

COVID-19: Responding to the Needs of Nova Scotians with Disabilities



In March 2020, the Accessibility Directorate reached out to approximately 60 community organizations and the Accessibility Advisory Board, asking them to share issues related to COVID-19 that were arising for persons with disabilities. The Directorate shared this information with our government colleagues and partners. An update on how these matters were addressed is enclosed below, based on information provided between April 1 – August 14, 2020.

Thank you to the organizations who are doing critical work in our communities. Please continue to contact the Accessibility Directorate with questions or concerns that require action. Email: accessibility@novascotia.ca

For information on COVID-19, please visit the Government of Nova Scotia website.

For information on the Accessibility Directorate, please visit <https://novascotia.ca/accessibility/>

Home Care

What we heard

- Many clients are experiencing considerable reduction in service and poor communication from providers about appointment changes, resulting in significant impacts on health and quality of life.
- COVID-19 information is being sent to clients by Canada Post. Those who depend on family and friends to access community mailboxes are experiencing significant delays in receiving information.

What we are doing

- Care Coordinators and some home care and adult day program providers contacted clients to check-in, ask about their needs, and provide updates about services. They continue to communicate with clients who have had services reduced or placed on hold.

- Nova Scotia Health Continuing Care established an email list to provide clients and their families with information and updates about services during COVID-19 (To sign up: <http://www.nshealth.ca/continuing-care>).
- Continuing Care assessments were not cancelled. They were being conducted over the phone, and signatures received through no contact deliveries and pick-ups. Beginning in July, in home assessments resumed more broadly.
- Nova Scotia Health developed protocols for triaging care during the pandemic and distributed the protocols to home care agencies for implementation. Considerations include what other supports are available to clients, the types of client needs, and risks to clients if services are reduced or put on hold.
- Until just recently, weekly meetings were being held between Nova Scotia Health, Department of Health and Wellness and home care agencies to provide updated information and problem solve issues that need addressing.

What we heard

- Safety protocols are slow to be implemented and vary by region and provider.
- There is inadequate access for home care providers and clients to personal protective equipment, such as masks and surgical gloves.

What we are doing

- Front-line workers in public and private home care agencies, nursing home, and residential care facilities are required to wear masks to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Masks were distributed to all home care employees and front-line workers in residential care and continuing care facilities.
- Government distributed surgical gloves to home care clients and other persons with disabilities who need them for self-care.

What we heard

- Clients awaiting results of a COVID-19 test have experienced temporary suspension of home care services.

What we are doing

- Agencies were notified that clients who test positive for COVID-19 are not to have essential services reduced; essential services will continue with the use of appropriate PPE.

What we heard

- There is no protocol in place to transport disabled clients for COVID-19 testing. In many communities, accessible transportation is limited or unavailable.

What we are doing

- In-home testing for COVID-19 is being provided by Emergency Health Services (EHS) in Sydney and Halifax, and VON or Nova Scotia Health home care nurses in all other communities.

What we heard

- To address staff shortages during the pandemic, home care clients are requesting relaxation of existing hiring rules so they can hire family and friends to provide care.

What we are doing

- In exceptional circumstances, Continuing Care is providing exemptions on a case by case basis to allow family members to provide home care during COVID-19.

What we heard

- The federal government is assisting the province to top up salaries for continuing care workers. There is concern that if this funding only applies to long-term care staff, home care staff will migrate to these facilities leaving many home care clients without service.

What we are doing

- Through the Essential Health Care Workers Program, front line continuing care staff working in publicly funded long-term care or home care, are eligible for additional payments for their work in responding to the pandemic.

Access to Information

What we heard

- Many persons with disabilities are finding it difficult to understand important information being provided about COVID-19, and related services and financial assistance. Essential information is requested in easy read versions and other languages.

What we are doing

- Communications Nova Scotia gives thoughtful consideration to accessibility of information and encourages partner and community organizations to adapt and translate government information into the languages most spoken by their specific audiences.
- Communications Nova Scotia created two posters to provide common public health guidance and general safety messages in plain language, supplemented by visuals to aid in understanding. These posters were also translated into French, Mi'kmaq, Arabic, and Simplified Chinese and shared with communities. The languages identified are based on Statistics Canada data for the top languages spoken in Nova Scotia homes, as well as Mi'kmaq, which supports our First Nations partners.
- In partnership with Autism Nova Scotia, the COVID-19 Visual Guide for Nova Scotians was developed to help guide Nova Scotians with intellectual disabilities through the testing process. In addition to being posted on the Autism Nova Scotia website, the guide was delivered by Canada Post to Disability Support Program participants living independently or with family members.
- Communications Nova Scotia has been using American Sign Language interpretation services and Communication Access Realtime Translation Service (CART) for all COVID-19 briefings, increasing accessibility for the Deaf and hard of hearing community.
- In January 2020, an accessible website dedicated to sharing important public health and safety information on COVID-19 was developed (novascotia.ca/coronavirus). The website satisfies approximately 90 per cent of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1 AA) criteria, ensuring the majority of people are able to find, understand, and use the site.
- The news releases posted online daily, and subsequent website updates, contain information directly from the briefings with the Premier of Nova Scotia and the Chief Medical Officer of Health. Nova Scotians can access free online web translation tools and services available to all web users to translate the most up-to-date information available on the government website.
- Nova Scotia Health and the IWK Health Centre messaging regarding COVID-19 is posted online and shared with community agencies. Many are being translated to French, Arabic, Simplified Chinese and Mi'kmaq.
- Language interpretation services continue to be offered to Nova Scotia Health and IWK patients/clients with limited English proficiency. Nova Scotia Health and the IWK continue to keep language interpretation service providers, such as the Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians informed of new processes and developments. With a shift to remote

and virtual appointments, they have established processes for language interpreters to participate in these appointments. Nova Scotia Health and IWK staff are being reminded that telephone interpretation (and video interpretation, where available) can be accessed 24 hours/ day, and to offer resources and teaching where required.

Access to Technology

What we heard

- Many services are now being delivered through phone and video meetings, and much of the COVID-19 information and updates are being distributed online. However, this information and these services are inaccessible for many persons with disabilities who do not have adequate access to internet or technology.

What we are doing

- In partnership with Telus, the Department of Community Services provided phones to some individuals in receipt of Employment Support and Income Assistance who were quarantined or self-isolating as a result of COVID-19.
- In partnership with the Department of Community Services, 211 launched a new service to connect people needing COVID-19 assistance with the Canadian Red Cross. Anyone referred to the Red Cross by 211 will be contacted and supported to connect to the services they need.
- Written communication was sent by Canada Post to Disability Support Program participants living independently or with family, with information about how to access support during COVID-19.

Training and Access for ASL Interpreters

What we heard

- American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters require training related to interpreting in health care settings during COVID-19 (such as, proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and interpreting remotely and in settings with isolation protocols).

What we are doing

- The Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians (the ASL interpreter service provider for Nova Scotia Health and the IWK) has been in close contact with health service providers to ensure the health and safety

of all parties during COVID-19. Nova Scotia Health and IWK continue to keep SDHHNS informed of new processes and developments that may impact ASL interpreter services.

- Nova Scotia Health and IWK protocol for interpreters outlines that health care providers will provide interpreters working in patient care areas with appropriate PPE, and will provide instructions to put on, take off and dispose of the PPE. They will answer any questions pertaining to PPE and safety protocols.
- SDHHNS noted they have communicated safety protocols provided by Nova Scotia Health and IWK to all interpreters who might have in-person assignments in health care settings.

What we heard

- To ensure access to interpretation services, American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters must be designated as essential workers is communicated widely to those working in health care and emergency response settings.

What we are doing

- Nova Scotia Health, the IWK, and the Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians confirmed that ASL interpreter services continue to be provided in a range of health care settings, both in-person and remotely.

Access to Food

What we heard

- Persons with disabilities are experiencing a reduction in access to food. Reduced home care service is resulting in difficulty with meal preparation. Ordering groceries and supplies for pick-up at grocery stores is not practical for those who lack reliable and accessible transportation, ability to carry items, or access to internet/technology. Access to food bank is limited due to inability to pick-up food. Grocery and meal delivery service is not possible for those without a credit card or access to online banking for e-transfers.

What we are doing

- Nova Scotia Power, EfficiencyOne and the Government of Nova Scotia redirected \$3 million from the HomeWarming program to fund community organizations to provide additional support for food, shelter, necessities and staying connected.
- Government allocated \$2.2 million to provide a one-time \$50 payment to every Nova Scotian on income assistance (this includes recipients and each

of the family members residing with them) The payment was also made to Disability Support Program participants who rent or board.

- Government invested more than \$1 million to support Feed Nova Scotia and its network of food banks, and gave approximately \$55,000 to support unaffiliated community food banks across the province
- Care Coordinators with the Department of Community Services' Disability Support Program are assisting clients who are experiencing difficulties accessing food.
- In partnership with the Department of Community Services, 211 launched a new service to connect people needing COVID-19 assistance with the Canadian Red Cross. Anyone referred to the Red Cross by 211 will be contacted and supported to connect to the services they need.

Access to 811 for VRS and IP Relay users

What we heard

- Some Deaf and hard of hearing Nova Scotians and those with speech disabilities use Video Relay Service (VRS) or IP Relay to communicate with voice telephone users. To access 811, VRS and IP Relay users must use only the 1-866-770-7763 number – they cannot access the service by dialing 811.
- A community member called the 1-866 number through IP Relay but reached a recorded message instructing them to call 811, which they are unable to do. As a result, they were unable to access the service.
- The 1-866 number is not being communicated widely to the public.

What we are doing

- Nova Scotians may reach a nurse at 811 using Video Relay Services or IP Relay. When callers contact their relay service, simply request contact with 811 using the alternate toll-free number: 1-866-770-7763.
- There are several reasons that someone may have to use the 1-866 number to reach 811. The most common reason is the type of telephone service purchased (for example, Voice over Internet Protocol – VoIP). Not all telephone carriers are required to make numbers like 811, 211 or 311 accessible using their telephone technology. As a result, government has enabled and promotes access to 811 using the 1-866 number.
- If callers have challenges accessing 811, it is important to notify their telephone provider. There may be issues with the telephone service or changes to the caller's account that may impact their ability to call 811.
- The Video Relay Service number is posted at the top of the 811 webpage. The Department of Health and Wellness and Communications Nova Scotia

are aware of the importance of ensuring it is communicated in public verbal and written messaging about the use of 811 for COVID-19 screening.

- Staff attempted to connect with the community member experiencing issues connecting through IP Relay, but were unable to confirm the root cause of the issue.

Increased Anxiety and Isolation

What we heard

- Persons with disabilities are experiencing increased anxiety, lack of connection and increased social isolation. Many do not have access to adequate internet and technology required for virtual communication with family and friends.

What we are doing

- The province allocated \$50,000 to purchase 100 cellphones for those who may be left with no way to communicate if they are required to self-isolate. TELUS is generously providing calling, texting, and data at a value of \$5,000 per month, for as long as is required under this temporary program.
- Nova Scotia Power, EfficiencyOne and the Government of Nova Scotia redirected \$3 million from the HomeWarming program to fund organizations to provide additional support for food, shelter, necessities and staying connected.
- In partnership with the Department of Community Services, the Red Cross Friendly Calls Program was established to provide pre-scheduled calls to individuals who are feeling isolated due to the pandemic. Callers are trained in a variety of areas, including psychological first aid, and can connect individuals with other support services available in the community.
- Written communication was sent by Canada Post to Disability Support Program participants living independently or with family, with information about how to access support during COVID-19.
- In partnership with Autism Nova Scotia, the COVID-19 Visual Guide for Nova Scotians was developed to help guide Nova Scotians with intellectual disabilities through the testing process. The guide was delivered by Canada Post to Disability Support Program participants living independently or with family members.