



LEO

**Nova Scotia
League for Equal
Opportunities**

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**Annual Presentation
& Recommendations
to Caucus**

Introduction

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. Yet many people with disabilities in Nova Scotia still experience discrimination in some way, each day, whether that be in terms of education, employment, housing or another area of life.

Currently one in five Nova Scotians, or twenty percent of the population identify as having some form of disability. 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.

For nearly 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 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.

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

2014 saw many positive developments in legislation and funding commitments. However, there were also negatives for persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia that set us back in some ways. 2015 promises to be a good year, although to ensure that is a reality, we must all work together to ensure persons with disabilities are seen as equals in this province.

Accessibility Legislation: The most notable positive development in 2014 that will have a lasting effect, is the empanelment of the Ministers Panel examining new accessibility legislation for the province. This is a very positive step forward to ensuring persons with disabilities are able to have the same opportunities many of our citizens take for granted.

Education: 2014 saw the release of “Disable the Label: Improving Post-Secondary Policy, Practice and Academic Culture for Students with Disabilities” from Students Nova Scotia, examining disability services at post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia. This document provides a very comprehensive picture of the current state of disability services at post-secondary institutions in the province. It also provides specific, achievable recommendations for

meeting the ever changing needs of students in the province. The StudentsNS report highlighted that funding to disability services offices at Nova Scotia public post-secondary institutions has remained static. Yet, the number of university students registered with disability services has more than doubled in the past 10 years, causing universities' discretionary disability services funding-per-student to fall from \$382.17 in 2007-08 to \$220.89 in 2012-13. Similar trends have occurred at the Nova Scotia Community College. In light of these financial constraints, programming is being compromised, including notably supports for successful transitions into the workforce, and stigma reduction and outreach programs. The full report can be found online at: [http://studentsns.ca/disable-the-label./](http://studentsns.ca/disable-the-label/)

2014 also saw the release of the Education Review. We, at NS LEO, have some major concerns as to what this Review could mean for inclusion here in the province. As written now, inclusion in Nova Scotia will be taken back at least 20 years, to a time where students with disabilities are segregated from their peers. We firmly believe that this would be a detriment, not only to students with disabilities but also students without disabilities who can learn a lot by being in the same class as students with disabilities. We must continue with full inclusion in education, but we must all understand how it works and how to make it work to benefit all students.

This past year, we also learned that there are 72 schools in Nova Scotia that are not fully accessible to students with physical disabilities. We understand that many schools are older buildings, which presents challenges in barrier free access. However, restricting students' education due to a structural barrier is not acceptable today. All students regardless of physical or mental ability should be able to have education available to them, in a way that is suitable for them.

Employment: In 2014, we learned through Statistics Canada and its 2012 Canada Disability Survey that less than 50% of persons with disabilities aged 25-64 had employment. In the context of Nova Scotia, this means that there is a great portion of the population who could, and want to, be contributing to the economy but are not for various reasons. This is often due to a lack of understanding from employers, lack of accommodations, or the severity of the disability. In this day and age, with the technology we have available to us to level the playing field in the workplace, this should not be an issue. There are many wonderful agencies in this province that work tirelessly to help persons with disabilities to find meaningful employment. However, they are often overstretched and underfunded, and funding available to directly assist clients with disabilities to transition into the workplace is often restrictive in nature or inadequate, which does not allow them to do everything that needs to be done. The average disability accommodation costs less than \$500, and most are low cost or no cost solutions. There is also the Workplace Assistant Program, which provides persons with disabilities with a paid attendant to help them carry out the physical tasks of a job that they are otherwise unable to complete. Many employers are not aware of these funding programs and resources in place. And it is also true that job-ready persons with disabilities may not be informed of these government supports. We need to address this disconnect.

In 2015 we must work together to ensure that all persons with disabilities have the opportunity to enter into meaningful employment, which will only be of benefit to the entire province.

Youth: Youth, including those without disabilities, is a group not often heard at the tables of decision makers. Youth with disabilities are often taught, even subliminally, that they are a burden on society, that they are bugging people, that they do not have a voice or a place within

their communities. This is why Youth: The Future of Ability, is the chosen theme for this year's Partnership for Access Awareness Nova Scotia (PAANS) week. This week will include a proclamation and flag raising ceremony at City Hall in Halifax and a scholarship luncheon. And this year we are proud to say that the first Youth with Disabilities Leadership forum will be taking place on June 3rd and 4th. We invite you to partake in the PAANS week activities, in particular the leadership forum, where you will be able to hear directly from youth with disabilities about what they need and want to be able to be full members of their communities.

Funding: You may be asking yourself, where does NS LEO fit within all of this? Traditionally we have been one of the main go-to groups, bridging the gap between consumers and government. We have been instrumental in many projects helping persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia. We have held forums. We have brought disability community groups together in many different ways. Importantly we have been an expert voice of persons with disabilities in presentations to government. However, over the past number of years with the continual erosion of funding we have had to scale back our operations, and consequently the impact we've been able to have has been seriously affected. This is true of many other disability groups, which are having to seek new and inventive ways of helping a population that is not going away, but rather only increasing in numbers. In order to be able to continue our work, we need your support. This is not just monetary support, but also recognizing that disability issues are human rights issues that affect us all.

Recommendations

As mentioned earlier, persons with disabilities are more than just a statistic or their diagnosis. Therefore the recommendations we make are meant to forge a path in which we can all work

towards making our communities more inclusive. In order to effect sustainable changes we must all work together; this includes persons with disabilities, stakeholder organizations and government. Many of the needed changes can only truly happen with involvement from all, and by those in authority -- in this case government and respective, responsible departments -- leading by example.

Accessibility Legislation: While we commend the government of Nova Scotia for undertaking the major step of enacting disability legislation, we have concerns regarding the implementation timelines. Many within the disability community have been working for a very long time to see change implemented, and to wait another decade seems like a very long wait, especially given the groundwork that has been laid.

Education: We urge the government to seriously consider the recommendations made in the DisAble the Label report.

We also recommend that any changes to the education system in the province are in line with Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This Convention recognizes education as a human right, as a way to allow people to participate freely within society.

We recommend taking steps to ensure that all schools are accessible to students with disabilities. Accessibility is not just purely physical, but also includes the attitudes and practices that are in place which can inhibit full participation.

Employment: We recommend that government work closely with front-line service agencies that assist persons with disabilities to find employment, to ensure they are able to effectively help

those in need. More emphasis must be put on awareness of the measures in place, and the benefit to hiring persons with disabilities, without taking away from the current level of service.

We believe strongly and passionately that persons with disabilities, and their organizations serve them well, and recommend that they be an integral part in any conversations that take place in terms of rejuvenating the Nova Scotia economy.

Youth: We recommend that the voice of youth with disabilities is valued, and heard at any chance possible.

We also recommend that there may be increased opportunities for youth with disabilities to be able to engage and enhance their leadership skills. This will enable them to be full and active members of their communities. We must ensure that existing leadership programs and opportunities are fully accessible, as well as any new programs that are developed.

Funding: We recommend that government work with organizations to ensure they are able to move forward, given the tight fiscal times we are in.

As stated above, our recommendations in this report are fairly broad, but we have cited recent reports developed in consultation with our disability community that show a path forward. The important thing is that we 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.