

SAFER SPACES WHITE PAPER #1

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR CSEC AND TRAFFICKING VICTIMS



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INTRODUCTION

When commercially sexually exploited children and youth (CSEC) begin exiting the sex trade, the supports and services they receive are crucial to their safety and well-being as they begin their journey to quit the “the Game.” Their vulnerability will be tested by a variety of pressures as they attempt to leave and their contact with service providers, teachers, law enforcement, and social workers will impact their recovery. This is why it is essential for everyone working with victims and survivors to be specifically trained, consistent and collaborative in their approach and practice. Implementing a Community of Practice framework among a variety of professionals can assist in these efforts.

For the past three years YWCA Halifax has convened a partnership among service providers, government and law enforcement who are collectively working to address CSEC in Nova Scotia.

The Trafficking and Exploitation Services System (TESS) is comprised of 140 professionals from 70 agencies or organizations all committed to developing and implementing the variety of specialized services needed to support victims. Through TESS a Community of Practice (CoP) has emerged providing partners with a baseline of knowledge, tools and resources to work with these vulnerable youths.

This White Paper will examine the characteristics of a Community of Practice, discuss how they are being applied to the TESS partnership, and why a Community of Practice is an important aspect on how we together respond to the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

Safer Spaces White Paper #1
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For more information about the TESS Partnership visit www.tessns.com

WHY A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE¹ ?

The Community of Practice model was first conceptualized in 1991 by cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger as a way to explore learning through practice and participation. Wenger originally framed CoP as a tool for educators, but later formalized and expanded to be applied to a variety of sectors such as health care and business. According to Wenger (1998), CoP provide five critical functions for members: education, support, cultivation of knowledge, encouragement and integration.

In a variety of applications, implementing the CoP model has been proven to enhance professional learning and practice and is particularly useful for responding to complex problems that require collaboration, engagement, interaction and collective response.

The problem of sexual exploitation and human trafficking is complex and precarious. No single agency or individual hold all of the answers or resources required to respond to the holistic needs of victims.

A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP) IS A "GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO SHARE A CONCERN OR A PASSION FOR SOMETHING THEY DO AND LEARN HOW TO DO IT BETTER AS THEY INTERACT REGULARLY" (WENGER)

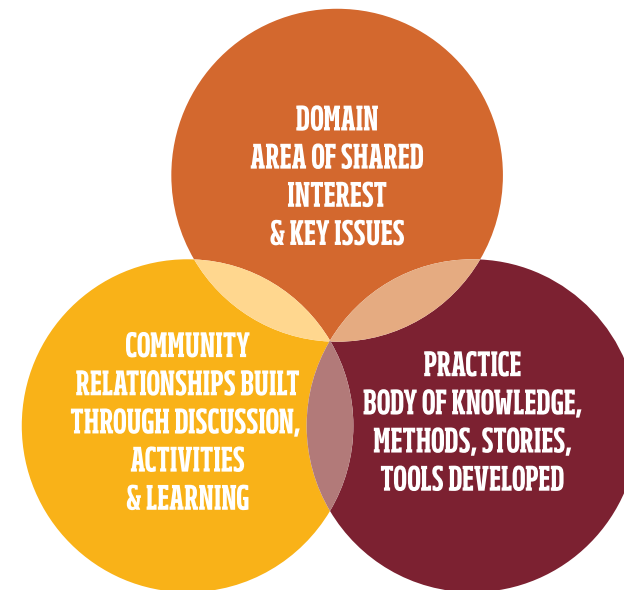
In Nova Scotia, where this area of work is emergent, a CoP can assist in providing practitioners with the skills, connections and confidence to enhance and advance the work.

There are three elements that constitute a CoP:

- It has a **DOMAIN** of shared interest, values and language among members; it creates the basis of the group's identity.
- It has a **COMMUNITY** defined by interaction, engagement and learning among members as they each pursue their own interest in the domain.
- The community is populated by practitioners, each bringing their own experiences, tools and methods to the group as best and shared **PRACTICE** for addressing recurrent problems.

The success and failure of a CoP is related to a number of factors, but the top three, as identified by Wenger, are: **1) Clear Identification** of the domain; **2) Leadership** to take care of logistics and hold the space; and **3) High Value** for Time for all those who invest in participating in them.

Other factors for success include: tapping into the expertise of local and international experts; access to adequate resources in order to reduce barriers to participation; a level of trust among members; and recognition for member contributions.



¹ For more information on Communities of Practice refer to <https://wenger-trayner.com/resources/> All references have been taken from source material written by Etienne Wenger

THE DOMAINS OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING WORK

The domain of a CoP is where the identity, values and language of the group are reflected. Defining the domain of anti-trafficking work is among the greatest challenges in organizing a CoP on this issue. This is because feminists are often the primary drivers of anti-trafficking movements and the buying and selling of sex has always been a divisive issue within the Women's Movement. This division can deeply affect the capacity to form a CoP. If there is no consensus on women and girls' agency or choice in participation in the sex trade, efforts to form a CoP are effectively thwarted. The sex trade and sex work have been shown to be deeply divisive within the feminist community with strong positions held at all points of the continuum.

Like most ideologies, feminist ideologies also exist on a spectrum and the distance between either ends can often seem vast and irreconcilable. As it relates to CSEC, for one end of the spectrum, the radical abolitionist side, the buying and selling of sex should be criminalized; "choice" to participate in sex work is a myth; and those who believe they are exercising free choice in participation are instead overly influenced by patriarchy and have not critically examined their participation. For those who identify as abolitionists: all those engaged in sex work are victims of sexual exploitation; and there is no such thing as safe sex work since sex work exists within the context of commodification of women's bodies, including the various forms of violence that is enacted upon them in that commodification. In short, the only guarantee of safety is to eliminate sex work altogether.



At the other end, radical legalization/decriminalization advocates believe that aspects of the sex trade are empowering for women; that women have a right to engage in the sex trade for economic security; that participation in the sex trade is real work; and that unless it is legalized and regulated, the health and safety of those working within it will continue to be at risk and exploitation within it will continue to be a problem.

These divisions in ideology are value driven and will often colour the language used to talk about the domain. For example, those who align with criminalization will tend to use the language of "prostitution", reflecting legal terms. This language, on the other hand, is largely viewed as derogatory by those who align with legalization who, in turn, will use the language of sex work, a term often viewed as offensive by those supporting criminalization.

These ideological divides have had consequences which have fragmented many communities and efforts to address CSEC collaboratively, not just in Nova Scotia, but across Canada and the United States. Previous to TESS, the partnership existed as the Nova Scotia Trafficking Elimination Partnership (NSTEP). NSTEP attempted to straddle this ideological spectrum and did not have a unified domain, despite attempts to find value alignment among partners.

NSTEP developed and adopted a common understanding of human trafficking which reflected an understanding that commercial exploitation and trafficking are enabled by existing systems of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism. Regardless of ideology, there was agreement among all partners that some people were more vulnerable to sexualized human trafficking as a result of a number of factors, including gender, race, class, indigeneity and experience within the child welfare system. That common understanding began to fracture, however, when discussing choice in the sex trade. Recognizing that victims

and survivors do not share a monolith of experiences in their victimization, it was believed that acceptance of this common understanding would mitigate ideological beliefs and labels on victims and survivors. However, it only exacerbated ideological divides and led to tension and conflict as they related to best practice and support. Value alignment was never attained in NSTEP, and as a result, the work itself stalled and became consumed by ideological debate.

CHOICE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SEX TRADE DOES NOT EXIST AS A SIMPLE YES OR NO DICHOTOMY

Ultimately, driven by a sense of urgency to move beyond ideological differences, the YWCA dissolved NSTEP and reorganized by forming the TESS partnership.

THE SPECTRUM OF CHOICE

NO CHOICE	COERCED CHOICE	PERCEIVED CHOICE	SITUATIONAL CHOICE	APPARENT CHOICE	EVIDENT CHOICE
3RD PARTY CONTROLLED			MAY BE 3RD PARTY	INDEPENDANT	
KIDNAPPED	DECEIVED	MANIPULATED	CO-DEPENDANCY	EDUCATED DECISION TO PARTICIPATE	
FORCED	THREATENED	ROMANTIC INVOLVEMENT	LACK OF ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY		ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY
CONFINED	BLACKMAILED /SEXTORTED	ECONOMIC DEPENDANCY			AUTONOMOUS
SLAVERY	SEXUAL EXPLOITATION		EXPLOITATIVE		EMPOWERED
TRAFFICKING			SURVIVAL SEX WORKER	SEX WORK	

CoPs thrive on social energy, and the clear identification of the domain and goals of the community are critical success factors. TESS has three clear and defined goals which assist in framing the community's domain: to enhance capacity among service providers; to create standardized tools for working with victims; and to develop a provincial strategy to respond to the commercial exploitation and trafficking of children and youth. To not repeat mistakes of the past,

TESS took care to define the domain of the work through a Statement of Guiding Values and Philosophies as well as a carefully crafted partnership agreement which framed the work of the partnership around those values.

TESS PARTNERSHIP STATEMENT OF VALUES

- We believe all victims and survivors have an inherent right to choice, equality, dignity, safety, respect and their basic human rights regardless of age, race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation or any other distinguishing characteristics.
- We are committed to consulting with victims and survivors and will make every effort to respond to their perspectives in the development and delivery of programs and services. We support survivor leadership in the community and will create opportunities for it to emerge.
- We believe that there is a spectrum of choice and economic opportunity which affects an individual's participation in the sex trade and we will not impose any personal, political or religious beliefs which strip victims and survivors of their agency, or passes judgement on their choices.
- We are committed to reducing barriers and filling gaps in services for victims and survivors through the development and delivery of new and innovative programs which are harm-reductive, trauma-informed, value the expertise of survivors and provide opportunity for change.
- We believe change is a voluntary process and that consistent service, unconditional acceptance, and healthy relationships are imperative in developing a trusting rapport with youth. It is only through this kind of trusting relationship that, when a youth is ready, we will be able to assist in facilitating a transition to a healthier lifestyle. We will meet youth where they are at, and let them take the lead in their own recovery.
- We are committed to supporting and promoting a holistic understanding of sexual exploitation by acknowledging the root causes of supply and demand present in the sex trade. We will support programs and policies which work to address systemic inequalities present in marginalized communities.
- We are committed to making and holding space at meetings for representatives of the Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities, and will strive to work with those communities to develop and adopt culturally appropriate and responsive solutions
- We are committed to using appropriate language and graphic representation of exploitation and human trafficking which do not sensationalize or lend credence to racist or oppressive narratives of the issue; we will speak out when media, community members or partners use such language and/or graphic representations
- We are committed to the protection of safety, dignity and confidentiality of victims/survivors and will gain their written consent to share information and collaborate to support them; we will never identify a victim/survivor, or discuss details of their story at TESS meetings
- We are committed to continual learning, reflection, and a willingness to make difficult decisions if they are in the best interest of victims and survivors
- We believe that fundamental changes to systems of response are necessary to effectively address youth sexual exploitation, however we understand that systems change take time even though we act with urgency

THE TESS COMMUNITY

The community element of a CoP is comprised of the active, mutually beneficial relationships that are forming as members engage in practice alongside one another to solve the problem they are facing and collaboratively work to respond to it. Imperative to the success of a CoP is trust among members and the creation of a brave space to engage in activities of mutual learning and professional development. A deliberate effort to provide opportunities for interaction and engagement will enhance the development of trust and a sense of shared responsibility.

All of the activities and interaction among TESS members are focused on the attainment of the community's goals: capacity-building; shared and best practice resource development; and the creation of a provincial strategy. The predominant activities of TESS are focused around quarterly face-to-face meetings and working groups; shared training

experiences and events; and eventually case conferencing tables. As TESS is a provincial community that is encumbered by geography, resources are provided in an effort to reduce barriers to participation.

The TESS community has an agenda which focuses on the development and delivery of inclusive services to victims and survivors. This community is inclusive of the perspectives of anyone with lived experience of the sex trade, regardless if they self-identify as a victim or a sex worker. It has created deliberate space for the marginalized communities that are and have been disproportionately affected by the issue: African Nova Scotian, Indigenous and LGBTQ2S cultural communities. With the formation of the regional working groups, the TESS CoP is now creating opportunities for local practitioners to engage in active, mutually beneficial relationships across rural Nova Scotia.

THE TESS COP 140+ PARTNERS FROM 70+ AGENCIES ACROSS NS

Virtual strategies are also implemented to enhance engagement and inclusion and to reduce geographic and cultural barriers among members. Through system mapping and community needs assessment activities, members are able to identify and situate themselves in the grand scheme of the work and make crucial connections to others within their community and across the province. The use of an electronic newsletter allows

7 REGIONAL GROUPS 3 CULTURAL ADVISORIES (INDIGENOUS, AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN, 2SLGBTQ+) 1 SURVIVOR ADVISORY

members to share information, events and initiatives, and also celebrate their successes as they advance their own work within their agencies. As TESS looks to the future, the community will brand as a

collective entity and engage in a communications campaign to bring public awareness and resources to communities across Nova Scotia. TESS members have also taken advantage of external expertise from elsewhere in Canada and the United States to lay the foundational principles of practice and organization. Training sessions with external experts such as Jane Runner from Transition Education Resources for Girls (Manitoba) and Rachel Lloyd from Girls Education and Mentoring Services (New York) have been facilitated in ways which reduce organizational, agency and sector siloes; with police, non-profits, policy-makers and civil servants all learning together.

The value of these collective learning experiences is substantial, as it builds trust among members and ensures consistent practice. They also provide a space for members to share and relate their own experiences to the training curriculum and refine external expertise to the local context.

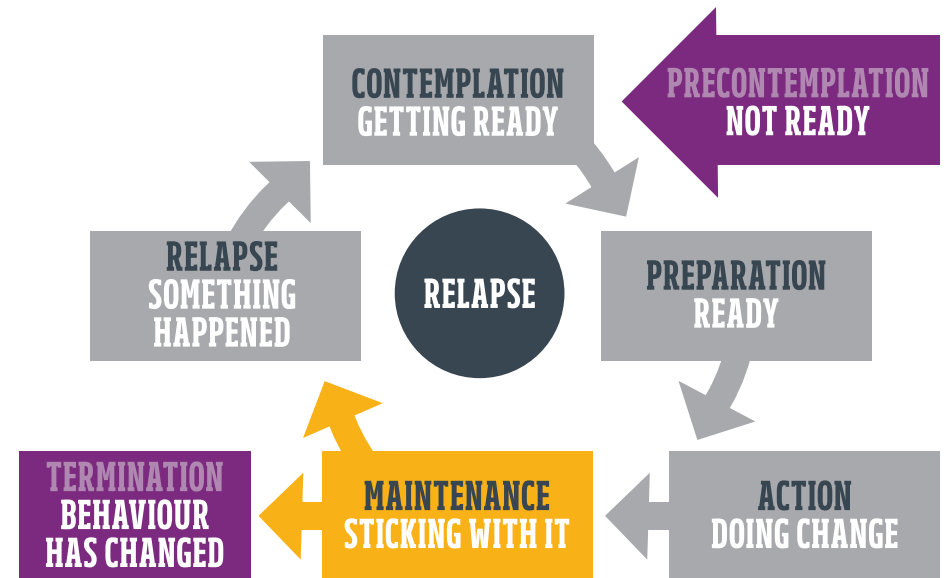
TESS PRACTICE

The way a CoP responds to a problem will depend on the experiences, knowledge, resources and tools that are intrinsic and available to members. Continual learning and revision of practice based on evidence reported from the field creates consistent, responsive and reproducible solutions. The knowledge and experiences shared among this community is rooted in trauma-informed research and evidence-based practice, working within a systems framework, and consultation with survivors and marginalized communities disproportionately affected by the issue. Culturally appropriate practice is essential to address the needs of victims and survivors.

As commercial exploitation and human trafficking are considered forms of gender-based violence, practice among TESS members has been influenced by the vast library of research in this area.

While members may have little specific experience working with victims, many have backgrounds and existing knowledge related to trauma-informed practice which provides the foundational principles of practice; an emphasis on safety, empowerment and the involvement of peer survivors. Members are encouraged to relate and share their existing knowledge as they develop practices specific to the population.

In addition to being trauma-informed, TESS members use the stages of change theory to frame how to engage in the work, and stages of change theory requires a harm reduction and developmental approach to service provision.



Using this theoretical model, services meet youth where they are in their journey rather than require them to meet prerequisites for support. An effective system of response will provide unique services and support to youth at all stages.

Harm reduction techniques will be particularly necessary for youth in the pre-contemplation stage through to the action stage if they remain entrenched in the sex trade. Once victims get to the action stage, abstinence-based recovery programs may be beneficial if they take a trauma-informed approach and provide opportunities for independence, decision-making and empowerment.

DISCUSSION

The commercial exploitation and trafficking of children and youth is a social problem that elicits a lot of passion from a diverse swath of the community and stakeholders. After decades of sweeping the problem under the rug while it disproportionately affected marginalized communities, it has been brought out from the shadows as more youth become vulnerable to sexual predators. The Internet has levelled the ground for youth risk. Thanks to advocates and activists at all points along the ideological spectrum, rich and challenging public conversations about youth involvement in the sex trade and how best to respond continue to take place. Although at times difficult and uncomfortable, ideological challenges have been essential for the growth of the TESS Community of Practice.

For example, there is a long history of difficult relationships between law enforcement and the non-profit sector as there has been little opportunity to cultivate relationships of trust

against the backdrop of systemic inequity for victims of gender-based violence. However, through mutual engagement in training activities and shared experiences of survivor-informed practice, TESS members on the front lines of law enforcement recognize that they need community resources to support victims as witnesses. Likewise, non-profit service providers who are supporting victims attempting to leave and/or bring charges against their perpetrators have recognized there are safety concerns which they need to know law enforcement will support. TESS has provided opportunities for law enforcement and community to begin cultivating relationships of trust.

Similarly, relationships between government and the non-profit sector have at times been adversarial and/or also lacking trust. The community sector is often acutely aware of the power imbalance that comes with the allocation of funding resources and sometimes feels that elected

officials want to be recognized for work being done in the community by front line, non-government staff. And yet, because of a shared vision and critical understanding of the issue, TESS members from the government generally, and the Department of Community Services specifically, have demonstrated a willingness to invest in and partner closely with non-profits. Likewise, non-profit service providers who are supporting victims have received strategic investments and been invited to participate along-side civil servants to develop strategies and programs for the protection and safety of youth from sexual predators. TESS has provided a learning opportunity for government and community to address the issue together, through policy planning and direct service delivery. The true art in a CoP is when partners recognize and value the contributions each has to make in addressing complex issues such as the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth.

There has been an increased interest of the issue from the Justice Department (beyond law enforcement), Education and Health between 2019 and 2020. The Public Prosecution Service

and Victim Services have shown a similar interest in meaningful partnership and collaboration, while delivering crucial services themselves. Likewise, leadership within the Schools Plus Program has prioritized training on commercial exploitation and trafficking and Schools Plus has representation on every regional working group across the province to contribute to community-based solutions. Health is the last crucial system required to develop a holistic and effective strategy to end the commercial exploitation and trafficking of children and youth.

Momentum is building within the TESS Community of Practice as more agencies and service providers become aware of and start working on the issue. With a foundation laid, collaboration will be critical to ensure that needs are being met, that services are not being duplicated, and that efforts are not being fragmented into smaller groups working at cross-purposes. As a whole, the government has committed to the prioritization of addressing the commercial exploitation and trafficking of children and youth through much needed investments in community.

CONCLUSION

YWCA Halifax has facilitated TESS with the support and collaboration of the Department of Community Services, Schools Plus, the RCMP and Halifax Regional Police as well as over 30 non-profits providing front line services to victims. In the four years that TESS members have been responding to the issue, a wealth of baseline services and prioritization has been established by multiple partners:

- YWCA Halifax's NSTAY program and Safer Spaces Housing Pilot
- DCS's Specialized Youth Outreach Workers (Dartmouth North Boys and Girls Club, the East Preston Family Resource Centre, and Native Women's Association)
- DCS's specialized placements for victims of exploitation and trafficking in residential facilities and foster care
- Homebridge's specialized care for youth entrenched in the trade
- Stepping Stone's services for trafficked youth

- RCMP's Human Trafficking Unit
- HRP's prioritization of victim-centered approaches to policing within the VICE Unit
- Prioritization within the Schools Plus network, who are already on the ground working with youth across the Province
- The creation of specialized Victim Services navigators and supports for victims
- A dedicated Special Prosecutor for cases related to commercial exploitation and human trafficking
- A 5-year investment with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, the Association of Black Social Workers, and the Jane Paul Centre, as well as funding to support the continuation of the TESS partnership

Members of TESS have participated in national consultations on the issue, bringing the Nova Scotia context to the Federal Government, through numerous venues including the House of Commons Standing Committee and Public

Safety Canada Regional and National Summits on Human Trafficking. TESS members have also been consulting with the US Consulate General's Office on a consistent basis about the nature of trafficking in Nova Scotia, and learning from American practitioners such as Minal Patel-Davis from the City of Houston, and Rachel Lloyd from GEMs.

Members of TESS have offered training to hundreds of front line workers on the identification and intervention of youth at-risk, exiting and entrenched in commercially exploitative relationships. Between the trainings offered by YWCA Halifax and DCS Prevention and Early Intervention, well over 750 professionals working with youth across the province, from a cross-section of sectors, have been trained by one or more sessions on survivor-informed practice within a stages of change framework. This training will continue for as long as it is requested and needed by the community. The majority of these achievements have emerged through the cultivation of the TESS CoP in the past four years. Relationship building and support between some member

agencies have increased trust and collaboration. TESS members who have been engaged with the CoP since 2016 are now seeing evidence of success from their sustained efforts with more victims being identified and coming forward, anecdotal outcome reporting from newly initiated programs, and successful resolution of criminal cases.

There is still much more work to be done. Newly engaged agencies and practitioners involved in TESS have not yet had the opportunity or experience to engage with the CoP in the same ways. However, YWCA Halifax is hoping to be able to sustain TESS beyond its initial 5-year project life and continue to provide resources, tools and opportunities for all members through this CoP framework.

While systems change (or in this case systems creation) can be slow for those who are suffering now, it is necessary. If we can ever hope to eliminate the commercial exploitation of children and youth in Nova Scotia, we must be holistic, unified and steadfast in our approach.

THE TESS COMMUNITY



TESS PARTNERS

- Adsum House
- Annapolis Valley Regional Centre for Education
- Antigonish Women's Resource Centre
- Avalon Sexual Assault Centre
- Be the Peace Institute
- Better Together Family Resource Centre
- Canadian Centre to End Human Trafficking
- Canadian Mental Health Association - Project H.O.P.E.
- Cape Breton Regional Police
- Chebucto Connections
- Chisholm Services for Children
- Community Justice Society
- Coverdale Courtwork Society
- ElevateHER Mental Health Support Services
- Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton
- Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia
- Family Service of Eastern NS
- Halifax Attendance Centre
- Halifax Regional Centre for Education
- HRM Public Safety Office
- Halifax Regional Police – VICE Unit
- Halifax Regional Police Victim Services
- Harbour House
- Homebridge Youth Society
- In My Own Voice Arts Association
- IWK Mental Health Services
- IWK SeaStar Child and Youth Advocacy Centre
- Jane Paul Centre
- John Howard Society
- Juniper House
- Kentville Police Service
- MetroWorks POSSE Program
- Mi'kmaw Legal Support Network
- Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre
- Mobile Outreach Street Health (MOSH)
- Native Council of Nova Scotia
- Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women
- NS Department of Community Services
- NS Department of Education Early Childhood Development
- NS Department of Justice
- NS Health Authority
- NS Legal Aid
- NS Native Women's Advisory Service
- NS Public Prosecution Service
- People's Counselling Clinic
- Phoenix Youth Programs
- The Portal Youth Outreach Services
- Provincial Victim Services
- RCMP Human Trafficking Unit
- RCMP
- Salvation Army
- Schools Plus
- Second Story Women's Centre
- Sexual Health Centre for Cumberland County
- Sexual Health Nova Scotia
- Shelburne County Youth Health and Support Association (Our House)
- SHYFT
- South House
- South Shore Regional Centre for Education
- South Shore Sexual Health
- Stepping Stone
- Tearmann House
- Third Place Transition House
- Trauma Recovery for Exploited Youth (TREY)
- Tri-County Women's Centre
- Valley Restorative Justice
- West Hants Education Centre/Windsor Adult High School
- West Hants Uniacke Community Health Board
- Yarmouth Association for Community Residential Options
- YMCA of Greater Halifax
- YMCA South Shore
- YWCA Halifax
- The Youth Project