

Executive Director's Report: 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020
For Annual General Meeting 30 October 2020

Take a deep breath.

Exhale.

Think back, way back. Back to the Before Times, when the notion of a global pandemic seemed like science fiction or history. Before COVID-19.

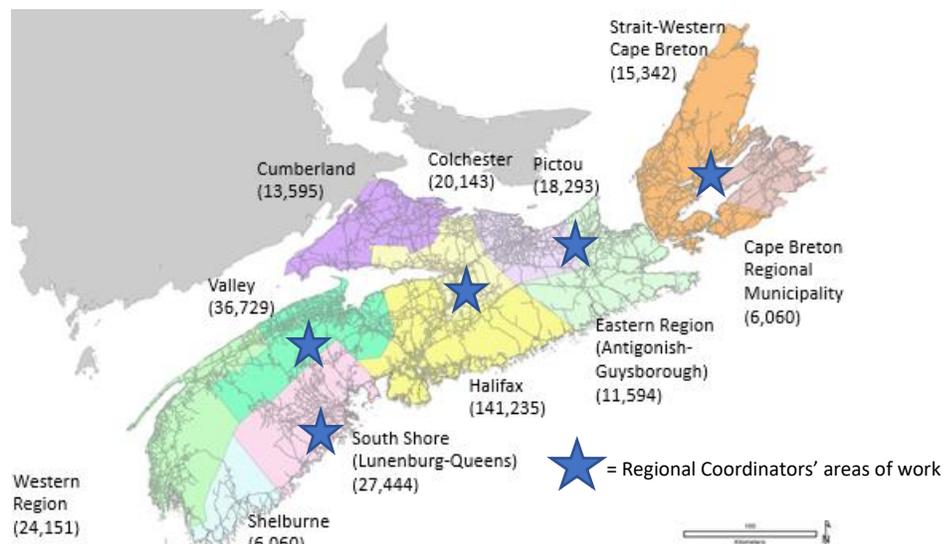
Back to 2019 and early 2020.

Back before masks, hand washing (although that was always a good idea) and social distancing – when we could meet in person, hang out over coffee, and share information, learn together and develop strategies and projects to support aging well in Nova Scotia.

What **was** Community Links up to, pre-COVID?

It could best be described as a rebuilding year, when we spent time reviewing the organization's first two and a half decades and determining what the path forward might be.

As an organization we welcomed five new directors, growing the Board to 10 (mainly) older adults who bring experience in gerontology, diversity, accessibility, aging and technology, Age-Friendly Communities, municipal affairs, mental health, nutrition, education and finance to the table. We also said goodbye to two, but recruited three, Regional Coordinators, all working part time, all home based, with backgrounds in community development, project management, health, adult education, community-based programming and seniors issues.



Executive Director's Activities:

As ED, I represented Community Links on the Department of Seniors SHIFT 2.0 Advisory Committee, the Seniors Advisory Council to the Nova Scotia Government, and the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging Advisory Board at Mount Saint Vincent University; gave presentations at Caregivers NS, Federation of Seniors and Senior Safety Coordinators conferences and spoke on Reviving Rural Volunteerism in Guysborough. Pre-COVID, when we were taking travel for granted, I attended a variety of stakeholder meetings across the province including the *Seniors Issues Matter* day of learning in Louisdale. It was a great way to get a first-hand look at the rural communities where we focus our work.

Regional Coordinators' Activities:

A considerable amount of Regional Coordinators' work involves nurturing collaboration at the local level. Much of their time is devoted to facilitating county-based Aging Well Together coalitions to share information and resources among stakeholders as well as plan and implement projects and events for older adults. Tables vary but include representatives of seniors clubs and organizations, Community Health Boards, Caregivers NS, VON, Canadian Red Cross, public libraries, food banks, community transit organizations, Senior Safety Coordinators, municipal recreation departments, NS Department of Health, Mental Health and Addictions, CMHA, the Arthritis Society and Alzheimers Association, hospice associations, women's resource and sexual health centers and community arts organizations.

It is hard to capture how Coalitions foster relationships, break down siloes, and create networks better able to respond to the needs of older adults locally and regionally. Last year projects ranged from planning a film festival devoted to aging well in Pictou County (scuttled by COVID) to partnering to coordinate Santa for Seniors deliveries to isolated older adults in the Annapolis Valley and conducting an age-friendly assessment of a Bridgewater church; each group sets its focus under the pillars of the Age-Friendly Communities program <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/aging-seniors/friendly-communities.html>. In 2019-20, more than 50 Aging Well Together Coalition meetings were held in eight counties; we know we need to find ways to better capture the stories of their collaborations.

Beyond their coalition work, Regional Coordinators provide information and resources to older adults through their participation in Seniors Fairs and Expos, by partnering with Senior Safety Coordinators to host wellness and fall prevention classes, and collaborating with others to create opportunities for tai chi classes, wellbeing sessions for caregivers, lunch and learn programs for seniors and fall prevention sessions for future care providers at Nova Scotia Community Colleges. Coordinators sit on a variety of committees in their regions, including Pictou County's Age Friendly Community Advisory Committee, Strait Richmond Housing Matters and the Centre on Rural Aging and Health (CORAH) in Middleton. Capturing conversations, tallying email exchanges or counting the number of attendees doesn't begin to measure the value of this work; we're looking for tools to help with that task and took part in Tamarack Citizens at the Centre training as well as other learning opportunities over the past year.

Administrator/Communications Coordinator Activities:

With the support of a Graduate to Opportunity Grant, Community Links was able to hire a full-time administrator/communications coordinator who assists with the day to day running of the organization while sharing resources through e-bulletins, Twitter, Facebook, Community Links' website and 15,000 Aging Well 2020 Calendars circulated across the province last November.

Over the months:

In 2019 we presented an extensive proposal to the NS Department of Seniors in response to the completion of *SHIFT: Nova Scotia's Action Plan for an Aging Population* <https://novascotia.ca/shift/>, to address where we believe Community Links can play a role over the next three years as part of the next phase of the work, under SHIFT 2.0.

In October 2019 we held a two-day Board/staff retreat to come to a common understanding of aging well, consider the impact of ageism, and develop plans for moving the organization forward, building on the proposal to the Province and strengthening our team by getting to know each other better.

In early 2020, we initiated a move which meant our Halifax office would be housed among other socially-focused organizations in a shared space, giving us the opportunity to exchange

information and ideas while learning more about collective impact from Inspiring Communities <https://inspiringcommunities.ca/>; aging better through social innovation and human centred design with NS Gov Lab <https://novascotia.ca/govlab/> and where the opportunities for inclusive Innovation-Driven Entrepreneurship at any age arise with ONSIDE <https://onsidenow.ca/>. We found a home at 1531 Grafton Street, Halifax, and continued our collective planning, pre-COVID.

Over the year, we worked with Engage NS to encourage responses to its Quality of Life /Wellbeing Survey <https://engagenovascotia.ca/aboutsurvey>, a request taken to heart by older Nova Scotians who provided the highest number of replies. Survey results were released March 12; we were discussing lessons to share as part of a panel on community resilience to be headlined by Dr. Michael Ungar of Dalhousie University's world-renowned Resilience Research Centre <https://resilienceresearch.org/about-resilience/>. Although postponed, we are planning on making it happen because we can't imagine a more important discussion in light of what we've all experienced since March 2020.

Speaking of March, as Community Links was nearing its fiscal year-end, COVID-19 struck and our Halifax operations moved home; staff began meeting weekly via ZOOM and as that topsy-turvy month ended, we were tasked by the Department of Seniors to help provide assistance to vulnerable older adults in remote and rural regions across the province.

But that is a tale for next year's AGM...

Suffice to say, it has been a year of growing together as Board and staff, working to build a vision we hope will take us to Community Links' 30th anniversary in 2022 and well beyond. It has been a privilege to work with our Board of Directors, lead by President Carol Rogers, and a delight building a strong staff team. We are thankful for funding provided by the NS Department of Seniors, which lets us carry out our work with and for older adults across the province.

Take a deep breath.

Exhale.

Get ready for whatever is coming next, knowing that the lessons COVID taught us matter – Community, Collaboration, Social Connection and Communication - are what Community Links is all about.

