



Accountability Report

2023–24

Community Services



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Accountability Statement

The Accountability Report of the Department of Community Services for the year ended March 31, 2024, is prepared pursuant to the *Finance Act* and government policies and guidelines. The reporting of the Department of Community Services outcomes necessarily includes estimates, judgments and opinions by the Department of Community Services management.

We acknowledge that this Accountability Report is the responsibility of the Department of Community Services management. The report is, to the extent possible, a complete and accurate representation of outcomes relative to the goals and priorities set out in the Department of Community Services 2023-24 Business Plan.

Original signed by:

Honourable Brendan Maguire
Minister of Community Services

Honourable Jill Balser
Minister responsible for the *Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act*

Craig Beaton
Deputy Minister of Community Services

Measuring Performance

The mandate of the Department of Community Services (DCS) is to provide effective supports and assistance for people in need so they can live more independent and healthier lives. The Department has three core business areas: Employment Support and Income Assistance, Child and Family Wellbeing, and the Disability Support Program. The Department is also responsible for the Status of Women Office.

The Department of Community Services is guided by the following outcomes:

- Nova Scotians will be supported to have more control over their own lives;
- Nova Scotians will be better able to meet their basic needs;
- Nova Scotians will be safe and supported through prevention and early intervention;
- Nova Scotians will be more included in their communities;
- Employment and income supports will be proactive, practical, and targeted;
- Programs and services will be delivered more efficiently; and
- Strengthened relationships with African Nova Scotian and African Canadian communities.

Priority Areas in 2023-24:

A. Child Poverty

The Minister's mandate includes a commitment to work across departments to reduce child poverty.

In 2023-24, the following investments provided increased support to children and families:

- \$8.0M to increase Nova Scotia Child Benefit rates. The benefit supported 42,618 children / 23,522 families in 2023-24.
- \$6.2M to expand employment support programs for youth including, EDGE, Career Rising, Digital Skills to Succeed and to enhance the Youth Development Initiative.
- \$3.2M through the Department of Health and Wellness for public health initiatives to enhance prenatal programming and improve oral health for children.
- Modifications were made by the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to the Rent Supplement Program to ensure Nova Scotians receiving income assistance are treated fairly, resulting in a more substantial subsidy.

The Department of Community Services continues to work with partners across government, in the private sector, and in communities to help ensure that all Nova Scotians have the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families.

B. Child and Family Wellbeing Program (CFW)

The Department continues to build a more comprehensive child welfare prevention and early intervention system through community-based programs. In 2023-24, investments included new sites across seven prevention and early intervention programs:

- 5 new Youth Outreach programs providing supports to youth-at-risk who have complex needs. Supports include safe community spaces for drop-in and outreach, individualized support and

mentoring, accompaniment and navigation, community connections and referrals, and provision of basic needs like food, transportation, and clothing.

- 5 new Youth Outreach Plus Programs, which are an extension of the Youth Outreach Program for youth with higher complex needs. Supports include intensive home and/or community-based intervention for youth and their family or care provider.
- 4 new Families Plus Programs to support families whose children are at high risk of coming into care. Families Plus Social Workers provide intensive home-based supports up to nine months to address complex family issues.
- 4 new Strengthening Fathers Programs supporting fathers who have used family violence or are at risk of using family violence. Programs and activities engage fathers early and in a neutral way, through individual and group supports and services.
- 6 new Fatherhood Matters Programs providing parenting support that is accessible, safe, and appropriate to the needs and challenges experienced by fathers, their children, and families. Supports can include parenting support groups and workshops, interactive activities, drop-in, and one-on-one support.
- 3 new Cultural Connections Initiatives providing culturally relevant and safe programs and services to African Nova Scotian children, youth, families, and communities.
- 3 new Community Family Peer support Networks, which provide grassroots initiatives to engage marginalized and isolated children, youth, and families and strengthen community capacity and connectivity to support children, youth, and families.

Implementation of the new Practice Framework for supporting children, youth and families is ongoing. The Framework reflects input and feedback received from approximately 500 individuals and organizations, including all levels of DCS and Mi'kmaw Family and Children's Services and community partners. The Framework is rooted in reflective practice and was developed with a focus on Africentric and Indigenous approaches, with the child and family at the centre of every decision. Work began in spring 2023 on the creation of a simplified public-facing policy manual. This manual is in the final stages of completion and will leverage the Child and Family Wellbeing Practice Framework and create the necessary policies, procedures, and forms that will enable the practice changes envisioned.

The Department continued to implement the redesign of the foster care system, including recruitment and retention of diverse foster families, expansion of foster care placement types, and improvements to peer support and respite for foster families through the Mockingbird Family Model – a network to support, develop, and retain foster caregivers. Forty-six Mockingbird constellations have been launched as of March 31, 2024. Foster care often provides the best outcomes for children and youth in care at the lowest cost. There were 728 foster families/caregivers as of March 31, 2024. The Department has a long-term goal to increase the number of foster carers to 1,000.

The Path program was launched to support young people transitioning to adulthood. Path includes increased financial support and additional youth outreach workers to assist young adults with future planning for up to six years once they transition from the Minister's care or Youth Services. Eligibility for supports and services through Employment Support and Income Assistance or the Disability Support Program are not impacted by receipt of support through the Path Program. Funds received through Path are not taxable income.

The Department completed public engagements on the *Children and Family Services Act* (CFSA) in Fall 2023. A review of the CFSA is required every four years, with the next report due by March 1,

2025. The main findings of those engagements – one general and one with African Nova Scotian communities – were summarised in two reports.

C. Disability Support Program (DSP)

In response to the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal's finding of systemic discrimination against persons with disabilities by the Province of Nova Scotia, the Province and the Disability Rights Coalition worked collaboratively to develop a jointly endorsed submission to the Human Rights Commission based on the *Human Rights Review and Remedy for the Findings of Systemic Discrimination Against Nova Scotians with Disabilities* (the Remedy). The Board of Inquiry Chair for the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission issued a decision on June 28, 2023, requiring the implementation of the agreement.

Work is under way to establish the human and technical resources, policies and organizational structures that will enable rapid and effective action to implement the Remedy. On January 15, 2024, the province submitted its first Interim Progress Report to the Parties and the Expert Monitor providing data relating to compliance and progress with the Interim Settlement Agreement.

DSP is working with program participants, families, communities, service providers, and other partners to build the best services possible for Nova Scotians with disabilities. The Rebuilding Hope Conference took place across the province in November 2023, providing space for over 1,200 people to take part in conversations to shape the future of Nova Scotia's disability community. In addition, the Africentric Community Engagement Project in 2023-24 included 15 community engagement sessions with over 500 community members. The findings are helping to inform more inclusive programming and policy for persons with disabilities.

Improvements continue to be made to allow participants more choice and independence in their lives. Harbourside Lodge in Yarmouth closed in 2023, the first facility to be phased out. There has been a 5.8% decrease in residents of large residential facilities. DSP supported 4,233 participants in community-based placements, an increase of 5.3%. The Independent Living Support program added 204 participants, an increase of 38%.

To better support families, changes to the Direct Family Support for Children Program were made to add a monthly inclusion benefit and provide higher levels of funding to purchase respite services. Additionally, policy changes resulted in the elimination of receipt requirements for families receiving less than \$500 monthly, and the ability to roll over unused respite funding from one month to another.

D. Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA)

In 2023-24, Employment Support and Income Assistance (ESIA) continued to implement system, programming, and policy changes to ensure supports to clients are equitable, anti-racist, and client focused. This included work on a new case management approach to enable a more preventative and holistic response to the needs of ESIA clients. ESIA also began implementing recommendations from an Africentric review of the full ESIA program and policy to address identified gaps, barriers and challenges impacting the African Nova Scotian communities served.

Employment Support Services (ESS) continued to provide internal employment support services to clients and fund external programming delivered through service providers. Elevate ESS, a multi-year

DCS initiative aimed at increasing labour market participation of income assistance clients, continued to improve program participation and employment outcomes. Elevate ESS aims to identify obstacles, enhance referrals to and participation in ESS programming, and better connect people to labour market opportunities. Participation in ESS programming increased 33.8% in 2023-24.

ESS is also committed to enhancing prevention and early intervention supports for youth, including access to post-secondary education funding, community and mentorship connections, career planning, and work experience. In partnership with community service providers in 2023-24, approximately 1,686 youth participated in a range of programs, including the EDGE program, Skills 2 SucSEED, Youth Development Initiative, Career Rising, Education Works, Youth Employability Program, Inspiring Success and the Immigrant Youth Career Exploration Program. 2023-24 investments included \$850,000 to deliver programming under the Youth Development Initiative for both Indigenous youth and for African Nova Scotian youth in communities across Nova Scotia.

Supportive Housing Approach

DCS is implementing Nova Scotia's first Supportive Housing Approach. Collaboration with community agencies, service providers, and government partners like the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Department of Health and Wellness, and the Office of Addictions and Mental Health has been critical.

Implementation of the Supportive Housing Approach in 2023-24 includes a continuum of supports from eviction prevention and emergency shelter to supportive housing with wraparound supports:

- Diversion Support is offered through service providers across Nova Scotia for eviction prevention and to help individuals secure and maintain housing (e.g., damage deposits, one-time grants for utility arrears). Seventy-eight Housing Support Workers embedded in various community agencies across the province provided a broad spectrum of client-centered support to those at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
- DCS funded 19 emergency shelters across the province (15 permanent and 4 temporary) with a total of 548 shelter beds (418 permanent shelter beds and 130 for emergency winter response). Over the year, shelters in rural communities received funding to help stabilize operations, professionalize staff, bolster support services, and provide emergency winter shelters and hoteling.
- DCS, Department of Health & Wellness, and Nova Scotia Health partnered to create an integrated services shelter within a former hotel, now known as the Bridge. The Bridge has operated in the former Doubletree Hotel on Wyse Rd. since May 1, 2023, providing an integrated services shelter with onsite health services and clinic for an average of 187 Nova Scotians.
- DCS invested in an expanded outreach team in Halifax Regional Municipality with Shelter Nova Scotia, which aims to co-ordinate all outreach services across the municipality to reduce duplication of efforts and ensure that all people sleeping rough are connected to the services and supports they need to exit homelessness. Outreach is a critical element to connect with people staying in encampments to ensure they are aware of available options and how to access them.

- Supportive Housing combines housing assistance with individualized, voluntary wraparound supports related to physical or mental health, substance abuse, or living with a disability. A total of 685 units were operational by March 31, 2024, with 516 of these units being created since fall 2021. This includes supportive housing focused on urban Indigenous, African Nova Scotian populations, individuals exiting corrections, and those with complex barriers.

Status of Women Office

The Status of Women Office focuses on issues and priorities that affect women, girls, and female-identifying individuals. It advances its vision of gender equality by:

- ensuring that women and their children are safe from gender-based violence;
- strengthening women’s economic security; and
- encouraging women’s participation in leadership.

The Office supports the Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women, which advises the Minister Responsible for the Advisory Council on the *Status of Women Act* about issues affecting the lives of Nova Scotian women and girls.

Status of Women Priority Areas in 2023-24:

A. Ensure women and their children are safe from gender-based violence

In 2023-24, \$3.133M was committed to continue Standing Together, the province’s plan to end domestic violence. Standing Together provides the province with a strong foundation for the Canada-Nova Scotia Action Plan to End Gender-based Violence that was announced in December of 2023. A total of \$18.3M has been allocated on a cost matching basis over four years.

The Status of Women Office is focused on investing in programs and services that are focused on prevention to get at the root causes of gender-based violence and ensuring underserved populations are prioritized, heard, and supported in culturally attentive ways. Through Standing Together and the National Action Plan to End Gender-based Violence, the Office supports programs and services provided by community organizations that are working to change social norms, support earlier intervention, and prevent further harm through better interventions and wrap-around supports.

Examples of programs and services in 2023-24 include:

- Men’s, Women’s and All Genders’ Helplines, which offer information, navigation, referrals and brief intervention counselling.
- GuysWork, a school-based program that normalizes help-seeking and creates safe spaces for young men to have conversations about health, wellness, and identity; and
- Creating Communities of Care Through a Customary Law Approach, which supports urban Indigenous and African Nova Scotian women who have experienced violence.

The Status of Women Office is committed to ensuring that its work aligns and responds to the recommendations from the Mass Casualty Commission and the Desmond Fatality Inquiry. The Office has mapped its investment strategy to the recommendations from these public inquiries, with a focus on increasing prevention efforts and prioritizing underserved populations.

B. Human Trafficking

The Status of Women Office partnered with the YWCA and community experts involved in the Nova Scotia Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS), an inter-agency provincial partnership, led by the YWCA Halifax, of over 140 community leaders and professionals working with children and youth who are exploited in the sex trade across Nova Scotia. TESS activities included convening Provincial Partnership for Action committees, increasing community awareness, and research.

The Status of Women Office supported the YWCA Halifax's Safer Spaces, which offers emergency housing for survivors of human trafficking and wraparound care and support. The Status of Women Office also support the Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Resource Centre, which supports high vulnerability Indigenous women involved in street-level sex work in the Sydney area, many of whom are vulnerable to human trafficking.

C. Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Implementing Indigenous-led approaches is a pillar of the Canada-Nova Scotia Action Plan to End Gender-based Violence. The Status of Women Office support the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association with an emergency assistance fund to support clients related to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-spirit, and funding for the Jane Paul Indigenous Resource Centre in Sydney, as well as the new Resilience Centre in Millbrook.

Funding was provided to the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre to develop programs to support urban Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

The Status of Women Office continues to support Creating Communities of Care Through a Customary Law Approach, a collaborative project that builds better supports for victims of gender-based violence and their families in Halifax's urban Indigenous and African Nova Scotian/Black communities. Activities have included:

- Giving voice to Indigenous and African Nova Scotian women that have been silenced through historical experiences, colonial systems, and services and structures that exclude and, in some cases, discriminate against these groups.
- Mi'kmaw Legal Support Network (MLSN) exploring how Provincial Victim Services and Halifax Regional Police Victim Services can develop more effective approaches to invite and support self-identification and collaboration with MLSN to ensure survivors of gender-based violence are referred to Indigenous-led supports.
- The Association of Black Social Workers increasing community engagement and finding new ways to reach African Nova Scotian survivors who may be hesitant to reach out for gender-based violence support out of fear that their partner or perpetrator will be identified by the criminal justice system.

D. Economic Security & Leadership

The Women Innovating in Nova Scotia Bursary (WINS) helps women to build sustainable careers in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The bursary includes designated awards for Indigenous women, African Nova Scotian women, and women living with disabilities. In 2023, 28 students received a bursary for their studies at Nova Scotia Community College campuses across the province.

Status of Women supported YWCA Halifax's December 6th Fund, providing women leaving domestic violence with grants and interest-free micro-loans to cover moving costs that might otherwise hinder their leave from violence. In 2023-24, the program supported 230 women.

The Status of Women Office partnered with Equal Voice, a nationally recognized organization, to run a campaign school for women and female-identifying individuals to help give them the skills they need to pursue elected office. Four online campaign school sessions were held in March of 2024.

Financial Results

Departmental Expenses Summary (\$ thousands)

<u>Programs and Services</u>	<u>2023-2024 Estimate</u>	<u>2023-2024 Actuals</u>	<u>2023-2024 Variance</u>
Senior Management	921	1,237	316
Strategic Policy and Decision Support	4,930	4,926	(4)
Corporate Services Unit	4,374	4,224	(150)
Inclusion, Diversity & Community Relations	394	480	86
Service Delivery	95,756	103,168	7,412
Strategic Operations and Innovation	17,424	18,612	1,188
Disability Support Program	552,146	545,737	(6,409)
Child and Family Wellbeing	161,318	171,663	10,345
Employment Support and Income Assistance Program	444,416	519,226	74,810
Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women	18,234	20,386	2,152
Total - Departmental Expenses	<u>1,299,913</u>	<u>1,389,659</u>	<u>89,746</u>
Additional Information:			
Fees and Other Charges	11	15	4
Ordinary Recoveries	19,472	18,067	(1,405)
Total: Revenue, Fees and Recoveries			
TCA Purchase Requirements	60	505	445
Funded Staff (# of FTEs)			
Department Funded Staff	1,613.5	1,622.5	9.0

Departmental Expenses Variance Explanation:

The Department of Community Services actuals were \$89.7 million higher than estimate primarily due to \$67.9 million for initiatives to reduce homelessness and improve food security, \$22.6 million for supporting adults with complex care needs, \$13.3 million to address social determinants of health, \$12.0 million for grants to support community housing, \$9.1 million to support children in care, and \$8.3 million for increased staffing and other operating costs. These increases are partially offset by decreases of \$22.2 million due to construction delays impacting new community-based option homes completion, \$10.0 million due to lower utilization of Income Assistance and NS Child Benefit, \$6.8 million due to lower utilization of healthcare worker retention incentives, and \$4.5 million due to timing of new Prevention & Early Intervention and Youth programming.

Revenue, Fees and Recoveries Variance Explanation:

The Department of Community Services' recoveries were \$1.4 million lower than estimate primarily due to lower recoveries of overpayments and Federal benefits.

Public Interest Disclosure of Wrongdoing Act

Annual Report under Section 18 of the *Public Interest Disclosure of Wrongdoing Act*

The *Public Interest Disclosure of Wrongdoing Act* was proclaimed into law on December 20, 2011.

The Act provides for government employees to be able to come forward if they reasonably believe that a wrongdoing has been committed or is about to be committed and they are acting in good faith.

The Act also protects employees who do disclose from reprisals, by enabling them to lay a complaint of reprisal with the Labor Board.

A Wrongdoing for the purposes of the Act is:

- a) a contravention of provincial or federal laws or regulations;
- b) a misuse or gross mismanagement of public funds or assets;
- c) an act or omission that creates an imminent risk of a substantial and specific danger to the life, health or safety of persons or the environment; or
- d) directing or counselling someone to commit a wrongdoing.

The following is a summary of disclosures received by the Department of Community Services.

Information Required under Section 18 of the Act	Fiscal Year 2023-24
The number of disclosures received	0
The number of findings of wrongdoing	0
Details of each wrongdoing	n/a
Recommendations and actions taken on each wrongdoing	n/a

The process for disclosing wrongdoings is accessible by employees of the Department of Community Services through the Department's internal intranet site.