

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Your guide to the Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP)

The AMA's Physician and Family Support Program (PFSP) has supported Alberta physicians for nearly three decades. It is delivered and grant-funded through an agreement between the Alberta Medical Association and Government of Alberta, and has operated in its current form since 1998.

In this episode of the *Alberta Doctors' Digest* podcast, Editor-in-Chief Marvin Polis sat down with Dr. Erica Dance and Dr. Diana Meakins, PFSP's Clinical and Program Co-Directors, to explore how the program works and whom it serves.

What the PFSP does: three core services

To understand the PFSP at a high level, Dr. Meakins offered a succinct summary:

The PFSP is a confidential program that provides support with personal health issues through three core services:

1. 24/7/365 Assistance Line
2. Physician Wellness, Events and Program Promotion
3. Case Coordination.

The PFSP's services are designed with a simple goal: to enhance the quality of patient care and public safety by promoting health and wellbeing for the medical profession that cares for all Albertans.

The Assistance Line: PFSP's flagship

At the centre of the PFSP is its 24/7/365 Assistance Line, a service both co-directors regard as foundational.

"The Assistance Line is really the flagship of the program, and it's where we pay a lot of attention and focus," said Dr. Dance.

Eligible callers – physicians, resident physicians, medical students and their immediate family members – can phone the Assistance Line at any time.

Calls are answered by unify consulting group, a third-party service provider with deep experience in physician health. The PFSP's partnership with unify means callers connect with people who genuinely understand the realities of medical practice. Callers always speak with a trained professional who collects key information to ensure their call is directed appropriately.

Crucially, callers are offered the chance to speak with a physician peer. As Dr. Dance explained:

“We have Assessment Physicians who take calls on the line and are always available to speak about whatever it is they're calling about. And you can receive some peer support, active listening and validation of your concerns.”

For those seeking therapy, this discussion also helps the third-party service provider who manages the Assistance Line to make the most suitable match to a therapist.

Why do physicians call?

The reasons physicians reach out are wide-ranging. As Dr. Dance put it:

“People call the Assistance Line for a variety of reasons, and we like to say that you can call us for anything. We're always happy to help.”

She continued, “Some of the most common reasons, though, are around crisis situations or mental health concerns when people are feeling down or unwell-- and especially if it relates to substance use.”

Callers also seek support for home, relationship and family challenges. Occupational stress is another frequent theme.

“People often call us too for occupational stress,” Dr. Dance explained, “whether it's stress at work or they need some help to arrange something like an independent medical examination that has been required from our regulatory body or the health authority. We can support through those processes as well.”

The PFSP also hears from physicians seeking help after an adverse event, or when they simply need a confidential space to talk through a difficult situation.

And sometimes the call is made out of concern for someone else:

“We also get calls from third parties ... colleagues, family members or leaders in the medical community can call our line to get advice if they have worries about their physician colleague or physician family member.”

Physicians for Physicians (P4P)

One support within PFSP is its Physicians for Physicians (P4P) service.

As Dr. Dance explained,

“We're big supporters that all physicians, medical students, resident physicians as well, should have a family physician of their own for primary care.”

Family physicians willing to take colleagues as patients sign up to be a part of this service, supporting callers who may not have a primary care physician. While accessing

this service does not imply priority or expedited access, and callers must still meet clinic intake requirements and standard wait times, it does help physicians connect with colleagues able to take them on.

Removing barriers to support

The PFSP's decades of experience have taught the team a great deal about the obstacles that prevent physicians from seeking help.

Round-the-clock access is one way the program addresses this and confidentiality is another.

"We very much care about confidentiality and privacy, so we have multiple mechanisms in place to ensure that a caller's privacy and confidentiality is maintained," said Dr. Dance

She added that peer support is also central.

"We feel very strongly about peer support and the ability to speak to a peer. We have *physicians* who take calls on the Assistance Line, so you're speaking to a colleague who's been there and who knows what you've been through or something similar."

Financial accessibility matters too. Each physician, resident physician or medical student is eligible for up to six funded hours of therapy in a 12-month period.

There are also six hours of funded therapy in a 12-month period for immediate family members to share.

And for those callers with more complex concerns, the PFSP offers wraparound support through Case Coordination.

Case Coordination: wraparound support

For physicians, resident physicians or medical students facing more complex or sustained challenges, the PFSP offers Case Coordination, a voluntary service designed to help them navigate both clinical and non-clinical supports through a collaborative approach.

As Dr. Meakins explained, this service provides continuity for those who need more support. Case coordinators work with clients over time, helping them manage issues that may span personal, occupational or mental health domains.

The PFSP's role is not to provide medical care but rather to support clients in navigating all the systems and providers involved to ensure they get the support they need.

Physician Wellness, Events and Program Promotion

The PFSP plays a broader role in shaping wellness culture across Alberta's medical community. This includes ongoing education, outreach and collaboration with learners and practicing physicians alike.

As Dr. Meakins described, PFSP staff participate in a variety of events throughout the year: "We attend conferences, events and orientations for learners in Alberta." The

program also contributes regularly to the *PFSP Perspectives* column in *Alberta Doctors' Digest*, offering brief, accessible pieces on physician well being.

Additionally, the PFSP works directly with physicians to develop presentations on wellness-related topics – part of a strategy to normalize discussions about health, resilience and support.

Additional supports: Group therapy and crisis response

In addition to its core services, the PFSP offers group therapy and group crisis support.

Group therapy may be recommended when a caller and their therapist believe a group setting could be beneficial.

Group crisis sessions are offered to physician, resident physician or student groups following a crisis event. Both services can be accessed by calling the Assistance Line.

Who can access the PFSP?

All PFSP services are available in Alberta to:

- Physicians
- Resident physicians
- Medical students

Immediate family members, including spouses and dependent children under 25, are eligible to call the Assistance Line.

Third-party callers concerned about a physician may also access the Assistance Line for advice.

Confidentiality: The cornerstone of the PFSP

The PFSP takes confidentiality extremely seriously.

Dr. Dance explained:

“We function independently from the regulator, the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, as well as from the health authorities and the universities.”

“We also have multiple systems in place to ensure confidentiality of each caller.”

All calls handled by the third-party service provider remain confidential, and no identifying information is shared with the AMA or core PFSP team.

Callers are assigned an alphanumeric identifier, so their identity is separated from demographic and referral information. Therapy referrals are not recorded in the provincial electronic health record.

Only non-identifiable information is shared with the PFSP for statistical purposes, program oversight and development and to support the Assessment Physicians who take the calls.

Confidentiality is reviewed with callers at the start of each call and questions about confidentiality are always welcome.

If a conflict arises (for example, if the caller knows the on-call Assessment Physician) there is always a second Assessment Physician available.

And, if needed, there is a third option which is Dr. Dance and Dr. Meakins who are also always available if there's a conflict with both Assessment Physicians.

From the Case Coordination side, Dr. Meakins added:

“We use an informed consent process to disclose personal information in order to liaise with treatment providers, as well as other non-clinical supports who may be involved in more complex situations.”

She continued, “We work with clients to ensure they understand what information will be shared and the purpose of the disclosure. We will not share information without clients’ consent.”

Limits to this confidentiality

Dr. Meakins clarified that rare limits exist:

“In situations where an Assessment Physician or Case Coordinators are obligated by law or regulatory standards, they would be required to take reasonable steps to ensure the safety of the client or others if there are concerns. This could include reporting to appropriate authorities, but these concerns would be discussed with the client transparently, with the goal of coming up with a plan together that the client is comfortable with.”

Your Frequently Asked Questions

When can I call?

- Anytime. Physicians, resident physicians, medical students and their immediate family members can call the Assistance Line 24/7/365.

What if I know the Assessment Physician on call?

- A second Assessment Physician is always available.
- If both are in conflict, Dr. Dance and Dr. Meakins are available as a third option.

How many therapy hours do I have?

- Each physician, resident physician or medical student is eligible for up-to-six funded hours of therapy in a 12-month period.
- There are also six hours of funded therapy in a 12-month period for immediate family members to share.

How do I renew my hours?

- Call the Assistance Line and discuss this with the staff there.

If I see a therapist privately, can they become a part of the therapy network?

- If you have a therapist that you're already connected to or interested in seeing, please call the Assistance Line and speak with someone from the third-party service provider.
- They may already be a member of our therapy network so that we could cover the therapy hours, or they may be able to be vetted and onboarded into that network.
- If for some reason that's not possible, we'd be very happy to refer you to a new therapist who would be a good fit.

Can the PFSP refer me to a family physician?

- Yes – through the P4P or Physicians for Physicians portion of our program. Call the Assistance Line and they will help you.

Final thoughts

When asked what message they hoped to leave with physicians, Dr. Meakins offered reassurance:

“PFSP is here to support you throughout your career. Please don’t hesitate to reach out.”

Dr. Dance agreed:

“No issue is too big or too small. It’s never too early or too late to call. We’re here to support you and are very happy to do so.”

Call the PFSP Assistance Line at 1-877-767-4637. It is available 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Credits

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Call AMA's
Physician and
Family Support
Program

1.877.767.4637
24 hours a day



**We are here
with you and
for you.**

If you need to talk to someone now, call 1.877.767.4637. The PFSP Assistance Line is available 24/7/365.