



Office of the President and Chief Executive Officer
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October 12, 2007

To All Saskatoon Health Region Staff, Physicians and Volunteers:

Re: Guidelines for Communicating during an Election

Due to the provincial election call on October 10, Saskatchewan Health is advising all Region Health Authorities (RHAs) to comply with the Elections Act regarding any communications during the election campaign. As President and CEO, it is my responsibility to ensure that the SHR complies with these guidelines until after the provincial election takes place on November 7, 2007.

I strongly urge you to review the guidelines (attached) to ensure that you and your staff are aware and in compliance.

If you are unsure if an activity is in compliance with the guidelines, please forward any communications initiatives your care group or support department may be undertaking between now and November 7 to Corporate and Public Affairs at (306) 655-3253. Should any of these initiatives (e.g. out of province travel or external communications) be in possible conflict with the guidelines or the Elections Act, we will let you know how to proceed. For those that appear to be in conflict, we will review them and make a determination as to the risk associated with proceeding with such initiatives.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation with this matter.

Sincerely,

Maura Davies, FCCHSE
President and Chief Executive Officer
Saskatoon Health Region

Attachment

Guidelines from Saskatchewan Health

These guidelines, which are issued to government departments, agencies and Crown corporations, are intended to ensure all government agencies not only comply with section 277 of *The Election Act, 1996*, but also take every step to avoid the appearance of the government taking an unfair advantage during an election/by-election period.

Regional health authorities will follow the guidelines on the basis that the RHAs were created through provincial legislation and the department appoints the boards that oversee the organizations. The Health Quality Council, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO), the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation and the Saskatchewan Impaired Driver Treatment Centre will also receive this summary. Responsibility for ensuring compliance with these guidelines rests with each RHA. A unit in Executive Council interprets the Act, in consultation with Saskatchewan Justice, to ensure a unified government policy is followed.

The Act states that during an election campaign, no government department shall publish any information with respect to the activities of the department. Further, every person in Saskatchewan in charge of a broadcasting undertaking in the province or an undertaking that publishes a newspaper, magazine or periodical shall file with the Chief Electoral Officer a solemn declaration setting out any advertising/ publishing that it has done on behalf of any department and the name of the department.

The Act exempts information that must be published in the public interest because of an emergency, with an emergency defined as a situation where the health or safety of the public is at risk, or where there is a risk of environmental or economic crisis, and timely communication with the public is imperative.

The term "publish" has been very broadly defined to include any means of communicating or disseminating information and includes direct mailings, websites, and any form of print, electronic or outdoor advertising.

The following would be prohibited (and cancelled if they were planned or underway):

- News releases (unless the topic is of vital importance - e.g. boil water advisory);
- Proactive media contacts. Media responses would be to provide technical or factual information by officials. If policy or program rationale is questioned, the matter would be referred to the Ministers to handle. **However, it should be noted that the Ministers' availability during an election campaign is curtailed;**
- Advertising (except in the case of emergency). This does not apply to advertising intended to ensure the health and safety of the public. For example, an advertisement urging people to get a flu shot would be allowed;
- Unsolicited publication distribution (newsletters, etc.);
- All signage promoting government programs or activities (removed or covered);
- Official openings of government buildings or facilities. However, the Minister could participate in the opening of a private project or appear at a ceremony conducted by another level of government (i.e. federal or municipal);
- Displays (e.g. trade shows, exhibitions) promoting government programs or policies;
- Polling and focus testing;
- Speeches or public statements concerning controversial issues or those promoting programs or policies;

- New, promotional material posted on a website, Internet banner ads or bulk e-mail advertising messages;
- Promotional giveaways;
- Public consultations unless required by law;
- Promotional presentations;
- New sponsorships - acknowledgement of existing sponsorships should be taken down, covered up or removed.

The following would be permitted, with caveats:

- Personnel, tender and legal advertising of an essential nature would be permitted but worded so as to avoid extolling any government program or service;
- Existing brochures and publications may continue to be displayed and made available to the public but no new publications would be produced or distributed;
- Signs and posters would be restricted to those needed for identification or direction. Signs at construction sites that are laudatory or provide the government with publicity would be strictly prohibited;
- Participation in public conferences/stakeholder meetings would be severely curtailed; statements should be confined to technical matters only.

The following would be allowed, without restriction:

- "Everyday" contacts between officials and regular clientele;
- Extension work of a technical nature;
- Ongoing reports/services that provide necessary, useful, non-political information (e.g. West Nile Virus surveillance results);
- Seminars, conferences or meetings where government employees explain technical information;
- Educational projects of an ongoing nature (e.g. talks in schools about oral health hygiene, food handling courses);
- All forms of legal advertising;
- Attendance and participation in committees, advisory boards, etc. that are part of routine duties;
- All requests from the public for information, brochures, publications.

RHA et al considerations

Caution and common sense are the watchwords as we go about our business during an election campaign. The objective is not to be seen directly or indirectly interfering in the political process. Here are some things RHAs, the Saskatchewan Cancer Agency, the Health Quality Council, the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO), the Saskatchewan Impaired Driver Treatment Centre and the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation should consider, in addition to the provisions of *The Election Act, 1996*. While these recommendations are not grounded in the legislation, you are expected to follow them:

- RHAs will follow the communications guidelines issued by Executive Council;
- Senior officials at RHAs, including chief executive officers and vice-presidents, will avoid out-of-province travel during the campaign and discourage travel by other employees outside their region;
- RHAs will not hold public board meetings during the campaign;

- RHAs will not hold internal meetings of a contentious nature that may lead to the public discussion of controversial topics. For example, it would not be prudent to hold a meeting on a proposed initiative that could involve job losses;
- RHAs will refrain from appointing senior executives (chief executive officer, vice-presidents) during an election campaign. Any exceptions will require the prior approval of the Deputy Minister of Health. However, the hiring of front-line health care workers may proceed during an election campaign;
- RHAs will work closely with health foundations to ensure the communications of the latter do not create an issue;
- During a campaign, representatives from RHAs will not attend trade shows and recruitment events inside the province. However, RHAs may send representatives to trade shows and recruitment events outside the province;
- RHAs will not sign major new contracts - defined as contracts in excess of \$1 million - during the election campaign, except in the case of emergencies.