

## Drug Policy

# From opioids to office: An interview with Alberta's new addiction minister

*Rick Wilson shares what led him into – and out of – addiction, his goals for Alberta's recovery model and the value of an 'Indigenous lens'*



by Alexandra Keeler

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Alberta's new Minister of Mental Health and Addictions, Rick Wilson, poses for a photo with Premier Danielle Smith on May 16. | Rick Wilson via Facebook

Read: 5 min

In mid-May, Alberta appointed Rick Wilson as the province's new minister of mental health and addiction.

Wilson, who represents the Maskwacis-Wetaskiwin riding south of Edmonton, was Alberta's longest serving minister of Indigenous relations, serving from 2019 to this year.

Now, Wilson is tasked with accelerating the implementation of the **Alberta Model**, a recovery-oriented system of care that prioritizes addiction prevention, early intervention and treatment over harm reduction.

Canadian Affairs spoke with Wilson about his priorities in the new role, how his prior work with Indigenous communities shapes his perspective and what lies ahead for mental health and addiction care in Alberta.

**AK: I understand you've been tasked with advancing the Alberta Recovery Model. What aspects of the model require the most focus in the term ahead?**

RW: My goal is going to be to keep the momentum going. [We need to] get all the recovery communities opened up, keep expanding our supports, like **CASA Classrooms** [classroom-based mental health programs], and just keep filling the gaps for better information.

**AK: Why was your predecessor, Dan Williams, shuffled out of the post?**

It was a cascading event. Our speaker took a job in Washington, so we voted for a new speaker, Rick McIver. That left a hole in Municipal Affairs, [where Dan was moved]. I'd been bugging Premier Smith for more help with addictions and mental health. She said, 'Go fix it then, I'll put you there.'

**AK: Do you have personal experience with mental health or addiction struggles?**

RW: Do you want the whole sad story here?

I used to raise a lot of cattle and had one really rank bull that was terrorizing the farm. One morning I tried to get him up, and it didn't end well — he got me down, fractured several vertebrae in my neck and back, and collapsed my lungs. I don't know how I survived, but somehow I did.

For a year, I couldn't walk. I was in so much pain I didn't even know who I was. I would literally pray for one second of relief. Whatever the doctor gives you, you'll take it — Oxytocin to Percocet; you name it, I was on it. My wife said she'd give me a pill and an hour later, I'd be begging her for more. This went on for close to a year.

I finally had what's called laser spinal surgery. I was one of the very lucky ones. I went into it in a wheelchair, but I came out walking, and the pain was gone.

About a week later, I told my wife, 'I think I'm full of infection — I'm burning up with fever, I'm sweating, and I think they've nicked a nerve. I feel like I got a giant hole in me.' She looked at me like I was crazy.

We went to the doctor. He said I was completely healed and asked, 'What do they have you on?' Then he said, 'You just quit taking everything?' I told him, 'Yeah, there's no more pain, so I just quit.'

He said, 'Well, you're in withdrawal.'

Once I knew what it was, I was able to tough it out, but it's not a pleasant experience. I don't think people are really trying to get high — you just don't want to feel that alone. I literally felt like there was a hole right through me, like I was just empty inside. So I have a lot of empathy for people that are in addiction.



Rick Wilson was sworn in as the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions on May 16. | Rick Wilson via Facebook

**AK: Having served as minister of Indigenous relations for more than four years, what key lessons did you learn?**

**RW:** When I was in Indigenous Relations, half my time was spent around addiction issues. It's horrible. Out on the First Nations, there's hardly a chief who hasn't lost a son or somebody close to them. That's all I did — go to funerals, one after another.

What I learned was you really just have to listen — and that's one thing the government isn't good at.

**AK: What learnings from that role are you bringing to your new portfolio, and how do you see them benefiting your work in mental health and addiction?**

**RW:** I want to put an Indigenous lens on the whole thing. I think that's the piece we're missing. What I found most successful was to use their culture. Get the elders involved. They have the sweats, smudges and language. To take somebody's language away is devastating.

You hear a lot about reconciliation, but I took it for real. My good friend Willie Littlechild said, 'Minister, I want to see some reconcili-action.' He said I could use that — so I do, a lot.

**AK: Can Indigenous recovery models work more broadly for non-Indigenous Albertans?**

**RW:** I've really seen it work with non-Indigenous folks as well. But everybody's going to be different. For some people, maybe Christianity is the way to go. And for some people, it's Alcoholics Anonymous.

I think [the common thread] is that hope. [When you're addicted] you feel hopeless.

I felt empty, and you need something to replace that emptiness. The problem is, you turn to alcohol, you turn to drugs to fill that gap, and that's not going to do it. It's a very temporary fix that just pushes you deeper down the rabbit hole.



Minister Rick Wilson celebrates the Pigeon Lake Regional School Class of 2025 on May 25. | Rick Wilson via Facebook

**AK:** Can you explain what a recovery community is, and how it fits into the province's continuum of care?

**RW:** The way they used to do it, you'd throw someone in recovery for a couple of weeks [and expect] that should cure it, then out you go. Well, that doesn't work.

[Now] it's more of a holistic approach: you go into detox, and then from there, you go into rehab. Some people fall out of rehab, [but they go] back into detox, and eventually you start working your way around the circle.

Transitional housing is key. You can't just send someone back into the community without support — they'll relapse. After housing, the focus is on community reintegration, finding work,

and family support. It's like an Indigenous healing circle — a full circle to prevent falling back into addiction.

We're working on 11 sites — one in Red Deer, Gunn, Lethbridge and Calgary opening this summer. Seven more are planned, including Edmonton, Grande Prairie and five with Indigenous communities.

**AK: Some critics argue that the Alberta Model leans toward coercive care, and that the benefits of involuntary treatment may not outweigh the risks and costs. How will the *Compassionate Intervention Act*, which mandates addiction treatment, address those concerns?**

**RW:** Compassionate care isn't just for the individuals [with substance use disorders]. We have to be compassionate for them, but we also have to be compassionate for the people in their community that are impacted.

In my own riding in the Maskwacîs-Wetaskiwin — some people come in [to the hospital] **three times in a day** that have overdosed. To overdose several times a day — you're doing brain damage when you're at that point.

These people are in dire straits, and we have to intervene with them, because they're not even capable of thinking for themselves [or] to go for voluntary treatment. We want to give the people that are addicted that opportunity to rebuild their lives. Right now, there's just a lot of enabling going on.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

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**Charles Justice**

July 6, 2025 at 4:12 pm

Kudos to Minister Rick Wilson! This provincial recovery program sounds promising. It wouldn't hurt to compare provincial addiction approaches to see which has been effective and which has not. This whole field of addiction needs a reset: We need to understand what it is, how it works, and what it does to society. We also need more interprovincial cooperation on tackling this problem. If we can get the provinces to cooperate on trade, why not share which programs are working and which are not. We all agree that drug addiction is destroying the most vulnerable among us, and also causing irreparable harm to our communities, so we could all put aside our political hats and put our minds together to solve it.

I realize that economic growth is a top priority right now, but we also need to prioritize our health, both as individuals and as communities. Addiction is pulling us down and we can't look away and ignore this problem any longer.