

Workplace Health and Safety in the Health and Community Services Sectors: Evidence-based Best Practices and Assessment of Current State in Nova Scotia

Prepared as part of the development of a **Workplace Safety Action Plan for Nova Scotia's Health and Community Services Sectors** by Research Power Inc.

Executive Summary

Background and Methods

Health and community services sectors play a critical role in the health and well-being of Nova Scotians, but they are challenged by high rates of work-related injury.

There is already much work underway in the province to address workplace health and safety for these sectors. We know the most common type of injury is sprains or strains related to assisting clients ("client" is used to refer to patients, clients, residents, and persons supported) move, but injuries related to workplace violence are also an area of concern.

In 2016, representatives from AWARE-NS, the Departments of Health and Wellness, Labour and Advanced Education, and Community Services, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the IWK Health Centre, and WCB Nova Scotia came together to facilitate the development a five-year workplace safety action plan, a partnership that in 2017 has grown to include employers and organized labour. The Action Plan work will focus on publicly-funded home care, long-term care, and community services, as these are the areas of greatest need.

The first step in developing the Action Plan was to conduct research to identify best practices for improvements, and assess the current state of workplace health and safety in these sectors in Nova Scotia. This research involved a literature/document review, and interviews with key informants from Nova Scotia, Canada, and internationally.

Findings

Research identified initiatives and supports for workplace health and safety currently available to employers and staff in the health and community services sectors in Nova Scotia, including:

- Legislation and regulations, licensing of publicly-funded organizations, and enforcement of requirements;
- Organizations such as AWARE-NS and WCB Nova Scotia that are supporting workplace health and safety through training and support to employers and workers;
- Provincial Workplace Safety Strategy and associated initiatives;
- Supports provided by the Department of Health and Wellness such as bed/equipment loan programs, infection prevention and control programs, funding to support training for nurses through the provincial Nursing Strategy, etc.;
- Initiatives to address safe lift and transfer of clients, based on the Soteria Strains strategy for health care workplace musculoskeletal injury prevention;
- Programs and training to address workplace violence (e.g. Steps for Safety, Challenging Behaviours Program);
- Efforts to build a safety culture (e.g., Health and Safety Leadership Charter, use of management systems that integrate safety into daily activities); and
- Injury management and return-to-work programs.

Although there is positive work underway to support workplace health and safety, challenges still exist. There are factors that, if lacking, can have a negative impact on workplace health and safety in Nova Scotia, including:

- Workplace culture that does not prioritize and support safety;
- Lack of safety leadership;
- Resource limitations that impact access to staff, equipment, and health and safety expertise;
- Increased complexity and acuity of clients, and associated increased care and support needs (e.g., increased levels of dementia, other mental health challenges and associated behaviours);
- Availability and composition of the workforce (e.g., staff shortages, turnover and difficulty recruiting, working alone, the aging workforce, mental health of staff, etc.);
- Barriers to accessing safety-related training and education;
- Physical environment in which staff work (e.g., conditions in a client's home, older facilities); and
- Lack of accountability for unsafe practices at the employee and organization levels.

Understanding the barriers and challenges that exist, and the current initiatives to support workplace health and safety in Nova Scotia, is an important first step in determining which areas should be addressed within the Action Plan.

This research identified initiatives and best practices that have contributed to reducing injuries in the health and community services sectors. While there are best practices that address various specific types or causes of injuries, there are also several broader areas where interventions could help to improve workplace health and safety across injury types, including:

- Initiatives related to safety culture and leadership, such as implementing and using safety management systems and continuous improvement practices;
- Providing education and support for leadership;
- Engaging employees at all levels, and empowering them to address safety issues;

- Using resources more efficiently (e.g., by collaborating on initiatives/policy development, group purchasing, etc.) and redirecting savings to health and safety initiatives;
- Gaining an understanding of the issues and needs of clients will help to ensure that an appropriate mix of staffing is in place that supports both client and worker safety;
- Providing support to staff (e.g., employee wellness/mental health programming, effective return to work/stay at work programs) to improve safety;
- Ensuring staff and leaders have access to appropriate and effective training, as well as support for implementation; and
- Accountability mechanisms (e.g., inspection/enforcement, licensing requirements) within organizations, and regular reporting on safety performance.

Conclusion

This work an important first step in developing the Action Plan, and will be complemented by findings from consultations with stakeholders in the sectors of interest, and additional research as the work continues through 2017.