Policy to the Point
Navigating the Alberta Government
THE ALBERTA GOVERNMENT: WHO DOES WHAT?

Nonprofits are intrinsically linked to the Alberta Government. Due to the pertinent role the government serves, CCVO has provided a refresher on how the Alberta Government works with the aim to elevate your understanding and assist in your engagement with the provincial government.

This resource provides a brief overview of three important branches of government: the Legislative Assembly, the Cabinet, and the Alberta Public Service. It also lists key Ministries for the nonprofit sector and some of their responsibilities, including relevant programs and services for nonprofits.

Please note that the Ministries and their priority areas are always subject to change, especially following an election.

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 and 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 the 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 among 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.

At present, the Alberta Public Service includes 23 ministries. The Premier has the ability to adjust the number of ministries and change the Cabinet Ministers.

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.