



Memorandum: Policy Reform for Places of Safety in Nova Scotia

To: The Honourable Brendan Maguire, MLA
Minister of the Department of Community Services (DCS)

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The recent Auditor General's report in Nova Scotia highlighted oversight and financial concerns regarding places of safety. While the recommendations focus on improving management within the Department of Community Services, there is a need to better understand the realities of children, youth, and social workers.

The recommendations stress the importance of processes like assessing implementation, updating policies, monitoring interactions, selecting providers, and documenting decisions. They also highlight completing tools thoroughly, meeting timelines, monitoring incidents, addressing abuse, and ensuring quality services through agreements.

To address these challenges effectively, it's crucial to consider the well-being and empowerment of both children and social workers. The current case load standards at DCS are outdated and don't match the complexities of modern families. Limited access to social determinants of health adversely impact child and family well-being, and inadequate housing and income support lead many into poverty, further increasing the need for intervention.

While anecdotes suggest complex cases in places of safety involving disability, mental health, violence, and safety issues, comprehensive data is needed to support this understanding. Acquiring essential insights is key to fully comprehending the varied challenges faced by individuals in these environments.

Drawing upon the NSCSW Social Policy Framework and its guiding principles, this memo aims to reshape the uses of temporary emergency shelters in Nova Scotia with an intersectional and evidence-based approach. By integrating these principles and leveraging the Auditor General's recommendations, policymakers can develop comprehensive strategies grounded in empirical evidence and a deep understanding of diverse identities and experiences, ensuring solutions for places of safety.

1. *Interconnectedness*

The concept of interconnectedness underscores the interplay between policies and issues, recognizing that individuals navigate policy landscapes differently based on their intersectional positions within systems. Enhancing social well-being necessitates breaking down silos and crafting policies that tackle multiple challenges simultaneously. The Auditor General's report does not address why children are coming into care; this context is essential to truly build a more effective system that is more responsive and uses resources effectively.

The use of places of safety stems from conflicting policy frameworks that warrant reflection. A significant portion (60%) of child welfare cases stem from socio-economic factors encompassing



shelter, food, income, and poverty-related indirect issues placing families at risk. Notably, during the pandemic, the introduction of CERB led to a 24% reduction in child poverty and a subsequent 17% decrease in children entering care. Conversely, the cessation of CERB saw a 7% rise in children entering care.

Additionally, the shortage of foster homes remains a pressing issue, albeit the forthcoming Mockingbird Model offering potential relief. Social workers are experiencing strain due to the gap in available homes.

Recommendations:

- a) Immediately alleviate child poverty by enhancing income assistance and tax credits to lift families out of poverty.
- b) Strengthen promotion of Mockingbird Model and bring online more foster and kinship care.

2. Decolonization and Anti-Black Racism

Reimagining social policy requires a shift away from government paternalism and a direct confrontation of the lasting impacts of colonialism and anti-Black racism. This historical legacy often results in intrusive interventions, particularly in areas like child welfare, and a consistent failure to provide essential services such as housing and clean drinking water.

By referencing the social policy recommendations detailed in the 94 Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission TRC, the 231 Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and the inquiry into the Home for Colored Children, actionable steps towards decolonization can be identified. Notably, initiatives like Jordan's Principle offer valuable guidance for addressing systemic injustices.

While DCS lacks comprehensive data on the exact number of Indigenous children or children of African descent in care, it is widely recognized that they are significantly overrepresented within Nova Scotia's care system and places of safety, mirroring broader trends observed across Canada.

Recommendations:

- a) Prioritize family and community connections in caregiving arrangements.
- b) Family members or close community members are given precedence in assuming care responsibilities for of Indigenous children or children of African descent when apprehension is necessary.
- c) Caregivers should receive financial support equivalent to what foster families typically receive, ensuring continuity of care within culturally relevant and supportive environments.

3. Social Inclusion

In addressing the systemic barriers entrenched in our policies, programs, and services, it is imperative that social policy solutions encompass various dimensions to ensure inclusive and equitable outcomes. This involves:

- Redressing the historical legacies of colonialism, racism, and slavery.

- Removing barriers to access and inclusion for individuals with disabilities, including those with invisible disabilities.
- Challenging gender-based and heteronormative inequalities.
- Supporting newcomers and individuals facing severe poverty.
- Addressing the needs of both urban and rural populations.

Social inclusion is essential for both service users and providers, requiring progress in equity and equality. The Auditor General's report recommends that the Department of Community Services update the placement information collection tool to include sections for describing a child's strengths and progress in overcoming challenges. Additionally, there is a need for public data to understand why children enter care.

In Nova Scotia, families with complex needs often lack adequate support, such as respite care, specialized services, afterschool programs, and summer care. Taking care of children with complex requirements can strain caregivers and impact the family's financial stability.

Recommendations:

- a) Enhance data collection and make aggregated data accessible for research and insights.
- b) Ensure high-quality childcare and after-school programs with robust inclusion support to facilitate parental workforce participation.
- c) Strengthen respite care services to effectively support families.
- d) Emphasize universality in providing services to ensure equitable access for all individuals in need.

4. Universality

Ensuring that programs and services are universally accessible, funded through general revenue from income taxes rather than user fees or payroll taxes, is essential for creating a fair and inclusive system. Access to services should be considered a right of citizenship, independent of one's financial capacity to pay. Universality holds significant importance for various reasons:

- **Durability:** Programs funded through general revenue are less susceptible to government budget cuts.
- **Higher Quality:** Universal services often lead to higher quality standards.
- **Reduced Stigma:** Universal access reduces stigma for both users and providers.
- **Social Inclusion:** Promotes social inclusion for all individuals involved in the service ecosystem.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Universality can lead to cost savings and more efficient resource allocation.
- **Solidarity:** Fosters a sense of shared identity and symbols within the community.

While universality is vital, there is also a need for progressive universalism, tailoring programs to meet the specific needs of diverse communities. Culturally responsive mental health services are scarce,

primarily following a medical model rather than considering the holistic well-being of individuals. In Nova Scotia, there exists a two-tier system where families with extended health benefits can access private care, while additional family and child well-being services through DCS require specific eligibility criteria, limiting universal access.

Recommendations:

- a) Collaborate with the Office of Addictions and Mental Health to allocate a minimum of 12% of the Department of Health and Wellness budget towards mental health and addiction services.
- b) Prioritize comprehensive community care through a bio-psycho-social lens, ensuring that the diverse needs of individuals within the system are effectively addressed, promoting inclusivity and equity for all.

5. Decent Work and Well-Being

To promote both decent work and well-being, policies should address challenges related to precarious work and recognize the significance of caregiving by providing financial support, services, and time resources.

Currently, places of safety rely on unregulated, non-unionized, and low-wage workers to provide intricate care for children and youth with diverse needs. I recommend that the Department of Community Services mandate all staff in child and youth care homes to undergo regular child abuse registry, criminal records, and vulnerable sector checks. Inspections should verify that these checks are completed as required.

There are more effective approaches to addressing the challenges of credentialing and oversight, such as regulating the social service profession. This could reduce the burden on social workers and minimize the need for frequent visits. The existing setup poses risks to the well-being of vulnerable individuals, as evidenced by 1900 critical incidents, professionalization staff would significantly increase safety and quality.

Recommendations:

- a) Professionalize staff by regulating all staff working in places of safety either through the establishment of a social service regulatory body or by expanding the scope of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) to oversee a social work technician or paraprofessional role.
- b) Ensure that all staff in places of safety are unionized to prioritize their health and safety.
- c) Guarantee that wages and benefits align with a living wage, while also providing pensions and additional benefits to support the well-being of these essential workers.

6. Public Provision

Shifting away from heavy reliance on familial structures (especially burdening women) or on the private sector is essential to address societal needs effectively. Public services offer several advantages over private solutions:

- **Quality of Services:** Public services often provide higher quality care and support.
- **Equity:** Public services ensure equitable access for users and improved working conditions for service providers.
- **Accountability:** Public services are accountable to citizens and prioritize meeting public needs effectively.

Currently, many places of safety are operated by for-profit organizations, leading to resources being directed towards profit-making rather than improving the quality of care. The Auditor General Report recommends that the Department of Community Services conduct a thorough review of funding models and establish a uniform approach to funding child and youth care homes. It also suggests implementing comprehensive agreements with third-party service providers to ensure high-quality and consistent services for children in care.

Additionally, the report advises reviewing and updating inspection policies for child and youth care homes to align with current department practices. This includes defining acceptable timelines for addressing violations and outlining factors inspectors should consider when setting these timelines. While these recommendations are important steps, further action is needed to enhance oversight, such as transitioning these services to public management for increased accountability.

Recommendations:

- a) Expand the involvement of organizations like HomeBridge, YWCA, and Phoenix in providing places of safety through a not-for-profit model to prioritize care quality over profit margins.
- b) Explore and enhance the initiatives of Wood Street Home to establish a public community model for personalized care and places of safety.
- c) Expand the mandate of childcare centers operated by DCS to offer safe havens and care facilities for vulnerable individuals in need of support.

7. Fiscal Fairness

Achieving high-quality, affordable, and accessible public services hinges on transforming both taxation and government spending practices. A progressive tax system ensures that those with greater financial capacity contribute their fair share. Overcoming the politics of scarcity requires substantial investments in our communities to foster growth and inclusivity.

Recent changes to the capital gains tax inclusion rate at the federal level will provide additional revenue to the Nova Scotia government. With an estimated \$30 million currently being spent to places of safety, there is an opportunity to address child and family poverty and change the service model of places of safety.

Recommendations:

- a) Utilize this revenue in conjunction with the commitment to social services to lay the foundation for implementing both public and non-profit service delivery models.
- b) Ensure comprehensive support for vulnerable populations and foster sustainable community development through strategic investments in social services and programs.

8. Shared Governance

Ensuring effective collaboration among federal, provincial, and municipal governments is crucial for providing comprehensive social welfare services to Canadians. Establishing national standards is key to preventing further fragmentation of Canada's diverse social programs and creating a more unified support system for all residents. Collaboration in funding services and setting consistent standards nationwide is essential.

Multiple government departments and programs, including health, justice, and education, need to work together to coordinate and integrate services for seamless care delivery. In line with this, the Auditor General recommends that the Department of Community Services review and enhance their quality assurance processes to regularly evaluate the files of children in care facilities for compliance with Department policies. This assessment should cover aspects such as finding the best placement option, developing, and reviewing care plans, and ensuring adequate contact between social workers and children.

While these improvements are necessary, there is a need for a practice model that fosters such enhancements. With places of safety being widely used across the country and children often moving between locations periodically, it is critical to establish standardized protocols and regulations to protect their well-being effectively.

Recommendation:

- a) Collaborate with the federal, provincial, and First Nations governments to develop national standards for the use of places of safety, ensuring uniform regulations and guidelines are implemented nationwide to enhance the safety and quality of care provided to vulnerable individuals.
- b) Implement Family Group Conferencing so that multiple service providers and families can collaborate on case plans for children and families, including health, justice, and education.

9. Democratization

For social policy to be truly effective and inclusive, it must prioritize engaging all stakeholders in its development. Governments play a crucial role in evaluating the social impacts of policies, breaking down barriers between different sectors, and conducting thorough gender-based and intersectional analyses to promote equality. Enabling communities to actively contribute to shaping public policy is essential for building a society that meets the needs of every individual.

The Auditor General's Report suggests that the Department of Community Services should record and monitor critical incidents and serious occurrences reported by child and youth care homes. This process should involve analyzing these events regularly to identify patterns, assess risks to children, and establish plans to manage these risks effectively. Furthermore, it recommends integrating a feature into the department's case management system to document allegations of child abuse or neglect in these settings.

However, these actions may not be comprehensive enough. Establishing the Office of Children and Youth offers an opportunity to showcase places of safety and ensure that children's voices are

integrated into decision-making processes. This holistic approach can lead to greater transparency and accountability in safeguarding the well-being of children and youth in care.

Recommendations:

- a) Ensure that the Office of Children and Youth is empowered with the mandate and funding to investigate and hold places of safety accountable for their actions.
- b) Amend the Fatality Investigation Act to enable the Office of Children and Youth to present reports on critical incidents involving injury or fatalities within places of safety, enhancing transparency and accountability in their operations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by embracing a data-driven, intersectional approach informed by the NSCSW Social Policy Framework, we can pave the way for transformative and inclusive solutions that address the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals in places of safety in Nova Scotia. This commitment to comprehensive understanding and evidence-based decision-making is essential for crafting policies that truly serve and empower all members of our community.

