



NOT WITHOUT US

WHAT WE HEARD

A REPORT ABOUT CHANGING THE
RESPONSE FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES
EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.



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More
than Able



**standing
together**

a provincial action plan to
prevent domestic violence





ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Not Without Us Project's goal is to give a voice to women with disabilities who've experienced domestic violence. Over the course of 12 community sessions, we heard first-person stories from women with disabilities who've experience domestic violence. The staff from various organizations that serve these women also attended the community sessions and provided input on resources and knowledge they need to assist women with disabilities. Our recommendations were shaped by the stories and ideas shared by everyone who took part in these sessions.

The project is funded by a Standing Together grant from the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women. Standing Together is a provincial action plan created to address the issue of domestic violence across Nova Scotia. In the spring of 2019, 24 organizations across the province received grants.

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the DisAbled Women’s Network Canada in partnership with Mount Saint Vincent University and supported by the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, hosted a panel discussion on the challenges faced by women with disabilities when accessing public social services, including those supports after leaving situations of domestic violence. The goal of that panel was to increase knowledge of services available, increase peer support, increase in networking, and decrease social isolation.

On December 3, 2018, a roundtable of participants from that panel met with the goal of identifying any measure of movement in the outcomes. The consensus was that no movement occurred.

Also on December 3, 2018, the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities brought together women with disabilities to talk about the gaps in services, especially for those women with disabilities living with violence. It was clear from this meeting that supports in the community, although fairly effective for able-bodied women experiencing domestic violence, were failing to meet the basic needs of women with disabilities.

Sherry Costa, provincial coordinator with the Nova Scotia League of Equal Opportunities, and Joanne Bernard, President and CEO of Easter Seals Nova Scotia, partnered on the Not Without Us project to research the needs of women with disabilities experiencing domestic violence and hear their first-hand stories and solutions. Costa and Bernard have extensive experience in working with women with disabilities, including those experiencing domestic violence.

In May of 2019, Easter Seals Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities hired Suzanne Rent as the project coordinator to host sessions in communities across Nova Scotia. The sessions were open to women with disabilities who’ve experienced domestic violence, as well as the staff of the organizations that serve those women.

In 2017, the Nova Scotia government passed Bill 59, the Accessibility Act. This legislation’s goal is to make Nova Scotia fully accessible and inclusive by 2030.

This report included details of what we heard at those sessions, at look at the accessibility of the communities we visited, and a number of key recommendations we hope will shape the standards currently being developed by the Accessibility Directorate, specifically concerning the built environment, transportation, and communication.

“
Most women with disabilities have experienced some type of violence or abuse. Most of them. We’re not talking about the odd woman. We’re talking about most. Yet the system is not set up to provide them with support. That needs to change.
”



METHODOLOGY

Between July 2019 to December 2019, project coordinator Suzanne Rent organized and hosted meetings in communities across Nova Scotia. Originally, five meetings were to be scheduled in Halifax, Sydney, Yarmouth, Amherst, and Kentville, however, after conversations with some of the stakeholders, primarily the leadership at transition houses, several more meetings were scheduled, bringing the final total to 12.

Each session was about two hours long. All of the women who took part in the sessions were guaranteed confidentiality and their names or identifying information does not appear in this report. Each woman signed a confidentiality-and-consent form before the sessions began.

Each session was hosted in an accessible space in the community. Attendees were provided with transportation and accessibility requirements, such as sighted guides and ASL interpreters, if needed.

We reached out to stakeholders in all of the communities directly and advertised the sessions through social media, local newspapers, and through various interviews on media, including CBC Information Morning, The Star Halifax, The Sheldon MacLeod Show on 95.7 radio. We were able to establish important relationships with the leadership at transition houses and women's resource centres, which already have relationships of trust with women with disabilities in their communities.

The meetings were recorded only for the sake of transcription and accuracy.

All of the conversations were organic and often led by women, although the coordinator asked questions. In the sessions, women discussed various topics about being a woman with a disability experiencing domestic violence, including accessing transition houses, housing, policing, transportation, stigma, financial barriers, and more. Much of this input is included in this report.

A PROFILE OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN NOVA SCOTIA

According to the Canadian Survey on Disability conducted by Statistics Canada in 2017, 30 per cent of Nova Scotians aged 15 and older have at least one disability. That's higher than the Canadian average of 22.3 per cent. Of those Nova Scotians with at least one disability, 32.4 per cent are female, compared to 28.1 per cent males.

According to the 2014 Statistics Canada General Social Survey, the rate of violent victimization for women in the able-bodied population was 65 per 1,000 people. However, for women living with disabilities, that number more than doubled at a rate of 137 per 1000.

LIMITATIONS OF THE SESSIONS AND RESEARCH

There were challenges reaching out to women with disabilities currently in situations of domestic violence. These women simply cannot safely leave their situations. Many of the women we met with were able to safely access transition houses and they often attended sessions with staff members of those organizations. The staff provided significant insight into the challenges women with disabilities face. Their input was invaluable to this research.

We worked to make the sessions accessible to all women, including by offering transportation, childcare, ASL interpreters, and CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation). Some of the technology for those who are hard of hearing was too cost prohibitive to include. Before the sessions were held, we kept in contact with those women who needed accessible communication options, including ASL interpreters, and provided those accommodations as needed. This project didn't have the funding to cover the expense of providing CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation).

Furthermore, there's a shortage of trained sighted guides in the province. The sighted guides are trained through the CNIB and offer their services as volunteers. The coordinator of the Not Without Us Project took the training so at least one person at each meeting could help guide women who were blind or partially sighted.

While we did speak with those staff at organizations that work with women in immigrant, African Nova Scotian, and LGBTQ communities to partner on hosting sessions, there were concerns that women with disabilities in these communities could be easily identified in the report because their numbers are smaller and, therefore, exposed to further violence. These women need to feel safe when sharing their stories.

There are projects under the Standing Together Initiative where people are working in these communities. The coordinator of the Not Without Us Project connected and met with the leaders of some of these projects, including those with *Descendants of African Americans Enslaved Living in Nova Scotia: The Last Taboo: African Canadian Women and Girls Confronting Domestic Violence in the Community in North Preston and Eskasoni* Mental Health Services: *The Way Forward: Understanding Healthy Masculinity in Eskasoni*.

She also met with a researcher with the *Kitchen Table Talks in the African Nova Scotian Community*, a project spearheaded by the Association of Black Social Workers and the Be the Peace Institute. The networks to establish positive, trustworthy, and meaningful dialogue in these communities are already there.

NOT WITHOUT US COMMUNITY SESSIONS

Halifax/Dartmouth, July 2019/October 2019
Truro, July 2019
Port Hawkesbury, July 2019
Yarmouth, August 2019
Shelburne, August 2019
Kentville, September 2019
Amherst, September 2019
New Glasgow/Stellarton, September 2019
Sydney, October 2019
Sheet Harbour, December 2019

Accessibility is different for each community where we hosted a community session. We wanted to provide snapshots of what that accessibility looks like. We compiled data on all elements women with disabilities need to navigate their communities. This not only affects their abilities to leave situations of domestic violence, but also how they can live healthy lives after leaving. For each community, we provided details on transition houses or women's resource centres, accessible housing, transit and transportation, communication, and policing.

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

HALIFAX/DARTMOUTH

Transition House

Bryony House, a 24-bed shelter located in Halifax, currently located in a temporary location with some accessibility features. A new, completely accessible shelter is being built in Dartmouth.

Alice House operates 18 self-contained, unfurnished housing units across the Halifax Regional Municipality. Units range from one-bedroom to four-bedrooms. Three ground-floor units.

Housing

No figures available

Transit

Halifax Transit: All buses in the fleet are 100 per cent, low-floor accessible vehicles. The ferries in the transit system are also accessible.

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

There are 14 active accessible owners' licenses for taxis out of 875 active taxi licences in total.

Access-A-Bus: There are 47 accessible buses in this fleet but only 33 of those vehicles are able to complete work on the road.

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell Mobility, Chatr, Cityfone, Eastlink Fido, Koodo, Petro-Canada, PC Mobile, Public Mobile, Rogers, Speak Out, Telus, Virgin Mobile, Primus, Zoomer

Internet Providers: 295.ca, Netfox, Auracom, Bell Aliant, Call-One Communications, Caneris, Chebucto Community Net, ConnectMoi, Copper.net, Eastlink, Galaxy, Leopard Networks, Montreal DSL, MySignal.ca, NSC Network, Seaside Communications, Slamhang, TekSavvy, Worldline, Xplornet, Zeuter, ZID Internet, City Wide Communications, Basic ISP

Policing

Halifax Regional Police
RCMP

TRURO

Transition House

Third Place Transition House: A 15-bed shelter (beds are available for women and children) that serves the Truro, Colchester, and East Hants areas.

Millbrook Family Healing Centre: One of two shelters in Nova Scotia serving women from First Nations. One-level building with a ramp out front.

Women's Centre

The Lotus Centre: A Resource for Women. Ramp at the main door in the back of the building and wheelchair accessible washroom.

Housing

No figures available

Transit

No public transit

Colchester Transportation Cooperative Limited (CTCL):

Priority is given to those with special needs, disabilities, or to seniors.

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

G&D Taxi: No accessible cabs but looking into getting one

Layton's Taxi: One accessible van

U-Need-A-Taxi: None

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Telus, Rogers

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, North Nova Cable, Seaside Communications, Xplornet, NCS Network

Policing

Truro Police Service
RCMP

PORT HAWKESBURY

Transition House

Leeside Transition House: Serves Richmond and Inverness counties and the Town of Port Hawkesbury. First floor of the building is accessible with accessible washroom and shower. Kitchen is not accessible and laundry is in the basement of the building.

Women's Centre

Strait and Area Women's Centre, located in the town's professional centre on the first floor. No ramp; accessible from street level.

Housing

No figures available

Transit

No public transit

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

Strait Area Transit: Has accessible vehicles

Dave's Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Harper's Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Ed's Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Seaside, Xplornet, Bell, Eastlink

Policing

RCMP

YARMOUTH

Transition House

Juniper House: Located in Yarmouth with outreach centres in Shelburne and Digby. The house in Yarmouth has accessible front-door entry, one accessible bedroom and bathroom. Outreach centre in Digby located in NSCC Learning Centre in Digby. Building is fully accessible with Braille labeling on individual rooms.

Women's Centre

Tri-County Women's Centre: Building includes an accessible ramp, entrance door, and washroom.

Housing

400 units out of the 2,400 units in Housing Nova Scotia's Western region are accessible. The Western region includes Kings County, Annapolis County, Digby County, Yarmouth County, Shelburne County, Queens County, and Lunenburg County.

Transit

There is public transit with an accessible bus.

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

Acadian Cab: No accessible vehicles

A-2-B Taxi: No accessible vehicles, but have picked up passengers who are in wheelchairs

East Coast Cab: No accessible vehicles

Tri-County Cab: No accessible vehicles, but have picked up passengers in wheelchairs, if the wheelchair can fit into the vehicle's trunk

Hope Dial-A-Ride: Three accessible vehicles. Passengers can book 24 hours in advance. The service operates Monday to Friday until about 4:30 p.m. each day.

Transport de Clare: Serves Digby County. Accessible vehicles. Reservations required

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Xplornet

Policing

RCMP

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

SHELBURNE

Transition House

Juniper House serves Shelburne, Digby, and Yarmouth. Outreach offices are located in Shelburne and Digby.

Women's Centre

Tri-County Women's Centre

Housing

400 units out of the 2,400 units in Housing Nova Scotia's Western region are accessible. The Western region includes Kings County, Annapolis County, Digby County, Yarmouth County, Shelburne County, Queens County, and Lunenburg County.

Transit

No public transit

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

No cab companies.

Sou'West Nova Transit Association: Serves communities in Shelburne County. Two accessible vans operated by staff and volunteer drivers. Trips must be booked by noon the day before travel.

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Xplornet

Policing

RCMP

KENTVILLE

Transition House

Chrysalis House: Shelter for 15 women and children. Current building is an older, three-floor home with one accessible bedroom on the main floor. Some accessible features in the bathroom. Fundraising for a new, one-floor fully accessible building is underway with potential opening date of end of 2020.

Women's Centre

Women's Resources Place located in Annapolis Royal. The front entrance and washroom are not accessible.

Housing

400 units out of the 2,400 units in Housing Nova Scotia's Western region are accessible. The Western region includes Kings County, Annapolis County, Digby County, Yarmouth County, Shelburne County, Queens County, and Lunenburg County.

Transit

Kings County Transit: All buses in the fleet are full accessible with low floors, entry and exit ramps, extra-wide passenger door, and safe, secure wheelchair tie-down spaces

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

CJ's Taxi: Located in Wolfville and serves Kentville, Wolfville, and New Minas. No accessible vehicles

M&G Cab: Located in New Minas and serves New Minas, Kentville, and Wolfville: No accessible vehicles

Chucky's Cab: Located in Kentville. No accessible vehicles

Kings Point to Point Transit Society: Serves Kings County, east of Aylesford. Fleet includes seven accessible minivans, full-sized vans, and an 18-passenger minibus. Day trips to any destination within Nova Scotia

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Xplornet, Cross Country

Policing

Town of Kentville Police
RCMP

AMHERST

Transition House

Autumn House: Building includes ramp, accessible first floor, accessible washroom, and room that can be converted to an accessible bedroom.

Women's Centre

None

Housing

No figures available

Transit

No public transit

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

Cumberland County Transportation Services (CCTS): Two accessible vehicles. Appointments must be booked at least 24 hours in advance. Service on a first-come, first-served basis.

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Amherst Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Another Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Your Cab: No accessible vehicles

Baker's Taxi: Four vans and two cabs and looking to get an accessible vehicle, but funding is an issue.

Communication

Mobile Providers: Eastlink, Bell, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Seaside Communications, Xplornet

Policing

Town of Amherst Police
RCMP

NEW GLASGOW

Transition House

Tearmann House: Located in New Glasgow. Wheelchair accessible. One wheelchair accessible bedroom with an ensuite bathroom that includes strobe lights connected to a fire alarm. TTY services.

Women's Centre

Pictou County Women's Resource and Sexual Assault Centre: Wheelchair accessible, ramp, and accessible washroom

Housing

No figures available

Transit

None

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

Centre Highlands Association for the Disabled: An on-demand door-to-door service for Pictou County residents who require transportation assistance. Offers several rates, including those for trips less than five kilometres and charters.

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Central Cabs: No accessible vehicles

ADE Metro-Midtown: No accessible vehicles

DC Cabs: No accessible vehicles

Todd's Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Matt's Taxi: No accessible vehicles

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Seaside Communications, TNC Wireless, Xplornet

Policing

RCMP
New Glasgow Regional Police

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

SYDNEY

Transition House

Cape Breton Transition House: Wheelchair accessible

Women's Centre

Every Woman's Centre: Wheelchair accessible

Housing

No figures available

Transit

Transit Cape Breton has some accessible vehicles in its regular fleet. There's also a Handi-Trans service: Registration is required, but can accommodate emergency appointments, if room permits. Additional 20 hours of service added as of September 2019

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

Maritime Bus: Drivers will assist people with walking difficulties, who are blind or partially sighted, are Deaf or hard of hearing. Can accommodate collapsible wheelchairs, walkers, and small assistive devices. One service animal per passenger permitted and passenger must provide written proof of animal's training. Those travelling with a wheelchair must provide 72 hours' notice. Personal attendants can travel free of charge.

Dynasty Taxi: No accessible vehicles

City Wide Taxi: No accessible vehicles, although the company was researching the purchase of one

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Rogers, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Seaside Communications, Xplornet

Policing

Cape Breton Regional Police
RCMP

SHEET HARBOUR

Transition House

None

Women's Centre

LEA Place Women's Resource Centre: Has a ramp at the front of the building.

Housing

No figures available

Transit

While Sheet Harbour is part of the Halifax Regional Municipality, it's not served by Halifax Transit.

Transportation (Taxis/Shuttle Services)

No cab companies

Musgo Riders: No accessible vehicles

Communication

Mobile Providers: Bell, Telus

Internet Providers: Bell, Eastlink, Seaside Communications, Xplornet

Policing

Served by the RCMP with a small detachment



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Because disability is often invisible because the very people we are talking to are stuck in their homes, they can't get out because of accessibility issues.

And the people who help them are their caregivers or the people close to them and sometimes that circle, as we know, is not always a healthy one.

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WHAT WE HEARD: HIGHLIGHTS

Over the course of the meetings, several trends were noticed.

HOME CARE

When a woman calls a transition house for support, she's asked if she can live independently. That means can she clean and cook for herself, take care of her own personal care, and healthcare. If a woman relies on home care for support, and some women with disabilities do, she often can't go to a transition house. Home care doesn't transition with the woman. Many staff in Nova Scotia transition houses do their best to accommodate the women who call. On occasion, however, there are women with disabilities who can't flee to a transition house. In those cases, staff often recommends other resources, including transition houses elsewhere or a local hospital.

"For the woman who has a disability the abuser is also the caregiver, right? If you had home care nurses who were able to come into the house and help, maybe that woman could get out of that position. With a lot of abusers, they already make it so you're forced to rely on them. That would put a woman with a disability a disadvantage because you would have to rely on that, not just financially, but you need to rely on them for cooking your food, helping you shower, helping you put your socks on. The abuser is going to like that because it gives them more leverage."

"I feel like it would be awesome if we had a staff person who could teach life skills at the house. Us staff don't have time for that. We do ask women are they able to live independently and they say yes because they want to stay with us. But the reality is they're not and we're not going to kick them out once they're there. Then they don't know how to turn on the oven. They have assigned chores because it's a big house and they have to clean up after themselves. So, they each have a chore and some people don't know how to prepare a mop bucket with soap and water. And staff doesn't have time to teach those things. But we don't have the money to hire people to do those things. Or hire someone to do the cleanup around the house. We have no time. If we are on a suicide call or the toilet is overflowing, we don't have time to help out."

"We had a poor woman ... One of the questions we asked is can you do personal care? Can you get in the shower by yourself? Can you get out of your wheelchair? Can you get into the bed? Oh, yes, I'm fine. I don't have a wheelchair. And it was all fine until she got into, we have walk-in shower with the seat and everything. She got in the shower, she couldn't get out. There's only one staff on the weekend. She is sitting in the shower hollering for help because she can't get out of the shower. She's a fairly large woman. She's wet and slippery, right? They got her out but I said they should have called an ambulance to get her out."

"If we had some kind of collaborative approach in our community, around working with other agencies and organizations that can support a woman in need of emergency shelter such as having VON come in with a seamless process, a gentle process, an expedient process. Like we have a woman coming in who needs some personal care we call a coordinator of such and such a place and have that set up for when she comes, not three weeks later ... If there were people skilled in that area to take care of that piece, that would totally work for us. When you get to the bottom line where we simply can't go in and do your personal care. We can't change your catheter. We can't change your pans or your dressing. We just can't do that. We don't dispense meds either. Meds go in the cupboard. Women come in and take them in the office. But we're not medical professionals."

"I know a number of times I've heard from women that if they have a disability where they require regular support from someone, so often their abuser that is giving them that support, then they're not likely to call because they know the next step means they have to figure out care. I can't do that, right? So, they look at it like there's no point in leaving because I'm just going to end up back where I started and dependent on this person. And now I've just angered him more."

"We get to the point where we just can't take the women and we don't take that lightly. It's hard to say no to anybody. And yet we can't meet the needs of all the people."

THE NEEDS OF WOMEN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Women with intellectual disabilities can physically access safe spaces, including transition houses, but often have challenges navigating systems, including legal and medical, which are a part of the process after leaving a situation of domestic violence.

Some women with intellectual disabilities have a limited understanding of healthy relationships and may not understand they are being abused. Many of these women find themselves in a cycle of coming and going through transition houses and other safe spaces, only to find themselves back in abusive relationships. Others are fortunate to connect with an informal network in their own communities. There they find the support of other women who help them with appointments with doctors or lawyers. In one case, we met a woman who didn't experience domestic violence, but was disabled herself. She was a part of a group of women who supported each other. She drove the others to appointments, most of which were well outside of their community where there's no access to transit. She helped one survivor with her appointments with a psychologist. While these networks are inspiring and supportive, women don't always have the training or supports they need to support others.

"For some of our girls and women, they would not identify themselves as being part of this. If I were to ask them, have you ever been in a domestic violence partnership, they'd be, 'like what?'" I feel like a lot of that is normalized. If I were to highlight that that's not a healthy relationship or that it maybe could look differently, then it's not even a thought. So, if I were to ask someone to engage in that kind of dialogue, it's kind of like, 'I don't need to go because I'm not being abused.' So, it's like trying to catch them in that small window of vulnerability where they feel like they can say it without being influenced by someone who will tell them to minimize it."

"There are johns out there that hunt out women who are disabled, that are mentally challenged, that are easier to take advantage of. And their actions can be despicable because these women are powerless."

"I am thinking of one person, you know, she had an intellectual disability and it was really, really hard for her to navigate services. I didn't realize that until she became a resident of transition. It's really tough."

"A few months ago, I did have a client with delays. I don't know what kind, but it was very hard to do programs with her. And it was mandatory from CPS. She had to complete. I tried the best I could, I gave examples to make it easier for her to understand, but I don't think I knew what exactly what the best way to teach her was. I don't know how much she got from those programs. Maybe if I knew more techniques to teach those with cognitive delays. I just don't know if she got it and it was important for her to finish them ... but she wasn't receiving the information the way she needed it delivered to her."

“

I am thinking of one person, you know, she had an intellectual disability and it was really, really hard for her to navigate services. I didn't realize that until she became a resident of transition. It's really tough.

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POLICING AND LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING AROUND ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

Police, including RCMP and Halifax Regional Police, have limited training related to accessibility and working with people with disabilities.

All RCMP police officers in Nova Scotia receive mandatory training in domestic violence/intimate partner violence (IPV) through a course covering IPV investigations, victim and offender management and vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities. Working with people with disabilities is also covered during cadet training at the RCMP Training Academy. At the RCMP Training Academy, cadets attend a panel discussion on living with physical disabilities that includes representatives from various organizations, such as the CNIB, the Canadian Paraplegic Association, as well as epilepsy and hard of hearing associations. This discussion includes time for cadets to ask questions.

On an ongoing basis, officers attend mandatory training every two years. Part of that training includes practice responding to scenarios requiring de-escalation of a person experiencing a mental health crisis.

For the Halifax Regional Police, there is no training in dealing with people with physical disabilities. Officers do have training to work with people with mental disabilities as officers often are required to deal with these people as a result of their conditions.

In many of the rural communities, the women and staff talked about how any issues in the community, including those around domestic violence, are not brought forward to the police. They talked about how some issues are solved amongst residents and families instead.

There was, however, support for some of the protocols put together by police forces. In one community, video statements are taken at the local women's outreach centre rather than at the RCMP detachment, which is located across the street from the town's Tim Horton's. Such measures gave women who needed to give statements more privacy in a space where they felt safe. In other community sessions, women and staff talked about how dealings with the police depend on the officer answering a call or who was working with a woman in a situation of domestic violence. Some of the staff we met with said those officers who had training in or understanding of trauma-informed care were better suited to working with and more empathetic to women who experienced domestic violence.

WHAT WE HEARD: HIGHLIGHTS

Some women talked about the issue of understaffing at RCMP detachments in their communities.

"And for those communities, getting help doesn't even seem to be an option. Like, they're all just coping with it themselves. They have this very, very big belief about no rats who do not rat someone out. Like, it's the wild west when it comes to reaching out to the police department."

"Police down here aren't much good. You could dead by the time the police got to you. Most women around here, if they're in an abusive relationship, they walk the streets until the husband calms down. Then they go home. If they have a physical disability, they have no place to go. They are stuck."

"We just recently got a new sergeant, a female who is responsible for this detachment. That detachment turns over staff quite frequently. We get a lot of young RCMP officers."

"It's an issue of personnel. It's an issue of training individual officers. So, depending on how long they've been a member and how long they've worked in different provinces. They'll come to Nova Scotia and know nothing about how we do things here because we have our own protocols, you know. So, you'll get people who, for whatever reason, because of personal life experience or just because of maturity or whatever, they handle situations really well. And then you get others, again because of personal life experiences and prejudices and everything else, who handle situations very poorly. It's inconsistent. You don't always know you're going to get the same reaction."

"If you call 911, the police come and the police aren't necessarily trained to deal with whatever the disability is. It's kind of six in one, half a dozen in the other."

"I think, too, with the police, if it's not physical abuse, if they can't see the marks on you, they're not as interested in what you're calling about, what your complaint is. They don't take emotional or verbal or any other abuses as seriously as they do, 'Oh look, she's bleeding. She's got a black eye.'"

"I've been working with clients for a number of years now and on individual had called the police one evening and they did not arrange to have an interpreter there. So, there was no communication. They were texting. They texted me and I said to the police officer, 'Please contact me through texting.' And the police officer said no, I will not do that."

"There was an incident, he got explosive or whatever, and I don't like to go there, but the police showed up and I was, I had said, you know, there he had said something that, 'Oh, she said she was gonna hurt herself,' which I never like, you know, there's ideation, but at the time, but there was never any, any actions because there was so much hopelessness. But I literally was handcuffed to my wheelchair. So, for somebody who's lost a limb to be forced to have a restriction and like circulation cutting off, that was a real eye opener. And there was no, I

can understand, like, you know, there are people out of control. They're trying to hit an officer. There was none of that. I was like completely passive. I was trying to look something up on my computer and they didn't like that."

"And then if you're from the Indigenous community, they might not come."

"I came from [community]. So you called the police, you had to wait. Yeah. It could be tomorrow."

"Sometimes they talk to you like they're interrogating you."

HOUSING

Nova Scotia has a lack of affordable housing. There's an even greater shortage of accessible housing, particularly in rural areas. Another concern in rural communities is that women with disabilities who do get housing may end up next door to friends or family of their abuser.

There are almost no figures on how many accessible housing units there are in the Housing Nova Scotia inventory. We did learn there are 400 accessible housing units out of the 2,400 units in Housing Nova Scotia's Western Zone, which includes Kings County, Annapolis County, Digby County, Yarmouth County, Shelburne County, Queens County, and Lunenburg County. We couldn't find figures for accessible housing in the private market. According to the Nova Scotia Housing Agreement three-year plan, which is a 10-year funding agreement between Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and Housing Nova Scotia announced in August 2019, \$4.3 million will be allocated to improve accessibility in existing public housing units. That includes improvements to 100 units, with 30 of those made fully barrier-free. But women with disabilities in rural areas are still without accessible and affordable housing, in a province already experiencing a crisis in affordable housing in general.

In the Halifax Regional Municipality, there are 18 units for second-stage housing. There is almost no second-stage housing elsewhere in the province. It's safe to say, there are fewer than 25 second-stage housing units across the province, including the 18 units in the HRM. Second-stage housing programs provide housing and support for women who have left abusive relationships as they make plans for independent living. Many women are referred to second-stage housing programs from shorter term transition houses and safe home programs. Second-stage housing programs provide emotional support, safety planning, safe affordable transitional housing, and referrals to support services and long-term housing. Second-stage housing is outfitted with extraordinary security measures, which can include, extensive alarms systems, shatter-proof windows, reinforced exterior doors, exterior lighting, and protocols around visitors.

"I know a few of my clients, outreach and even some who are in a transition house over the last while, going into regional housing, going into seniors' units. They always request to have those first-floor apartments. They're not always available, so they have to wait that much longer. That's really hard."

"In regional housing, a lot of our houses that are available are old-style duplexes. There's not a single bedroom or bathroom on the first floor. If you're a low-income person and you land one of those, I mean, those houses are beautiful. There's nothing wrong with any of these units. But it's all stair based."

"I think they would be required to make modifications to your unit in order to accommodate. But other than that, you'd be hard pressed unless you rented a house from someone who already had accessibility issues and they had made the modifications. It would just be luck of the draw."

"There are stairs everywhere. Most of our main floor, like one-level units, are expensive as heck like starting at \$900 plus utilities. You'd think this was the middle of the city."

"The challenges people have trying to find adequate housing are multiplied by 10 for people who are trying to find housing who are suffering a mental illness. When they do find housing it's often substandard and a real challenge to their health in other ways. So, I consider those huge handicaps, social handicaps."

"Unless you can afford to pay \$700 or \$800 a month for rent to get accessible housing, good luck, because you get \$535 a month for rent and lights. You can't even find inaccessible housing for that price."

TRANSIT AND TRANSPORTATION

Transportation and transit in each community ranges from a full transit network such as the one in Halifax to communities with no public transit at all. Other forms of transportation included cabs and shuttle services. Some of the shuttle services are organized and operated by volunteer-run groups. While these shuttle vehicles are often accessible, they are also limited in frequency of service and cost prohibitive to many women with disabilities. Cab companies in many communities don't have accessible vehicles; the cost of purchasing such a vehicle is cost prohibitive. Grants for funding the purchase of accessible vehicles go to non-profits in communities. Some cab companies in rural areas said they could put a wheelchair in the trunk of their car. Halifax has a limited number of accessible vehicles for a city its size.

"Sometimes we are able to arrange transportation. We arrange a cab. We send cabs far away, like, we pay \$150 for a cab bill to get somebody to the shelter. But if there's a disability and they can't get in the cab, that has been an issue, where women couldn't physically leave their home and get in a cab. It's a real issue."

"They don't get more funding because they're in a wheelchair even though it might cost more to go someplace because it might be more expensive to get a cab that can come."

INTERNET AND COMMUNICATION

About 70 per cent of Nova Scotians have access to high-speed internet, mostly in urban areas in the province. Cell phone service is spotty, especially in rural areas. These services are often crucial for women to access when looking to leave situations of domestic violence. Cell phones are an important part of safety plans created by staff at transition houses. Ineffective internet and cell phone connections put women's lives in danger. The cost of a computer, cell phone, and internet is out of reach for women with disabilities who face financial barriers as well.

Develop Nova Scotia has several projects under the Internet for Nova Scotia Initiative. Develop Nova Scotia signed contracts with internet providers, including, Cross Country, in Canning, Kings Co., Mainland Telecom, in Middleton, Seaside Communications in Sydney, Bell Canada, and Xplornet to bring high-speed service to 42,000 homes and businesses currently without high-speed service. On March 20, 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the provincial government identified up to \$15 million in funding intended to support the increase of internet delivery. This funding was in addition to the \$45 million for the first round of projects to increase high-speed access in communities in rural Nova Scotia.

"That probably just adds to the isolation and makes them or makes them stay a little longer. They may not have a way to ask for help, a cell phone or something."

"You can't even Google 'Is he an abuser?'"

"There are actually people without computers. I know it's 2019 and all but some people don't have the internet. I know some people who don't have a cell phone either."

"We do have emergency cell phones but they are so old you wouldn't be able to get internet on them. You could just call 911."

"When a woman comes forward to a women's centre and identifies they are in a risky situation, one of the things we offer them is a cell phone for themselves, separate from their house phone. But it doesn't always work. We can give you a cell phone with a phone card but if you're not going to have access, I don't want to set you up thinking we can pick that up and it's not working. There's a huge risk factor there. Your safety plan becomes more critical."

"We always caution when we actually make them sign off that you understand that you can't get 911 in certain areas. You can't rely on it. You can't rely on a cell phone. It's a big piece of the safety plan in your house, but depending on where the service is, there are places in the

WHAT WE HEARD: HIGHLIGHTS

house that have better service. So, knowing you can only phone from the window in your living room more than the bedroom upstairs and if you have an abusive partner, they're going to know that as well."

"We're paying the same price point. When I was living in Halifax, the same amount I was paying for internet, for high-speed internet, I'm paying the same amount here. Yet, it's a fraction of the speed."

STIGMA OVER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND DISABILITIES

The issue of stigma was raised in all of the community sessions. There's still a significant amount of silence surrounding domestic violence and how and who should resolve it. As well, there is still a lack of support for those with disabilities in these communities. Stigma around domestic violence further isolates women with disabilities who are already socially and often geographically isolated.

"But it there could be some element of this introduced in schools, if that helps. The nurse health centres in our high schools are phenomenal. For there to be a poster campaign at the high school level, that would be really great, too, because kids with disabilities become invisible by the time they hit high school."

"I would also just say that as far as women with disabilities, employment is a challenge all on its own. And because we're so hungry for jobs around here, sometimes that translates to employers that don't need to accommodate you because there are 20 more of you standing at the door. So, you've got an issue? Grab a tissue and don't let the door hit you on the way out."

"I think with our clients ... I can see a few in my mind that if you have a relationship and they're both disabled, because I mean, you're very co-dependent."

"Another thing too that I think should be considered is that for some people who are disabled, that's guaranteed income and they're taken advantage of by the partner."

"They are geographically isolated. So, when you have further barriers, like a woman in a wheelchair that lives with her abuser, God knows where her family is, what are her resources? 1-800 transition house is not going to do much for her."

"Domestic violence is pretty normalized ... I had a guide counsellor at the high school there say they beat their women like it's the 1950s."

"There's such a dependence. There's such a skewed power without the abuse even being in the picture that to turn on that person, to bite the hand that feeds them, if you will, they rarely do report. And you know, if you would hear of a report, I can't even think of one off the top of my head."

"It's very difficult because everybody knows everybody. And everyone it seems is on top of everyone. You're in an apartment building and trying to get out and the other six tenants are around and they see the police coming. And then all of a sudden it's all over social media."

"You might get into housing and the unit is next door to your abuser's best friend."

"Most women with disabilities have experienced some type of violence or abuse. Most of them. We're not talking about the odd woman. We're talking about most. Yet the system is not set up to provide them with support. That needs to change."

"Small towns, people know your vehicles. They know your habits."

"Because disability is often invisible because the very people we are talking to are stuck in their homes, they can't get out because of accessibility issues. And the people who help them are their caregivers or the people close to them and sometimes that circle, as we know, is not always a healthy one."

"We get to the point where we just can't take the women and we don't take that lightly. It's hard to say no to anybody. And yet we can't meet the needs of all the people."

"It's also been interesting to see how many people don't understand what a big problem this is, how prevalent it is in our society, how many people feel shame because they've experienced domestic violence, or because they thought of suicide, or because they're dealing with mental-health issues."

"In a small town, not everybody, but a lot of people, are very close minded. And where, you know, in other in other places, women's rights and stuff, you know, they're still evolving ... I find around here people are so quick to dismiss it and laugh."

"A lot of women just stay because they are scared of what everyone will say and not being able to get away from that ex because they're just living down the road."

"There's so much work that has to be done to change basic societal attitudes toward what domestic violence looks like, who the victims are ... People will think they know what goes on in a family and they'll see the abuser is this pillar of the community doing all this good work and their family is living in terror at home. They tend to believe the pillar of the community and the family is kind of afraid to even speak because, you know, women are penalized for speaking, for breaking the silence."

"I think it's minimized a lot. And I don't think even when people talk about domestic violence ... we are immersed in it every day, so people don't just generally understand the complexities of domestic violence."

Lack of resources

"[Mental health] is a big issue in this town. To be honest with you, I'd like to get some help."

Cultural considerations

"Another element I'd love to see out there is traditional inclusion of many healing practices that have some great traditional ways of deal with trauma, talking circles and stuff like that. Respect that spirituality and the history that comes along with that ... because I appreciate that for a lot of people who are poor who are living through abuse, sometimes spirituality is the one thing that can bridge the gap into life and survival."

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They are geographically isolated. So, when you have further barriers, like a woman in a wheelchair that lives with her abuser, God knows where her family is, what are her resources? 1-800 transition house is not going to do much for her.

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EVALUATION

Participants at the community sessions each filled out two evaluation forms: One form was created by Suzanne Rent, coordinator of the Not Without Us Project, and Joanne Bernard, president and CEO of Easter Seals Nova Scotia.

The second evaluation was a participant survey provided by the Standing Together Initiative and asked key demographic questions about the participants.

All of the evaluation forms were sent to Marlee Jordan, a research assistant with the Standing Together Initiative Evaluation Team. Jordan also conducted midway progress interviews. The coordinator of the project also attended a daylong evaluation and learning workshop in December. That was hosted by Dr. Diane Crocker and her evaluation team at Saint Mary's University in Halifax.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCESSIBILITY SURVEYS

- Complete accessibility surveys of all transition houses in Nova Scotia as well as other safe places such as women's resource centres used by women with disabilities who need to flee situations of domestic violence. All accessible features should be included on the transition house website.
- Work with the leadership and staff of each transition house and women's resource centre to upgrade the facilities to include as many accessible features as possible.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- Develop a program around accessibility for police and staff at organizations that serve women with disabilities leaving situations of domestic violence. This program of accessibility-informed care can help anyone working with women with disabilities at any stage understand what it means to live with a disability and how these women navigate the systems, their communities, and world. Such a program should include women with different disabilities, including physical, cognitive disabilities, and those women who are blind or partially sighted, Deaf or hard of hearing.
- Develop tools to educate and support women with disabilities at organizations on how to understand and develop healthy relationships. As well, this program can teach them about reporting their abuse, reaching out, and where to go for accessible supports in their communities.
- Develop a training program for staff at organizations that work with women with disabilities so they can recognize the signs of domestic violence and know how and where to report that abuse.

EDUCATION ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY

- Create a community awareness campaign on domestic violence and accessibility. Neighbours, Friends, and Family is a domestic violence awareness program currently in Ontario. They previously worked on an NFF program around the particular circumstances for women with disabilities in situations of domestic violence. The NFF program hosted some training sessions in Nova Scotia at least 10 years ago.
- Create community task forces that can help understand, implement, and monitor accessibility in their communities. These task forces should include survivors of domestic violence, women with disabilities, as well as local elected officials, staff who work with women with disabilities and those experiencing domestic violence, and local/municipal planners in each community.

NAVIGATION AND OUTREACH

- During the sessions, many of the survivors and staff spoke about the need for a navigator in their community. Staff at transition houses, women's resource centres, and other safe spaces for women need a navigator who can help them direct women with disabilities to the appropriate resources. This could be a central phone line or person who can do intake and direct staff to resources throughout the province. The province currently has a 211 service via telephone and online. Complete an audit to confirm that all accessible features of resources women with disabilities need are included in 211 listings.
- More outreach resources for women with disabilities, including an accessible mobile unit through which these women can not only work with a navigator to create a safety plan, but also receive other information on health and wellness, mental health resources, and more.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

- Develop safe spaces for women with disabilities who experienced domestic violence, as well as for staff who work with these women. One of the benefits of the community sessions was the networking opportunities they provided for survivors of domestic violence and the staff at the organizations that serve these women. Many who attended sessions said they were glad to have a chance to share their stories and ideas. Separate meetings can take place for victims and staff.

HOME CARE

- Develop a pilot program that includes Home Care Nova Scotia, Caregivers Nova Scotia, Transition House Association of Nova Scotia, and the Nova Scotia Health Authority to find ways to have home care transition to shelters for those women with disabilities who require such care. **Home care is an essential service for some women with disabilities, and this service must move with them when they are in a transition home.** This pilot will be a top-level project. Transition house staff along with home-care operators in each community can work together to customize how providing home care will work best for them. All home-care organizations and staff who work in transition houses must abide by the rules of confidentiality, not only to protect women with disabilities in those shelters, but also the other residents there. Any home care provided to women with disabilities in transition houses should be funded by the province of Nova Scotia.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

ACCESSIBLE HOUSING DATABASE

- Create an online, searchable database of accessible housing in the Housing Nova Scotia inventory. This database should be available to leadership and staff at transition houses whose clients are searching for accessible housing. The database would include the details of accessible features in each housing unit. Such online registries already exist elsewhere, including The Social Registry of Ottawa, non-profit organization that maintains the central waiting list for people applying for rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing. The registry includes units for those with special needs, including wheelchair access.

<https://www.housingregistry.ca/>

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Work needs to be done to reach into African Nova Scotia, Indigenous, and LGBTQ communities where women with disabilities experiencing domestic violence face additional barriers, including racism and stigma.

CONCLUSION

Women with disabilities experiencing domestic violence are some of the most vulnerable people in Nova Scotia. They are often physically, socially, and geographically isolated. They are also dependent on the people who abuse them, not only for personal care, but financially as well.

On a positive note, there are already networks and supports in place to reach these women to help them leave situations of domestic violence. The effort must concentrate on reaching out to them in their own communities through supports like organizations that work with people with disabilities or with vulnerable women. We hope this project has created tools that can then be implemented in communities across Nova Scotia and customized by those organizations that work with women with disabilities experiencing domestic violence. That includes transition houses, women's resource centres, independent living and long-term care facilities, home-care operators, continuing care, and those groups, like the CNIB and the Society for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which work with women with disabilities.

This research and its recommendations have the potential to make a much larger impact in Nova Scotia. Much of the work will also assist other women experiencing domestic violence and anyone living with a disability. When improvements are made to transportation, the built environment, communication, and further education around domestic violence and accessibility in Nova Scotia, this will connect us all.



Easter Seals Nova Scotia and the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities recognize the support of the Province of Nova Scotia. We were pleased to work in partnership with the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women as we stand together to reduce and prevent domestic violence across Nova Scotia.

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