

## Alberta to begin funding midwives next spring

### Province to cover costs for birth at home or hospital

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Alberta women will be able to deliver their baby with the assistance of a midwife for free starting next spring after the province pledged to publicly fund the service that formerly came with a steep price tag.

Advocates hailed Thursday's announcement for offering more choice and relieving pressure on the stressed medical system, but cautioned some expectant moms may have a difficult time finding a midwife because demand for their services far exceeds supply.

Previously, midwifery services were not covered by the public health system, making Alberta the only province to regulate midwives without paying for the service. Couples who hired midwives had to pay a \$3,500 fee.

"This is fantastic news," said Sharon Schroeder, a 39-year-old Calgarian who used midwives for her four children and will do the same for her fifth baby, expected next spring.

"It gives women more options to have the kind of birthing experience that perhaps they couldn't afford before."

Alberta midwives have been fighting for public funding for more than a decade.

Government approved the regulation of midwifery in 1994 and four years later the first Alberta midwives were registered to practise in the province.

"This is the final piece of the puzzle that has fallen into place and we're grateful," said Meryl Moulton, past president of the Alberta Association of Midwives.

Under the changes announced Thursday, midwifery services will become part of the province's publicly funded health system on April 1, 2009.

Pregnant women who want the services of a midwife will have their care covered and the option of delivering their child in hospital, at a birthing centre or at home.

Government estimates the decision will cost \$4 million in the first year.

Health Minister Ron Liepert said the changes will offer women options for their



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald

Pregnant with her fifth child, Sharon Schroeder and her husband Elmer plan to once again use a midwife in the upcoming birth. Previously, they had personally employed midwives for the delivery of their first four children.

pregnancy and delivery.

"I believe strongly the time has come," said Liepert in an interview. "In many ways, it gives women a comfort level. A midwife can actually spend a lot more time than a doctor can."

Medical groups welcomed the decision to publicly pay for midwifery services, but expressed opposition to the fact that home births will be covered under government's plan.

The Alberta Medical Association said deliveries should take place in hospitals -- even in low-risk pregnancies -- where acute care is available in case of an emergency.

"We don't support planned home births," said Dr. Noel Grisdale, president of the AMA.

"Though the percentage may be small, things can go wrong and that can be catastrophic for mom and baby."

In addition to offering women more choice, government and midwives said the decision will help relieve pressure on Alberta's health system, which is facing shortages of doctors and hospital beds.

A baby boom in Calgary has local maternity wards stretched to capacity.

Diane Rach, a Calgary midwife and chairwoman of the Alberta Midwifery Health Disciplines Committee, said the move will also help women who are having trouble finding a family doctor. An estimated 250,000 Calgarians do not have a regular family physician.

"I see it as being a big benefit for the health system," said Rach.

But relief for the health system -- and easy access to midwifery services -- could still be a few years off because of a shortage of midwives.

Rach said the previous lack of public funding in the area has kept the number of midwives in Alberta low and only 30 are practising in the province.

Both Rach and Moulton said they expect Thursday's announcement to change that, saying the money should draw back midwives who have left the province, encourage others to train in the profession and spur internationally educated midwives to come forward for registration.

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