

# NOVA RAMP UP

**Nova Ramp Up: Project Report**  
**October 2023**



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Only Nova Ramp Up partner groups and  
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the content of this report in part or in full.

More information about this project can be found on  
the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia's website:

[www.jhsns.ca](http://www.jhsns.ca)

or on the PEACH Research Unit's project webpage:

[www.peachresearch.ca/nova-ramp-up/](http://www.peachresearch.ca/nova-ramp-up/)

## Acknowledgement

Nova Ramp Up wishes to thank all project partners and committee members, business owners and managers, local residents, and other stakeholders who chose to participate in this important initiative and provide valuable feedback to inform future efforts to improve accessibility in the commercial buildings and landscapes of Nova Scotia.

This project would not have been possible without funding granted through Nova Scotia's Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program and the support of the Nova Scotia Accessibility Directorate.



## About this Report

Nova Ramp Up (NRU) is the result of a collaboration between government, non-profit, and educational organizations, funded through the Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage, Business ACCESS-Ability program.

Modelled after the StopGap initiative of Ontario, Nova Ramp Up took action in Nova Scotia to provide free, custom, and portable storefront ramps to small businesses and community organizations with a single-step barrier at their entrance.

This report records the activities of the Nova Ramp Up pilot project, which took place from December 2021 to August 2023, and reflects on the successes, challenges, limitations, and lessons learned from the project overall.

The findings summarized in this report were collected through semi-structured interviews with participating businesses, community stakeholders, project team members, and an anonymous, online public feedback survey launched in the final months of the project.

As a pilot project, Nova Ramp Up aims to be the first of more initiatives like it, with the goal to improve the accessibility of Nova Scotian businesses for more people to visit, use, and enjoy.

The details recorded herein may be used to inform future efforts to extend this project's activities, as well as widely share the achievements and challenges of Nova Ramp Up.



# Background

## Disability in Nova Scotia

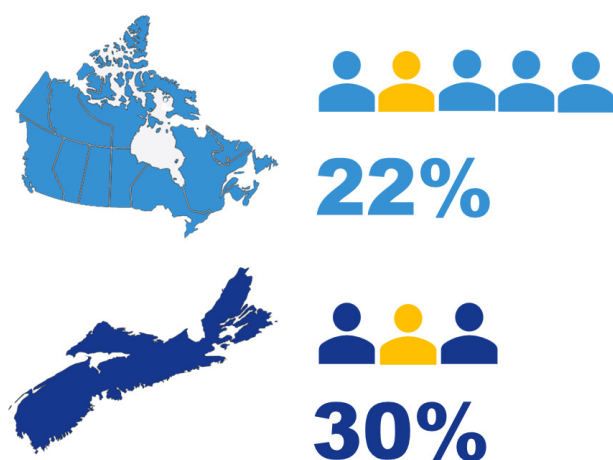
In Canada, nearly 22% of the population 15 years of age or older live with one or more disabilities. This is equal to more than 6.2 million people. In Nova Scotia, the proportion is even higher, with over 30% of Nova Scotians experiencing some form of disability (Statistics Canada, 2017).

After adopting the Accessibility Act (2017), Nova Scotia became the third province in Canada to adopt accessibility legislation and set the goal to be fully accessible by 2030. This legislation formally recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to participate fully in society and live free of barriers and discrimination. The Accessibility Act directs action to remove barriers to accessibility in the workplace and employment, to accessing goods and services, education, transportation, information and communication, and in the built environment.

Three of the most common disabilities in Nova Scotia are pain-related disabilities (19.8%), flexibility disabilities (14.2%), and mobility (13.3%) disabilities. These may include people who move around with the assistance of mobility devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and crutches. Stairs are a common barrier to people who experience these types of disability, and especially those who use wheeled mobility devices.

Even a single step up from street level can make a restaurant, store, apartment complex, or other building inaccessible to many persons with disabilities.

Nova Ramp Up aims to make real and immediate change in the built environment by addressing the barrier of the single-step storefront entrance, and in doing so aid efforts towards Nova Scotia's goal of becoming a fully accessible province by 2030.



**About 1 in 5 people in Canada live with one or more disabilities. This population is even greater in Nova Scotia, where the proportion is 1 in 3 people.**

Figure 1 (above): A graphic of Canada and Nova Scotia with icons of 1 in 5 (22%) and 1 in 3 (30%) respectively.

## StopGap Foundation

In 2011, the [StopGap Foundation](#) of Ontario began as a small-scale initiative to build and deliver portable ramps to improve wheelchair access to cafes, restaurants, offices, and storefronts with only a single-step barrier (Fritsch, 2019).

Since then, the StopGap Foundation has become a registered charity distributing simple wooden ramps as a temporary measure towards accessibility to over 2000 businesses globally (StopGap, 2022).

In consultation with the StopGap Foundation, initiators of the Nova Ramp Up (NRU) project took this idea to apply to the small businesses of Nova Scotia. While StopGap offers ramps for a small fee, this NRU pilot project acquired funding to support the construction and distribution of ramps at no charge to businesses, thanks to the [Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program](#).

Figure 2 (bottom right):  
A blue StopGap Foundation ramp pictured outside a bookstore in Toronto, Ontario.  
Credit: K.Clark, 2021

## Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program

Nova Scotia's Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage offers businesses this cost-shared grant up to \$100,000 per applicant to make accessibility-related improvements.

The grant accepts applications that fall under five categories: built environment, accessible communications services, assistive devices, Universal Design capacity building, and accessible transportation. All businesses registered as a for-profit entity with the NS Registry of Joint Stocks are eligible to apply.

The John Howard Society of Nova Scotia was awarded this grant for Nova Ramp Up when its eligibility criteria was open to non-for-profit agencies. This is no longer the case, and not-for-profit agencies and municipalities are now, instead, offered funding through the [Community ACCESS-Ability program](#).



## A Collaborative Effort

The John Howard Society of Nova Scotia initiated Nova Ramp Up with the help of several organizations and provincial departments. The project activities were undertaken by a committee of representatives from each of the organizations and government bodies who partnered with Nova Ramp Up. The following describes each partner and their role with the project.

### The John Howard Society of Nova Scotia

The John Howard Society of Nova Scotia (JHSNS) is a not-for-profit organization that works with criminalized and at-risk persons to deliver programs that offer social and mental health services, employment opportunities, and other supports to build independence and growth in individuals.

As the grant-awarded agency, JHSNS was responsible for handling and distributing funds on behalf of the Nova Ramp Up project, including hiring persons to fill paid positions with the project, and carrying out the project outcomes with the support of the project partners.

Two paid positions – a Project Manager and a Community Ramp Ambassador – were hired, trained, and supervised by members of the JHSNS team for the duration of the Nova Ramp Up initiative. Both positions were held by persons living with disabilities.



Figure 3. Members of the NRU team pose together in front of JHSNS posters at the public launch of the initiative.

### Accessibility Directorate Nova Scotia Department of Justice

The Government of Nova Scotia established the Accessibility Directorate to administer the Accessibility Act and advance disability issues within government. Governed by the Accessibility Act, the Accessibility Directorate works with persons with disabilities, municipalities, businesses, post-secondary institutions and others to help meet the provincial goal of being fully accessible by 2030.

Aligned with this mandate, the Accessibility Directorate supported the management and coordination of the NRU project, contributed the salary of the Project Manager, and facilitated connections between JHSNS and other government bodies, and added to the capacity of Nova Ramp Up to realize its project goals.

## **Correctional Services** **Nova Scotia Department of Justice**

Nova Scotia correctional facilities house individuals from either provincially sentenced, remanded, immigration, parole violations or who are newly sentenced to a federal custody term. The staff regularly works with community partners to develop offender programs that will assist with reintegration into the community and provide opportunities for incarcerated persons to feel they can and do contribute to the surrounding community while serving their sentence.

In cooperation with the administrators of a Nova Scotia provincial correctional facility, Nova Ramp Up employed incarcerated individuals to assist with the construction of the NRU ramps.

Participants of the in-reach program were employed for the construction process of the NRU ramps. This program offered incarcerated individuals the opportunity to learn new skills or improve on construction skills they had already, cooperate in a team setting with a supervisor, earn a wage, and feel a stronger sense of connection to the wider community.

## **Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage**

Nova Scotia's Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage is responsible for helping to grow the tourism industry in the Province of Nova Scotia. The Department works to protect and promote the province's culture and heritage by helping local communities and businesses fund programs and events. As the funding body for this project, representatives of CCTH oversaw and, where possible, supported the delivery of Nova Ramp Up as a grant-funded project.

## **Planning for Equity, Accessibility, and Community Health Research Unit** **Dalhousie University**

The PEACH Research Unit is a team of researchers, faculty members, and students of Dalhousie University's School of Planning who lead and support projects exploring how planning tools, theories, and practices can better achieve more equitable, accessible, and healthy communities.

For the NRU project, PEACH's primary responsibility was to record the project activities, and prepare this summary report to document the project's outcomes, and present lessons learned for future initiatives like Nova Ramp Up.



# Project Scope

Nova Ramp Up committee members composed the following mission statement and goals to guide the project.

## Mission Statement

The mission of Nova Ramp Up is to increase community awareness, contribute to the advancement of an accessible province, remove barriers and provide employment opportunities for criminalized men through their participation in the building and installation of access ramps.

## Project Goals

Through the process of providing ramps to small businesses and community organizations, Nova Ramp Up aims to:

1. Add to community awareness of accessibility needs.
2. Provide an interim measure to make businesses more accessible to more people.
3. Employ incarcerated persons and grow their connection to social initiatives.

## Rationale

The project goals were undertaken with the following intended impacts in mind.

- Expanding businesses' reach into the disability consumer market, valued at \$165 billion annually in Canada (Conference Board of Canada, 2018)
- Enhancing access to services, commodities, and community organizations to persons with disabilities.
- Providing greater access to employment opportunities for persons with disabilities with local businesses.
- Providing skills training and employment opportunities for incarcerated persons.
- Improving awareness of accessibility issues in select communities across Nova Scotia.
- Moving closer to making Nova Scotia accessible by 2030.



## Process

Nova Ramp Up followed a linear process pictured in the corresponding graphic (right).

Initial activities of the project include hiring and training skilled personnel and preparing the in-facility construction team. This preparation leads into engaging directly with businesses to collect and fill ramp orders, which are then constructed by the build team of skilled incarcerated persons.

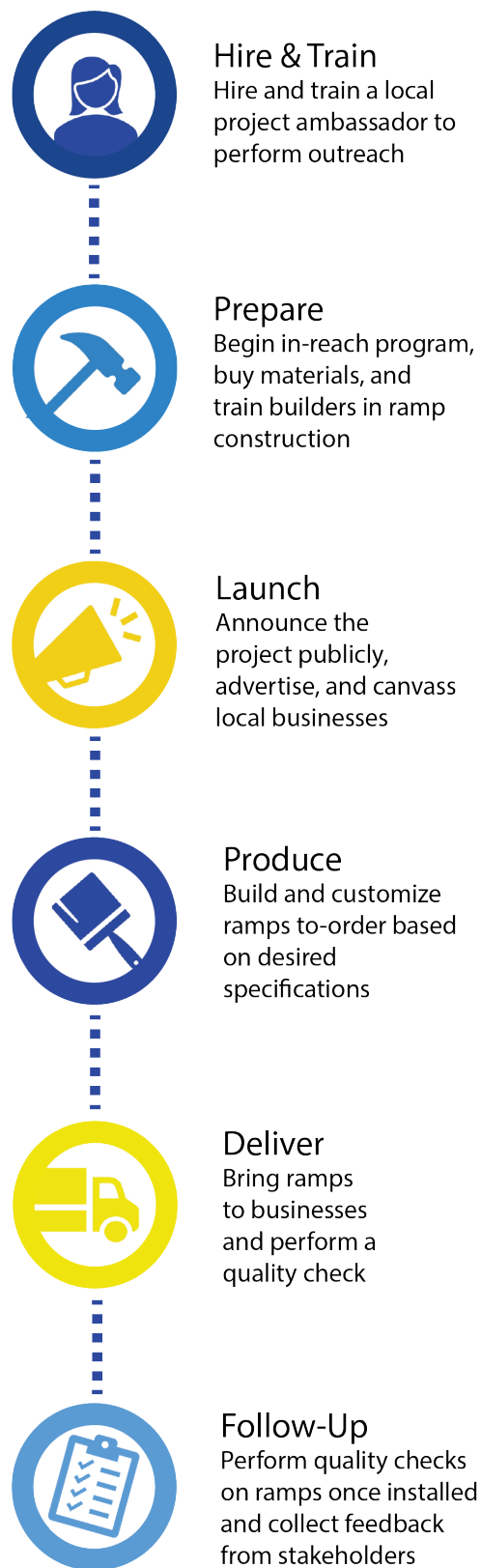
The final stage of the project plan involves following up with the participating businesses and consulting with the public to assess the effectiveness of Nova Ramp Up against the project mission and goals.

## The NRU Ramp

The Nova Ramp Up (NRU) ramp is modelled after the StopGap Foundation ramps found in Ontario. Easily-sourced, low-cost materials are constructed into a simple but robust ramp, which is measured to fit the width of storefront doorways and the height of the step that broaches the vertical gap between the sidewalk and the entrance-level.

The NRU ramps are constructed with half inch spruce plywood. They have hollow bottoms to reduce the overall weight of

Figure 4. A process diagram with simple icons.



the structure. The minimum width of a ramp is 32 inches and minimum height is 3 inches. The maximum height of a ramp is 12 inches, or 1 foot.

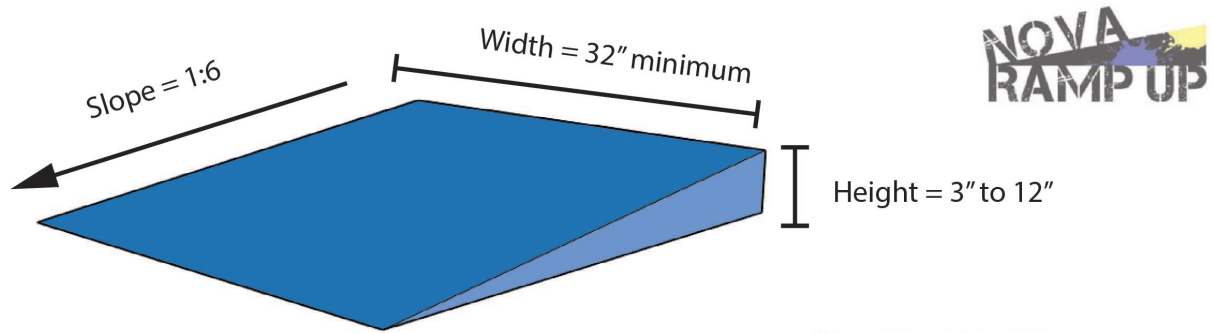
The length of each ramp is determined by the height needed to meet the top of the step while keeping its running slope approximately 1:6 (16%). This slope has been modified to suit the limited sidewalk space usually available in front of storefronts. It is not compliant with standards for permanent ramps, which should be between 1:12 (8.33%) and 1:20 (5%).

A clear, firm, and level area of sidewalk or other paved surface is required in front of the step where the ramp will be placed. This surface must also be wide enough to support a person's forward approach to the ramp – approximately 42 inches of clear space between the edge of the ramp and the sidewalk curb.

Businesses were ineligible for a ramp if they did not have sufficient paved clear and level space in front of their step, if there were multiple steps into the business, or if the measurements of the step did not fall within the minimum and maximums for construction.



Figure 5. A series of diagrams displaying measurements and materials of the NRU ramp.




### An Illustration of an NRU Ramp

- Plywood structure with a hollow bottom
- At least 32" wide
- Between 3" to 12" high
- Colourfully painted with a textured finish
- Rope handles for lifting from the sides (optional)


  
 Non-slip, water-resistant paint finish available in red, green, blue, and yellow
 

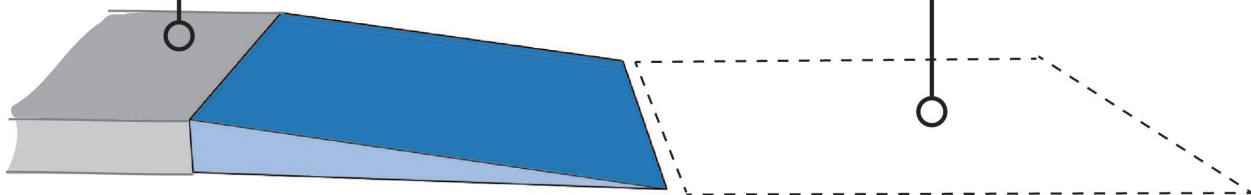
Constructed from 1/2" spruce plywood



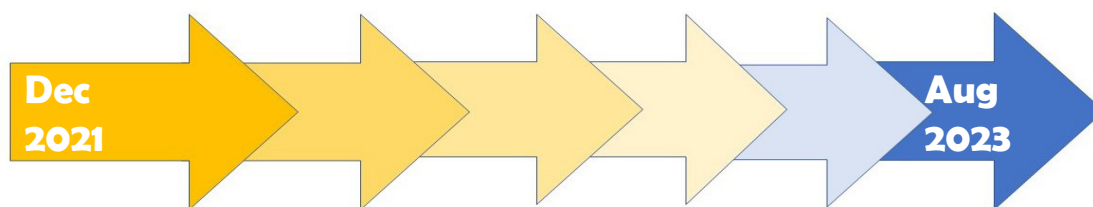

Single-step front entrance required (NRU ramps were not built to exceed one step)

Flat, unobstructed, solid surface required in front of ramp

Sidewalk wide enough for pedestrians to pass by



# Project Timeline



Nova Ramp Up activities began after a committee had been formed to oversee the project, made up of representatives from each of the collaborating groups. For a detailed record of events please see Appendix 1.

## Hiring and Training Winter 2022

A Project Manager was hired to manage day-to-day tasks, chair the committee meetings, pilot the ramp construction, and be the primary point of contact for committee members.

A Community Ramp Ambassador was also hired whose role was to be the public face of the project. Primary responsibilities of the Ambassador were to canvass eligible businesses in the communities of interest, distribute information on the Nova Ramp Up project to businesses, take measurements of the storefronts of interested businesses and act as liaison between the businesses and the project.

The Ambassador was the first point of contact for businesses, and the last,

because they were also responsible for delivering the completed ramps once they were constructed. This was, therefore, a very crucial role for the project.

Candidates with personal experience of disability and/or incarceration were prioritised for the opportunities of Project Manager and Community Ramp Ambassador. Through the course of the project, both successful candidates spoke to their own experiences of barriers to accessibility and added value to the outcomes of the NRU project by way of sharing their lived expertise.

A Masters student from Dalhousie University was also hired to perform follow-up research under the supervision of the research team to support the assessment of the project outcomes. The participating correctional facility also sought out an internal candidate to oversee and supervise the ramp construction program.

The first four months of the project were spent seeking candidates for these three opportunities and acquiring all necessary permissions to proceed with the project activities.

## Acquiring Approvals Spring 2022

Ethics approvals were obtained from Nova Scotia's Correctional Services and from the research institution, Dalhousie University. Insurance was also required from a third-party provider to insure the ramps for use by the participating businesses and by members of the public once installed.

## Public Launch Summer 2022

Once insurance was acquired and the hired positions were filled, a prototype ramp was constructed and advertising materials were produced in preparation for the launch of the project.

By June 2022, a soft launch of the project took place. Businesses in Pictou, Pictou Landing First Nation, Stellarton, Trenton, Thorburn, Westville, and New Glasgow were canvassed and the first ramp orders were received in July. The official public launch of the project took place on August 16, 2022, in the Town of Stellarton, Nova Scotia.

Figure 6 (top right): Masters' student voices support for the project at the public launch.  
Figure 7 (middle right): Four NRU team members attending the public launch.  
Figure 8 (bottom right): NRU Project Manager rolls up the Curious Crow's ramp.



The Curious Crow Coffee House, a young business along the main street of Stellarton, agreed to be featured for the launch and the first recipient of a Nova Ramp Up ramp for their storefront.

The launch attracted media attention to the project, with a report published through *SaltWire* and a local radio station, 989 XFM.

The mayor of Stellarton, Mayor Danny MacGillvray, attended the launch and showed his support for the project. A small crowd of community members stopped to speak with team members and expressed support for the project.

## Distributing Ramps Fall 2022/Summer 2023

As canvassing continued, the geographic reach of the project was expanded to include Tatamagouche, River John, Toney River, Scotsburn, Antigonish, and Truro, and more orders were received from businesses in these areas. A single store in Halifax Regional Municipality was distributed a ramp, as well as two not-for-profit agencies.

Ramp construction accelerated into the fall and ramps were delivered over the months of September through October. A second wave of orders were collected in the early winter, with ramps delivered starting in spring 2023, and a final wave of orders are being collected and filled in summer 2023.



Figure 9. Photograph of Curious Crow Coffee House's blue ramp uploaded to CANdid Access in November 2022.

## Knowledge Dissemination Summer 2023

Participating businesses are invited to share their new ramps as an accessibility feature of their business by adding photos of them to an existing web map called CANdid Access.

[CANdid Access](#) was created by the PEACH Research Unit as an online crowdsourcing tool for anyone to share their experience of accessible or inaccessible features in the built environment on Nova Scotia.

Photos of the NRU ramps in front of some of the participating businesses have been added to this public information source, and more may be added by businesses at any time.

Project partners anticipate more opportunities to report on and share the outcomes of Nova Ramp Up beyond the summer of 2023.



Figure 10. Map of study area, including Truro, Tatamagouche, River John, Toney River, Pictou, Scotsburn, Pictou Landing First Nations Band, Trenton, Thorburn, New Glasgow, Stellarton and Antigonish.

**“The Town of Stellarton is very happy to be the first one and that the Curious Crow was the first business to do it. We think it will catch on, we really hope it catches on, on our Main Street.”**

**-- Mayor MacGillvray, Town of Stellarton**



## Participating Businesses

The majority of businesses who took part in Nova Ramp Up and received a NRU ramp were small, independent businesses. They include,

- **Curious Crow Coffee House, Stellarton**
- **Final Touch Party Rentals, Stellarton**
- **Tax 2000, Stellarton**
- **The Raw Edge Pet Health, Westville**
- **Limelight Studio Design, Westville**
- **Soley Shoes, New Glasgow**
- **Virtualzone Reality Arcade, New Glasgow**
- **Metro-Midtown Tax, New Glasgow**
- **Auto Trim & Signs, Thorburn**
- **Seaside Treasure Trove, Pictou**
- **Hilly Island Design, Pictou**
- **Train Station Inn, Tatamagouche**
- **Down to Earth Art Gallery, Antigonish**
- **RE/MAX Park Place Inc., Antigonish**
- **Trendys Clothing Ltd., Antigonish**
- **Casey Concrete, Trenton**
- **Lady Luck Boutique, Halifax**
- **Final Chapter Books, Stellarton**
- **Andy's Tire Shop, Truro**
- **Underground Snax, Truro**
- **Seasstrands Salon & Spa, Truro**
- **Inglis Jewellers, Truro**
- **Cannabis Cave, Pictou Landing First Nation**
- **Papa D's Auto repair, Scotsburn**

## Other Participating Groups

Some not-for-profit groups and government agents also applied for, and were supplied, NRU ramps. They include,

- **Bluenose II Heritage Site, Lunenburg**
- **Nova Scotia Recreation Consultant**
- **Municipality of Pictou County**
- **Nova Scotia Works, Tatamagouche**
- **Pictou-North Colchester Exhibition**
- **JHSNS**



## Key Successes

The research team followed up with businesses who received one or more NRU ramps before February 2023 to learn of their initial experiences using the ramps. An online survey was released in December 2022 and was active until February 2023. It collected feedback from 149 residents and business owners from the participating communities to assess Nova Ramp Up's community-level outcomes.

From the feedback collected, it is clear that the activities of Nova Ramp Up succeeded in adding to the accessibility of locally owned and operated businesses in Nova Scotia, and positively contributed to a growing awareness of accessibility considerations in employers and community members.

While it is difficult to measure the extent to which the NRU ramps have made an impact, and may continue to do so into the future, the research team has identified some short-term benefits from speaking with the various stakeholders involved in the project, and suggest where these benefits have long-term potential. This section summarises these five key successes.

**“This projects does so much good in [the] community starting with the inmates learning new skills and taking pride in helping a vulnerable community. It helps business expand their customer base and access to a large talent base. And for the disability community it provides us access!”**

**-- Anonymous Survey Response**



## **Nova Ramp Up offered a feasible option for small businesses to immediately become more accessible.**

Businesses that were approached to participate in Nova Ramp Up were mainly small businesses, each with typically fewer than 10 employees. In Nova Scotia, small businesses – those with 1 to 99 employees – make up 98% of employer businesses. This makes them an important segment of the province’s economy.

Unfortunately, small businesses have faced numerous challenges since the start of the global COVID-19 pandemic, including, lessening customer demand, lack of employee availability, and disrupted supply chains (Isabelle, Han, & Westerlund, 2022, p. 323). For many businesses, this has meant competing demands on their time and resources which have limited their capacity to make many needed improvements.

Much of the feedback from participating businesses was an agreed appreciation for the ease of the NRU order process and how little demand it had been on their time. Because the ramps could also be offered for free, or an option of a small donation to the John Howard Society, there was also little to no financial burden to the participating businesses.

The operation of the portable ramp has also been described as easy to use day-to-day. Its hollow-bottom design has made its weight manageable for most storeowners to take in and out as needed. On nice weather days, most storeowners like to put the ramp out when they open, and bring it back in at the close of the day. On days with poor weather, the ramp can be kept indoors and only brought out as needed.

The lack of ‘set up’ that is required, and the straightforward design of the ramp itself has made it an approachable option for many business owners.

**“[The NRU Ambassador] came in and offered us a pamphlet on what it was all about. [We] talked about it for a second and were like, yeah, and filled it out and it was done. So, it was really easy, and then I didn’t have to worry about it, or think about it again, and it showed up. Very easy.”**

**– Final Touch Party Rentals,  
Stellarton**

## **Nova Ramp Up has encouraged business owners and operators to become accessible in more ways.**

Many of the participating businesses were aware of at least some accessibility needs for their business, and this motivated them to participate in the project from the beginning.

A few businesses owners or their employees reported that they experienced disabilities themselves. These included chronic pain, reduced dexterity, epilepsy, and other neurodivergent conditions.

Many also told the NRU team about past efforts to become more accessible, and the number of roadblocks they faced in the process. These included struggling to obtain landlord permissions to make permanent renovations as tenants of their space, contending with budgetary demands, and past investments that had not turned out. An example of the latter includes a theft of a portable aluminum ramp that one business had purchased for their entrance. Another had been

ready to launch an accessible renovation to an entrance off of their parking area, which was halted when work crews were forced to drop the job during lockdowns.

In this way, the NRU project was a welcomed solution to those who were already somewhat aware of accessibility barriers. However, through the process of receiving and installing the NRU ramp, business owners and operators were made aware of several more accessibility improvements that could be introduced to their storefronts and indoor facilities.

For instance, one business learned about accessible washroom upgrades from a wheelchair user who had entered their store with the help of the NRU ramp. The customer and their companion were able to visit the coffee shop for the first time and reportedly offered advice to the owner about, "...how to install the proper [grab] bar in my bathroom, so that they can use the toilet."

The installation of the NRU ramps also regularly brought attention to the uneven paving of the sidewalk or front stoop, which could be brought to the attention of a landlord or the municipality.

As part of their follow-up interview, other businesses shared their future plans to widen doorways, install an automatic door opener, or remove a second set of doors from their interior vestibule. Many of these were planned as a result of observing numerous customers with walkers or other mobility devices experience difficulty when entering their business.

**“First off, it’s a low-cost option for businesses to use to increase their accessibility. It’s not a full answer, but it’s a step in the right direction... We do talk to businesses about accessibility and always the biggest barrier is financial capacity...”**

**– Mayor MacGillvray, Town of Stellarton**



## Nova Ramp Up has the potential to grow awareness of accessibility for businesses and in communities.

In the same way that business owners become more aware of accessibility improvements by installing the NRU ramp, members of the public reported greater community-wide awareness as a present and future outcome of Nova Ramp Up.

The public feedback survey found that 83 of 123 people (67.5%) agreed that the top benefit that the NRU ramps brought to their communities was a greater awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities overall. (The next greatest benefit being more equitable access to goods and services for more community members (n = 81)).

Businesses who received their ramp in the late summer and early fall reported more opportunity to leave the ramp outdoors, where it was observed to attract attention from passersby and customers alike.

**“There was an increase in people noticing the ramp and appreciating the ramp....And they gave positive reviews on it and a few additional tips.”**

**– Curious Crow Coffee House, Stellarton**

Individuals who were employed by, or volunteered with, the project have also reported that doing so grew their understanding of the different forms that accessibility barriers take in the community.

It is expected that the colourful sidewalk ramps will continue to draw attention to accessibility considerations for residents, business owners, and visitors to the over 13 Nova Scotian communities where participating businesses are located.

**“I was driving down one of our main streets with my wife a couple weeks ago and I saw myself looking at storefronts being like, oh, that’s not accessible. Like, how would people get into there?”**

**...You don’t really realize the challenges that some people are faced with... and being involved with this project kind of opened my eyes to that need in the community.”**

**– Corrections Officer**

## The ramp-building program has connected incarcerated individuals with the community in a meaningful way.

Due to lockdowns from COVID-19 outbreaks in the correctional facility participating in this project, only 1 of 3 criminalized persons who were involved in the construction of NRU ramps was able to provide feedback on their experience.

A correctional officer supervising the program was also able to offer some observations from his experience. The two perspectives both aligned in feeling the program was beneficial to incarcerated persons in multiple ways.

The program offered an opportunity to work outdoors during the summer months of the project – something that is rarely available to people housed at the correctional facility. The fresh air and sun were described as being of significant mental health benefit to participants, especially amid COVID-19 lockdowns.

Primarily, the interviewee described their participation within the context of its impact on the larger community. “It’s just a way to get back to the community, makes it feel good. Like you’re able to make a change, a small change, you know, makes big changes in the community, especially for those who are disabled, so it’s just overall a good thing to do and good to give back.”

The vast majority of survey respondents (88% or 109/123) agreed that the involvement of criminalized individuals in the NRU ramp construction was a valuable component to this initiative.

The NRU Project Ambassador similarly reported that the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia’s name added significant credibility to the initiative, with businesses being more willing to speak with him after hearing the project partners who were involved.

**“It’s just a way to get back to the community, makes it feel good. Like you’re able to make a change, a small change, you know, makes big changes in the community, especially for those who are disabled, so it’s just overall a good thing to do and good to give back.”**

**-- Incarcerated person**

## **NRU ramps have enabled more access for more people to Nova Scotian businesses.**

Finally, feedback confirms that NRU ramps have been successful at achieving greater access to participating businesses for more people – mainly individuals who use wheeled mobility devices. Through interviews with participating business owners and operators, many said that the NRU ramps have allowed people using wheelchairs to enter their businesses for the first time. People with strollers, using canes, or who have reduced coordination have also been observed as benefitting from the availability of the NRU ramps.

Many business owners and operators reported receiving unsolicited, positive feedback from customers about the ramps since they have been in place. In fact, the ramps have received largely positive reviews from both participating

businesses and members of the public, including individuals living with disabilities.

The online follow-up survey conducted with members of the public found that 83 of 92 people (90%) who said they interacted with an NRU ramp found it was helpful for them to access the business. Over half of the people who answered this feedback survey (60%) self-identified as experiencing one or more disabilities, with the two most common forms being mobility disability and neurodivergent conditions. Please see Appendix 3 for more details on the survey results.

Based on this feedback, the ramps are functioning as intended – as an immediate (and interim) solution to increase access for more people.

**“We have gotten a lot more people in wheelchairs physically coming into the store. Yes, and they’re happy that they have a place that they can come in.”**

**– Soley Shoes, New Glasgow**

**“The customers have said that they appreciate it, especially the older ones with walkers or just a little mobility problem. They appreciate it.”**

**– Metro Midtown Taxi, New Glasgow**



## Limitations

The key successes described in the previous section of this report are valuable contributions to furthering accessible built environments and accessibility awareness in the province.

However, there were some limitations to the Nova Ramp Up concept and to the effectiveness of the ramps themselves to be acknowledged.

These are summarized by this section into three main points heard from stakeholders:

1. NRU ramps only address single-step barriers into business entrances and do not address other barriers that impede access.
2. While NRU ramps enable access to more people, they are not always the best option for everyone.
3. NRU ramps are a temporary accessibility enhancement and cannot take the place of more permanent improvements into the future.

### **NRU ramps are only a solution for single-step barriers.**

The design of the Nova Ramp Up ramp is limited to addressing single-step barriers. During canvassing, it became clear that while many businesses had a “one-step problem”, there were many structural features posing barriers to accessibility that the NRU ramp could not solve.

A sample Google Streetview audit\* found that only approximately 30% of storefront businesses in the area met the eligibility criteria for a NRU ramp. Barriers that were observed through this audit included multi-stepped entrances or irregular frontages that could not support a NRU ramp (21%).

Other barriers noted by the NRU Project Ambassador include too-narrow door width, the presence of interior stairs once entering a business, or doorsill heights exceeding  $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

This limitation emphasizes that a ramp alone cannot be expected to create a fully accessible entrance when there are numerous other factors that still pose barriers.

\*Please see Appendix 4 for more explanation on this data collection method.

## NRU ramps are not always the best option for everyone.

It is a reality of many accessibility improvements that while they improve accessibility based on some people's needs, they do not always serve the needs of others.

For Nova Ramp Up, some participating business owners reported that some customers found the ramp to pose more barriers than a step up. For instance, some frail older adults using walkers were observed to face challenges using the ramp due to limited balance or fears of instability on a sloped surface.

One business owner described the experience of a customer in their 90s who struggled to stay on the ramp while manoeuvring the manual door to the business. “[The client is] trying to hang on to the walker, she's trying to get up

the ramp, and she's trying to hold the door. Plus, she's trying to get in around [the second] door... It's a lot.” They note, “[The ramp] will probably work somewhere that has an automatic or sliding door, you know?”

A benefit of this project's portable ramp design is in its flexibility of use. As such, businesses found it functional in that it was adaptable, either to put the ramp in place when helpful to customers or move it out of the way in cases when customers found the stepped entrance more accessible than the ramp.

Unfortunately, this study did not hear directly from many older persons, with only 3% of survey responses being from persons aged 65 years or older.



## NRU ramps offer an interim solution, but permanent solutions are even better.

One observed challenge with the ramp includes unsteadiness of the ramp due to uneven or cracked concrete at the front entrance being cracked or weathered, and posing an inconsistent surface for the ramp's base. Follow ups with businesses have been performed by the construction team to resolve these issues.

Businesses also expressed uncertainty around seasonality of the ramp and its use in winter weather. One business worried about how icy or snowy conditions will affect the use of the ramp, saying "It could be more of a challenge given ice and snow, I don't know." Another business owner notes limitations to access in the wintertime, beyond the ramp itself. "In the wintertime there may not even be access out there for people to use the ramp because of sidewalk plowing. People [using] wheelchairs will not be able to access the sidewalk, let alone the store."

Relatedly, businesses were advised not to keep the ramp out in the rain, snow, or even extreme heat, in order to prolong it's life. Despite being given window stickers to notify customers of the ramp's availability upon request, it appears few businesses have opted to use them. Instead, ramps are either left outdoors or kept inside at the business operators discretion.

These experiences point to some of the limitations of using a temporary solution such as the NRU ramp. As an "interim" measure, the Nova Ramp Up ramp is not meant to be a long-term solution to providing an accessible storefront. It is also not built to withstand adverse weather conditions.

Overall, it is important that Nova Ramp Up is treated as a short-term, immediate option and not mistaken for a complete solution to accessibility.

# Operational Challenges

It is the intention of this report to inform future initiatives like Nova Ramp Up. To do so, the following operational challenges experienced by the project team may be addressed.

1. Delays securing insurance,
2. Inflated material costs for construction,
3. Challenges hiring and retaining uniquely skilled persons, and
4. Construction shutdowns.

These were overcome with time or through the resourcefulness or persistence of team members.

Due to these challenges, the number of ramps projected for completion were reduced over the course of the project timeline. It is important to note, however, that many of these circumstances were unique to the post-COVID environment in which this project operated and similar challenges may be avoided if this project were to be repeated in the future.

Despite the setbacks, the NRU team is confident this initiative made tangible and valuable accessibility improvements to businesses in numerous Nova Scotian communities.

## Insurance Delays

Insurance was a necessary part of this project to protect the participating businesses from any liability claims resulting from the ramps once they were installed. While the StopGap Foundation secured a similar policy in Ontario, implementing the same type of policy in Nova Scotia encountered many delays and roadblocks.

This was eventually resolved, and the project was able to move forward with the proper coverage. This is an important challenge for future projects to be aware of from the start so that conversations with insurance providers are initiated early in the planning process.

## Inflated Material Costs

Material cost and availability of materials to construct the ramps was a challenge the project experienced due to post-pandemic conditions. The cost of materials – specifically plywood along with other softwoods — were significantly affected by supply chain disruptions from extreme weather events and labour shortages, COVID-19-induced recession, and heightened post-pandemic demand paired with lessened supply that was experienced in 2022 during the project period.

In fact, it has been found that prices of softwood lumber (USD) increased by more than 300% between 2020 and 2022 (Zanello et al., 2023). This unexpectedly changed budgetary expectations and resulted in some additional strain on the construction team when procuring materials.

## Hiring and Retaining Uniquely Skilled Persons

The role of a Ramp Ambassador was a demanding position for Nova Ramp Up. Candidates were asked to have strong interpersonal skills, experience with social media and digital record keeping as well as flexible availability. This included an expectation that candidates would have access to a vehicle or reliable personal transport, the capacity to perform outreach duties independently at irregular hours, and take ownership as the spokesperson for the project. It was also a fixed six-month position.

The project gave preference to an individual who was, or was a family member of, a formerly incarcerated person, or who identified as indigenous, racially visible, or living with a disability. Initially, the position attracted a limited number of applicants. It was a lengthy process to find the desired individual, but in time a candidate came forward.

In addition, a Project Manager was not able to be retained for the full duration of the project. This role was supplemented through volunteered time for the

latter half of the project. The Ramp Ambassador also was unable to continue in the position in the final months of the project.

Additional challenges were reported finding internal candidates to support the construction program supervisor working in the correctional facility.

## COVID-19 Outbreaks and Construction Shutdowns

A significant disruption to the project was the frequency of facility-wide shutdowns in the correctional facility where construction of the ramps took place. These were due to COVID-19 outbreaks in the facility and related health protocols.

During the summer of 2022, COVID-19 outbreaks were still regularly occurring in the facility, and for a number of weeks the construction of ramps were put on hold. The team was reluctant to move ahead with approaching businesses and taking ramp orders until there was greater confidence that the ramp construction would move forward.

Once the programs within the facility were able to resume, the project was able to schedule an official launch. Unfortunately, outbreaks of COVID-19 in the facility would delay construction two more times after the summer months. These production challenges led the committee to reduce the target number of ramps by over half.

## Top Takeaways

Nova Ramp Up's successes, limitations, and challenges outlined by this report point to two main conclusions that can be carried through to future projects.

The first expands on the potential of Nova Ramp Up, the NRU ramp, and other initiatives like it to advance and accelerate the accessibility of communities beyond the day-to-day contributions of the ramp itself.

The second is an area where future projects may improve upon the efforts of Nova Ramp Up and expand on the outcomes of this pilot project.

**“First and foremost, more people will be able to access the businesses, so it’s good for the individual that can access services and goods but it’s also good for the business....The buying power of the disabled community is huge and that’s something that businesses are starting to recognize, and this Nova Ramp Up will help accelerate the businesses’ ability to become more inclusive to all.”**

**-- Mayor MacGillvray, Town of Stellarton**

## Addressing a ‘single-step’ barrier can be a crucial *first step* for making real change towards accessibility.

Many of the successes of Nova Ramp Up indicate that enhancing access to businesses, even through an interim measure, can have a ripple effect that extends beyond the life of the NRU ramp itself.

The NRU ramp has demonstrated its potential to bring people with different life experiences into places where they had previously not been before. Not only is this of benefit to the people who, through the use of a NRU ramp, are newly entering businesses and may choose to participate as consumers, receive services, and enjoy social opportunity there, but by entering these businesses, customers with lived experience of disability have brought this expertise with them to share with business owners.

In some cases, this has meant customers with disabilities directly informing business owners of more renovations that can be done to improve their business’ accessibility. Moreover, the businesses who welcome more persons with lived experience of disability into their stores will have more opportunity to learn passively from providing services to people with different accessibility needs.

This has been observed by a Nova Ramp Up team member who uses a powered wheelchair when he entered a previously inaccessible business for the first time using the NRU ramp, and was quite possibly the first wheelchair user in that space. Along with describing the experience as “welcoming” and “uplifting”, he believes his presence alone had an impact on the members of the family business. “It might have been [the] son’s first-time serving coffee to someone like me. I really enjoyed receiving my hot chocolate and my cookie from the son and that really, truly was the most inspiring part of the process for me.... I’m seeing that intergenerational understanding of accessibility issues, [and it] was really uplifting seeing it.”

This anecdote speaks to the potential of the NRU ramp to facilitate relationships between members of diverse populations, including multiple generations of people using or working in common commercial and social spaces. The result of which is often to enhance awareness and understanding of accessibility needs and solutions through simple day-to-day interactions.

Feedback from businesses also suggests that the presence of the NRU ramp has prompted business owners and employees to be attentive to the spaces outside of their businesses, bringing attention to sidewalk quality and maintenance, such as winter maintenance and snow clearing,

as having a direct effect on the approachability of their businesses.

Overtime, the growing attention paid to accessibility barriers by business owners and members of the community has the potential to drive improvements at a larger scale.

## **Future projects may anticipate operational challenges and plan for more internal supports.**

Nova Ramp Up encountered several challenges which, as this report has acknowledged, delayed some parts of its deployment.

The top lesson learned from the pilot project was the importance of project management and public outreach to maximising the potential of this type of initiative, and the need for sufficient supports for the people who take on these responsibilities.

Projects looking to learn from Nova Ramp Up should allocate sufficient resources to seek out, support and retain uniquely skilled and passionate team members to oversee and monitor project operations.

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# Appendix 1

## Record of Project

The following is a record of Nova Ramp Up operations. Details have been summarized from committee meeting notetaking and summarised herein.

Date	Details
February 2020	Business Accessibility Grant from the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism, and Heritage awarded to the John Howard Society of Nova Scotia.
December 2021	Team members convene, prepare budget, and establish current and future roles for partners and employed persons (i.e., Project Manager, Project Ambassador, summer student, incarcerated persons)
January 2022	Seek internal ethics approvals for research activities involving people as participants (e.g., Dalhousie, Corrections) Plans for project activities are scenario-based due to frequently changing COVID-19 restrictions (e.g., construction of ramps to occur in Nova Scotia provincial correctional facility or, alternatively, in the JHSNS Hub workshop by community members) Goal for 150 ramps in Pictou County
February - March 2022	Challenges acquiring necessary insurance for the ramps Stop Gap Foundation no longer to be a formal partner Memorandum of Understanding being drafted between JHSNS and Department of Justice Ambassador position advertised
April 2022	Ethics approvals received from Dalhousie REB Summer student's employment begins, receives training from Project Manager Goal reduced to 100 ramps Town of Trenton interested in addition to Pictou
May 2022	Aim to soft launch by end of month (in time for Accessibility Awareness Week) Drafts of communications materials composed and under internal review COVID-19 outbreak in the correctional facility, all programs (including ramp construction) are put on hold, HUB is considered as alternative for construction Ramp Ambassador hired
June 2022	COVID-19 exposures slow down progress on transferring construction activities to the HUB location (challenge receiving permissions) Website content and promotional materials approved by partners Project Manager and Ambassador begin canvassing businesses in Pictou, Trenton, Westville, and New Glasgow Goal reduced to 50 ramps Logistical concerns and delays for construction process at correctional facility ongoing, construction materials (e.g., tools, paint) procured in the meantime



July 2022	<p>Pictou Landing First Nation canvassed along with other communities same as previous</p> <p>First ramp orders received from businesses (several interested businesses found to be ineligible due to steep slope of sidewalk, too-narrow entrance, etc.)</p> <p>A limited number of incarcerated individuals approved to participate in ramp construction, and construction activities still not free to resume in the correctional facility due to health protocols until the end of this month</p>
August 2022	<p>Social media materials and project statement released on web</p> <p>Correctional facility experiencing staff shortages, continues to slow down ramp production</p> <p>One ramp completed and delivered for August 16 media launch at Curious Crow Coffee House, Stellarton</p>
September 2022	<p>Project Ambassador continues to canvass businesses in expanded geographies: Pictou, New Glasgow, Westville, Stellarton, Tatamagouche, and Pictou Landing First Nation, Landon, River John, Trenton</p> <p>Ramp construction in the correctional facility pick up production</p>
October 2022	<p>Six ramps built and delivered, more in-production</p> <p>Orders continue to come in from businesses approached by Project Ambassador to continue canvassing – more orders placed</p> <p>Follow-ups with businesses begin, phone interviews</p>
November 2022	<p>Follow-ups with businesses continue, in-person visit to some businesses who received ramps</p> <p>Public survey released online to gain feedback on the project</p> <p>Ramp construction continues with new team members hired within the facility</p>
December 2022	<p>Construction paused due to incarcerated team members no longer being available</p>
January 2023	<p>Ramp construction delayed due to illness and COVID-19 lockdown</p> <p>Final orders for ramps accepted</p>
February 2023	<p>Public survey closed to responses</p> <p>Final follow-ups conducted with business owners</p>
March 2023	<p>Internal report draft submitted</p>
July 2023	<p>Ramp location and details added to the CANdid access online map</p>
August 2023	<p>Final reporting submitted to funder (CCTH)</p>

## Appendix 2

### Ramp Order Form (Online)

Company/Organization Name \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Name (First/Last) \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a single step store front in the Nova Scotia Pictou/New Glasgow area that could use a temporary access ramp? (yes/no)

Is your single step storefront between 3 and 12 inches in height and at least 32 inches in width? (yes/no)

What colour ramp would you like?

- Blue
- Green
- Yellow
- Red

Are you willing to make a \$50 charitable donation to the John Howard Society in exchange for the ramp? If this is not possible, we will provide the ramp at no cost. (Yes/Not at this time)

How did you hear about the NOVA RAMP UP program?

- Word of mouth
- Poster
- Social media or digital poster
- Other

Please give dates and times you are available to meet the Community Ramp Ambassador at your business or organization to take measurements and pictures of the storefront to ensure eligibility and quality fit.

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## Appendix 3

### Summary of Public Survey

#### About the Survey

An online survey was released in December 2022 and remained active until February 2023. The survey was hosted on REDcap, a secure web application for building and managing online questionnaires.

The survey was accessed through a link posted to the PEACH Research Unit's website and distributed through social media posts and email announcements. All information collected was voluntary and anonymous.

#### Respondent Profile

A total of 149 responses were collected. The greatest proportion of respondents (n=73, 49%) lived in, or regularly visited, one of the communities where NRU ramps were distributed. Some (n= 45, 30%) reported also being business owners in one of the participating communities, and 19% were employed by a business located in one of the participating communities.

Respondents belonged to multiple age groups, ranging between 18 and 84 years of age. Most responses were from working-age adults, with the greatest proportion aged 25 to 44 years old (n=86, 57%).

Over half of the respondents (n=89, 60%) self-identified as experiencing one or more disabilities. Mobility disability was

experienced by 49 (33%) respondents, 32 (21%) experienced a learning disability or other neurodivergent condition (e.g., dyslexia, autism, vertigo), 28 (19%) experienced undefined barriers to accessibility, and 20 (13%) experienced vision or hearing impairment. 14 (9%) people also reported being caregivers to someone living with disability.

#### Age Ranges of Participants

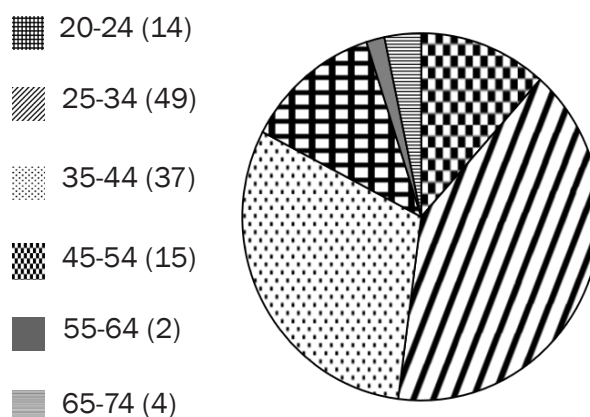


Figure 11. Pie chart of participant age ranges.

#### Types of Disability Experience

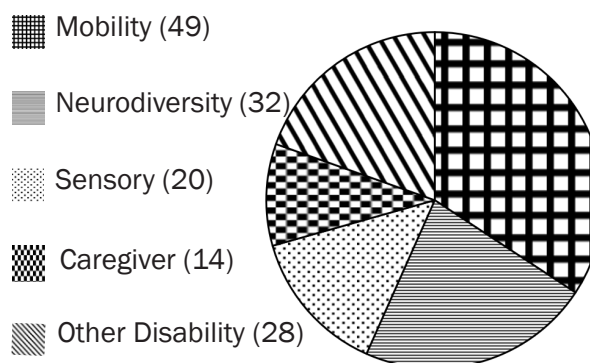


Figure 12: Pie chart of participants' types of disability experience.

## General Feedback

Most respondents reported that the accessibility of storefronts was very important (n=73, 49%) or somewhat important (n=34, 23%) to them, with 11 who said they were not sure and 28 who preferred not to answer. Three people answered that the accessibility of storefronts was not very important.

There were 92 respondents who reported visiting a business with a NRU ramp. Of these, 83 (90%) found it helpful for them to enter the business, 4 people did not use the ramp because they did not require it, 2 people used the ramp but found it was unhelpful, and 3 people said they were not sure if it was helpful or not.

A few respondents suggested how the usability of the ramps could be improved. Such as, “It needs to be a part of the daily ‘business day opening’. Too often these types of aids are only put out on request, which is something no other patron has to ask for before entering.”

There were also some concerns expressed about the ramp’s performance in outdoor conditions. For example, “Wet and dirty can be dangerous” and, “I don’t know if it’s not slippery, but someone almost fell earlier.”


The involvement of incarcerated persons in the ramp construction was received well, with 78 (52%) people saying this component of the study was “very valuable”, 29 (19%) people called it “somewhat valuable”, and only 2 (1%) people said it was “not very valuable”.

## Perceived Benefits


Respondents were asked about the perceived benefits of the NRU ramps for both the community and for participating businesses. The graphs below list their responses.

### Top Benefits to the Community


Greater awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities (n = 83, 56%)




More equitable access to goods and services (n = 81, 54%)




Economic growth from a broadening customer base (n = 69, 46%)



More opportunity to meet and interact with people who have different experiences (n= 67, 45%)




May encourage businesses to invest in permanent renovations (n = 58, 39%)



### Top Benefits to Businesses

Higher satisfaction/employee morale from achieving greater inclusion (n = 86, 58%)



More customer visits (n = 78, 52%)



Improved public opinion/publicity (n = 66, 44%)



Greater possibility of hiring people with disabilities (n = 60, 40%)



Attract new clientele (n = 40, 27%)



## Appendix 4

### Google Streetview Audit

#### Purpose

A streetview audit was undertaken on a sample of main streets in four of the participating communities. The purpose of the audit was to approximate the proportion of streetfront businesses that may be eligible for a Nova Ramp Up ramp, not to produce a complete inventory.

#### Method

Nine communities were selected for sampling. These were:

- **Town of Pictou,**
- **Town of Westville,**
- **Town of New Glasgow,**
- **Town of Trenton,**
- **Town of Antigonish,**
- **Pictou Landing First Nations Band,**
- **Village of Tatamagouche,**
- **Village of Thorburn, and**
- **Village of Scotsburn.**



Figure 13. An image of the yellow Google “Pegman” used to view the digital streetview data.

Zoning maps for each of the communities were used to identify commercial main streets. A total of 15.3 km were sampled along the commercial streets. A research assistant ‘travelled’ along the selected routes using Google Streetview. Using a combination of data stored through the Google Maps platform and visual recognition (e.g., exterior signage), the research assistant identified commercial businesses along the route.

Each storefront was visually examined for whether it had a one-step entrance, an already accessible entrance, or an inaccessible entrance exceeding one step. One-stepped storefronts were also assessed for adequate sidewalk frontage to accommodate a NRU ramp.

The research assistants results were verified by a second researcher who also undertook the audit along the same sample routes to achieve interater agreement.



Figure 14. A blue and orange map of the study area with each of the canvassed communities labeled.

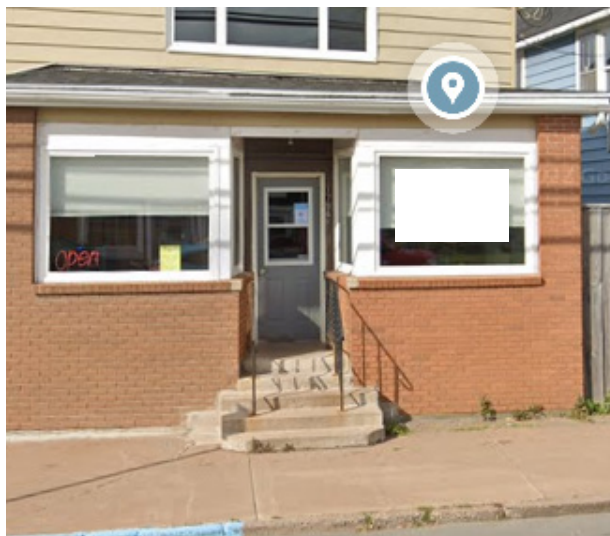


Figure 15. A multi-stepped storefront entrance in Westville, NS. (Source: Google Streetview)



Figure 16. A storefront with a level entrance in Pictou, NS. (Source: Google Streetview)

## Results

A total of 299 storefronts were assessed. Of these, 91 (30%) were identified as having single-step entries and adequate sidewalk frontage to accommodate a temporary ramp, such as the Nova Ramp Up ramp. The remaining 208 were determined not to be candidates for NRU ramps.

Of the remaining businesses, 62 (21%) were identified as having more than one front step, or an entrance step that was too irregular to support a temporary NRU ramp (please see example image to the right). Therefore, these businesses are in need of another accessibility solution than the NRU ramp. It also suggests that the ‘one-step barrier’ to businesses is more prevalent in these communities than multi-stepped barriers.

Finally, 146 (48%) of the remaining businesses were identified as having



Figure 17. A business entrance in New Glasgow, NS, with an irregular transition from the sidewalk. (Source: Google Streetview)

level entrances or a ramped primary or secondary entrance.

Door sill heights could not be reliably assessed using the streetview imagery, nor could door width or the accessibility of business interiors. It is, therefore, not appropriate to label this proportion of 146 businesses as accessible.