



**2025**

NOVA SCOTIA ORAL HEALTH REPORT

# From Waitlists to Wellness:

Strategies for Workforce Resilience

in Dental Care



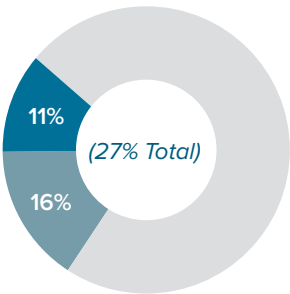
# More Mouths to Heed

Nova Scotia is growing. While our Population Growth Strategy aims to double Nova Scotia’s population by 2060, over the last ten years, international and intra-provincial immigration has resulted in record-breaking provincial population growth. This growth, coupled with increased access to dental care under the new Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP) is resulting in a wave of increased demand for services. Nova Scotia’s programs to educate and train homegrown oral health professionals need to keep pace and grow as our population booms.

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## Waiting a while for a check on that smile

It’s anticipated that when fully rolled out, the federal Canadian Dental Care Plan will see almost 1 in 4 Nova Scotians eligible for covered care. Already, with the plan still in its early stages, Nova Scotians are waiting longer for routine dental appointments as staffing shortages curtail capacity to see new patients.



**Approximately one-quarter (27%) report they or a member of their household have already received services (11%) through the Canadian Dental Care Plan in Nova Scotia or plan to do so (16%).**

*In their annual public study of Nova Scotians’ expressing online concerns about dental care, the Nova Scotia Dental Association found that concern over wait times for care jumped from 6th place in 2023, to 1st place in 2024.\**

*\*nordspark, December 2024*

## Historic challenge in the field of dental care

As Nova Scotia's population continues to grow, coupled with increased oral health care access through the Canadian Dental Care Plan (CDCP), the province faces a historic challenge in the field of dental care; with widespread labour shortages struggling to keep pace with surging demand.



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Several factors, including an aging workforce, limited training opportunities, and financial constraints affecting educational institutions are contributing to the dental workforce crisis. There is an urgent need for a strategic response to ensure that Nova Scotians can continue to receive timely, high-quality oral health care services.

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A series of actionable recommendations aimed at revitalizing dental education and training programs within the province is necessary, along with promoting public health initiatives like community water fluoridation that lessen the need for dental procedures, and simultaneously reducing the burden on the broader healthcare system in the province.

**By taking these steps, we can work collaboratively towards a sustainable future for dental care in Nova Scotia, ensuring that all residents have access to the care they need and deserve.**



Nova Scotia's dentists have largely limited their participation in the new federal plan to existing patients only – as capacity issues initially caused many new patients to be turned away. Additionally, many dentists cited capacity bottlenecks within their practices as the reason behind their decision not to take part in the Canadian Dental Care Plan.

## Causes behind the shortages

- ***An Aging Workforce:*** A significant portion of the dental workforce in Nova Scotia is nearing retirement age. This will exacerbate staffing shortages as these professionals retire.
- ***Limited Training Opportunities:*** There are a limited number of training programs for dentists, registered dental assistants and registered dental hygienists in Nova Scotia, and existing programs cannot keep pace with the demand for new graduates.
- ***Funding crunch:*** In the face of rising demand for larger class sizes for its dental programs, Dalhousie University's Dental School has seen a decade-long annual erosion of budgets.

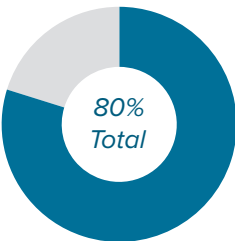
# Solutions Here at Home

Nova Scotia is fortunate to be home to the only English speaking Faculty of Dentistry East of Montreal, and one of only ten Faculties of Dentistry in all of Canada. For over a century, homegrown dentists, and later dental hygienists, have graduated from Dalhousie University Programs. We also have both public and privately-run programs to train Registered Dental Assistants. It is crucial we leverage these assets. Solutions to easing the staffing shortage are right here at home - if we can make the necessary changes.

## Recommendation #1

### RESTORE STABLE PROVINCIAL FUNDING FOR DENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AT DALHOUSIE.

Unlike Faculties of Medicine, whose students use publicly funded facilities for their clinical training, Faculties of Dentistry need to build, staff, and support “dental hospitals”. The cost of supplies has increased by 35% over the past decade, all while university funding has steadily decreased. We cannot train more Nova Scotians to provide oral care without a commitment to adequately fund the university programs doing the training.



**There is strong support (80%) for increased funding from provincial and federal government for education and training for dental health professionals to meet the expected demand for services.**

*Graphic credit: Atlantic Quarterly, February, 2025*

## Recommendation #2

### EXPAND TRAINING SEATS AND COVER TUITION FOR REGISTERED DENTAL HYGIENISTS AND REGISTERED DENTAL ASSISTANTS.

Increasing the number of training places and covering tuition for budding dental professionals is vital for addressing workforce gaps and bolstering the future of oral healthcare in the province.

## Recommendation #3

### ENCOURAGE STUDENTS AT THE JUNIOR HIGH AND HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL TO CONSIDER CAREERS IN DENTAL CARE.

We must proactively promote oral health careers among students, helping to attract the next generation of dental professionals.

## Community Water Fluoridation: A Crucial Public Health Strategy

Community Water Fluoridation (CWF) is a vital public health measure that plays a crucial role in preventing dental caries. This preventative measure becomes particularly important during times of dental labour shortages and increased wait times for appointments.

Fluoride, a naturally occurring mineral, strengthens tooth enamel and makes it more resistant to decay. By adding Health Canada-approved amounts of fluoride to public water supplies, communities can ensure that all residents,

regardless of age or socioeconomic status, receive consistent exposure to the protective element. Widespread fluoridation provides a simple, effective way to promote oral health and reduce inequalities in dental care access.

Longer wait times for dental appointments can lead to untreated oral health issues, which may escalate into more serious problems requiring extensive intervention and potential emergency room visits, stretching the healthcare system’s resources. By maintaining optimal fluoride levels in drinking water, communities can enhance overall wellbeing, minimizing the burden on dental systems and ensuring a healthier population.

Preventative dental care is the most important step you can take for a lifetime of good oral health. In addition to daily brushing and flossing, community fluoridated water further prevents tooth decay and the need for expensive dental surgeries.

**Recommendation #4** .....

THE PROVINCIAL AND MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS MUST WORK TOGETHER TO PROVIDE ACCESS TO FLUORIDATED WATER FOR NOVA SCOTIANS ACCESSING MUNICIPAL WATER SYSTEMS



**The staffing shortages facing dental offices in Nova Scotia pose serious challenges to public access to oral healthcare, particularly for vulnerable populations in rural and low-income areas. By addressing the root causes of these shortages and implementing targeted solutions, the province can work towards a more sustainable and equitable oral healthcare system for all residents.**

Through strategic investments in education, targeted career communication to junior high and high school students, and government support, Nova Scotia can overcome the current staffing crisis and ensure that all citizens have access to timely and effective dental care. Working together, we can pave the way to a healthier future.



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