



East Preston Recreation Centre (EPRC)

October 2024 | Peopleddevelopment.antigonish@gmail.com

Part of the Preston Community for Generations

The East Preston Recreation Centre (EPRC) is one of several community-based organizations in the Preston Township, located on the eastern edge of Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia. Established in 1965 EPRC has stood the test of time as a hub for the traditionally Indigenous African Nova Scotian / African Canadian communities within the area. The physical facilities are owned and maintained by Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), but the centre, coordinated by a volunteer board, is much more than a recreational facility. Over the years EPRC has served as a beacon of hope, cultural preservation, and community engagement, providing safe accessible meeting spaces, and essential programs and services for all age groups, particularly underserved populations. From youth basketball to senior activities, the EPRC continues to foster unity, resilience, and personal growth.

Historically, the centre has played a vital role in bringing together the residents of East Preston, providing a space for social, cultural, and recreational activities. It has served as a gathering point for generations, addressing the unique needs of Indigenous African Nova Scotians and fostering community spirit. As one community elder noted during a recent event, “The centre has always been a place for us to connect, to celebrate who we are, and to pass our traditions on to the next generation.”

Over the decades, the EPRC has created a sense of pride in Indigenous African Nova Scotians through events like annual basketball tournaments, celebrations of African heritage, and inter-generational activities. The centre has also supported the personal development of residents through sports, education, and life skills

training. Community groups such as the *East Preston Seniors Club* and the *Preston and Area Lions Club* have space reserved for them in the centre which they call home.

East Preston, where the centre is strategically located, is one of Canada's oldest and largest historically Black communities, with some families here for over 450 years – primarily composed of descendants of Indigenous African Nova Scotians (here prior to Canada becoming a nation) Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, and Black refugees who arrived in the 19th century. These early settlers were offered land by the British government in return for their loyalty during the American Revolution, but the land granted to Black settlers was typically of lower quality than what was given to white settlers. Over time, East Preston developed a vibrant community despite facing significant economic and social hardships, with residents cultivating the land, building strong family ties, and creating enduring institutions like churches and schools.

Located within the Halifax Regional Municipality, East Preston has remained a predominantly Black community, with nearly 80% of its population identifying as Indigenous African Nova Scotian. Over the years, the area has evolved while retaining its cultural and historical identity. As more newcomers and immigrants have moved into the area in recent years, East Preston has become more diverse, but it still maintains its roots as a historically Black settlement.

The EPRC is currently in a period of revitalization and transition after challenges encountered during the covid-19 pandemic and a newly constituted board is working to take the EPRC forward as a dynamic community space for the future. EPRC is exploring several avenues to increase its services to its historic constituency and to expand its role to support the integration of newcomers, providing essential programs to help them adjust to life in Nova Scotia. This dual focus—honouring the community's Indigenous African Nova Scotian roots while embracing new cultures—is crucial in maintaining the centre's relevance and importance in East Preston today.

However, like many community centres, the EPRC has faced challenges ranging from underfunding to evolving community needs. With changing demographics, particularly the increase in newcomer populations, the centre is at a crossroads—balancing its rich historical roots while adapting to new demands.

Andreas Robinson, the Vice President of the EPRC, summed it up: “Canada has to invest in its people. We don't have the privilege of a large population; we must mobilize the people we have. We are trying to ensure our community gets the support and opportunities it needs, especially compared to other communities that receive more overt support.”

Mission, Vision, and Values for Community

The EPRC's mission is to enrich the lives of Preston residents by creating positive experiences through an affordable, safe, and welcoming facility. It offers a wide variety of quality programs, activities, and events that meet the community's needs. The centre's vision emphasizes the empowerment and development of East Preston and the broader township through partnerships, programs, and community events. Their motto, “Community starts with you,” reflects their belief in collective community action and involvement.

At the core of its values are inclusivity, empowerment, and respect. The centre strives to maintain a space where people of all backgrounds and ages can come together to participate in recreational, educational, and social programs. This is especially critical as the demographic composition of East Preston changes, with more newcomers arriving in the community.

“Moving into a community doesn't make you a part of it. Connection, relationship, and trust are vital for true integration,” said Robinson. This philosophy guides the EPRC's work with new Canadians and immigrants, recognizing the importance of building a sense of belonging.

A Diversity of Programming and Partnerships

The EPRC offers and intends to grow a broad spectrum of programs, targeting youth, seniors, and families. These services are foundational to the centre's role as a community hub, offering a safe and supportive space for all residents to engage, learn, and grow.

Youth Programs: The *East Preston Pacers Basketball Club* is a cornerstone of the centre's youth engagement. The club, which has been active for decades, promotes teamwork, discipline, and physical health among young people. The *East Preston Boys and Girls Club* also utilizes the centre, offering summer camps that foster leadership skills and community involvement. Charnell Colley, EPRC Chair, highlights the importance of these programs: "It's not just about basketball—it's about building life skills. Our youth need opportunities that empower them to lead and excel."

Seniors Programs: The EPRC provides space for the *East Preston Seniors Club* that hosts a range of activities for seniors, from exercise classes to social events, helping combat social isolation and promoting physical health. Intergenerational programs such as identifying living community heroes are a unique offering, bridging the gap between youth and seniors through shared activities. Seniors are an essential part of the community, and their engagement remains a top priority for the EPRC. As one community member shared during a focus group, "The centre is a place where the elders can come together, reminisce, and pass on their wisdom to the younger generation." Dolly Williams, President of the Seniors Club, related how the club has speakers on topics like housing, relationships, transportation, education, fraud, etcetera and was instrumental in establishing a neighbourhood watch program.

Community Events and Partnerships: The EPRC provides space and partners with many local organizations to deliver various programs, including cooking classes, financial literacy workshops, and anti-racism education.



An annual basketball tournament awards athletic skills, hard work, commitment, education, equity and community.

The *East Preston Day Care and Family Resources Centre (EP Day Care)* often uses space at EPRC when their own facility is stretched. They are a vibrant and growing organization just down the street from EPRC and always open to collaborating on programs. Trina Fraser, CEO of the *EP Day Care* wants "to see EPRC flourish. Don't start and stop things", she says, "sustain a new way of being." The *Preston and Area Lions Club* has met at EPRC regularly for decades and facilitates various projects. They are currently considering a project to provide a splash-pad for EPRC. The centre also continues to partner with community organizations like the East Preston Rate Payers, *Infinitus Academy Inc.* and *Limitless Media CIC*, to host municipal, provincial and federal round tables, with current representatives, as well as with candidates during elections.

EPRC is revitalizing its online presence with a new website and active social media accounts, significantly increasing its reach and accessibility to younger generations. Robinson noted, "We're living in a digital age, and the EPRC needed to catch up. Now, we can reach more people and keep them informed about our programs."

EPRC also functions informally as a "comfort centre," providing emergency shelter during extreme weather events. However, it has not officially received that designation because it faces some challenges with aging infrastructure, and particularly the lack of a generator. This has been a long-standing issue with HRM who has

promised a generator, but there are ongoing bureaucratic delays. “We’ve been waiting over two years for a generator to fully serve the community during emergencies,” said Robinson, emphasizing the centre’s critical role as a community safety net.

Community Outreach and Inclusion: Engaging New Canadians and Newcomers

The demographics in East Preston are only changing slowly, but there is an increasing number of newcomers and immigrants arriving in the surrounding communities of Porter’s Lake, Lake Echo, Cole Harbour, and Dartmouth. EPRC is recognizing these changes and considering the opportunity they must design and deliver new programming that will appeal to both their long-term residents and newcomers to the area. Because of their strategic location just off the 107 Highway, and their long experience of nurturing a community that is diverse EPRC could play a critical role in welcoming and integrating new Canadians. Karen Hudson, Principal of Auburn High School, suggests EPRC find ways to appeal to the community and use the facility in creative ways. “We need to understand the complexities and histories of where new immigrants are coming from. We need to break down stereotypes. People want to belong and be part of something. We don’t know what they left. To be part of community they need to learn our norms and we need to learn their norms.” EPRC has already begun experimenting with programs that cater to the specific

needs of newcomers, and its leadership envisions a future where the EPRC becomes a vital hub for the settlement and integration process.

Programming to Support Newcomers

The EPRC, in collaboration with *Infinitus Academy*, an Indigenous African Nova Scotian-led social enterprise, has implemented several initiatives aimed at helping newcomers integrate into life in East Preston and Nova Scotia. These include:

Cultural Competency and Anti-Racism Programs:

Understanding that both long-standing residents and newcomers need support in adapting to a diverse community, workshops have been offered that focus on cultural competency and anti-racism education. These initiatives help foster a deeper understanding and respect between different cultural groups, creating a more welcoming environment for all.

Digital Literacy and Financial Literacy Workshops:

These workshops are particularly useful for newcomers unfamiliar with Canadian systems. The EPRC has offered training in basic computer skills, navigating online platforms, and understanding Canada’s financial system, which is critical for securing jobs, managing finances, and integrating into the economy. As the head of *Infinitus* puts it, “Being digitally literate is essential today—it’s as important as traditional literacy. Our workshops help community members, especially newcomers, gain the skills they need to thrive.”

Cultural Exchange Events: To break down barriers and build bridges between diverse populations, the centre has hosted cultural exchange events where newcomers can share their traditions and learn about local heritage. These events are essential for fostering a sense of belonging and understanding among different community members. Participants have emphasized the importance of these events: “It’s not just about sharing food or music—it’s about building connections and learning from one another.”



The Center has been used for events such as a celebration of African Food, Culture and Heritage on Canada Day.

The EPRC believes with the right resources there is the potential to strengthen its role as a key player in the settlement and integration process for newcomers in Preston Township. The centre could expand its support for immigrants through traditional settlement services such as Employment and Skills Development and Language and Educational Support. Helping newcomers secure employment and build professional skills, with job-readiness workshops, offering resume-writing sessions, and creating partnerships with local businesses to help place newcomers in job opportunities is one possibility. Partnering with organizations like ISANS (Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia) to offer language classes and educational programs designed to help newcomers, especially those with limited English, gain the language skills necessary for employment and integration would also be valuable.

Beyond these traditional settlement services there is great potential for EPRC to leverage their facilities, location and the existing partnerships they have with *East Preston Boys and Girls Club, Infinitus Academy, East Preston Seniors Club, Preston and Area Lions Club, EP Day Care*, and other community groups to offer more diverse social and cultural programming that would help newcomers feel part of the Preston community.

Resources and Capacity Needs for Supporting Newcomers

While the EPRC is committed to supporting newcomers, it faces several capacity and resource challenges that must be addressed to effectively meet the needs of new Canadians. These include:

Increased Funding for Programs: The EPRC needs sustainable programming and staff funding to consolidate its existing services and consider expanding its programming for newcomers. Currently EPRC is understaffed and operates on reduced hours and certain facilities (e.g. the kitchen) need repair and upgrading. With some of these core services in place the EPRC board can access



Decorations in the centre promote community, pride in cultural heritage and values such as kindness and respect.

resources to offer additional programs they know will appeal to the local community and the language classes, employment workshops, and socio-cultural events that will be useful for newcomers. Without more reliable funding streams, the centre's ability to provide these critical services will remain limited. As Robinson emphasized, "There is a ton of money out there, but it doesn't always end up in the places where it could make the most impact. We need to change that."

Staff and Volunteer Training: To provide adequate support for newcomers, the EPRC will need to invest in training for staff and volunteers. This training will focus on cultural competency, trauma-informed care, and best practices for assisting immigrants and refugees. Trina Fraser, of the *Day Care* highlighted the need for this investment: "Our staff and volunteers are dedicated, but we need to equip them with the right tools to help newcomers." Currently 18 of the 72 *Day Care* staff at their various locations are newcomers and Trina speaks very highly of them and what they offer. These are changes in our community "we are blessed with and that we need to embrace" she says. EPRC has the potential to also hire newcomers as programming staff who could help families of long-term residents and newcomer families learn from each other and create the community they want for the future.

Partnerships with Immigration Services: The centre recognizes the need to formalize partnerships with organizations like ISANS to deliver more comprehensive settlement services. Building these partnerships would allow the EPRC to tap into expertise and resources that are essential for supporting the growing immigrant population. Robinson is optimistic about these potential partnerships: “We can do so much more if we work together.”

Physical Space and Infrastructure: The EPRC’s facilities are currently stretched thin, limiting the centre’s capacity to expand programming for newcomers. Upgrading its physical infrastructure—including creating more flexible program rooms and improving accessibility—will be essential for supporting both current residents and newcomers.

Ongoing Challenges Faced that Limit Possibilities

Despite its many achievements, the EPRC is not without its struggles. The centre faces several constraints that threaten its long-term sustainability:

Funding Shortages: One of the most pressing challenges is the chronic lack of funding. While the centre does receive support from Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), this funding is insufficient to maintain and modernize its aging facilities. The EPRC’s designation as an emergency shelter has not yet been fully realized, as the centre has been waiting over two years for a generator, which would allow it to serve the community during emergencies. “We’ve been waiting for far too long for basic infrastructure needs. It’s frustrating,” said Robinson.

Infrastructural Limitations: The physical structure of the centre needs significant upgrades, including better parking facilities, improved lighting, and the installation of a generator. These infrastructural issues limit the centre’s capacity to host large events and offer more comprehensive services. Public transportation to the facility is also an issue. As Robinson noted, “We have the heart and the drive, but without the right infrastructure, we can’t fully serve our community.”

Governance and HRM Relationships: EPRC’s governance structure, while improving under new leadership, faces difficulties in navigating bureaucratic hurdles with HRM. The relationship between the centre and HRM has been marked by inequities, with Indigenous African Nova Scotian communities often receiving less overt support than other areas in Halifax. Robinson expressed frustration: “We need to be seen and treated as equals. Our community deserves the same level of support as any other.”

Community Engagement and Shifting Demographics: The changing demographic landscape in East Preston has created challenges in engaging both long-time residents and newcomers. Integrating these groups has been a slow process, particularly when it comes to participation in programming and events. “It’s tough to get people from different backgrounds to engage, but it’s crucial for building a strong, unified community.”

Vision for the Future

Looking ahead, the EPRC board is committed to revitalizing the centre to meet the evolving needs of the Preston community. Their priorities include modernizing the facility, enhancing digital platforms, and securing sustainable funding streams. Collaborating with external partners, such as ISANS and local schools, is seen as key to expanding program offerings and providing more robust support for newcomers.

Additionally, the board aims to strengthen its governance structure and formalize its relationship with HRM to secure more equitable support. By focusing on both infrastructure and programming, the EPRC hopes to become a more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming space for all residents.

Conclusion: A Community Hub at a Crossroads

The East Preston Recreation Centre remains a crucial institution within the Preston Township, representing resilience, unity, and hope. However, its future is dependent

on overcoming significant challenges, particularly around funding, governance, and community engagement. The EPRC's leadership is optimistic about the potential for revitalization and growth, but the road ahead will require strong partnerships, advocacy, and sustainable investment to ensure that the centre continues to serve as a lifeline for its community.

As the EPRC moves forward, its mission remains clear: to empower the Preston community through accessible, inclusive, and impactful programming, ensuring that future generations can thrive in a space that reflects the values and spirit of their community.



The Seniors Club based at the centre holds events to celebrate the resilience of the community.

