



Women's Centres Connect

Annual Report 2021-2022

The Provincial Association of Women's Centres

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Introduction

Women's Centres Connect (Connect) was formed in 1988 as a provincial association of women's centres in Nova Scotia. Nine (9) Women's Centres are members of Connect. Women's Centres in Nova Scotia are multi-service organizations working in mostly rural communities from Yarmouth to Sydney. Each Centre works within and responds to their unique, community. Although each Centre may address different needs and work with different local partners and resources, they also provide a range of core services common across the province. Women's Centres bring feminist and intersectional advocacy to public policies to advance the equity and equality of women and girls. Women's Centres bring their autonomous organizations to a provincial table through Connect, which involves a joint commitment to plan and act together on shared goals.

Women's Centres Connect is recognized as a strong, supportive collective voice articulating issues of concern to women and girls across the province.

The Mandate of Connect is to work with Centres to:

- Provide a forum for information exchange and organizational development among Women's Centres;
- Articulate a common voice about the activities, concerns, and needs of Women's Centres in Nova Scotia;
- Enhance the visibility and credibility of Women's Centres in Nova Scotia;
- Provide a feminist voice for women's concerns in Nova Scotia;
- Work together and with other organizations to advance the status of women.

This report outlines the activities of Women's Centres Connect for the period April 2021 to March 2022. The report highlights activities on a broad range of issues including engagement with community and government partners.

A significant event this year for Connect and the women's centres was a two day facilitated priority setting meeting. Like many organizations the pandemic pressure provided opportunity for Connect to pause regularly scheduled activities and reflect on next steps and directions. In late 2021, Connect made the decision to engage in a priority setting process, to refocus and prioritize activities of Connect. For this work Connect engaged Heather Spidell who facilitated both key informant interviews and an in-person work to identify priority actions for Connect. Key reflections of this process included a review of previous strategic planning, the confirmation of Connect's vision and mission and the goal of setting priorities for the next 12-18 months.

In 2017 Connect underwent a significant evaluation and reflection process, which resulted in a logic model (Appendix 1) and a multi-step evaluation plan. Step one of this evaluation plan was completed by Peggy Mahon in November 2017 and was essentially an internal SWOT analysis completed with key informant interviews with Executive Directors of each Women's Centre and the Connect Coordinator. The overall purpose was to focus on Connect's member perceptions of how well Connect was meeting the objectives for each of the following main components of the Connect Logic Model:

- Communication internally and externally;
- Relationship building internally and externally;
- Research on issues affecting women and girls;

- Advocacy with funders as well as with members and partners for program and policy change.

There were several recommendations from the evaluation.

- Purposefully create opportunities to build and strengthen internal relationships and develop an orientation process for new Connect members/EDs.
- Have a full discussion of communication challenges identified through this inquiry
- Develop and document meeting structures and communication protocols and procedures to make internal communication more effective and efficient.
- Consider the need for more inclusive dialogue, and challenges when consensus is not always being reached,
- Consider the impact on the engagement of EDs/centres with Connect and the ability to carry out other areas of Connect's
- Develop a strategic external communications plan including a media strategy
- Develop protocols and procedures related to internal communication to ensure communication occurs in a timely manner.
- Decide if research is part of Connect's work; and, if so, what and how resources are allocated
- Connect should set clear priorities and a plan of action for advocacy for funding for services
- Prioritize current partner work
- Consider whether the Connect Coordinator position should be made full-time, two part-time positions, or potential contracts to complete portions of Connect's work. Connect should also consider whether Connect should have office space which would benefit visibility and profile for Connect and Women's Centres.

Connect and the Women's Centres have been working since then to enact many of these recommendations. For example, in 2019, Connect finalized their new policy and procedures document that addressed several of the aforementioned queries. Also in 2019 Connect brought together a communication working group to support "external" communications with partners and stakeholders. As a result Connect now develops and distributes a monthly newsletter, blog and social media postings. In 2020, Centres began to onboard with the national Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (*HIFIS*). This information system will help Centres quickly get quantitative data on the diversity of services and programming they offer.

The intention was to continue to incorporate and evolve some of the other recommendations further in 2020, however, the Covid pandemic occurred and paused most of the non-pandemic activities at Women's Centres and Connect in general. Which is why the facilitated priority setting in 2021 offered a re-boot and reprioritization of this evaluation work.

As a result of this prioritize setting work, Connect reviewed their purpose and vision (appendix 2). After the 2021 priority setting report Connect agreed to keep the focus on creating a 1-2 year work plan.

Table 1 Priority Activities for 2022-2023

Administration		Notes and Lead
New Connect Membership	Talk to NSACSW on what are their thoughts/ support on expanding their support to new Women's Centres.	On hold until Shiva gets back to us about additional core funding.
	Review procedure that new groups can follow to start a membership application process as outlined in our policy document	On hold until the Fall
	Will move ahead with hosting 2-3x per year Woman Serving Organization of NS (WoSONS) discussions	Plan for one in October. Comms team will take this on.
Orientation	Orientation for New EDs. 1) Review of Connect shared folder, filing and sharing documents, templates, and tools 2) Review Connect policy document, (roles of Eds, structures of meetings, responsibilities to Connect etc.)	Cora will send out some dates and times over the summer as an informal Lunch-n-Learn style of meeting. Cora will do a walk through of Google Drive, and group will read over the Connect policy and other key documents within Google drive
	Offer media training to EDS be Connect spokespersons	Sheri will provide a contact from THANS Media training
	Orientation package to Centre Staff and board members.	Cora & Comms team to prepare 1-2 pager on Connect for Staff and Centre boards

Communication		
Raise the profile of Connect	1) Hire PR firm to re launch / re-brand Connect as an Association of Women's Centres	Fall
	2) Communication Team to Review Awareness Days	Summer 2022
	3) Messages to Gov't and Funders	As part of PR work
	4) Current Affairs Response.	Comms Team will address this process
	Bring social media or communication staff across centres together to plan a coordinated effort particularly for Awareness Days	Bring individual Centre staff together in early September to share social media planning. Maybe each Centre can lead a few days each?
	Coordinator to continue newsletters and Social Media	In progress, will review with Comms team for topics and suggestions
	Generate report for Connect (Compile statistics from each Women's Centre as well as reports submitted to Nova Scotia Advisory Council on Status of Women). Note: Excellent summary of relevant facts in October newsletter. 43% of Nova Scotians living in rural communities is a powerful statistic!	Done as part of annual report
	Identify and write a series of 'real life stories' to illustrate the reality for women and girls and the need for social change in Nova Scotia.	PR and Comms
	Create an annual standardized PowerPoint presentation to use in government relations and partner communications	Done as part of annual report
	Request to meet with Ministers/Deputy Ministers of Departments of Community Services, Health and Wellness, and Justice, three Caucus offices, Local MLAs	PR and Comms
Partnerships		
Establish positive working relationships with other organizations and services that support the Connect philosophy	Invite sister organizations (WoSONS) to an informal meet and greet, coffee talk once or twice or a year. (Not Impact Assessment stuff)	Comms to start over summer to be ready for the Fall
	Invite NSACSW to one meeting each quarter	Doing
	Convene an Annual Summit to lift up the voices of women and position WCC as leaders and social change agents	
	Virtually host guest speakers, subject matter experts, and training (eg. Mental health, communications/marketing, human	

resources best practices, media training, other). Invite community partners and staff to co-learn. (Lunch N Learns)	
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Collaborations/Partnerships

One of the key activities for Connect is opportunity to collaborate and partner with organizations and agencies in our communities and around the province. This includes working as a provincial association and supporting each other Centre-Centre. To do this, Connect met virtually 23 times, in addition to our two day priority setting meeting. Here to offer support to sister organizations Connect met with three other women serving organizations who would like to joining Connect in some fashion, they are:

- Black Girl Magic
- Jane Paul Indigenous Women’s Resource Centre
- Immigrant Migrant Women's Association of Halifax (IMWAH)

Despite many Covid protocols still in practice, Connect was able to maintain and participate with many of their long standing collaboration partners in advocating for social change below is a summary of the collaborative partners that Connect worked with in 2021-2022.

Affordable Energy Collation (AEC)

- AEC responded to Bill 57 - the proposed Enviro Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act (EGCCRA).
- AEC also requested a look at electrification as a goal – including for the Affordable Multi Family Housing Program, to reduce GHGs and increase savings for tenants and their landlords.
- Lobbying for increased support in Emergency fuel requests.

- Wrote a letter to the Federal Government to include funding for energy efficiency for lower income households in the 2022 budget, and to tie this funding to the following best practices, specifically to prioritize lower-income and least efficient homes for federal funding delivered in the form of no-cost and turnkey energy retrofits.
- Neighbourhood Stabilization Program (NSP) submitted their application to an increase to cover the cost of meter replacement, no decision yet but AEC is in support of this as most often in homes owned by low income households and or in rental properties serving low income tenants.
- Wrote to MP Andy Fillmore, who then wrote to Finance Minister Freeland, cc'd to Natural Resources Minister Wilkinson, on behalf of AEC to gain support for Efficiency Canada's campaign for federal funding for low-income efficiency.
- Requested the addition of: "The disproportionate impact of the General Rate Application on low-income customers."
- Wrote to Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board (UARB) and an opinion piece.

Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS), is a multi-sector inter-agency provincial partnership of over 160 community leaders – participated in several Core Services team meetings.

Be the Peace Institute- attended meetings and participated in **GBV Learning Lab** project work

NPower

- Promoted IT/tech training program and internships opportunities.

Community Society to End Poverty (CSEP)

- Signed on to a letter to the premier citing the implications of removing the rent cap and the renovations policy for people living on income assistance and other low/fixed incomes.

Dal Legal Aid

- Signed on to support advocacy connected to the withdrawal on child benefits whose children are temporarily removed in care.

National Advisory Council on Poverty

- Participated in focus groups where Connect shared the pressures on the downloading of care for those experiencing poverty to community organizations, and the triaging of need based on depth and extent of need before “fully” funded programs kick in.

NS Action Coalition for Community Well Being (NSACCW) – Attended meetings Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) database - Attended Meetings

- Signed a HIFIS service legal agreement.

Metro Interagency- Attended monthly meetings with about 20 other agencies

Nova Scotia Action Coalition for Community Well-Being

- Wrote an open letter to our new Premier-designate asking him to Include housing in his plans to “fix” health care. The digital campaign HousingisHealth.ca states that if the new Premier-designate wishes to achieve his mandate of “fixing” health care in Nova Scotia, then housing must be a part of his strategy and this strategy must include permanent rent control.

Public & Professional Education

Members of Connect attended several notable professional education opportunities including

Dal Legal Aid Training

The training facilitated legal research to provide information and make recommendations with law students if Centre, or community partners need research done

The Collective Impact Toolkit Self Study via Tamarack Institute

Decolonization Learning Journey Independent study -through the Community Sector Council of NS

Attended the Climate Justice Webinar hosted by the Nova Scotia Action Coalition on

GBV Learning Lab project This project offered training on some key systemic issues in the eco-system of GBV and gender equity that make substantial progress in this field more challenging. Joanna Kerr, CEO Makeway and board member from the Equality Fund and Ruth Rominger, past director with Garfield Foundation presented examples of systems change funding.

Presented at the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers Conference - A summary of our pandemic report to the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers

Standing together Project Evaluation Completed a survey on the Standing together process- it was not related to any specific projects.

Connect is committed to the professional education of our team, but also to educate the public on matters that are important to us and our clients. Connect published twenty, educational blogs advocating for and drawing attention to concerns and issues related to women in Nova Scotia and beyond. This is in addition to the ten newsletters that highlight important Days of Awareness that is delivered monthly to nearly 200 readers each month. Connect continued to interact on social media, with marked increase in followers on both Linked In and Facebook. Connect has

- Produced 10 Newsletters with an average of 85 people reading it regularly and an over 40% open rate.
- We grew our Facebook following to 1192 individual followers during this year
- Wrote and circulated 15 Blog postings

Policy Engagement and Advocacy:

Connect and each of the nine women's centres participated in a number of policy engagement and advocacy opportunities over the last year. As Connect acts on consensus, we offer a formidable voice in issues and solutions related to the social determinants of health. The follow are examples, of Connect's advocacy during the past year.

- Lobbying that Public Utilities Act considering the addition of: "The disproportionate impact of the General Rate Application on low-income customers." Connect was also a key player in this discussion as well as the Time Variable Rate Project Update: NSP + Dal Legal Aid and AEC.

- Participants in IWK Vaccine Research exploring both intended and non-intended impacts of covid-19 vaccination policy.
- Connect participated in the Poverty Consultation –in Nova Scotia Conversation in 2021.
- Through the YWCA, Connect is actively participating in the interesting and intense discussions around Bill 36. Despite Bill 36 not being used a great deal, not used as it was intended, it seems the bill is going to change, and the question is not when but how. It will either Decriminalize Sex trade, or Legalize Sex Trade.
- Wrote a statement in support of gender affirming care.
- Recommendations were sent to Environment Minister Halman on the Climate Change Reduction Act to assist low income households in making the transition to low cost zero carbon energy for homes and transportation in which Connect was a participant in.
- Connect with the Centres responded to the proposed changes to the Labour Standards Code that relate to the issue of pregnancy loss and protected leave.

Summary Of Centre Services

While each Women’s Centres operate independently, there is strength in reviewing Centre numbers collectively to objectively measure the impact Centres have across the province. The following tables summarize the statistics each Centre reports, given the variety of recording methods, and program/ service interpretation it is likely these numbers are under-reported.

Table 2 Summary of Services

Services	# of individuals	# of contacts
Support Counselling and Crisis Intervention Reference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on one counselling; • Crisis intervention • Drop-in; and • Support groups 	3352	7202
Advocacy and Accompaniment Reference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court accompaniment; • Systems navigation; 	1261	905
Information and Referrals Reference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal information; • Primary health issues; • Financial security; • Community-based services; • Employment Support; and • Addiction, health and mental health services 	1405	8287
Programs Reference <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life-skills and personal development; • Family and youth; • Self-expression and leisure; • Poverty relief and food security; • Housing; • Economic development and self-sufficiency; • Sexual violence prevention and intervention; • Health and wellness; • Healthy relationships; and • Sexual assault services 	1741	6922
Outreach Reference:		
Community Education Reference: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy relationships, self-esteem, violence prevention programs; • Women, their families, and poverty; and • Primary health issues/social determinants of health 	3262	3279
		Number of Meetings Attended

<p>Community Development Initiatives Reference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interagency committees; • Social advocacy; • Housing and homelessness projects; • Food security and anti-poverty initiatives; • Sexual Assault service development; • Violence prevention; • Multicultural linkages; • Social research/Action research; and • Healthy community initiatives. 	<p>1361</p>
<p>3352+ Individual Women And Adolescent Girls Came to Us for Support Counselling & Crisis Intervention. Equates to 27,654 + Caring Contacts with our Staff or 11% of all Females in rural Nova Scotia</p>	

Top Issues for 2021-2022

While there were many topics and issues tackled throughout this year, below are a list of issues that took a great deal of time and energy at both the Centre and Connect level.

- Pandemic recovery, and return of programming and service delivery
- Priority setting for Connect
- Onboarding and getting agreements finalized for HIFIS
- Supporting an RFP on Sexual Violence Trauma.
- Funding concerns