

# Addressing Racial Injustice within Nova Scotia Health

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Summary of conversations  
and discussion of next steps

May 2021



## Message from the President and CEO

In June 2020, I sent a message to staff and physicians acknowledging the injustice, trauma and pain that the Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) members of our Nova Scotia Health community experience as a direct result of racial inequities that occur here and around the world. I wanted to start a conversation within Nova Scotia Health about how systemic racism and health inequities are showing up in our organization and what we can do to address some of the barriers experienced by BIPOC and other marginalized communities. I also wanted to signal my commitment to move Nova Scotia Health's efforts forward in a meaningful way. I received dozens of messages in response.

Since then I have met with and reviewed recommendations from the provincial and zone diversity committees. I've also had a number of conversations with individuals and groups who offered to share their experiences and insights. The stories I heard reflect ignorance, implicit and/or unconscious bias and racism that ranges from overt to subtle, including:

- lack of diversity represented at all levels of the organization
- colleagues/patients that use offensive and racist language
- leaders who do not take appropriate or sufficient action in response to racist behaviours by colleagues and/or by patients/clients towards staff – deflection or denial
- barriers to care and lack of support for immigrants
- lack of culturally competent education, training, programs and services
- lack of opportunities for recruitment, retention, promotion and growth
- lack of culturally competent supports and processes available to staff experiencing racism
- lack of cultural humility.

Racism is a public health issue. It impacts health, safety, opportunity and sense of self. People who experience racism report poorer health and poorer health care. It contributes to the onset of disease and increases disparities in physical and mental health. These disparities have become even more evident with the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an organization committed to helping all Nova Scotians to be healthy and stay healthy, Nova Scotia Health not only has a responsibility to address systemic racism in our organization, but an obligation to act to ensure individuals feel welcome and safe, and to ensure we attract and retain the best talent and expertise.

Understanding and addressing systemic racism and the negative impacts of implicit or unconscious bias within our organization is a critical priority for me and I look forward to doing this important work together.



**Dr. Brendan Carr**  
President and CEO

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brendan Carr".

## Specific comments we heard

“Systemic racism is cloaked in a robe of civility, which can make it even more difficult to identify and confront.”

“I hope these people aren’t racist.” — This is something one of our employees thinks about every time she walks into a job interview, goes to the dentist or to a medical appointment.

“I was told by a health professional, a colleague, that my skin was too black to be able to see the vein to draw blood.”

“Diversity is the differences you see. Inclusion is a sense of belonging.”

“Whiteness is the default against which everything is measured.”

“We express ourselves differently. Why do I have to take on the labour of other people’s ignorance.”

“It sometimes feels like we are advocating against the organization and that’s a difficult place to be.”

## Context and Background

Since its creation in 2015, Nova Scotia Health has recognized the importance of building a more inclusive, diverse and culturally competent health system in Nova Scotia. There are a number of foundational pieces in place that will support efforts to advance this work.

### Highlights include:

The provincial diversity and inclusion committee and zone-based committees champion the work of diversity and inclusion. Through the work of these committees, and partnership with the IWK Health Centre (IWK), the diversity and inclusion framework was created to further focus on specific areas, including:

- Developing and ensuring culturally competent person and family centered care and services
- Increasing diversity in the workforce
- Engaging and partnering with diverse communities
- Ensuring diversity in organizational leadership, decision making and policy
- Achieving equity through data collection and research

During this time, a partnership between the Health Association of African Canadians (HAAC), Nova Scotia Health, and IWK Health Centre resulted in the development of a report for the health and wellness of people of African descent in Nova Scotia. The report, written by Dr. Ingrid Waldon (Ph.D) was developed based on research, conversations directly with people of African descent in Nova Scotia about their experiences with the healthcare system, as well as survey data.

It was intended to inform the development of a culturally specific strategy to addresses health disparities among people of African descent in the province.

The report was submitted to Nova Scotia Health in 2019. While work has continued in several areas that are aligned with and foundational to advancing this work, including the hiring of an African Nova Scotian Health Consultant to lead this work, progress has been slowed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nova Scotia Health has not officially launched the strategy. Organizational leadership remains committed to working closely with African Nova Scotian communities, stakeholders and organizations such as the Health Association of African Canadians and Nova Scotian Decade for People of African Descent Coalition (DPAD) to move this work forward in a meaningful way.

Nova Scotia Health has a number of formal and informal partnerships with First Nations communities in Nova Scotia at the provincial, zone, community and program level including work within Mental Health and Addictions, Cancer Care and Public Health. This includes representation at the Tripartite Health Working Group, Aboriginal Continuing Care Policy Forum and the Tui’kn Partnership (Strength in Numbers). A focus of this work is access to reliable population health data to help First Nations monitor health within their communities.

## Context and Background (cont.)

Partnership tables have worked on a broad range of priorities including policy issues, improving access to culturally competent care and education and training on cultural safety with a view to reconciliation and reducing racism experienced by First Nations when seeking healthcare.

Staff have expressed that being a culturally competent and culturally safe, inclusive organization is important to them. Actively Building Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) into the Workplace is one of five key themes identified in Nova Scotia Health's People Strategy, which was launched in March 2021. The actions reflected in the strategy are directed at fostering a climate of trust, enabling innovation through harnessing diverse perspectives and inclusive cultures, and eliminating racism, discrimination and harassment.

The conversations we had over the past several months with members of diversity committees, as well as staff, physicians and community leaders who offered to share their insights, align with many of the priorities identified through this work. These conversations also brought forward new ideas to explore. Discussions centered about three main themes:

- Culture
- Systems, Structures and Accountability
- Representation

### What we heard:

There is a strong desire to discuss this topic so we can learn from the lived experience of staff, physicians and communities to become an organization that truly values diversity; for the opportunities it creates for individuals to grow and learn; for the organization to offer the best in expertise; and for communities to thrive with the best possible health outcomes.

Meaningful and sustainable change requires leadership, commitment to continuous learning and listening, resources, action and accountability. While there is a sense of urgency, there's also a recognition that action needs to be strategic and meaningful to ensure maximum value and sustainability.



Diversity is the differences you see. Inclusion is a sense of belonging.

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## Culture

Racism impacts people who work here and those we serve. Leaders need to take responsibility for educating themselves about diversity, systemic racism and the implicit or unconscious bias that we may hold and how that can impact our colleagues and people we serve. However, there is also recognition that education without systemic action is not transformative in itself and will not lead to change.

Nova Scotia Health needs to commit to being an anti-racist organization and set clear expectations that align with our organizational values.

We need to become an organization that truly values diversity for what it brings in term of improvement and outcomes – not simply because it's the right thing to do.

The People Strategy creates an opportunity to connect all of this work. There is a sense of momentum and hopefulness and urgency, but also a recognition that real and lasting change can take time.

### Items for discussion

- Put a structure in place to support a strategic, coordinated, resourced, system-wide approach and ensure our efforts/actions reflect best practice.
- Create opportunities to integrate efforts, build capacity and bring people together to learn from each other.
- Commit to build on the work that has been done by the diversity committees and others including the African Nova Scotia Health Strategy Advisory Committee.
- Develop a Position Statement/Guiding Principles that is explicit and clearly lays out what is expected (beyond Nova Scotia Health's Code of Conduct and Respectful Workplace Policy).
- Create opportunities to capture and tell stories about the lived experience of our staff for the sake of bringing about meaningful change. Ensure we honour the impact that telling one's experience of racism and discrimination can have on that person; those sharing their stories will determine what feels safe to them.
- Require mandatory education to create a common level of awareness and understanding about key issues such as the impact of racism on health.
- Implement the People Strategy. Monitor, measure and report on progress.
- Implement an equity in employment policy that contains elements found in best practice. It needs to be prescriptive and give people clear direction, and support, to implement diverse interview panels. Ensure other related organizational policies are aligned.
- Create mentorship opportunities with/and for BIPOC employees/community members.



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## Systems, Structures and Accountability

Nova Scotia Health needs to deconstruct systems and structures that create barriers to access and rebuild to advance a more equitable organization, with a focus on policies, process and procedures. Organizational leadership needs to ensure we are measuring our progress and holding ourselves and each other accountable.

### Items for discussion

- Conduct a policy review and revise all policies with an equity lens. Include accountability measures.
- Set goals and measure progress.
- Create and implement an anti-racism and anti-discrimination policy that sets clear expectations and includes accountability measures.
- Provide educational opportunities to ensure a common level of awareness and understanding of important concepts around diversity, equity and anti-racism.
- Develop a culturally appropriate and safe mechanism to capture and track internal and external complaints/incidents of racism and discrimination and ensure appropriate follow-up and action is taken.

## Increased representation through recruitment, retention and promotion

It is not possible to achieve equity without representation. Nova Scotia Health needs increased representation at every level of the organization to reflect the makeup of the communities it serves. There are fewer opportunities for BIPOC employees than for white employees and often the types of roles that are available for BIPOC individuals aren't secure or sustainable (i.e., funded by grants) and there are fewer opportunities for development or advancement.

Nova Scotia Health needs to understand the barriers to getting trained professionals from diverse backgrounds into the system and cultivate pathways for growth and development. This not only creates a more diverse and inclusive workforce, but builds trust with community, builds relationships and increases cultural compassion and value, leading to better quality health care. This needs to be measured and Nova Scotia Health needs to report on progress.



It sometimes feels like we are advocating against the organization and that's a difficult place to be.



## Increased representation through recruitment, retention and promotion (cont.)

Implement an Equity in Employment Policy that contains elements found in best practice. It needs to be prescriptive and give people clear direction and support to implement. One example is ensuring diverse interview panels.

- Ensure community representation in hiring processes.
- Audit employment processes to ensure compliance with equity in employment policies.
- Work with unions and other stakeholders to address internal barriers to equity in employment and advancement.

Collect and track disaggregated race-based data and experiential information in a way that is culturally appropriate, safe and driven by the needs of the community.

Review Nova Scotia Health's approach to recruitment – where staff are being recruited from, and our efforts to retain staff from diverse communities.

Build and strengthen partnerships that can support this work, including:

- Decade for People of African Descent (DPAD)
- Providing Leadership for African Nova Scotians (PLANS)
- Health Association of African Canadians (HAAC)
- The Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs
- Black Health Alliance
- Tajiikeimik (Mi'kmaw Health and Wellness)
- Office of L'nu Affairs
- Office Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives



We express ourselves differently. Why do I have to take on the labour of other people's ignorance?



## Progress:

Nova Scotia Health has a number of foundational pieces in place that will support efforts to advance this work. This includes provincial and zone diversity and inclusion committees, a Diversity and Inclusion co-ordinator, PrideHealth Navigator, a French Language Service Consultant and an Interpretation Services Coordinator, African Nova Scotia Health Consultant and a number of health equity consultants.

Nova Scotia Health offers a number of education and development opportunities for staff and physicians to build awareness and understanding on topics related to diversity, racism and cultural competency and is in the process of developing an Equity in Employment Policy.

The Nova Scotia Brotherhood Initiative offers access to culturally specific health care to African Nova Scotian men and the Newcomer Health Clinic provides preventative health and primary medical services for refugees and refugee claimants in the greater Halifax area. There are other initiatives within the organization focused on improving access to and care for specific communities including Acadian and Francophones, First Nations, immigrants, 2SLGBTQIA+ and people with disabilities.

Organizational leadership knows there is much more to do. Nova Scotia Health's CEO and Board of Directors have made public commitments to advancing this work. It's important to note that even as leadership has been listening and learning, we have continued to move forward with several important initiatives that will support a more strategic, coordinated, system-wide approach.

### Recent developments include:

Nova Scotia Health launched its People Strategy, which includes a number of actions and initiatives for actively building diversity, equity, anti-racism and belonging into our workplace. As part of this strategy, organizational leadership has made a commitment to:

- Expand and implement respectful workplace initiatives, including education specific to diversity, equity, anti-racism, anti-discrimination and belonging.
- Refresh and implement the Employment Equity Policy, now known as the "Equity in Employment Policy," measuring progress and accountability against key performance indicators.
- Support more diversity in leadership recruitment and strive to ensure members of diverse communities are equitably represented in all levels of the organization.

- Develop and roll out an anti-racism and anti-discrimination position statement and policy.
- Define measures and monitor and report on progress.
- Collect and track disaggregated race-based data and experiential information in a way that is culturally appropriate, safe and driven by needs of the community.
- Evaluate people management policies and practices to support anti-racism, equity, diversity and belonging.
- Work with the workforce to highlight their role in inclusion and alliance and set clear standards for behavior aligned to Nova Scotia Health values.

Nova Scotia Health announced the creation of a provincial diversity, inclusion and equity network. The network will design and recommend strategy and improvement plans to drive the achievement of targeted, measurable and sustainable improvements in operations, health and health care service delivery. The organization is in the process of hiring a director to lead the network and work with teams and community partners to make evidence-based decisions to tackle problems and be action-focused.

As part of efforts to move forward with the African Nova Scotian Health Strategy, Nova Scotia Health has approved the terms of reference for an African Nova Scotian Health Advisory Committee to provide guidance, advice, input and recommendations in achieving equitable and culturally competent health care services and programs for African Nova Scotians. Recruitment of members is now underway. Organizational leadership will work with the Advisory Committee to officially launch the strategy and provide regular updates on progress to the community.

Nova Scotia Health has hired an Indigenous Health consultant to provide leadership and guidance to achieve the goal of culturally safe and appropriate health services for Indigenous people, as well as support our efforts to develop as a culturally competent, diverse, and inclusive workplace. Funded through the Bi-lateral Funding Initiative and submitted jointly with the IWK Health Centre, the position is a commitment to strengthen our response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and calls to action. The consultant position will play an active role of representation, engagement and liaison with First Nations communities and groups supporting Mi'kmaw and Indigenous health.



## Progress: (cont.)

Nova Scotia Health's Public Health program is now collecting ethnicity, race and indigeneity information as part of its COVID-19 case investigation work, and has expanded this to apply to data collection for all reported communicable diseases in the province. The organization will continue to build on this going forward.

### Next steps:

Over the past several years, many people have contributed their ideas, expertise, time and passion to lay the groundwork for the important undertaking ahead. Nova Scotia Health has a lot of important information about needs and have identified some specific actions for moving forward. Leadership are putting a structure in place to support a more strategic, coordinated, system-wide approach and are committed to reporting on progress.

Thanks to everyone who has shared their experiences and insights. Many of the items brought forward during conversations over the past several months are aligned with the policies and strategies already underway. The remaining items will be shared with the provincial diversity, inclusion and equity network as part of ongoing planning.

Cultural and systemic change takes time, resources, action and accountability. We are committed to working together, along with community partners, to advance this important work on anti-racism, health equity, diversity and inclusion within Nova Scotia Health.



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