Atlantic Provinces Library Association Conference

May 30, 2016 – Janet Knox Keynote

Good morning. It’s a pleasure to be here with you for the 2016 APLA Conference.

As I was preparing for today, I was reflecting on the important role that libraries have played in my life and those of my children. Each of my children had a library card from the time they could walk. My youngest child learned to read and write by the age of three, I believe thanks in large part to her participation in library programs every week from the time she was two; it was just part of her life. Now my granddaughter is off to the library program every Wednesday. She is 19 months old.

Libraries are an important part of the lives of so many Nova Scotians, from children to the elderly, in settings from rural to urban, public to academic. I was happy to see the
theme of this year’s conference, *Libraries: Supporting Bodies and Minds*.

Nova Scotia Health Authority’s vision is healthy people, healthy communities – for generations.

Our work is to shift the conversation in Nova Scotia from being solely about treating the sick – which will always be an important part of our work – to focusing on the long-term health outcomes of our people. This means supporting people and communities to achieve their best state of health.

We have a challenge in Atlantic Canada of ill health. Nova Scotia has among the highest per capita spending on health care in Canada and among the worst health outcomes.

Our rates of high blood pressure, arthritis, cancer and respiratory disease are higher than most other Canadian provinces. Our health-adjusted life expectancy in Nova Scotia –
that is, the number of years we can expect to live in full health, is two years less than the Canadian average.

We know that health outcomes are worse yet for people living on low incomes. We must meet this challenge.

This is not about spending more money on health. It’s about spending differently, doing differently and deciding together how we can best spend our resources for the sake of a healthier province. It is about working together for a healthier population.

Over the past seven months, NSHA has embarked on some important conversations with Nova Scotians. *Talk about health* included 42 face-to-face conversations with almost 1,000 people in communities across the province, asking big questions about how we can change our health status.

Our Community Health Boards and many other community partners and stakeholders – including libraries – collaborated
to make these events a huge success. In addition to these in-person conversations, many Nova Scotians shared their thoughts through our *Talk about health* website, talkabouthealth.ca.

The feedback we received from community participants has painted a picture of where Nova Scotians see the challenges for achieving good health and also the opportunities we have to make change.

The feedback we heard breaks down into five theme areas:

- **Live well** – They talked about personal and community choices.
- **Cooperate, coordinate and collaborate** – we need to work together – competition is not helpful.
- **Encourage a healthy population** – Focus on health in all we do.
• Build person, family and community centered support systems, and
• Build a healthy society – Have the courage to do the right thing.

Of course, Nova Scotia Health Authority is just one piece of the picture when it comes to achieving these goals. Health is multi-faceted. We know that education, literacy and access to good jobs play a far greater role in the health of our population than health services themselves.

Libraries are supporting individual and collective health by bringing communities together to support learning, literacy and a sense of belonging.

Libraries have long been leading the way in terms of providing equitable access to services, with programs like:

• the bookmobile
• large-print books (reading as long as one can)
• public access computers
• programs for new immigrants
• outreach services for those who are not able to get out of their homes
• and specialized programming for all ages and a range of needs and interests

Libraries recognize the whole person, with offerings that touch on topics from early childhood development to healthy eating and physical activity to parenting, personal finances, the arts and much more.

By partnering with community organizations, you increase access to information and resources that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to obtain because of stigma, physical location, cost or other barriers.
As librarians, you understand your role in helping people be all they can be. You are a significant resource in helping individuals and communities achieve their best life.

When I read (present tense) about programs like seed libraries – offered on the South Shore and in the Annapolis Valley – helping people learn to grow vegetables so they can eat healthy, local food – I am reminded of the broad impact libraries have on health.

Paws to Read – offered at several public libraries – helps children improve their reading skills by matching them with a therapy dog listener, supporting the literacy we know is so vital to a healthy, happy life.

The Chess Club at the Margaret Hennigar Library on the South Shore, and the book clubs that many of you offer throughout Atlantic Canada – speak to the social connection
and sense of belonging that are so important in living a healthy and fulfilling life.

The Play Packs program, which makes children’s books and toys available for loan at libraries in Antigonish, New Glasgow, Pictou, River John, Stellarton, Trenton and Westville, underscores the importance of early childhood development in creating healthy communities. This initiative was made possible by libraries in partnership with Antigonish County Recreation, Town of Antigonish Recreation & Active Pictou County, as well as the North Shore Area Community Health Boards. Again, we are far stronger together than any one of us is alone.

In New Brunswick, the Aboriginal Library Services program provides collections, programming and welcoming spaces to New Brunswick Aboriginal peoples, and shares elements of First Nations culture with non-Aboriginal people.
This June, the PEI Public Library Service will participate in First Nation Communities READ. This annual reading program promotes works written or illustrated by First Nations peoples throughout Canada, while nurturing family literacy and intergenerational storytelling. These programs highlight the importance within Canada – and the Atlantic Provinces in particular – of embracing our diversity, celebrating individual cultures and history, and learning from one another. We cannot achieve good health for all populations without considering and celebrating the diversity of those who make up our communities.

The Newfoundland & Labrador Provincial Literacy Clearinghouse has more than 2,000 books, videos and other resources for anyone involved in literacy, such as new learners, tutors and researchers. The Provincial Literacy Clearinghouse is located in the A.C. Hunter Public Library in the St. John’s Arts and Culture Centre.
Libraries have been and will continue to be a valued partner of Nova Scotia Health Authority. There are many examples of NSHA partnering with libraries for the benefit of those we collectively serve.

NSHA’s health sciences libraries and Nova Scotia’s public libraries recently partnered to make our patient education pamphlets available through public library websites. This significantly expands the reach of these important resources to the public.

Several of our community health boards have engaged with libraries to cross-promote events and host education sessions, and many libraries have received support from CHB wellness funds.

The Central Cape Breton County Community Health Board partnered with the Cape Breton Regional Library on a project where the library loans out exercise equipment. The CHB paid
for the equipment, such as rackets and snowshoes; as well as the applicable insurance needed. This is a wonderful way of making physical activity more accessible, and is a partnership in which everyone wins.

The Southeastern Community Health Board works with the Cole Harbour Public Library, Boys & Girls Club, RCMP, local schools and others to offer Global Tours, a program that addresses stereotypes and helps ease the transition from junior high to high school. Through hands-on activities, mentoring, presentations and community exploration, students discover their larger community in a way they would not otherwise. They spend four days touring and exploring the communities of Cow Bay/Eastern Passage/Shearwater, Cole Harbour, Cherry Brook/Lake Loon, North Preston, East Preston, Lawrencetown and Mineville. The participants are then challenged to take that first-hand knowledge and share it with students in their classes and their school. This initiative is helping to build healthier
relationships and communities, which will serve not only this
generation but those to come.

About two years ago, the West Kings Community Health
Board chair and co–ordinator started hosting “community
development chats” in the Berwick area. This concept arose out
of the need for communication and collaboration between
Town staff and the CHB. As time progressed, it has grown to
include partners from the Library, Public Health, Early Years
(representing school board and Primary Care), Seniors Safety,
the community health centre and others. This is a wonderful
example of co–operation, co–ordination and collaboration in
action.

Halifax Public Libraries and Chebucto West/Halifax
Community Health Boards recently co–hosted an engagement
session at the Keshen Goodman branch. The CHB Co–Chair
discussed the social determinants of health and library staff
illustrated how libraries can advance health and wellness
through programming. One specific example brought forward described how the CHB Wellness Fund supported a "conversation for newcomers" initiative that eventually became part of the library program. These CHBs have also supported library programs such as Leading Learners by covering the cost of snacks.

Eastern Counties Regional Library (Dr. Coady and Tompkins Memorial Library Branch) received wellness funds from the Central Inverness Community Health Board to create Margaree Cooks, a community-built outdoor oven and kitchen space. The space, situated next to an existing community garden where ingredients will be harvested, has also created social opportunities to discuss nutrition. When we are part of a community that celebrates and supports good health, we are far more likely to be healthy as individuals and families.

Lunenburg County Community Health Board provided wellness funds to South Shore Public Libraries in 2014–15.
Their project involved a four-week program for youth, teaching participants how to prepare healthy snacks while learning about the origin of the ingredients, using local and organic products.

Cumberland County Community Health Boards have had a strong relationship with the Cumberland Regional Libraries for several years. In addition to sharing information and supporting each other’s events, the Community Health Boards have supported the Cumberland Regional Libraries with four wellness fund grants over the past six years, totaling $2,500. The funds have enabled them to add health and wellness materials to their collection, making them available to thousands of library patrons.

Another notable example of partnership between CHBs and libraries has been the Youth Program at the Woodlawn Public Library in Dartmouth, which has been so popular that the interest exceeded program capacity. The Dartmouth CHB
has presented Community Leadership Awards to the library youth leaders; they’ve engaged youth in health planning at the library, and have supported the program’s goals through wellness funds.

Some of NSHA’s Your Way to Wellness programs, designed to help adults with chronic health conditions to overcome daily challenges, take action and live a healthy life, are offered in public libraries. Being able to provide these programs at such an accessible community space contributes to its success.

Public Health and Libraries have also worked together for a number of years. Not only do we rely on libraries to hold information such as breastfeeding books and videos and loving care resources for families accessing the space, we also work together in a variety of other ways.

In addition to providing breastfeeding resources for families who access the library, a number of libraries
throughout the province are breastfeeding friendly. We know that making businesses and community organizations breastfeeding-friendly has a very real impact on breastfeeding rates, and therefore, on health.

Given that the libraries are CAP sites, we often direct individuals there to access the Welcome to Parenting pre-natal education modules. NSHA staff work with library staff, building their capacity around the program so they can help clients navigate the pre-natal resources within their local communities.

We also partner with libraries across the province around literacy projects. We know from the Nova Scotia population health profile that 15 per cent of Nova Scotians aged 25 to 64 have less than a high school diploma.

In our Northern Zone, Public Health, the local family resource centre and the library received funding through the
Family Literacy Initiative Endowment Fund to provide programming for parents and preschoolers. This program, called Nova Scotia Hodge Podge, includes active and creative play, early learning and literacy, and good food.

The vision for the new Truro library includes the creation of two community kitchens – one to support youth-related activities and the other for community use. This library has also actively supported the Truro Farmer’s Market recommendation for the creation of a community garden, which will be an integral part of the new civic square outdoor space.

In Yarmouth, the library is part of the Early Years Centre Coalition, in which Public Health is also a partner.

Public Health recently collaborated with Halifax Public Libraries to offer a session called “Colouring your Stress Away” with the Youth Health Centre. This session was very popular with youth, and the Youth Health Centre and Library have
agreed to offer a similar session again in the fall.

Public Health, prideHealth and the Halifax Central Library recently co-hosted a public talk entitled, “My community: Technologies, safer sex and the ‘boundaries’ of young gay and bisexual men’s ‘personal communities’” with visiting scholar Dr Nicola Boydell from Glasgow University.

I have been speaking largely about public libraries, but we know that school libraries and academic libraries play an important role in advancing health as well. For some students, the school library may be the only source of new reading material. What a treat it is for young children when it is “library day” at school. And we know that as students move through the education system, school libraries are an important resource that supports their ongoing learning and development.

Of course, Nova Scotia Health Authority has a strong research and academic mandate. Our academic and health
sciences libraries are a vital resource in keeping us up-to-date on best practices and supporting evidence-based decision making.

When it comes to improving the health of our province, we believe that change will happen in communities. Communities need to work together to take charge of their contribution to greater health. Libraries have played and will continue to play an important part in this change.

We need communities to focus on our province’s health as a whole. What we do for the benefit of one community can’t be at the expense of another. How do we work together for the benefit of all Nova Scotians? I know we’ve got people here today from other Atlantic provinces as well – I would suggest the same holds true for all of us – both as individual provinces and as a collective.
As a province, we need to focus on how we develop courage together to do things differently for the sake of a more vibrant, healthier Nova Scotia.

Ultimately, the measure of our success is that our health status will shift.

We will no longer be among the unhealthiest provinces in the country, but among the healthiest. These changes will happen over many years; generations, even.

Educating people, getting them employed, focusing on promoting health; all of these lead to economic viability and support creation of a healthier province, a healthier population.

Libraries are a wonderful example of progressive, population-focused, inclusive and accessible organizations. You are working to create healthier communities every day,
with every program and service you offer, and with every person those services touch.

I congratulate all of you for your role in making Atlantic Canadian libraries such a valuable resource for the health of our population.

I look forward to continuing to work with you to create healthy people, healthy communities – for generations.

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Now, I’d like to hear from you. What ideas do you have about the role of libraries in supporting better health?

What questions are coming up for you?

What possibilities do you see?