



IWK Health

Year in Review

Mental Health & Addictions

Health Promotion Team

2025-2026





Our Vision



The vision of the Health Promotion Team is for every child, youth, and family in Nova Scotia to experience **positive mental health and well-being**.

We recognize that the surroundings of where people live, grow, learn, work, and play have a profound influence on their health. The **Health Promotion Team (HPT)** strategically works to address inequitable conditions which contribute to mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

We do this by reviewing the most recent **evidence and data**, building relationships with **community partners**, and supporting the advancement of **public health policies**.

The goal is to improve health and well-being outcomes at the population level and for all Nova Scotian children, youth and their families **to thrive**.

The Work We Do

Our team works toward preventing substance related harm, and promotion of protective factors that align with the Social Determinants of Mental Health :

- Regulated Substances and Gambling
 - Focus on High Potency Cannabis & Alcohol
- Exploring the Online World
- The Importance of Housing
- Preventing Gender-Based Violence
- Supporting the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth
- Consulting on various projects and calls to action while incorporating a lens for equity, social justice, child rights, and inclusion.

Regulated Substances & Gambling: Spotlight on High Potency Cannabis & Alcohol

Youth are curious and experimentation with substance use and gambling are common in this life stage.

The HPT has specific objectives aligned with youth substance use and gambling:

- **Delay age of first use or exposure**
- **Reduce overall population consumption**
- **Reduce heavy episodic consumption**

Of particular concern, highly concentrated synthetic cannabis continues to cause serious harms for children and youth, including sometimes irreversible psychiatric symptoms. As there have been reports of increased cannabis induced psychosis among youth, the HPT has prioritized evidence sharing and partnership building to change conditions surrounding high potency cannabis, to reduce access and related harms.

Alcohol remains a commonly used substance for youth. When availability and access of regulated substances - including alcohol - is increased in the community, there is increased consumption and an increase in harmful impacts on communities, families, and individuals. Alcohol policy advocacy was a leading piece of work in 2025 as government hosted a consultation on expanding alcohol retail in Nova Scotia.

Public health policy concerning access, availability, product concentration/potency, marketing, and pricing are approaches that reduce harm on a population level. The retail methods for cannabis, alcohol, nicotine and gambling products have wide impacts on access and availability of substances in community.

Commercialization and online access combine to make an environment where high potency cannabis and unregulated products become easily accessible online, with just a few clicks and minimal age verification. The team continues to focus on population health policy that will reduce youth access and availability of regulated substances and gambling, and advocacy for health policy that could reduce the youth appeal of high potency cannabis.



Regulated Substances & Gambling: Spotlight on High Potency Cannabis & Alcohol



Highlights of the Year for Regulated Substances

- Sharing evidence and increasing partnerships: Presented a poster at the Lung NS PEI Conference - PESTLE Analysis of Tobacco21 in Nova Scotia
- Jurisdictional scan of High Potency Cannabis resources, shared on IWK MHA Shelf and ready to share with people who support youth
- Mobilized evidence to inform an IWK Health response to a consultation hosted by the Government of Nova Scotia, on the potential expansion of retail alcohol to gas stations, convenience and grocery stores. Many community partners were called into a consultation and the team was able to provide evidence on prioritizing children and youth, to those invited. The team was very pleased to read the consultation report that indicated there would not be alcohol sales expansion at this time.
- The HPT, in partnership with Injury Free Nova Scotia, Canadian Cancer Society, Nova Scotia Health MHA & Public Health, and Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, hosted a daylong conference on November 20, 2025, and approximately 70 people gathered in downtown Halifax at the Nova Scotia Convention Centre.
 - The day featured an opening keynote, panel discussion, evidence-based presentations, and opportunities for networking and collaboration.
 - The event concluded with calls to action to stay involved in alcohol-related work in Nova Scotia and across Canada.
 - The event successfully brought together a broad range of partners and participants—including African Nova Scotians, Indigenous, Newcomers, 2SLGBTQIA+, and staff representing health, justice, education, academia sectors and community-based organizations - highlighting the importance of collective action in addressing alcohol-related harms.
- The HPT work in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder prevention continued through partnerships with local, provincial and national prevention groups. The team attended the annual Fetal Alcohol Nova Scotia's (FANS) conference.

Our work is organized according to this theory and evidence:

Social Determinants of Mental Health

[Kirkbride, et al](#)

[Canadian Mental Health Association](#)

Exploring the Online World

In 2025, the team expanded the focus to include online harms as more evidence and data continues to emerge showing the increasing impact of online harms experienced by children, youth and their families

The amount of screen time exposure among the pediatric population has been steadily increasing over the last decade.

With this increase, youth are reporting problems including sleep disruptions due to screen time. Research indicates that the more time youth spend on personal devices, the more likely they are to experience poor mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

The HPT recognizes that the online world can offer benefit, and can be protective for youth mental health and wellbeing in fostering connection, representation, social inclusion and belonging.

This is balanced with risk factors that contribute to harm and poor mental health, including exposure to violence, increased substance access, and hate online. The team takes an approach to enhance protective factors and minimize exposure to platforms and content that include serious risks.



➔ Highlights on the Online Environment

- Collaboration with Nova Scotia Health MHA Health Promoters in creating a report about how health promoters can approach their work in the online environment. This work was shared in a presentation to the Integrated Prevention and Health Promotion Leadership table within the Government of Nova Scotia.
- The specific online harm concerning Online Violent Extremism has been emerging as a persistent presence and threat to youth. To build team capacity, the team attended various panel discussions, presentations, and workshops. There are plans underway to host an IWK Pediatric Grand Rounds session on Violent Extremism in Children and Youth, with presentations from renowned researchers Ghayda Hassan and Dr. Cecile Rousseau.

The Importance of Housing: Hosting Students & Learning for Everyone



Supporting learners is an essential action toward building an enduring Health Promotion workforce. In 2025/26, the team hosted two student placements:

- **Gehreen Brar - Master of Science in Public Health from Brock University**
- **Divjot Kaur - BSc Health Promotion Internship from Dalhousie University**

Both student placements focused on adequate, affordable and appropriate housing as an essential support for mental wellbeing for children, youth and families in the Maritimes.

In the summer of 2025, Gehreen developed policy options that improve housing access for families, and the importance of housing as a stable and secure base for healing. She spoke to health care providers internal to IWK Health to understand how inadequate housing raises barriers to families in treatment and can prevent progress in physical and mental health recovery. Internal and external actions were identified to support families at risk of insecure or inadequate housing, and suggestions were prepared for policymakers at different levels of intervention, to address housing concerns.

In the winter of 2026, Divjot was able to take the concept of housing for families in an intersecting direction - researching varied housing challenges and needs for newcomer families experiencing gender-based violence (GBV). Divjot hosted conversations with transition housing and emergency shelter organizations, as well as newcomer serving agencies and GBV prevention advocates from across Nova Scotia. Unique and challenging intersectional considerations were raised, including barriers to programs because of immigration status, trust of systems, reduced resources and access to these in rural areas, and a system that continues to see housing as reactive in cases of GBV and not preventative.

The team was so pleased to share this work internally with IWK and health sector colleagues, as well as at the 2025 Housing Symposium hosted by the Affordable Housing Association of NS and United Way Maritimes.



Both students were able to amplify the experiences of client-supporting providers, to make actionable policy recommendations.

We are filled with gratitude.
Thank you to Gehreen and Divjot, for your time with us!

Preventing Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) impacts children, youth and families across our province at alarming rates, and the [Mass Casualty Commission recommendations](#) call for public health approaches to prevention.

Our team has been able to step into this work by increasing partnerships, synthesizing evidence, and participating in opportunities to bring a child, youth and family lens to sector conversations. These partnerships include support for actions to reduce the risk factors for experiencing violence.

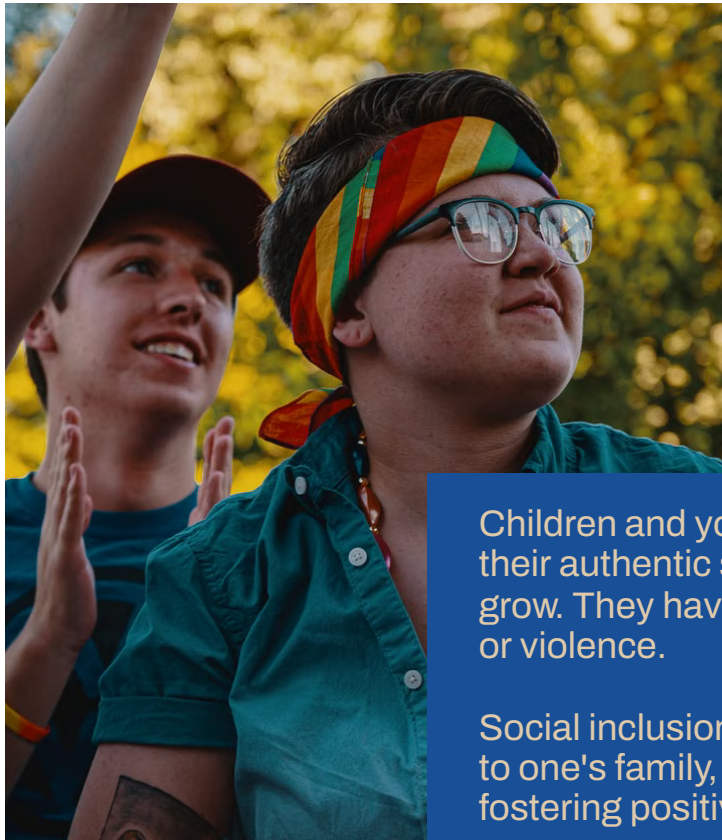
➔ Highlights on GBV Work

The 2025 - 2026 year was filled with great partnership in planning, community strategic events and collaboration on moving evidence forward.

- In July the HPT hosted Dr. Elizabeth Such, Director of Knowledge for Public Health (KNOW-PH), Nottingham University, a UK-first knowledge mobilization team that brings public health evidence closer to policy and practice. Dr. Such shared the learnings from public health approaches to address modern day slavery, and whole system approaches.
- The HPT hosted a gathering of 40 community partners and health colleagues for a day-long learning, networking and strategic reflection opportunity. The session included a chance to forge stronger relationships among organizations, partners and government through shared goals. Participants were able to solidify their understanding of population health approaches and actions across the prevention continuum.

Lila, Jenna and Dr. Such in Halifax





Supporting Affirming Environments for 2SLGBTQIA+ Children and Youth

Children and youth have a right to fully participate as their authentic selves where they live, learn, play, and grow. They have the right to live without discrimination or violence.

Social inclusion, belonging and a sense of connection to one's family, community and school is critical in fostering positive mental health and well-being.

Discrimination and violence based on gender and/or sexuality can have a deep impact on the well-being of children and youth, and it is documented that 2SLGBTQIA+ populations experience worse health outcomes than those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual. “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)

In a world with a rise in misinformation, discrimination and hate directed at two-spirited, transgender, and gender-diverse people, there is great need to address public misunderstanding, barriers to safety, and access to care.

Gender affirming environments and care are critical to well-being. The Health Promotion Team will continue to connect with community partners and health colleagues with the intention to center the rights of children, focus on increasing social inclusion and reducing discrimination and violence at a population level.

➔ Highlights of the Year

- Participated in two IWK Health Gender Inclusivity Committees and supported and celebrated the launch of the new IWK Gender Inclusivity Policy
- Developed a draft evidence brief for colleagues across the health center specific to the importance of clear understanding on Gender Affirming Care
- Participated in planning the annual affirming care conference in collaboration with prideHealth, Nova Scotia Health and IWK Health colleagues

Building Capacity of Health Promotion in Mental Health and Addictions

The HPT consulted on and led various networks, presentations, projects and calls to action while incorporating a lens for equity, social justice, human rights, and inclusion.



Presentations and Lectures: 8

- Presented on an all **IWK Health Panel at a Dalhousie University/IWK/CASCADES hosted event** held in May 2025 at the Nova Scotia Health Innovation Hub to speak about the health promotion team's project related to centering child and youth mental health in a climate crisis.
- **Online Harms** - Presented on the benefits and harms of the online environment, directed at NSH and IWK Health Promoters to share evidence on what was learned through literature reviews and strategic conversations.
- **Housing Symposium** – United Way and Affordable Housing Association of NS hosting at Atlantica Hotel October 20. Presented in concurrent session on housing and impact to child/youth mental health in the Maritimes.
- **Tobacco and Vaping Reduction Symposium** - Poster
- **Dalhousie Health Promotion Course Lectures** – Team presented as guest lecturers for the courses: Drugs and Drug Education, Mental Health Promotion, & Health Communications
- **Gender Based Violence** – Be the Peace Summit attended and presented on the Population Approach to Address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Consultations: 4

- **Public Health Agency of Canada** – Provided editing and review feedback on Federal, Provincial Territorial Collaboration on Mental Health report, a pilot project of the Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Steering Committee of the Public Health Network Council and will be presented to the Public Health Network Council in fall 2025
- **Nourish Nova Scotia** – Partnered to work on two evidence briefs: a Municipal Investment in School Food; Student Engagement on Evaluation of the School Food Program.
- **Violent Extremism Workshop** – collaborated with other health professionals to plan a two-day youth workshop focused on gathering information on their experiences of social polarization.
- **3rd Legislative Review of the Tobacco Vaping Products Act** - consultation response invited by **Health Canada** on the theme of enforcement

Networks: 12

Chairing:

- Atlantic Gambling Policy and Program Network
- Atlantic Alcohol Policy Network
- In the Loop: a network for Health promoters across Nova Scotia from IWK, NSH, CHB's

Supporting Members:

- Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health - Youth WG
- Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation Community of Practice
- Atlantic Tuition Waiver Project
- TESS (Trafficking and Exploitation Services System)
- Gender Based Violence Prevention
- IWK Population Health Advocacy Committee
- Smoke Free Nova Scotia
- Housing and Homelessness Partnership
- Harm Reduction Community of Practice

About Us

We are a small but mighty team of
Prevention & Health Promotion Specialists:

- Sarah Blades
- Jenna Hopson
- Sabrianne Penner

And, our ever supportive leader:
Rhonda Atwell, Clinical Manager
Partnerships & Community Engagement

Pictured L to R:
Erica A, Sarah B, Jenna H, Sabrianne P, Lila P and Rhonda A.
May 2025

This year, we said
"so long" to our
colleagues Lila and
Erica.

We are wishing them
well in their new
endeavours!





IWK Health

COLLABORATE WITH US
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