

Who is the Public and What is the Public Interest?

ACSLPA's mandate is to protect and serve the public by regulating and ensuring the competent, safe, and ethical practice of speech-language pathology and audiology in Alberta. Protecting the wellbeing and welfare of the public and ensuring that the public interest is served is therefore the foundation and lens with which ACSLPA views all its activities and functions.



When it comes down to what 'the public' means in the context of health colleges, we can simply start with the common meaning of the word. Health colleges and health care providers broadly define 'the public' as anyone other than the service provider who may be affected by the provision of a health service. However, this is a massive group of people—essentially everyone who accesses health care in Alberta is part of the public, including speech-language pathologists and audiologists when they access services for themselves.

Given that protecting the public interest is the foundation for health colleges in Alberta, it is important to have a nuanced understanding of this large population. By contextualizing the whole Alberta public with useful information, such as provincial census data, ACSLPA can gain a better understanding of who we serve. Recent data tells us that, the Alberta public is a diverse and varied group. Over the course of providing services ACSLPA regulated members will interact with many different members of the public, including:

- People with hearing and communication disabilities, who face impacts to their social participation, and potential decreased quality of life.
- Indigenous people and communities, who are still experiencing the long-term and intergenerational effects of colonization, displacement, forced assimilation, and the loss of their cultures and languages.
- Populations in a variety of geographic locations. Health attitudes and behaviors vary by location and setting in Alberta. Rural populations and urban communities, for example, may face different issues when it comes to the accessibility of services.
- People across the socioeconomic spectrums, but particularly the economically disadvantaged, who are overrepresented on public health and education caseloads and who face greater health disparities, including in hearing and communication health.

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Who is the Public? (continued)

- Newcomers to Canada and to Alberta – This includes people who migrate voluntarily for social and economic opportunities, and those who are forced to leave their homes due to war or disaster. Increased international mobility had also resulted in a more linguistically diverse public. Results from [ACSLPA's 2021 survey on membership and caseload diversity](#) is consistent with this, as over 90 languages spoken by clients were reported by ACSLPA regulated members. Overall, culturally and linguistically diverse clients are overrepresented, particularly on speech-language pathology caseloads.
- Sexual and gender diverse individuals, who may face marginalization in society (including how easily they are able to access healthcare, and in their experiences while accessing care), and who may have unique communication health needs (e.g., gender affirming voice therapy).
- Other vulnerable populations, who may have limited health literacy and political agency to advocate for themselves.



Many of ACSLPAs publications use the phrase “protect the public interest”; From Insights articles to Key College documents that govern and guide the practice of our regulated members. These documents often demonstrate how the public interest may vary based on situation and context. ACSLPA recognizes the public interest, like the Alberta public, can be something that evolves and changes over time, as the needs of individuals, groups, and society change. For example, many Albertans developed a need for and interest in virtual care when the Covid-19 pandemic began. The public interest also frequently includes

competing and conflicting interests and issues, and at any given time, there may be certain public issues that require prioritization, like a pandemic, or concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Importantly, the view of the public interest must be broad enough to include the ability of individuals to practice in their chosen profession in Alberta and for there to be an adequate supply of sufficiently qualified practitioners to meet the Alberta public’s need for audiology and speech-language pathology services.

An understanding of who the public is and the nuances of the public interest are required in order for ACSLPA to fulfill its lofty mandate.

If you have any questions about these topics, the legislation behind them, or the way ACSLPA functions you can email feedback@acslpa.ca or call 780-944-1609 ext. 101. ■