



MHA HEALTH PROMOTION TEAM

Year in Review 2023-24



Meet our team of prevention and health promotion specialists.



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Hopson



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**OUR****VISION**

Where we live, grow, learn, work, and play has a profound influence on mental health and wellbeing.

People and communities can thrive and experience positive mental health when supportive surroundings and conditions are present.

The reality for Nova Scotia is that oppression, racism, discrimination, and systemic barriers continue to exist and contribute to inequitable conditions that contribute to poor health outcomes.

The IWK MHA Health Promotion team's vision is to influence, create, and strive for equitable conditions for healthy, thriving, and engaged communities that result in positive mental health and wellbeing for children, youth, and families.

We strategically work to address unfavourable and inequitable surroundings, conditions, and circumstances that contribute to poor health outcomes.

Through the practice of reviewing the most recent evidence and data, we build integral relationships with community partners and advocate for population health policies that will improve population-based health outcomes.

Our work centres on children's rights and strives to achieve the three key social determinants of mental health: access to economic resources, freedom from discrimination and violence, and social inclusion.

ACCESS TO ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Income that covers the cost of living, food and housing security, affordable childcare, education, and equitable employment opportunities provides people with the supportive conditions to live with minimal barriers and limitations.

The circumstances of being able to afford to live, have shelter, buy food, and gainfully work while children are safely cared for increases one's dignity, ensures access to basic human rights, and reduces distress. These conditions also allow for the time, opportunity, and access to participate in the broader community and benefit from social connections.

FREEDOM FROM DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE

When people feel safe and are supported and encouraged to be their authentic selves, they experience a sense of belonging and connection to their family, community, and society. On the contrary, when people experience discrimination, racism, and violence, their human rights are violated and the impact on mental health can be significant.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

When people are supported and feel a strong sense of attachment and feel represented and respected in their family, community, school, and neighbourhood, this can be incredibly protective of positive mental health. The feelings of attachment and respect can foster connection and a sense of belonging that allows people and communities to thrive.





Cultivating safe and supportive environments for 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth

Positive mental health and well-being is essential for children and youth to thrive and fully participate where they live, learn, play, and grow. They have a right to fully participate as their authentic selves and to live without discrimination or violence.

Discrimination and gender or sexuality-based violence can have a deep impact on well-being. Evidence shows 2SLGBTQIA+ populations experience worse health outcomes than cisgender and heterosexual individuals.

Worsening health outcomes due to discrimination can be connected to lack of housing, low income, low

rates of employment or precarious employment, and reduced access to appropriate healthcare.



The key reasons for these differences stem from the long-standing stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion associated with diverse sexual orientations and diverse gender identities in a heteronormative world.

— *One Chance to be a Child, 2022*

[VIEW REPORT](#)

Tessa Firth, a Master of Public Health candidate, joined our team in the summer of 2023 to complete her graduate practicum placement.

Tessa conducted a policy scan to determine gaps and opportunities for safe and supportive environments for 2SLGBTQIA+, children, youth, and families. She reviewed extensive literature and reports, built strong relationships with community partners and

colleagues, and developed a thorough report.

Our commitment to addressing the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth deepened through this work.

Recently, our team was proud to support a youth-focused day for the 2024 Nova Scotia Health and IWK Health Affirming Care Conference.

We will continue to advocate for the rights of children and youth to be their authentic selves and be safe and supported within their homes, communities, and society.



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Developed a well-informed resource for identifying supportive policies to address and uphold the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth in Nova Scotia
- ✓ Will continue to advocate for safe and supportive surroundings for 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth to thrive and be their authentic selves
- ✓ Built trusting relationships with community partners and health colleagues to plan and promote the annual Affirming Care Conference
- ✓ Will participate in the IWK Health Gender Inclusive Care Committees

Ensuring naming rights respect children's rights

Recreation facilities are essential to build complete communities and improve opportunity for social inclusion and connection – key predictors of positive mental health outcomes for children and youth.

Halifax Regional Municipality opened a new, accessible outdoor public pool in 2023. At the same time, infrastructure like this carries associated costs for construction, maintenance, and operations. Before opening the facility, Halifax proposed the sale of naming rights to the complex to a sponsor.

Sponsorship is a form of marketing. Not only does marketing influence purchasing behaviour but can build brand affinity, product identification and product preferences.

In response, the Health Promotion team drafted a letter to the city requesting that the sponsorship opportunity be withheld from any bid by a tobacco, cannabis, or alcohol company.

The team secured endorsement of the letter by Dr Krista Jangaard, IWK Health's CEO.

Designed as a family-friendly outdoor space, the aquatic complex will benefit thousands of residents.

With strong voices for children's right to live free from the influence of substances, we look forward to the unveiling of potential names for the complex in 2024.



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Letter included evidence on how marketing substances impacts children and youth
- ✓ Leadership supported this work by sharing the opportunity and related interest for mental health impacts of sponsorship on children and youth
- ✓ With Halifax yet to announce the name of the aquatic centre, we're proud to keep children's rights central to discussions of sponsorship and marketing of regulated substances



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Collaborated with NSH MHA health promoters to contribute to public consultation opportunities
- ✓ Provided health evidence and a health equity, child rights and mental health promotion lens to HRM decision-making and guiding frameworks

Building environments designed for children and youth

The personal, social, economic, environmental, and cultural contexts of our lives determine our health. The quality of our homes, schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, experiences, and the opportunities we have, especially in early childhood, are the most significant determining factors for overall health and well-being.

All environmental aspects have distinct and interrelated influences on mental health. Children and youth are more vulnerable than adults to exposures in their environment.

This is why contributing a child and youth lens focused on protective factors for mental health and resiliency is needed.

Alongside health promotion colleagues at Nova Scotia Health, we submitted a robust document with key considerations for a revised draft of The Halifax Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (also called the 'Regional Plan').

The Regional Plan sets out a common vision, principles, and long-range, region-wide planning policies outlining where, when, and how future growth and development should take place.

Ensuring a health equity, child rights and mental health focus within this plan is critical to shape a healthy future in HRM.

Elevating child rights and well-being in Nova Scotia

Collaborating with co-authors from the Healthy Populations Institute at Dalhousie University and Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, we contributed to a published **commentary** reflecting on the 2022 National Day of the Child event – a fishbowl conversation.

The panel engaged in a critical conversation about ongoing work in Nova Scotia aimed at addressing child rights and wellbeing for the purpose of guiding the work of a Child and Youth Commission (CYC).

Pulled from the commentary:

“Children and youth have a fundamental right to have their needs met and to have their health and well-being considered a priority. Nova Scotia is one of the last provinces in Canada to create an independent body focused on

asserting and protecting children’s rights. At present, legislation in support of an independent CYC is being considered to monitor child rights and engage young people in conversations about the things that matter to them.”

“Having a sense of belonging” and “feeling like their voice is being heard” emerged as themes from youth in focus groups and whose voices were relayed by the youth representative at this panel.

The tools and information available through existing reports and initiatives need to be acted upon. With the formation of a CYC, an opportunity exists to advance the rights of children and youth in Nova Scotia. Sustainable development goals and social determinants are embedded in human rights

charters, and government and wider society have a responsibility to act.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Commentary was published in the Healthy Populations Journal
- ✓ Fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring youth voices are heard will be essential in the design of government structures to support children and youth
- ✓ The IWK MHA Health Promotion Team continues to advocate for a CYC in Nova Scotia



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Presented to Canadian Human Trafficking Crowns and the Nova Scotia Crown Attorneys to elevate an understanding of the intersections of CSEC
- ✓ Alongside IWK's Trauma Informed Care Team, briefed House of Commons on trauma informed approaches to interviewing survivors of gender based violence or human trafficking (Informing research focused on online harms of illegal sexually-explicit materials)
- ✓ Presented at IWK Health and Dalhousie University's Pediatric Grand Rounds
- ✓ Presented at Be the Peace Institutes' International Women's Day event at Oak Island's Conferencing Centre

Addressing the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Nova Scotia (CSEC)

Nova Scotia has the highest provincial human trafficking rate in Canada and is among the highest for youth ages 12-17. It's an issue that has historically been tackled through a justice-based approach.

Following the 2022 release of the **Hearing Them** paper on risks and vulnerabilities of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Nova Scotia, the IWK MHA Health Promotion Team acted on the top recommendation emerging from the literature – a need for an upstream population health approach to protect young people.

Through an in-depth literature review, mobilization of key partners and expertise gained through 85 lived experiences, we co-developed a first-of-its-kind population health approach to address CSEC.

The publication includes promising practices and intersecting recommended actions that work to address the root causes of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in the province.

Catalyzing collective action with key partners

Partners in government and community organizations across Nova Scotia strive to improve health outcomes and conditions for children, youth, and families.

Collective action is needed to break down silos and come together. In September 2023, we welcomed Master of Public Health Candidate Mariya Ahmed from McMaster University to join us for her practicum placement. Together we designed and led a collective action to develop a draft Population Health Approach to Commercial

Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth in Nova Scotia.

We applied the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) application, tools, and practices. The process involved partner mapping, snowballing methodology, and four interactive working group sessions.

In addition, strategic one-on-one conversations advanced a deeper understanding of the work – to continue mobilizing partnerships or to establish buy-in and support.

Sessions began with an orientation or recap, followed by a learning component and an interactive session using Google Jam boards to increase participation and capture comments.

Evaluations included opportunities to shape future sessions.

Participants were supported through regular email updates and all suggestions were integrated and followed up on.



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ 85 people participated in working group sessions or conversations
- ✓ Participants included local, provincial, Canadian, and international experts in their field
- ✓ Established a common goal to work toward a population health approach to address commercial sexual exploitation and violence

Adding a child and youth lens to provincial alcohol policies

Alcohol consumption leads to related harms. Children and youth have a right to be protected from harmful substances.

Heavy alcohol use is associated with family conflict, intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, and violent crimes, including sexual assault.

The younger the youth when they start using substances and the heavier or more frequent their use, the higher the risk for substance use disorder and harm later in life.

Many factors influence consumption. Alcohol is highly marketed and readily accessible, and consumption rates among

children and youth in Nova Scotia reflect this.

Data from the Canadian Student Tobacco and Drug Use Survey (CSTADS) indicates youth have their first drink at just over 13 years-old, a decrease from past data. Healthy public policies can address these risk factors, increasing the age of first consumption and reducing volumes of alcohol consumed – reducing harm as a byproduct.

In early 2023, Nova Scotia Health held a third virtual Alcohol Policy Forum to engage folks working in health and community settings on alcohol policy, with a lens of a lifespan approach...

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...The IWK MHA Health Promotion team presented policy options to reduce alcohol harms for children and youth.

Over 150 participants registered for the forum and discussed policy options they felt were impactful and possible in their roles.

Evidence suggests careful policy changes but not prohibition will reduce alcohol related harms, while maintaining access for adults who consume alcohol.

Our recommendations for public policy options to protect children, youth, and families include:

- 1. **Reducing** marketing exposure to inside licensed venues only
- 2. **Maintaining** and strengthening a public monopoly for retail
- 3. **Considering** volumetric pricing, driving choice toward low alcohol products
- 4. **Offering** alcohol-free events and spaces as the norm for children, youth and families to celebrate and connect
- 5. **Restricting** alcohol advertising in sport and recreation facilities
- 6. **Reducing** recent expanded access (ex: home delivery)

Our team will remain involved with alcohol policy work through a national advisory committee on knowledge mobilization for the new **CCSA Guidance on Alcohol and Health**.

Additionally, the team will continue to co-chair an Atlantic Alcohol Policy Network and stay connected to local and regional issues as it relates to protecting children and youth from substance related harms.



HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Considered experts in the provision of a child and youth lens on alcohol policy options
- ✓ Presented to 150 participants at the NS Alcohol Policy Forum
- ✓ Health Promotion Team contributes to ongoing work through the National Advisory Committee for CCSA Guidance on Alcohol and Health and the Atlantic Alcohol Policy Network



MORE

2023-24

MILESTONES

- ✓ Continued supporting federally-funded project examining tuition waiver programs at Atlantic post secondary institutions for former youth in foster care
- ✓ Met with health colleagues and government staff to request updated research and data for gambling/gaming prevalence among NS youth
- ✓ Virtually attended the Canadian Sexual Exploitation Summit sessions exploring child-on-child sexual violence, pornography, male involvement in prevention of violence, and lived experience
- ✓ Virtually attended the National Conference on Ending Homelessness
- ✓ Participated in IWK Health's Crucial Conversations course on effective communication skills
- ✓ Circulated and promoted federal government Members of Parliament petitions specific to access to universal contraception and school food programs
- ✓ Researched and provided responses for two Health Canada consultations on recommendations to amend the Cannabis Act and commenting on the Tobacco and Vaping Products Act
- ✓ Alongside partners and colleagues, participated in the interpretation of the third Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation (CAPE) results for Nova Scotia to better understand policy improvement opportunities
- ✓ Abstract for Canadian Public Health Association conference on cannabis and population harm reduction was accepted



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