between March 1 and May 31, with the date chosen by the Premier. MLAs in Alberta are generally affiliated with a political party. The dominant political parties in Alberta include the Alberta Liberal Party, the Alberta New Democratic Party (NDP), the Alberta Party, and the United Conservative Party (a merger between what was previously known as the Progressive Conservative Association of Alberta and the Wildrose Party). Independent MLAs do not belong to a political party.

Majority governments are formed when a political party wins more than half of the seats in the Legislature. Minority governments are formed when no political party wins a majority of seats. It is important to note that Alberta has never elected a minority government.

Members of the Opposition are MLAs who are not part of the governing party. The role of the opposition is to hold the government accountable, criticize government activity, propose amendments to policies, and present themselves to the public as an alternative to the party in office. They work to ensure that legislation is carefully considered, and alternate views are expressed and debated. The opposition party with the most seats is called the Official Opposition, and the leader of that party is known as the Leader of the Opposition. When bills or motions are introduced, the Leader of the Opposition, or an Official Opposition Critic, is usually called on after a Cabinet Minister who speaks on behalf of the Government.

MLAs also serve on Committees of the Legislative Assembly. These all-party committees discuss specific topics and then submit recommendations to the Legislative Assembly, such as a recommendation to implement a new Act or amend an Act already in place.

The Legislative Assembly votes on proposed legislation brought forward by any MLA. When a bill is brought forward by an MLA who is not a Cabinet Minister, it is called a Private Members' Bill. Bills become Acts once they have received three readings and Royal Assent, or proclamation by the Lieutenant Governor. The Assembly also votes on the provincial budget.

The Cabinet (Executive Council)

The Cabinet, also known as the Executive Council, is made up of the Premier and Cabinet Ministers. As head of the Executive Council, the Premier selects Cabinet Ministers from MLAs of the governing party to lead a Ministry. As such, citizens do not elect their Cabinet Ministers in direct elections. However, Cabinet Ministers are elected representatives of the Legislative Assembly and play an important role in our system of governance – even though in many jurisdictions, authority has become increasingly centralized in powerful offices of the Premier.

While MLAs are elected as members of a political party (except in the rare case of an Independent member), their role as Cabinet Minister is to act in the interests of the people they represent, not in the interests of their political party.

During sessions of the Legislative Assembly, Ministers introduce and debate legislation for consideration by MLAs. They are the main drivers of government policies and priorities. Cabinet Ministers present plans and budgets for areas of responsibility within their ministries to engage with MLAs and obtain funding authorization for programs. Ministers then develop department programs and ensure that laws administered by their Ministry are enforced. The Cabinet provides direction for policy development and implementation administered by the Alberta Public Service.

The Alberta Public Service

The Alberta Public Service is made up of over 27,000 government employees who perform policy, legal, and administrative duties needed to deliver programs and services to Albertans. These employees are non-partisan, meaning they do not represent a political party. These are not elected positions; rather, public servants are professional administrators and continue in their roles even when elected governments change. These positions are hired from within the Public Service, or through an external process open to the general public.

Relationship Between Nonprofits and the Alberta Government

The Alberta Government, like all levels of government, is intrinsically linked to nonprofits. It provides resources and support to nonprofits that help them to effectively accomplish their mission and initiatives, examples of this include:

- Providing programs and services that support communities.
- Providing grants, awards and other types of funding models.
- Leading key research and innovation initiatives.
- Partnering on educational and awareness campaigns.
- Providing a provincial platform to share ideas and perspectives.

In addition to election engagement opportunities (see chapter 7), your nonprofit should make efforts to build and establish relationships with public servants in the Alberta Government. Fostering these relationships allows for open communication and can streamline the sharing of information. Furthermore, public service employees are not elected officials, so even if the government of the day changes through an election, you may continue to benefit from the relationships that you have built with public servants. It is important to remember that your nonprofit is free to engage with all three branches in the Alberta Government, including **local MLAs** (members of the governing party and all other major political parties represented in the legislature), Cabinet Ministers and Alberta public servants.¹¹

Ready to engage, but still not sure what to connect with the government about?

Here is a list of ideas to get you started:

- Share the successes and impact of your nonprofit.
- Share your visions of the future for your nonprofit or the sector.
- Share different approaches for tackling common issues.
- Share how government programs and services are experienced in the community.
- Indicate needs for your nonprofit or the sector.

Three Levels of Government: Who Does What?

Understanding the different levels of government and strategically addressing concerns to the right level, will go a long way to ensure your nonprofit achieves its advocacy goals. To clarify these roles, the following chart lays out the high-level responsibilities of each level of government. Note that some responsibilities, such as environmental management, are the responsibility of more than one level of government.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT addresses the needs of all Canadians, examples including:

- Aboriginal Laws and Rights (overlaps with provincial government)
- Canadian Pension Plan and Old Age Security
- Employment Insurance Benefits
- Income Tax Act
- Criminal Law
- Immigration Policies (overlaps with provincial government)

THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT places its primary concern on the needs of Albertans, examples including:

- Education and Training
- Health Programs, Services and Regulations
- Family and Social Services
- Employment and Labour Standards

THE MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT aims to handle issues facing citizens living within defined municipalities and local communities, examples including:

- Affordable Housing (overlaps with federal government)
- Community and Youth Services
- Public Transportation and Parking Bylaws
- Libraries, Parks and Public Spaces
- Waste and Water Management

RESPONSIBILITIES OF KEY MINISTRIES

MINISTRY	RELEVANT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES PROVIDED
Ministry of Children's Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancing Futures Benefit • Alberta Child Benefit • Child Care Support and Subsidy • Child Intervention • Early Learning and Child Care Centres
Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmental Disabilities Support • Employment Services • Family and Community Support • Family Violence Prevention • Low-income Support Programs
Ministry of Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Initiatives Program • Sport, Recreation and Tourism • Stars of Alberta Volunteer Awards
Treasury Board and Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget planning • Financial management and economic analysis • Administration of tax and revenue programs
Ministry of Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Child Education • Elementary Education • Secondary Education • Adult Learning • Apprenticeship and Industry Training
Ministry of Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AHCIP • Cancer Screening • Continuing Care • Mental Health and Addictions • Midwifery • Primary Health Care • Protection for Persons in Care • Seniors' Care
Ministry of Justice and Solicitor General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal Justice • Child Support programs • Court Services • Criminal Law • Dispute Resolution Network • Family Law • Victims of Crime

[RETURN TO TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

At present, the Alberta Public Service includes 25 ministries.

The ministries and Cabinet Ministers are subject to change, and very often do following an election. Each Ministry has a Deputy Minister, who leads the policy development that supports the work of the Legislative Assembly. Working with each Deputy Minister are Assistant Deputy Ministers who lead separate divisions of the ministry. Each division is divided into branches which are led by Directors. Managers report to Directors and staff report to managers.