

August 11, 2004

Enhanced package benefits all seniors

Edmonton...Seniors in Alberta will benefit from changes made to the Alberta Seniors Benefit Program, optical and dental assistance, the elimination of health insurance premiums for seniors, and assistance with education property taxes.

"The changes mean that more seniors will be eligible for cash benefits and seniors already receiving cash benefits will see an increase. Also, more seniors will be eligible for optical and dental benefits," said Stan Woloshyn, Minister of Seniors.

Changes to the Alberta Seniors Benefit (ASB) program for lower-income seniors mean that an additional 17,000 seniors will receive a monthly cash benefit. Single seniors with an income of \$21,000 or less and couples with a combined income of \$33,000, will be eligible for a monthly cash benefit. The increase in thresholds comes into effect July 1, 2004, which is the beginning of the program's new benefit year.

Seniors already receiving the monthly cash benefit will receive an increase of at least \$60 a year. The changes also bring homeowners up to the same maximum benefit level as others such as renters. The August cheque will include the increase for July and August. Letters informing recipients of changes to their monthly benefits will be sent in the coming weeks.

New dental and optical coverage is an investment in the good health of Alberta's seniors and will take effect April 2005. The coverage will be a progressive, co-pay benefit, which means that benefits will be based on income with maximum assistance targeted to lower-income seniors. It also means that many seniors who are not currently eligible will be able to apply for the Special Needs Assistance for Seniors program for assistance with dental and optical expenses. Details of the program will be finalized and released prior to April 2005.

The property tax component of the benefit package will take effect at the beginning of the 2005 municipal tax year and will bring some predictability and stability to seniors' tax bills. Details of the property tax assistance will be made available in early 2005.

"Eliminating health insurance premiums has long been a priority of mine," Woloshyn said. "A single senior will save \$528 and a senior couple, \$1,056 each year; this will have a direct and immediate affect on their pocketbooks."

The premium exemption comes into effect Oct. 1, 2004, which is the beginning of the next billing period.

"I'm very pleased that Alberta's debt-free status has allowed this government to enhance seniors' benefits," Woloshyn said.

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Backgrounder

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Highlights of enhanced benefit package for seniors

Alberta Seniors Benefit - Thresholds for assistance

As of July 1, 2004, eligibility thresholds for monthly cash benefits will increase by \$2,150 for a single senior to \$21,000 and by \$4,260 for senior couples to \$33,000.

Monthly cash benefits increase beginning July 2004, which is the start of the program's benefit year. People receiving this benefit will receive the July and August increase in their August 2004 cheques. Letters informing recipients of changes to their monthly benefits will be sent in the coming weeks.

The Alberta Seniors Benefit is an income-tested program that provides monthly cash benefits to eligible, low-income seniors. Assistance provided through the Alberta Seniors Benefit is in addition to federal benefits like Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Alberta Seniors Benefit - Yearly maximums

Single senior - annual income of \$21,000 or less

Accommodation	Yearly Maximum
Homeowner	\$2,880
Renter	\$2,880
Lodge	\$2,880
Long-term care	\$2,880*
Other	\$1,860

Senior couple - annual income of \$33,000 or less

Accommodation	Yearly Maximum
Homeowner	\$4,320
Renter	\$4,320
Lodge	\$4,320
Long-term care	\$4,320*
Other	\$3,720

* Those seniors who live in long-term care and receive monthly cash benefits under the Alberta Seniors Benefit are eligible to receive additional financial assistance to a maximum of \$4,455 annually to help cover accommodation costs.

Alberta Health Care Premium exemptions

As of October 1, 2004, all seniors in Alberta regardless of income will no longer have to pay Alberta Health Care Insurance Premiums. For a single senior, the elimination of health care premiums provides a cost savings of \$528 per year. For senior couples, the health care premium exemption provides an annual cost savings of \$1,056.

The four changes to seniors benefits include a \$50 million investment in cash benefits under the Alberta Seniors Benefit, a \$40 million investment in the Special Needs Assistance for Seniors program, financial assistance for seniors with the costs of education property taxes and the elimination of health care premiums for all seniors. The benefit package totals approximately \$190-million annually.

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