



LEO

**Nova Scotia
League for Equal
Opportunities**

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**Annual Presentation
to Caucus**

Introduction

“Coming into this weekend, I felt like an ugly duckling and now I feel like a swan.” This quote from a youth participant in the Abilities Now Youth Summit, is in essence what the Summit was all about. It also sums up how many people with disabilities can feel going through their daily lives, often without the opportunity to feel like a swan. Even in 2016, many of the one in five Nova Scotians who are living with some form of a disability, still have to struggle to find appropriate housing, must deal with stigma and stereotypes within education and employment and often feel on the sidelines of their communities. These are the issues that were voiced loud and clear at the Summit and the issues that we receive calls on, on a daily basis at NS LEO.

For thirty-five years, the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities (NS LEO) has worked towards the full inclusion of persons with disabilities by promoting and protecting their basic human rights. NS LEO is a disability organization – led by disabled persons -- that has helped governments and communities to recognize the changes needed to allow Nova Scotians with disabilities to live, learn and work with dignity in their communities. Using a rights-based approach we strategically shape disability community-driven organizational activities that aim to identify and dismantle barriers to dignified independent living. We take seriously our commitment to making disability issues a central consideration in all government initiatives and offer meaningful and workable solutions to identified concerns. We remain focussed on this mandate, despite recent funding cutbacks that are necessitating new and inventive ways of ensuring we can continue to help persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia. We are here in front of you today, to talk about the issues that broadly affect persons living with disabilities, which came up as a direct result of the Abilities Now Youth Summit and from our daily work.

As one of our big accomplishments this year, the Abilities Now Youth Summit was made possible by a partnership between Partnership for Access Awareness Nova Scotia (PAANS), the Nova Scotia League for Equal Opportunities (NSLEO), HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development and the Disabled Persons Commission (DPC). Funding was made possible by a Government of Nova Scotia Youth Strategy Grant. Follow up events will be funded through grants from the Gordon Foundation and the Community Foundation of Nova Scotia. All disability accommodation costs were generously supported by the DPC.

The Summit was a time to come together to learn from youth living with disabilities about what they need in order to amplify their impact as valued members of their communities. It was to be an opportunity for youth with disabilities to have their voice heard, in order to give them the skills and support necessary to be full members of their own communities. There are direct actions that youth can take back to their communities and into the rest of their lives. It was meant to be a fun, impactful, inspirational weekend for all in attendance. The Summit provided an opportunity for youth living with various disabilities, adults, community connectors and government to come together to learn from one another and to provide a long lasting network beyond Summit. The Summit also provided the basis for ongoing initiatives and follow ups. The quote at the beginning demonstrates the impact that Summit had on the self-esteem and overall feeling of worth of one participant.

Over the past year we have also hosted a community picnic for persons with disabilities and their allies, an all candidates debate for the federal election and a celebration for the International Day of Human Rights, which brought together people from various equity seeking groups for an evening of celebration and beginning the process of breaking down the silos we so

often work in. The culmination of each of these are extremely important, not only because of the issues mentioned about but because disability is the only minority group that anyone can join at any time. Disability does not discriminate, young from old, male from female, race, religion, or socioeconomic status. The nature of disabilities can include physical, intellectual, mental health, sensory and other conditions of a permanent or episodic nature. However disability is more than the statistics or the diagnosis, it is about the people and their families who live day to day in an environment that restricts access in some or many ways.

As part of your daily work as legislators, we urge you to include the voices of people with disabilities, as an integral part of your consultation and planning so our communities can become welcoming and accessible for all. We also urge you to see beyond the statistic, or the disability, to the person as a valued member of our Nova Scotia, who -- given the proper support and opportunities -- can help to grow this province.

This paper is meant to get you thinking about disability, about those in your constituencies living on a daily basis with a disability, the organizations who are there to help from a position of expertise, and what you can do to support the diverse-abilities in Nova Scotia.

Areas of Focus

This year's Caucus presentation will focus on some key findings from activities NS LEO has undertaken throughout the year and from consultations from those associated with the disability community. Emphasis will be put on ways in which working together we can resolve many of the issues discussed to create a more inclusive Nova Scotia.

General barriers/supports/needed changes: Even as we start 2016, NS LEO still receives calls daily about the barriers that persons with disabilities face. As determined at the Abilities Now

Youth Summit, many of these barriers are around lack of funding, lack of information, stigma/attitudinal barriers, and general accessibility. These are part of daily life that many take for granted, but for these youth living with disabilities leave them feeling as outsiders in their lives. These also fall in line with the calls our office receives on a daily basis.

Participants at the Summit, were also asked about the supports or positive aspects they have experienced. This showed that despite the number of barriers or negative aspects a person faces on a daily basis there are as many or more positive aspects. The supports reported by participants can be divided into formal and informal. Some of the formal supports included school/education and recreation activities, medical and various organizations. However, it was noted that there is a discrepancy in the availability of supports, especially in more rural areas of the province and that they need funding to ensure their continued success. Informal supports included friends, family and community.

Most importantly the final part of this section focused on what can be done collectively to ensure a more accessible NS. Answers ranged from more awareness in public, media and political to ensuring resources, funding and fundraising options are readily available, increasing accessible infrastructure, and the power of connection. These however cannot be done alone, or by just one small group. We all must work together to ensure full inclusiveness.

Education: While education and the school system was a stable formal support for many participants at the Summit. It can also cause stress and is not set up to meet the needs of the majority.

As the province moves towards reforming the education system in the province, we urge that a system of Universal Design, which is meant to be used by the greatest extent of people

possible, be explored. Everyone learns in various ways, and a system build using the principles of Universal Design would allow students to succeed without as many individual accommodations having to be put in place. We also urge that people from various stakeholder groups, including those with disabilities be involved in the transformation process, as well as the taskforce examining Post Secondary Education in the province. These consultations are imperative to ensuring that any changes made are inclusive for all.

Employment: People with disabilities continue to be one of the most underrepresented groups in today's job market. Speaking from personal experience and from those who attended the Summit, inability to secure employment weighs heavily on one's mind. One young man with autism who attended the Summit, who had gone through the struggle of trying to find employment, held a conversation on how we can all work together to help find jobs for those living with disabilities. It was agreed that education and by in from various sectors and organizations is extremely important. The participants in the session also felt that volunteer work should be promoted and recognized. The group felt that it was important to be able to showcase their abilities and have them recognized. The group also felt that by engaging employers, and helping them understand disabilities, that more opportunities may become available. In order for this to happen though it is important it is for government at all levels to encourage greater labour market involvement for people with disabilities, to help eliminate the stigma and stereotypes surrounding hiring persons with disabilities.

Housing: The definition of "accessible housing" is as broad as it is elusive; so many properties have access features that will work for one type of disability but exclude another or they are accessible to the bare minimum. In a Kijiji search last year out of approximately 3000 listings, 5 came up showing as accessible within the HRM. Even if one is fortunate enough to find an

appropriate apartment, rental costs may push it beyond their means. Many people with disabilities are, users of the Income Assistance program; as such, they are limited in how much money they can receive, often living under the poverty line and therefore unable to afford the current rental rate in most Halifax apartment buildings. Accessible housing becomes even more of an issue in more rural parts of the province, where transportation can be an added barrier. There is no current database that people can access identifying where they can find accessible apartments.

NS LEO encourages government to work with landlords and developers to take the concerns of disabled renters into account when building or renovating spaces.

Community: Community, the various identities and the activities people participate in was also found to be an important part of life for the youth who attended the Summit. Community can mean many different things to many different people. It can be the physical community in which you reside, the groups you are a part of, the activities you do, the people around you, etc. For many at the Summit, they were weary of wearing the ‘disabled’ identity, due to the stigma often times associated, but said they often did not feel a part of mainstream communities. For many of the participants this disconnect came from lack of accessibility, attitudes, and funding.

Some of the participants talked about how they had a great sense of community through their various disabled sports activities, however funding has been greatly cut for these programs, which reduces the opportunities people have to participate or requires them to have to fundraise to do so.

Community is about choice, equality and respect and persons with disabilities should be able to have the same opportunities as others would.

The other projects that NS LEO has undertaken over the past year, such as the community picnic, the debate and the celebration reception, were all aimed at increasing community and opportunities for those living with disabilities and their allies.

As you have read this report, we hope that you are able to gain a better understanding of the challenges persons with disabilities face on a daily basis. In order for anything to change for the better it is important to allow for all levels to work together to ensure positive change. Please do not hesitate to contact the Nova Scotia League of Equal Opportunities if you have any questions, concerns or if we can be of any assistance.