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Kindergarten hearing program expands in northern Alberta

GRANDE PRAIRIE — Kindergarten children from the greater Grande Prairie and Peace River areas will have their hearing tested as part of a new Alberta Health Services program rolling out this spring.

The program was established following a six-week pilot project late last year when nearly 700 Grande Prairie kindergarten children had their hearing tested.

About one in 10 required a followup appointment; of those, several were identified with permanent hearing loss that may not have been otherwise identified and several others are being monitored due to middle-ear problems and ear infections.

“Hearing is a critical part of a child’s social, emotional and cognitive development,” says AHS audiologist Ulla Fisher.

“The purpose of the screening program is to identify early in a child’s life any possible hearing loss that may affect their development and their overall general health.”

During the pilot project, Fisher and audiology assistant Bev Bauer screened all kindergartners in Grande Prairie public and Grande Prairie Catholic school districts.

Rollout of the program through Peace Country, now in its initial planning stages, is expected to start in the spring and will screen children ages 5 and 6 in as many as 60 schools this year.

“Symptoms of hearing impairment or middle-ear problems are not always apparent or the same for each child,” says Fisher. “It’s important to evaluate a child’s hearing to detect any loss early.”

Improving access to primary care is one of the goals outlined in the 5-Year Health Action Plan, jointly developed by AHS and the Government of Alberta and supported by the 5-Year Health Funding Plan.

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than 3.7 million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

- 30 -

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