



# CASE STUDY | DIGBY'S YOUTH-LED INITIATIVE CREATES A SPACE FOR YOUTH IN NOVA SCOTIA

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During the current global pandemic, youth and young adults have lost important connections to physical spaces (e.g., their school, recreation programs, clubs, sports and work), as well as losing the social connections linked to those physical spaces. Many youths are also facing uncertainty with respect to important milestones like graduation, entering post-secondary education and finding employment. In rural areas like much of Digby County, Nova Scotia, transportation barriers further limit access to social and other types of connections.

Turning the Tide's Rural Youth Connections Project set out to provide opportunities for young people to connect in a safe, youth-friendly environment. Through this youth-led initiative, a space was created for youth that provides programming and social interaction, as well as learning components that focus on skills needed to successfully transition to adulthood, including employment, further education or training.

Digby & Area Youth Space (DAYS) is a space created by youth for youth to foster connection and support. Led by Turning the Tide's Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) project and located within the Digby Area Recreation Commission, the space opened on March 8, 2021, and offers programming and a hang-out space for youth.

## CONNECTING RURAL YOUTH THROUGH CONNECTION

Turning the Tide is a collective impact initiative of Inspiring Communities, a non-profit organization working to build collaborative relationships for social change in Atlantic Canada. Through Turning the Tide, Digby was selected as one of the communities in Canada to host a CBYF initiative. This happened at a point when the organization recognized that Digby youth felt particularly disconnected from their community.

Through our research with the Digby area community, which was done through Turning the Tide, we at Inspiring Communities recognized that the ability to connect socially builds stronger communities and is particularly important for youth. Yet, our community survey found that young people in their 20s felt less connected to their community than any other age group. Here in Digby County, as in many rural areas, distance and relatively fewer events or activities limit opportunities for youth to connect with one another and with their communities.

Both our community survey and our Youth Connections Team, a group of eight to ten youths that come together biweekly to talk about key issues involving youth, identified a need in the Digby area for a youth-friendly space. In this youth space, youth want the ability to meet friends; study together; learn important life skills with workshops and programs; or just hang out, play board games or video games. From discussions with our Youth Engagement Coordinator, high school youth in the Digby area said they felt ill-equipped for life after high school. This led our Youth Connections Team to identify a need to support youth as they prepared to find jobs or explore education or training opportunities.

Connections to other youth, to community and to services and resources play an important role in helping youth cope with life and make a successful transition to adulthood and life after high school. Yet, connections are more difficult in rural areas, which struggle with internet access and infrastructure.

The original intention of the Rural Youth Connections Project was to provide internet access and devices to youth in the Digby area. This idea shifted when the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Child Development announced that they were [providing devices to students across the province](#). At that time, the Turning the Tide team felt that the need for devices and internet access was being addressed.

Turning the Tide staff saw an opportunity to generate a new idea for the Community Innovation Fund in a way that was fully youth-led. They hosted a design sprint session with the Youth Connections Team where youth were given guidelines for the project and then invited to brainstorm and design the new idea.

Together, the Youth Connections Team decided to create a space specifically for youth. This space became Digby and Area Youth Space (DAYS). DAYS provides programming that offers learning and social opportunities that help our rural youth address the challenges that were identified in the youth survey and through conversations with youth.

Intended outcomes for DAYS:

- Youth will have more options for social interaction, will participate in the programming and workshops and will feel more connected socially.
- Youth will gain life skills and knowledge needed for life after high school and feel more confident in their ability to transition successfully into employment or further education or training.
- Youth will develop connections with mentors and with young adults who can support them as they explore options for employment, further education or training.
- Youth feel a stronger sense of connection to their community.

Connections to other youth, to community, and to services and resources play an important role in helping youth cope with life and successful transition to adulthood and life after high school. Yet, connections are more difficult in rural areas like ours, which struggle with internet access and infrastructure.

## HOW DAYS WAS CREATED

During the spring and summer of 2020, Turning the Tide delivered two Lunch and Learn sessions to youth in the Digby area to address youth-identified needs for information on life after high school. These were delivered with the guidance of a community-based planning team that included members from [SchoolsPlus](#), [Nova Scotia Works](#) and Digby Mental Health and Addictions. After the program was completed, the team agreed to provide coaching and mentorship for future projects and programs.

In October 2020, CBYF staff had a series of meetings with Youth Connections Team members to determine the best approach for supporting connections among rural youth. Participants at these meetings vocalized the need for opportunities for youth to get together to learn new things and to have a safe space to interact with other young people.

Once the idea for DAYS was solidified, a partnership was formed with [Digby Area Recreation Commission](#) (DARC) to lease space suitable for youth gatherings, conforming to COVID-19 related physical restrictions at the time. The space is located within the recreation complex in an upstairs area.

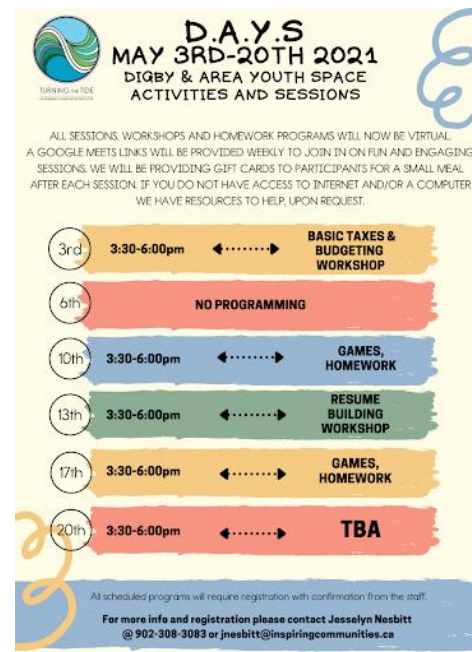
In November 2020, two co-op students (Kelli Olsen and Abbie Scott) polled students in their high schools to collect more data about which programs might be of interest for youth. These efforts resulted in creative and helpful suggestions regarding content and delivery of youth programming.

Kelli and Abbie researched and came up with ideas of items to purchase for the space. They also connected with youth centres across Nova Scotia to learn best practices for risk management and COVID-19 protocols for DAYS.

In January 2021, two youth were hired to run the space – Jesselyn Nesbitt as the Rural Youth Connections Coordinator and Abbie Scott as Youth Intern. Around this same time, a DAYS Action Team was formed to help guide decisions and implement DAYS. This Action Team consisted of some Youth Connections Team members, community partners previously involved in the Lunch and Learn program, and the co-op students.

DAYS was due to open in late Winter 2021, so CBYF staff and co-op students quickly got to work to create a fun and exciting space for youth. With input and direction from the DAYS Action Team and co-op students, Turning the Tide purchased gaming equipment, colourful furniture, board games, books and eight laptops for youth to rent or use while at DAYS.

During the creation of this space, CBYF staff and co-op students found a quote by a local young author Bee Stanton: “We tell our children that this town has nothing to offer, when we should be asking them what can you offer this town?” The DAYS Action Team and co-op students together felt this was perfect for DAYS. They proposed that it be painted on a wall to serve as a focal point for youth to feel empowered and that this was their space. More murals have been included with welcoming words in French, English and Mi’kmaq.



The space was designed entirely by youth and intended to be a welcoming, fun place where youth can feel comfortable, learn valuable skills and have a place to call their own.

March 8, 2021, marked the official opening of DAYS. The Action Team decided not to hold any structured programs and instead allowed youth to come and go freely so that they could meet staff, view the space and offer feedback on how they envisioned DAYS in the future. Eight youths participated in DAYS in March; they played video games and ping pong, talked about school and their pandemic-related experiences, and made connections.



In the beginning, it was hard to advertise DAYS and get youth to attend. At the time, external people were not allowed in schools due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Turning the Tide staff relied on the co-op students to promote DAYS by word of mouth and flyers in schools. CBYF staff advertised through social media and created a TikTok account [to share videos about the space](#).

In Nova Scotia, COVID-19 numbers soared in April 2021, causing the province to go into lockdown and making it necessary to shift quickly from in-person programs to online offerings. This meant changing the original work plan for DAYS. Based on earlier research, staff had planned fun, engaging

programs to help youth learn more about taxes and banking. This was not what the youth were interested in anymore as they were spending most of the day in online schooling. Staff decided to pivot to playing fun activities and games such as Pictionary, Kahoot, trivia games and online scavenger hunts. Youth also asked if they could allow their younger siblings to join in, which shifted the online programming to become more family oriented. This then turned into offering online programming for both children and family (ages 7 to 14) and youth (ages 15 to 20) to accommodate older youth and give them their own space. Staff had great success with these sessions and 15 students from communities across the Digby area attended the programming.

As soon as COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in July 2021, in-person programming resumed at DAYS. Throughout the summer, DAYS partnered with SchoolsPlus, DARC and [Bear River First Nation](#) to provide summer programming that included outdoor movies, campfire evenings, a survivor campout in the woods and other outdoor activities. In addition, Turning the Tide offered the DAYS space to youth staff working for DARC and other local organizations as a place to meet, work and hang out during the summer. Turning the Tide also organized university and college preparation sessions for youth continuing to post-secondary education.

When staff were asked what the opening of the space has meant and what positive changes they have seen from having a place for youth, they shared:



***We have had very positive comments and reactions to the opening of DAYS, from both community and youth.***

*– DAYS staff*

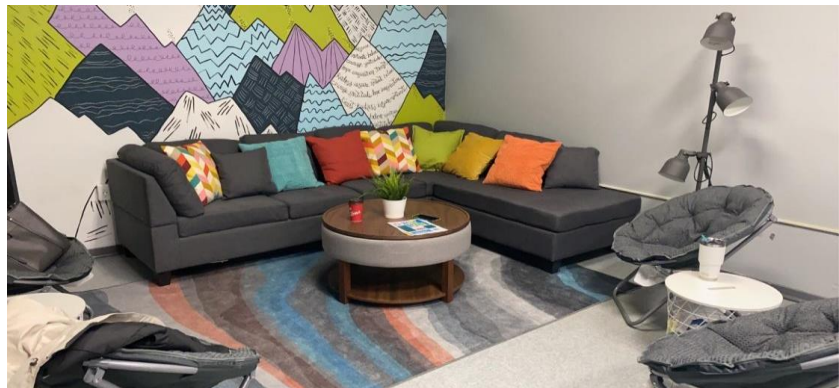


***It has been so awesome! I am so happy we are able to provide a safe and inviting space for youth. There are many youth that don't have a safe space to go or that don't have positive/supportive people in their life, so I am happy we can be this place for them.***

*– DAYS staff*

## A YOUTH-LED PROJECT

Youth leadership and involvement has been critical throughout this project. Youth have played key roles in the creation of DAYS, and as programming commenced, youth have assumed responsibility for most aspects of project delivery.



Youth have been involved in the project in the following ways:

- Six members of our Youth Connections Team developed the concept for the revised Rural Youth Connections project. We had two Youth Connections Team meetings, during which youth participated in a Design Sprint to generate a new idea for the project, which resulted in DAYS.
- Four youth from the Youth Connections Team participated as members of the Action Team dedicated to mobilizing the Rural Youth Connections project.
- Two high school co-op students provided research and other forms of support for this project, including:
  - Surveying high school students on topics for learning sessions and on preferences for social activities.

- Conducting research into the types, sources and costs of equipment needed for project programming
- Making some purchases of needed equipment
- Learning about the budgeting process and funding allocations
- Conducting research on other youth centres in Nova Scotia
- Participating in the DAYS Action Team
- 18 high school youth provided information about their interests in topics for learning sessions, and about their preferences on social programming.
- 2 members of our backbone team have played essential roles in guiding development of the project, contacting youth directly and through social media, facilitating meetings with youth and others, and supervising the work of our co-op students.



***Having youth involvement from the beginning has been powerful. We have seen growth and capacity building throughout the process. Youth have stepped into a leadership role. A positive change we have seen is youth grow in their leadership through planning and implementing DAYS and watching their ideas come to life, as well as their pride in what they have been able to accomplish. It has been great to be able to give youth a voice in what they want to see and learn about at DAYS. Youth have also been able to build new connections and relationships with each other and with community partners.***

– CBYF Coordinator

## LEARNINGS

Below are some successes and challenges we experienced throughout the Rural Youth Connections Project.

### Successes:

- Youth involvement in every step of the creation of DAYS
- Formation of a partnership with DARC to lease space and collaborate
- Development of new partnerships inside and outside our communities for delivery of connection opportunities
- Willingness to adjust and adapt

- For example, when tax workshops were not what youth needed, staff created spaces for fun and connection instead. They adapted programming when younger people were interested by creating two different time slots for ages 8 to 14 and 15 to 20
- Recognition from youth that DAYS was a place they could go to study and get involved

### Challenges:

We have encountered various challenges in this project due to COVID-19's impact on the number of youths we can communicate with and engage. There was a period where we were unable to go into schools to contact students directly. Bearing that in mind, working with co-op students has offered a helpful way of maintaining contact with high school students. A word-of-mouth approach was used to grow interest among youth during this time. Gatherings in other locations were significantly restricted in terms of numbers and space. We are using social media to contact youth, but we recognize that this may not reach all the youth we are trying to engage.

Digital connection has also been a barrier, as youth may not have access to a device or internet and/or may only have access to unreliable internet. Another barrier we face as a rural community is access to transportation. All these barriers largely impact youth and their ability to participate.

### TIPS

Based on our successes and learnings, here are some tips to support you in implementing a similar project in your community:

- Building awareness and ownership takes time. Keep going. Something will come out of it.
- Do not feel the need to start from scratch; ask others what already exists. Learn best practices and policies, then adjust for specific needs.
- Seek information from youth to design roles. We initially advertised for two part-time roles and then changed the position to one full-time role after feedback from youth.
- Have a mindset for adaptability.
- Partner with others to develop opportunities and help the work to be sustainable.
- Leverage co-ops to connect with youth and guide the work.





The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".The logo for Tamarack Institute, featuring a stylized yellow and orange "E" symbol to the left of the text "TAMARACK INSTITUTE" in a serif font.

Initial funding for the **Digby & Area Youth Space (DAYS)** was provided as a Community Innovation Fund grant to [Digby Communities Building Youth Futures](#). The aim of [Community Innovation Fund](#) grants is to pilot and scale innovative projects to support better outcomes for youth.

[Communities Building Youth Futures](#) (CBYF) is a five-year, pan-Canadian project to develop Collective Impact, system-wide solutions for youth as they build and act upon plans for their future. CBYF is funded by the [Government of Canada's Goal Getters Program](#) and delivered by the [Tamarack Institute](#).

*The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada*