

Nova Scotia Lighthouse Project Opportunity Statements

Context:

Nova Scotians have among the highest rates of chronic diseases and disability in Canada. The rise of chronic illnesses has a significant impact on quality of life, health-system utilization, and economic growth in the province. The economic and lost productivity costs arising from poor health and chronic diseases are significant, and place additional strain on Nova Scotia's healthcare system. Innovation in chronic disease prevention and population health has the potential to achieve improved health outcomes and cost savings, while also enabling economic development in the province.

Physical inactivity, unhealthy eating, substance use, and impaired sleep increase a person's risk for being overweight and obese as well as developing associated chronic diseases. Some risk factors are genetically inherited, but many others, while modifiable, are not simply a matter of personal choice. The root causes of these issues are complex and deeply influenced in the environments in which Nova Scotians live, learn, work, play, and commute. Unhealthy, highly processed foods are more available, accessible, and affordable in many community, recreation, work, and school settings in Nova Scotia. The design of cities and towns impacts physical activity levels, and increased screen time and social media use have shown to negatively affect physical activity, sleep, and mental health.

While many initiatives to reduce chronic diseases focus only on changing individual behaviour, a person's behaviour is the result of their capability to perform the behaviour, opportunity to support the behaviour, and motivation to engage in the behaviour. Without addressing opportunity and capability issues, motivation is not sufficient. In fact, focusing on motivation alone can promote learned helplessness and stigmatize individuals. Experiences of weight stigma¹ and weight bias² lead to socio-emotional consequences that negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth living with obesity. Many of these physical and mental health issues persist into adulthood, impacting their quality of life and health-system utilization throughout their life. Children and youth who experience weight stigma are more likely to face discrimination in schools, healthcare, and employment; suffer from weight-related bullying and harassment; have poor body image and low self-esteem; have increased stress, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts; and develop harmful eating behaviours that can lead to disordered eating.

Collaboration and commitment among all levels of government, communities, and non-government organizations is key for sustainable prevention efforts to reduce the impact of chronic diseases in Nova Scotia and to promote a healthy start for young people in the province. The following areas of focus have been identified in the literature as key areas of focus to impact the health and wellness of children and youth.

¹ "Weight stigma" refers to negative stereotypes about people who are overweight or obese.

² "Weight bias" refers to negative attitudes and views about obesity and about people with obesity.

Opportunity Category	Specific Areas of Focus for Solutions	Supporting Context
<p>Increase consumption of healthy foods</p>	<p>Expand access to healthy food</p>	<p>Many Nova Scotians live in neighbourhoods that lack access to grocery stores with healthy foods and fresh, affordable produce.</p> <p>For example, these “food deserts” can make it challenging for residents to obtain healthy foods, leading them to rely on less-nutritious options. Children and youth in lower-income families are often most impacted as affordable housing options are more likely to be located near food deserts with less access to public transportation. Living in families experiencing poverty, financial stress, and/or food insecurity negatively impacts family relationships and increases children’s risk of mental and physical health problems and challenges.</p>
	<p>Promote healthy eating</p>	<p>Nova Scotians live in environments that promote unhealthy food and beverages.</p> <p>For example, marketing and advertising of unhealthy foods, particularly to children and adolescents, is pervasive and creates a strong pull toward unhealthy foods. Children are exposed to a substantial amount of advertising for unhealthy foods and sugary beverages while watching screens. These advertisements can influence their food preferences and consumption patterns. The absence of strong policies and regulations (e.g., limited restrictions on advertising and labelling requirements) that promote healthier food choices can contribute to the promotion of unhealthy options.</p>
<p>Increase physical activity and risky play, and decrease screen time</p>	<p>Design communities that promote physical activity, risky play, and active transportation</p>	<p>Many Nova Scotians live in communities that make it difficult to be physically active.</p> <p>For example, the design of cities and towns can influence physical activity levels. Children’s physical activity and movement</p>

		<p>levels have declined a great deal from past generations. The physical and mental health benefits of physical activity and risky play among children and youth is well documented. Communities with pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, parks, trails, and safe cycling paths can encourage active transportation. Lack of access, concerns about road safety, and affordability of recreation and sport facilities can create barriers for rural communities and lower-income families to be physically active. Almost 20 per cent of Nova Scotians name cost as a barrier to participation in recreation programs.</p>
	<p>Reduce screen time and sedentary behaviour</p>	<p>Increased screen time and use of technology has increased sedentary behaviour and leads to disrupted sleep.</p> <p>For example, children who engage in prolonged screen time (TV, video games, computers, smartphones) are less physically active and spend more time sedentary, reducing their overall energy expenditure. Excessive screen time, especially before bedtime, can disrupt a child's sleep patterns, which can negatively impact healthy growth and develop an increased risk for weight gain and obesity. Screen time can also influence mental health, such as stress, depression, and anxiety. Environments that fail to support physical activity and cultural norms that promote inactivity (e.g., screen time) can negatively impact health of children and youth.</p>