



NOVA SCOTIA DISABILITY SUPPORT WORKFORCE STRATEGY

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Disability Support Program

NOVA SCOTIA DEPARTMENT OF OPPORTUNITIES AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Why a workforce strategy

Everyone should have the freedom to create the life they want to live, in a community where they are welcomed, supported and valued.

Through the Remedy – a five-year, legally binding agreement -- government is transforming the disability support system in Nova Scotia, closing large government-funded institutions and supporting people with disabilities to live in the community of their choice. It is called “the Remedy” because it is what government must do to remedy the discrimination against people with disabilities in Nova Scotia.

The Remedy represents generational change for people with disabilities in Nova Scotia. It is one of the largest transformation efforts in our province’s history.

A critical enabler for delivering the Remedy is a skilled workforce: “...sufficient to support the Remedy strategies (philosophically and practically).”¹ Specifically, the Remedy requires, “...the development of Disability Sector Workforce Plan, including relevant compensation issues, building on the existing workforce plan and including the new elements to meet the Remedy.”²

Nova Scotia’s disability support workforce is passionate about their work, with many describing it as a calling; however, they have also reported that:

- Their work is misunderstood;
- They are often ill-prepared; and
- They need additional resources to effectively do their jobs.

This strategy represents the beginning of a new conversation with disability support professionals, their employers, labour unions, Nova Scotians with disabilities, their families and support networks about how persons with disabilities can be supported to live in community. The strategy provides a blueprint for building a strong disability support

¹ Bartnik, E., & Stainton, T. (2023). Human Rights Review and Remedy for the Findings of Systemic Discrimination Against Nova Scotians with Disabilities: Technical Report of the Independent Experts to the Disability Rights Coalition and the Province of Nova Scotia. ([Remedy in Disability Rights Coalition v Province of Nova Scotia | Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission](#))

² Interim Consent Order, Appendix A Y1, pg. 6

workforce that is respected and has the skills, knowledge, and resources needed to support Nova Scotians with disabilities to live the life they choose.

Background

How the strategy was developed

The strategy was developed through an iterative process whereby the findings of each step were validated with key stakeholders, refined and then formed the basis for subsequent steps. Two critical components informed the development of this strategy:

1. Community engagement

We consulted with individuals with disabilities and their support networks through various advocacy groups, such as Autism Nova Scotia, Inclusion Nova Scotia, People First of Nova Scotia, and the DSP Disability Advisory Committee. We spoke with partners and interested parties, including unions, post-secondary institutions, employment agencies and the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia. We also engaged partners in other provinces and other countries to identify best practices and lessons learned.

2. Data analysis

Data sources included:

- *Labour Force Insights*: data from across Canada related to compensation and benefits, education requirements and job titles for front-line disability support roles.
- *Workforce Survey*: the first Disability Support Sector Workforce Survey was conducted in fall 2023. (Insights available in the: [Workforce Survey Insights Workshop](#)).
- *Focus groups*: Focused conversations were held in each of the four regions (Central, Western, Northern and Eastern) with frontline disability support workers and individuals with disabilities. The goal of the sessions was to hear directly from those impacted regarding what was important to them and where there are gaps.
- *Research and reports*: A literature review/jurisdictional scan was conducted regarding disability support workforce planning in other Canadian provinces and internationally. Evaluation results of two recent DSP pilots (the Behaviour Home Pilot Project and the Certificate of Professional Studies in Disability Supports) were also considered.

Current state of the disability support workforce

Service providers

The Disability Support Program (DSP) funds and/or licenses 144 service provider organizations to deliver residential, day and community-based programs in the province. Within these organizations, DSP funds 6,616 full-time equivalent positions, representing approximately 8,601 individuals in full-time, part-time, and casual positions ³ that include:

- 3,064 Residential Rehabilitation Workers (RRWs)
- 164 Residential Care Workers (RCWs) and
- 3,388 staff in allied health, operational, management and other support roles (such as job coaches and day program coordinators).

There is fragmentation and inconsistency across the operational and service delivery models of these service providers. For example, there are both licensed and unlicensed residential service providers with both non-union and unionized sites, sometimes within the same organization. Unionized sites are represented by eight different unions: NSGEU, CUPE, Unifor, IUOE, PSAC, NSUPE, SEIU, and NSNU.

The sector also employs a variety of health professionals (e.g., registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, occupational therapists, etc.) and non-health professionals (e.g., accountants, recruiters, teachers, etc.). The number and mix of these staff are not based on a formula or policy, but rather historical arrangements dating back to 1998 when the province assumed direct responsibility for disability supports from municipalities.

Additionally, there are four different associations representing service providers in the sector depending on their governance model and services offered (e.g., profit vs non-profit or residential vs day program). Some service providers join more than one association; others are not members of any association.

Because of its fragmentation, the sector also lacks consistency in hiring and compensation practices, including pensions and benefits (e.g., some employers require higher levels of training for the same job).

Disability support workers

For purposes of DSP licensing and funding, there are two disability support worker classifications in Nova Scotia today: Residential Rehabilitation Worker (RRW) and

³ Source: Financial Advisory Services, Department of Opportunities and Social Development Spring 2024 DSP funded FTE data.

Residential Care Worker (RCW). At the same time, disability support service providers have adopted a variety of job titles to describe frontline support roles -- caregiver, community access facilitator, community inclusion facilitator, lifestyles coordinator, recreational coordinator, youth worker, to name a few. This is not unique to Nova Scotia; a jurisdictional scan found 800 different job titles being used in the disability sector across Canada.

Compensation

Currently, the hourly wage range is \$21.79 to \$23.62 for RRWs and \$19.81 to \$21.47 for RCWs. Historically, those employed as RRWs were compensated at a pay rate of 103 per cent of the Continuing Care Assistant (CCA) pay rate and those in the RCW classification compensated at 90 per cent of the CCA pay rate. Following a CCA classification adjustment in 2022, Nova Scotia adopted a new wage scale for publicly funded unionized RRWs and RCWs, which was later adopted by non-union RRWs, RCWs, and day program instructors.

Training requirements

In 2004, DSP adopted a set of core competencies as the training requirement for RRWs and RCWs working in licensed organizations. These competencies are:

1. Fire and life safety
2. Health and personal care
3. Medication awareness
4. Standard first aid/CPR
5. Crisis intervention
6. Behavioural supports
7. Individualized planning

RRWs must possess all seven core competencies and RCWs must have the first five. The difference in competency requirements is reflected in different compensation rates between RRWs and RCWs.

Ensuring staff have completed all necessary training is a licensing requirement. DSP provides funding to service providers to cover the cost of training and backfilling as required. This funding is primarily used for standard first aid/CPR and non-violent crisis intervention training; other training is sourced through third-party organizations or provided in-house.

Post-secondary training

There is no regulatory requirement for a post-secondary credential to work in the disability support sector in Nova Scotia today. However, an analysis of over 6,000 disability support job postings across Canada found that Nova Scotia employers often ask for a diploma in a

related field (e.g., disability or social services). Paradoxically, frontline staff, first voice and families shared during focus groups that current training practices and requirements are insufficient and outdated.

Although not a requirement of DSP funding or licensing, Nova Scotia's post-secondary education institutions offer a wide range of disability support-focused credential programs.

Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) offers a one-year Disability Support Professional Certificate and a variety of related diplomas and graduate-level programs, including Mental Health Recovery and Promotion, Social Services, Behaviour Interventions, and Addictions Community Outreach. Additionally, disability support programs are also offered by three private career colleges: Island Career Academy, CBBC, and Academy of Learning.

In 2020, the sector approached NSCC to pilot a four-course certificate of professional study to address skills gaps within in the sector. While overall course evaluations were very positive, participants indicated that they would benefit from the opportunity for more in-depth content and more time to complete the training. As a result, the one-year Disability Support Professional Certificate was created, replacing this professional certificate and an existing two-year full-time diploma. The one-year Disability Support Professional Certificate program includes training specific to a human rights-based approach to service provision, as directed by the Human Rights Remedy. The program will accept its first cohort of students in fall 2025.

The Workforce Strategy

A two-year plan

Implementation of the plan began in fiscal year 2024-25 with early initiatives as directed by the Human Rights Remedy⁴ to alleviate immediate challenges while keeping an eye on the future. Actions included in this report continue until the end of March 2027 and beyond.

Vision

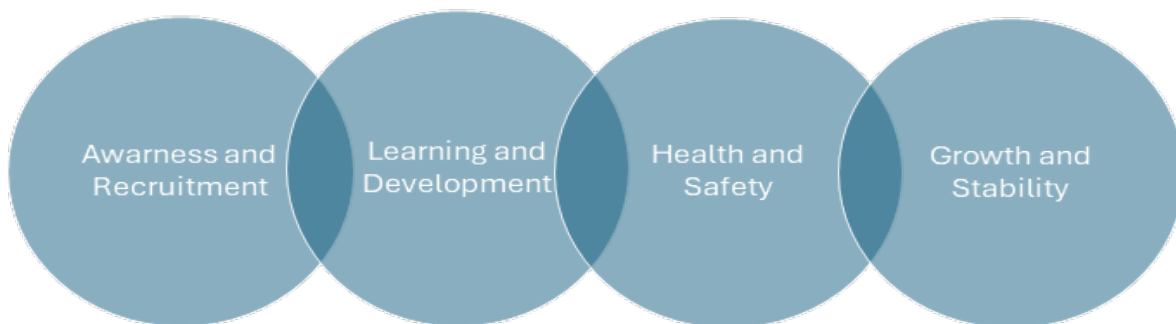
Nova Scotians with disabilities are pursuing their goals and dreams for a good life in their community.

Mission

To modernize and strengthen the disability support workforce in alignment with the Remedy.

Goals and objectives

The strategy consists of four goals:



These goals and objectives will guide government's work over the next two years.

⁴ Take immediate actions to address any staff ceilings or other barriers to early recruitment of necessary staff – for example to do the early policy and program work required. Interim Consent Order, Appendix A Feb-June 2023, pg. 3

Goal #1: Awareness and recruitment

The disability sector is recognized and pursued by a wide range of job seekers as a valued career with opportunities to grow.

To achieve this goal, innovative approaches will be used to attract qualified candidates who are dedicated to a human rights-based approach to support people with disabilities.

Awareness and recruitment actions

2024/25	Engage Health Association of Nova Scotia (HANS) to provide recruitment support to service providers. <i>(In progress)*</i>
	Providing funding to Nova Scotia Career Development Association to create and deliver a career advisor training module (e.g., NS Works) about working in the disability support sector. <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Partner with Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia to create and deliver a newcomer bridging program for internationally trained disability support workers. <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Develop resources for high school students about career opportunities in the disability support sector.
	Partner with Education and Early Childhood Development's African Canadian Services Branch and Prep Academy to identify pathways to post-secondary education and employment through culturally relevant information and resources on the disability support worker profession.
2025/26	Raise awareness among post-secondary students about career opportunities in the disability support sector, including resources, tools, and information for career advisors.
	Engage Mi'kmaq community leaders and intergovernmental subject matter experts to identify and build new pathways to the disability support sector.
	Expand Immigrant Settlement Association's Bridging Program, which prepares newcomers to work in Nova Scotia's disability support sector, and explore options to offer a similar one through Labour, Skills and Immigration's One Journey program.
	Complete a labour force assessment in collaboration with Labour, Skills and Immigration to better understand staffing needs as the sector evolves.
	Develop and launch a marketing campaign to promote roles in the disability support sector as a career of choice.

Goal #2: Learning and development

The disability support workforce has the skills, knowledge, and abilities to provide disability support using a human rights-based approach.

Critical to achieving this goal is increased access to formal training and professional development that reflects a human rights-based approach to practice, is trauma informed, culturally responsive and person-directed. Updated core competencies – aligned with the spirit of the Remedy – will inform education and training standards in Nova Scotia and post-secondary and workplace training programs.

Professional development that complements foundational knowledge will be relevant, consistent, informed by leading edge practice and delivered by experts in their fields.

Learning and development actions

2024/25	Provide funding to NSCC to pilot a certificate of professional study (approx. 65 students in three cohorts currently funded to complete). <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Fund the delivery of Trauma Informed Practice Professional Development (approx 200 sector staff participated in 2024). Explore options to adopt a train-the-trainer program. <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Fund NSCC to develop and deliver two micro credentials: i) Intro to a Human Rights-Based Approach and ii) Applying a Human Rights-Based Approach in Community. <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Partner with NSCC to create a new one-year hybrid (virtual and in-person) certificate to replace the current two-year full-time diploma and the four-course certificate of professional study program. <i>(In progress) *</i>
	Conduct an occupational analysis of disability support professionals to replace the current list of core competencies with requirements that better reflect the current and future skills required under the Remedy.
2025/26	Develop training guidelines for post-secondary institutions to meet new competency requirements and work with Advanced Education to ensure all post-secondary programs reflect these requirements.
	Work with partners to create a tracking system for training required as part of entry to practice (e.g., updated core competencies) as well as ongoing professional development.
	Develop an approach for professionals currently working in the disability support sector to ensure their prior learning and on-the-job experience are recognized, in line with updated core competencies.

Recommend options to develop sector specific mentorship and coaching programs for professionals working in frontline and supervisory roles.

Facilitate access for professionals in the sector to improve essential skills and/or prepare for post-secondary education through government-funded programs - offered free of charge for participants – offered by the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, community learning organizations and sector associations.

Work with Labour, Skills and Immigration to provide employment transition support to staff displaced by facility closures.

Create and/or fund a leadership training program to address succession planning gaps in the disability support sector.

Partner with Mount Saint Vincent University to adapt “Continuing Care: Ready to Lead” (microcredential) for the disability support sector.

Work with Labour, Skills and Immigration and service providers to complete workplace training needs assessments to identify skill gaps that can be addressed through professional development including:

- Operational professional development (e.g., HR practices), customized for the disability support sector; and
- Profession-specific training (e.g., trauma-informed practices).

Recommend options to manage tracking and delivery of professional development training at the sector level.

Goal #3: Health and safety

The disability support workforce understands and acts on its responsibility to create physically and psychologically safe workplaces.

Health and safety objectives

2024/25 Partner with the Workers’ Compensation Board of Nova Scotia (WCB) to assess and prioritize the physical and psychological health and safety needs of the disability support sector.

Partner with Labour, Skills and Immigration and Aware Nova Scotia to offer funding and programs to ensure employers in the sector meet all occupational health and safety requirements. *(In progress)*

2025/26	Develop a plan to mitigate risks while enhancing safety competencies, fostering a culture of safety in the disability support sector.
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Goal #4: Growth and stability

Workforce practices are consistent across the disability sector, providing clear communication and equitable opportunities for employment, benefits, and training.

Consistent practices, clear communication and equitable opportunities for benefits and training are required to help attract new people to the sector and retain existing staff. It is equally important to establish ways to strengthen collaboration, leverage existing resources and avoid duplication across the sector to support staff and ensure people with disabilities are provided with consistent, high-quality support.

Growth and stability actions

2024/25	Work with partners to ensure all DSP service providers and staff have access to workplace safety leadership training as well as Employee and Family Assistance Programs, including return-to-work programming.
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Identify and analyze alternative approaches to compensation that address calls from employees about inadequate wages and benefits.

2025/26	Identify opportunities to align with existing sector associations and allied health partners on a consistent approach to the development of resources and the delivery of training for service providers, leveraging existing organizational models like the Alberta Council of Disability Services and EECD'S Common Services Bureau.
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Conclusion

This strategy is a first step in realizing a bold new direction – one that ensures the disability workforce is prepared with the tools, skills and supports required to deliver services to Nova Scotians with disabilities in their communities.

This is a living document that will evolve to reflect ongoing engagement and collaboration with – and feedback from -- Nova Scotians with disabilities, disability support professionals, labour unions, families and support networks. We will continue to listen intently, collaborate, and adjust course as necessary to ensure the success of this critical work.

We would like to thank all the first voice self-advocates and their families, as well as the disability support workers and service providers, who made invaluable contributions to

this work so far. Their insights, lived experiences, and dedication were essential in shaping the development of this strategy. Through discussions and shared perspectives, they have helped identify key priorities and meaningful pathways for change. Their commitment to improving disability support systems in Nova Scotia continues to guide our efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable future for all.