

Purpose of this note:

In 2021–2022, our team of researchers at the Spatializing Care: Intersectional Disability Studies Lab at St. Francis Xavier University conducted an environmental scan of information on accessible and functional sheltering in emergency situations for people with disabilities in Canada. Our overarching goal was to collect and generate information that could be used to identify the most suitable facilities to use as shelters for people with disabilities during a mass evacuation in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

We reviewed and analyzed federal and provincial evacuation policies and programs, academic and public commentary, and current knowledge about promising practices and directions was also considered. Emergency sheltering practices in Halifax were contextualized using genealogical methods and information from the Nova Scotia Archives. Our approach and interpretations were guided by a critical disability studies perspective. Conversations with subject matter experts and lived experience advisors enriched and validated our findings.

Our study on sheltering addressed one of four stages of evacuation explored in a MacEachen Institute project on evacuating persons with disabilities, funded by Accessible Standards Canada. This briefing note summarizes what we learned from the scan and shares recommendations.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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Accessible, Functional Sheltering for People with Disabilities

May 2023

Our study aimed to contribute to knowledge about accessible and functional sheltering during an emergency for all people, including people with disabilities.

We conducted an environmental scan of federal and selected provincial/territorial jurisdictions for legislation, policies, programs, services, action plans and publicly available information on emergency sheltering for persons with disabilities.

The scan generated information that can be used to identify the most suitable facilities in Halifax to use as shelters during an evacuation.

The issue of how to identify and locate people who may experience barriers to safe, accessible, and functional sheltering during a mass evacuation was raised by the project advisory group early in the project and guided our work and recommendations.

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What We Did

The environmental scan was completed between May and August 2021. Information was collected and organized using multiple methods and included: (1) reviewing publicly available information on the sheltering phase of evacuations and analyzing how the access and functional needs of persons with disabilities are included in legislation, policies, programs, services, plans, and publicly available information including websites and brochures; (2) interviewing subject matter experts and people with lived experience of disability and emergency situations; (3) visualizing potential shelter locations and places where people with disabilities may be more likely to reside, using Google Maps.

The jurisdictional scope of the scan included the federal government, six provinces (BC, AB, MB, ON, NB, NS) and one territory (NWT). Only one municipal jurisdiction was included (Halifax Regional Municipality). The rationale for inclusion of Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia was having accessibility legislation in place at the time of the scan; Alberta because of the historical context of evacuations due to forest fires; New Brunswick as an additional Atlantic province in closest proximity to Halifax; and Northwest Territories because of their work with the 'On Thin Ice' project. Information from not-for-profits involved in emergency management preparedness or response (e.g., Red Cross, Salvation Army, St. John Ambulance) and disabled persons' organizations (e.g., Nova Scotia League of Equal Opportunities) and allied groups and networks (e.g., Disability Rights Coalition of Nova Scotia) was also included.

An adapted three-phase, ten-step approach was used for the policy scan (Mullen 2014). For each jurisdiction, multiple government domains were searched (e.g., Department of Health, Department of Community Services, Department of Municipal Affairs) using specific search terms (e.g., evacuation, sheltering, disabilities, older adults) for information relating to emergency services and people with disabilities. In each jurisdiction, an attempt was made to find information in six categories: legislation, policies, training, action plans, public awareness, and non-government/disabled persons' organizations.

Below we briefly describe some key insights from the scan, identify the characteristics of suitable sheltering facilities, and propose recommendations. For detailed information please see the full report, posted on the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance website (Burke, Kelly, & Aubrecht 2022).

What We Learned

Accessible and functional emergency sheltering is a global human rights issue.

The United Nations emphasizes the need for states to make and action commitments that respect and protect the human rights of people with disabilities. This requires shifting the culture of accessibility from a charity model to recognition of persons with disabilities as subjects with rights who can make decisions for their lives and are active members of society (United Nations, n.d.). Canada is committed to working with other countries to support the rights of people with disabilities and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2010 (Government of Canada, 2020). Canada is also a signatory on the Sendai Framework, adopted at the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, on March 18, 2015 (Public Safety Canada, 2018). The Sendai Framework aims to reduce disaster risk in the economic, physical, social, cultural, and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries and loss of lives over the next fifteen years (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, n.d.).

There is diversity in the access and functional needs and barriers experienced by people with disabilities.

It is important to note that persons with disabilities are not a homogenous group. Individuals have complex identities, and their lives and experiences are shaped by multiple intersecting structures and characteristics such as poverty, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, religion,

language, and physical and mental disabilities (Saxena, 2020). As such, persons with disabilities have diverse access and functional needs that must be taken into consideration in emergency planning and throughout all four phases of evacuation, including sheltering.

Nova Scotia has a higher percentage of persons with disabilities residing in the province than any other province in Canada (Government of Nova Scotia, 2020). People with disabilities are more likely to experience barriers to income, social and information supports, leading to increased vulnerability in emergency situations. In Canada, persons with more severe disabilities aged 25 to 64 years were more likely to live in poverty than their counterparts without disabilities (Morris et al., 2018). Among those with disabilities aged 15 to 64 years, lone parents and those living alone were the most likely to be living in poverty among any type of household living arrangements. Since eight in ten lone parents were women, the high risk of living in poverty in this group disproportionately affected women (Morris et al., 2018). Limited financial and social supports and precarious housing situations are not the only challenges people face. Accessing information and decision-making supports is another major challenge, and one that grows with an increasing reliance by governments and organizations on websites and social media platforms to communicate information. Recent evidence suggests that nearly 20% of persons with disabilities do not use the internet (Statistics Canada 2021a); however, anecdotal information suggests the percentage is actually much higher.

Nova Scotia also has an aging population and by 2030, it is expected that one in four Nova Scotians will be 65 years of age or older (Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, 2017). It is estimated that more than 17,000 Nova Scotians live with dementia (Alzheimer Society of Nova Scotia, 2021). People who are older and/or living with dementia generally want to remain in their homes (Canadian Institute for Health Information, n.d.) and may require support to do so safely. Family and friend caregivers often provide than two-thirds of the support for older adults in the community (Hango, 2020). Social isolation, and limited or no available family and friend supports, increase the vulnerability of people who may already be experiencing accessibility barriers and social, clinical and/or age-related frailty. According to Statistics Canada (2021b) lower-income seniors were vulnerable to less social support than higher income seniors, as well as older people with mental health conditions.

Most persons with disabilities live in community, and this number will increase as people age and institutions housing people with disabilities close.

Persons with disabilities are overrepresented in institutional spaces such as hospitals, nursing homes, and a range of residential care facilities. As such, it is crucial that such places are meaningfully engaged, included, and represented in HRM's emergency management preparedness and planning work. Although they may be being places where many persons with disabilities live, they should not be assumed as habitable or safe spaces that meet and support the access and functional needs of persons with disabilities (see, for example, commentary by Haiven, 2019 and Hannebohm, 2019). Overcrowding and waitlists also suggest that such spaces should not automatically be identified as potential sheltering sites for persons with disabilities without fulsome consultation with health and continuing care sector leaders and first voice disability organizations.

Persons with intellectual differences, disabilities, and labels have long advocated for inclusion in the community. In the 1970's, the Independent Living movement in the United States was established when persons with disabilities upheld their rights to have control over their lives (Kelly, Dansereau, et al. 2020). The Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (Independent Living Canada), created in 1986, is now in its' 35th year (Independent Living Canada, n.d.). In 2013, the Nova Scotia Government committed to a roadmap that would lead to the closing of institutions and to the inclusion of persons with disabilities living in community-based options by 2023 (Disability Rights Coalition 2021). In 2014 the Disability Rights Coalition launched a human-rights claim against the Province of Nova Scotia, on the grounds that barriers to social assistance for persons with disabilities created barriers to living in the community of their choice and for some resulted in disenfranchisement and institutionalization. The 'remedy' to the finding of systemic discrimination by

the Nova Scotia Court of Appeal in 2021 includes closing institutions, moving most people into communities and removing barriers to social assistance (Disability Rights Coalition, 2023).

Accessibility legislation, regulations and changes in public expectations could lead to more suitable places to shelter in HRM.

The access and functional needs (AFN) approach allows greater flexibility to address individual needs irrespective of diagnosis rather than focusing on people with disabilities as a broad, homogenized category (CDC, 2021). To help operationalize the AFN approach, the CMIST Framework was developed based on five categories that should be addressed in emergency preparedness and response:

1. **C**ommunication
2. **M**aintaining health
3. **I**ndependence
4. **S**afety, support, self-determination
5. **T**ransportation

The AFN framework and approach is widely used in emergency management in the United States but appears to be less so in Canada. The Disability Alliance BC (2016) created several functional needs frameworks for use by individuals and local authorities. The Red Cross in Nova Scotia, which has the contract to operate emergency shelters, uses the Sheltering Handbook by the American Red Cross. It includes guidelines to meet access and functional needs of persons with disabilities in shelters.

Under Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act (2017), the provincial government, municipalities, and other prescribed public sector bodies are required to have accessibility plans developed in consultation with persons with disabilities, the organizations that represent them, and organizations impacted by the Act (Government of Nova Scotia 2018). The Act also requires the development of accessibility standards, with the following areas prioritized: Built Environment, Education, Employment, Goods and Services, Information and Communication, and Transportation. While work to implement the Act is ongoing, it has catalyzed changes in HRM that align with an AFN approach. One relevant instrument is the municipality's accessibility plan.

Central to the plan is HRM's adoption of Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification (RHAC) standards to advance accessibility of the built environment (RHAC 2024). Future objectives of the HRM Accessibility Plan identified at the time of this environmental scan include: using RHAC standards for current and future infrastructure; developing a review system to audit buildings and public facilities; ensuring that signage is accessible; and increasing training for municipal staff, including fire and police (Myers 2021). HRM has also committed to ongoing collaboration with organizations representing persons with disabilities to improve accessibility in the municipality and update the municipal website with information that is accessible, in plain language and in accordance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (Myers 2021).

Emergency preparedness for persons with disabilities is a collective responsibility.

Planning and preparedness assistance and decision-making supports: Personal preparedness guides for persons with disabilities and older adults at the federal and provincial levels share similar advice: Plan to be self-sufficient for 72 hours; know the risks; create an emergency kit with extra medical supplies; develop a personal network of friends, family, neighbours, and coworkers who can assist in an emergency; and prepare a plan for service animals and pets. However, not everyone has the resources or capacity to independently prepare and plan for an emergency. People with intellectual disabilities, cognitive impairment, and mental health conditions and challenges, as well as persons

with disabilities who are parents or caregivers, and/or have limited or no social or familial supports, are precariously housed and/or living in poverty may require assistance and decision-making supports and may not have the time, resources, or capacity to independently develop and action emergency sheltering plans.

Accessible information about sheltering resources and options and coordination across sheltering sites. Effective planning at the personal and collective levels requires information about resources and available options. Municipal and provincial bodies often advise individuals to prepare evacuation routes and know in advance the location of their nearest shelter. Yet, the locations of shelters, usually predetermined by municipalities, are not often made public until the time of an emergency.

Our scan yielded limited public information on the types of facilities or locations of possible shelters in the various jurisdictions. When this information is communicated there is an overreliance on text-based and digital forms of communication and inadequate consideration of communication barriers experienced by people with disabilities.

Our research did not identify public information suggesting a coordinated approach in emergency sheltering. When Category 5 Hurricane Dorian hit Halifax in 2019, shelters were in community centres. Three shelters were opened for evacuees: Canada Games Centre, St. Margaret's Centre, and East Dartmouth Community Centre. At the time there was no standardized approach to supporting access and function across these sites.

Training for emergency staff and volunteers. Emergency support services depend on volunteers to operate shelters and provide services including reception and registration of evacuees, food, clothing, and to meet individual needs. While most jurisdictions provide opportunities for Emergency Management Office of Nova Scotia's training of staff and volunteers involved in emergency management, there was limited information on training specifically for the provision of emergency support services in shelters that accommodate the access and functional needs of persons with disabilities. COVID-19 has negatively impacted the availability of volunteers for the delivery of emergency support services (Community Sector Council 2020), and this is a future consideration in the planning and management of emergency social services.

How this Knowledge Can be Actioned

What are the suitable facilities to use as shelters during an evacuation in Halifax Regional Municipality? The most suitable locations to use as shelters during an evacuation are:

- ◆ buildings operated by prescribed public bodies under Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act, and specifically colleges, universities, and schools,
- ◆ community halls and recreation centres (including ice facilities), and
- ◆ buildings certified by the Rick Hansen Foundation and/or buildings operated by public and private bodies that choose to go "above and beyond" the minimum accessibility standards [a municipal or provincial voluntary designation system may be required].

Universities and Colleges: Subject matter experts and people with lived experience of disability identified community colleges, universities, and schools as preferred locations.

- ◆ Nova Scotia Community Colleges are owned by the province and, as such, can be used as shelters without any permission or negotiations required. There are seventeen campuses located in the province and three in HRM. Amenities vary between the campuses with cafeterias, gymnasiums, residences, and childcare centres available in some locations. Some are near waterfront campuses (e.g., Ivany Campus), which may render them unusable during a flood.
- ◆ Dalhousie University has committed to exceeding basic standards and requirements under the law and was the first institution in Atlantic Canada to have a new building certified with the Rick

Hansen Foundation. Its central location in the city of Halifax makes it a less desirable location during a mass evacuation. Acadia University in the town of Wolfville may provide a suitable alternative. The city of Wolfville piloted the first municipal accessibility plan in the province and has worked closely with the Government of Nova Scotia's Accessibility Directorate, housed in the Department of Justice and responsible for administering the Act and advancing disability issues within Government (Nova Scotia Accessibility Directorate 2019).

Community Halls and Recreation Centres: Other common facilities that may be used as shelters during an evacuation include ice facilities, aquatic centres, multi-purpose facilities, churches, and community centres. Data from Statistics Canada (2021c) indicates that ice facilities are deemed to be the most accessible type of facility in Canada.

- ◆ HRM owns and operates nearly 70 recreation centres (Halifax 2021).
- ◆ Ice, aquatic, and multi-purpose facilities in HRM include the Canada Games Centre, Zatzman Sportsplex, Dalplex, Saint Mary's Homburg Centre for Health & Wellness, Centennial Arena, Cole Harbour Place, Halifax Forum, Scotiabank Centre, Sackville Sports Stadium, and RBC Centre.
- ◆ Arenas in other parts of the province include the Membertou Sport & Wellness Centre, East Hants Sportsplex, Rath Eastlink Community Centre, Clearwater Seafoods Arena (LCLC), Queens Place Emera Centre, Sandy Wickens Memorial Arena, and Andrew H. McCain Arena at Acadia University (Recreation Facility Association of Nova Scotia 2020). The recently renovated Zatzman Sportsplex had new accessibility features added per the recommendations of the Accessibility Advisory Committee (Halifax 2021).

Recommendations

1. One or more 'permanent' or 'central' emergency evacuation shelter/s should be identified with information about the shelter posted on the HRM website. The location of additional shelters should be added to the website and communicated as soon as that information is available.
2. Information about the location/s of all shelters should be housed on the municipality's website and promoted publicly in accessible formats using a multi-pronged approach engaging radio, television, social media, with targeted outreach to people and communities that may be disproportionately impacted by accessibility and functional barriers during a mass evacuation.
3. Information about access and functional barriers that may exist in shelters should be included to support the public's informed decision-making about where to shelter.
4. Emergency sheltering guidelines should be required to include information about how to support the diverse access and functional needs of people with disabilities. Emergency guidelines should be developed in consultation with organizations representing people with disabilities, and people and communities disproportionately impacted by access and functional barriers during emergencies (Mi'kmaq and other First Nation and Indigenous people, African-Nova Scotian, Immigrant and Refugee, Francophone and other linguistic minorities, 2SLGBTQ+).
5. Facilities that meet and/or exceed the baseline expectations in guidelines should be able to voluntarily apply for a designation as an accessible emergency shelter. All facilities should be eligible for the designation, without requirement of certification from private entities involving fees. The designation process could be led by municipal or provincial governments, or by an organization representing persons with disabilities with support from the municipal or provincial government.

6. Municipal and provincial governments should invite the Council of Nova Scotia University Presidents and Nova Scotia Community Colleges leads to collaborate on an emergency strategy that clarifies the role universities and colleges can play in supporting accessible and functional sheltering in emergency situations in HRM, and the province more broadly. Municipal, provincial, and university and college accessibility advisory committees and organizations representing people with disabilities should be consulted and engaged in this process.

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MacEachen Institute Briefing Notes on Emergency Evacuation for People with Disabilities

[Communication and Alert for Mass Evacuations: Improving Accessibility for People with Disabilities](#)

[Mass Evacuation Planning for the Halifax Peninsula](#)

[Return and Recovery from Evacuations: Improving Accessibility for People with Disabilities](#)