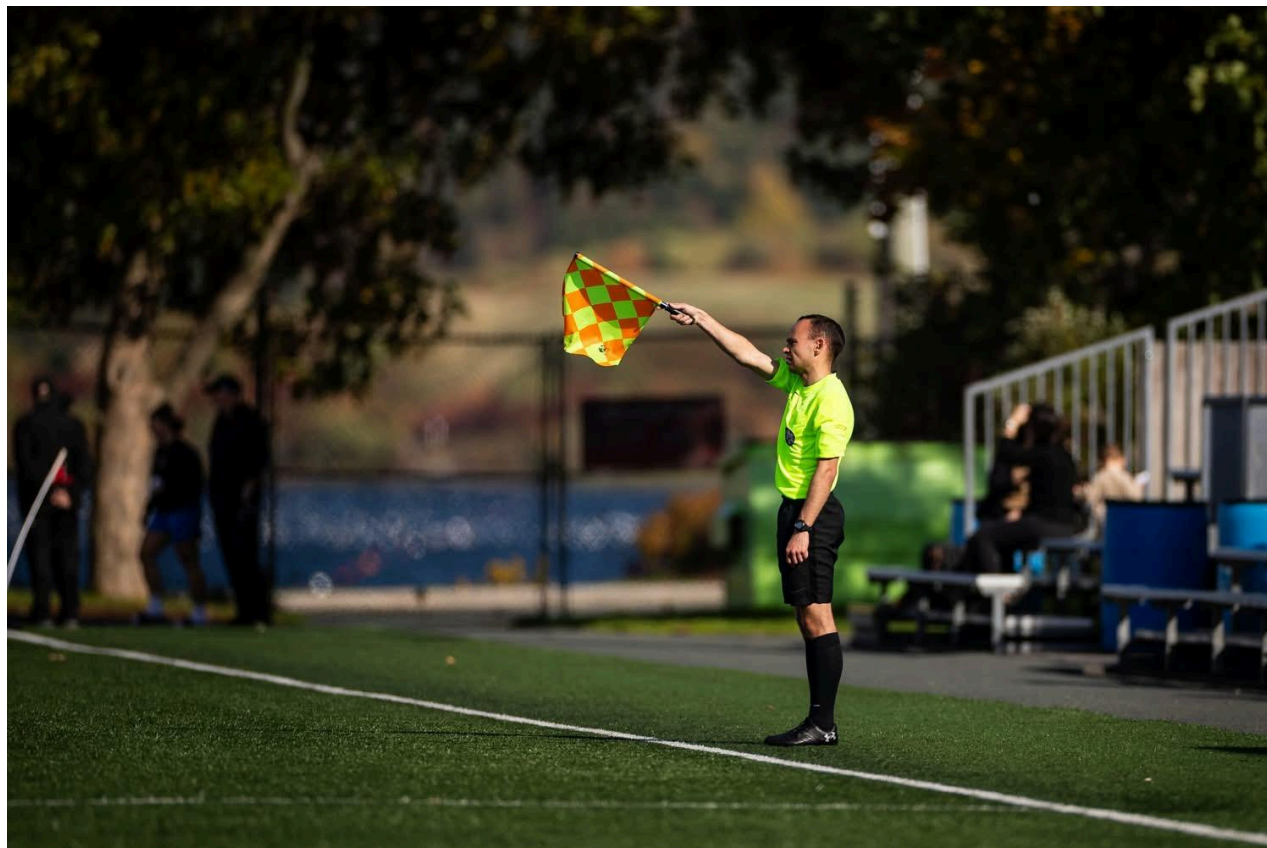




Newfoundland and Labrador Soccer Association



REFEREE DEVELOPMENT

FIVE YEAR PLAN 2026-2030

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June 2026



REFEREE DEVELOPMENT

Soccer involves many individuals - first and foremost the players, but supported by coaches, trainers, parents, facility operators and many more. This document focuses on a vital part of the sport - the match officials. In simplest terms, you can't play a soccer match without a referee. In this document, the term 'Referee' refers to the centre referee plus assistant referees and fourth officials (collectively this group is referred to as 'Match Officials').

Recruitment and retention of referees is a challenge everywhere. In Canada about 40% of registered referees do not return the following year - meaning an equivalent number need to be trained every year just to maintain numbers. In some jurisdictions the retention rate is lower. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the retention rate is estimated at ~50%.

Retaining and developing referees needs to be a high priority at all levels of soccer, and the responsibility for this is distributed throughout the soccer community, from FIFA at the top to grass-roots clubs.

Investing in referee development pays off at all levels by improving standards of refereeing, by developing referees to handle more challenging matches, and by increasing retention rates. Recruitment is time consuming and challenging. Courses can be hard to arrange, so by far the best means of ensuring we have enough referees to cover games is to retain the referees already in the system. These referees also bring the benefit of experience.

Successful referee development programmes may mean the referee is eventually lost to the club or league, as they move up and take on higher level assignments. However, referees who have been supported by their organization will commonly give back to it, by becoming an instructor, an assessor, a mentor, or assisting in other ways.

Referees are athletes, just like players, and as with successful player development, organizations can take pride in referees graduating to higher level appointments - possibly to national or international levels.

BACKGROUND

The tracking of registration numbers is an important metric as to the health of the referee program. Similarly, the maintenance of registration records over the years for individual referees (registration, completion of courses, assessments) will ensure the integrity of the registration process. Registration data exists back to 2011.

i. Registration numbers

Over the past 4 years (data from RAMP) referee registration in the province has generally increased (apart from 2023), both at the Senior level (defined as 11-a-side referees) and youth level (defined as small-sided referees).

District level and above referees are responsible for most of the officiating in Provincial league matches (Challenge Cup, Jubilee Trophy and PYL). Maintenance of levels above District requires the completion of an annual fitness test. Fitness testing has not been



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completed in several years. However, several of our senior referees are considered to be refereeing at least at the Regional level. Youth referees are primarily responsible for officiating small-sided games at the club level.

Year	District and above	Youth (small-sided referees)	Total
2022	129	256	385
2023	122	155	277
2024	184	291	475
2025	200	329	529

ii. Gender

The following is based on identified gender from the 2025 registration data.

	Male	Female	Total
Small-sided	194 (59%)	135 (41%)	329
District	151 (76%)	49 (24%)	200
Total	345 (65%)	184 (35%)	529

iii. Referee demographics

Registered referees range in age from 12 (the minimum age for registering as a small-sided referee) to 68. Referee demographics are skewed towards the younger age groups – a reflection of the age of referees who take small-sided and entry-level referee courses.

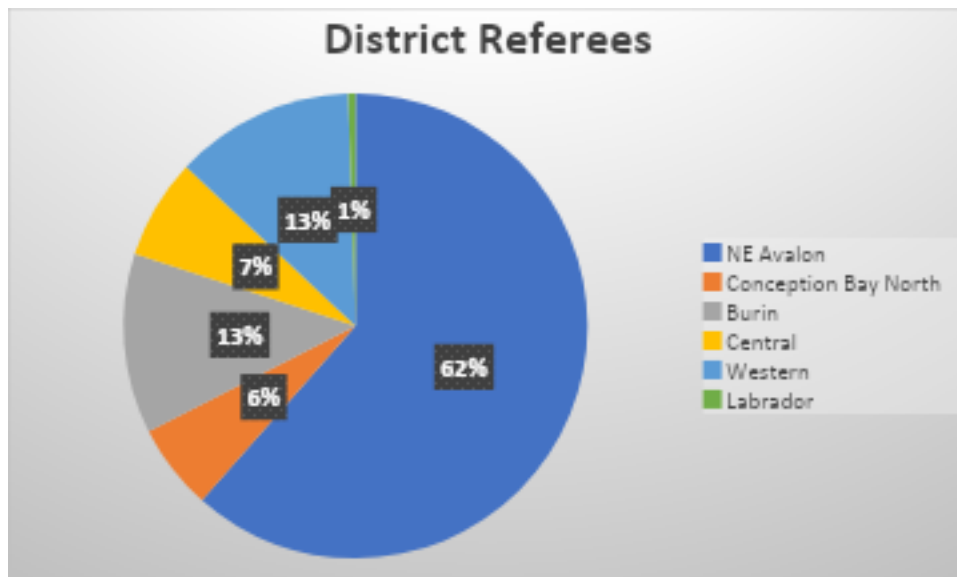
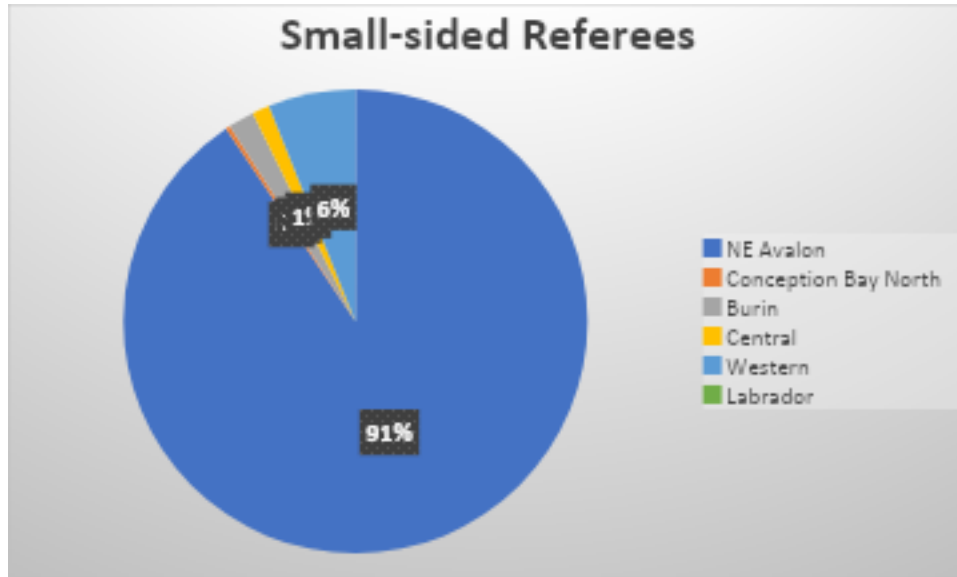
In 2025, 83.4% of referees were under 20 years of age.

iv. Referee Distribution

The registration database lists home communities, although it is recognized that this may not reflect where the referee is active. Referees are distributed across the province as follows, based on the hometown of the referee:

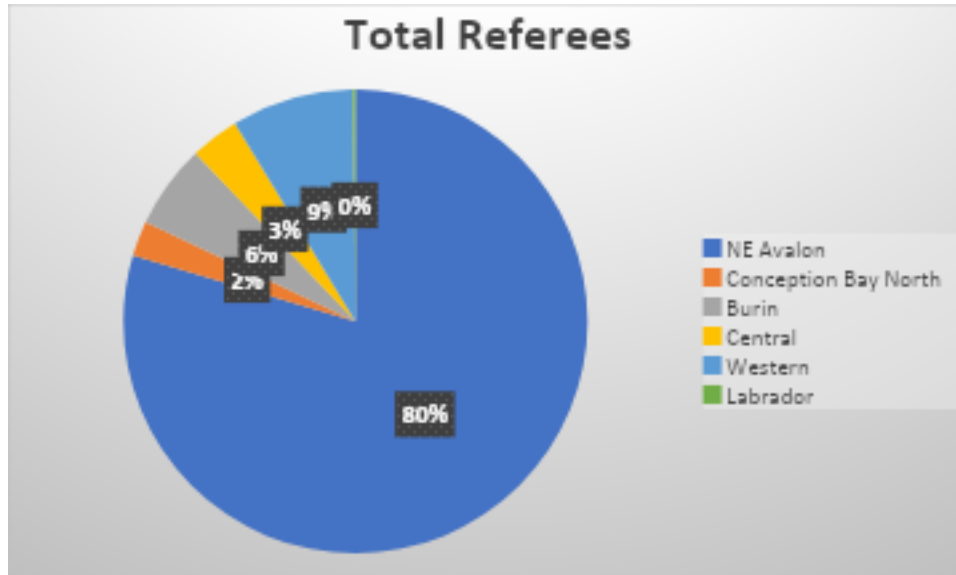


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The following observations are made based on these 2025 registration data:

1. Youth referees comprise 329 of 529 registered referees or 62%.
2. Youth referees are split 59% (195) male and 41% (136) female.
3. District level (and above) referees comprise 200 of 529 registered referees or 38%.
4. District level referees are split 76% (154) male and 24% (49) female.
5. There are only 6 Regional level referees, with an average age of 50.0 years. Only 1 Regional-level referee is under 40 years. All 6 of the Regional referees are in the metro area.
6. There are currently 0 Provincial-level referees.
7. There are 0 female referees above the District-level.
8. Female referees are generally under-represented – roughly one-third of all referees are female, and only 25% of referees at the District level are female.
9. Referees are concentrated in the Northeast Avalon. 91% of small-sided referees and 61% of District-level referees reside on the northeast Avalon.

These data point to some challenges facing the NLSA over the coming years, specifically the low numbers of referees above district level, the impending experience gap at the higher levels of the game, the lack of higher-level referees outside of the metro area, and the lack of female referees beyond youth level. All these factors need to be addressed in any long-term planning exercise.



Long Term Planning for Referee Development

Referee Development is a program managed by the NLSA Referee Manager. The Referee Manager reports to the NLSA Executive Director.

Long-term planning for the Referee Development Program is aligned with the strategic goals of the overall NLSA Technical Program.

This five-year plan outlines strategic initiatives for the Newfoundland and Labrador Soccer Association (NLSA) to significantly enhance its referee program. The core objectives are to increase the total number of registered officials across all levels, to provide ongoing education and other referee development tools, to develop a clear administrative structure, and to establish robust pathways that facilitate the promotion of qualified referees to higher levels of officiating.

Our Vision

To cultivate a thriving, skilled, and respected community of soccer referees in Newfoundland and Labrador, ensuring quality officiating for all levels of play and providing clear, supported pathways for officials to reach their full potential, from grassroots to national.

Key Pillars and Strategic Initiatives

The plan is structured around four interconnected pillars:

- 1. Recruitment**
- 2. Retention**
- 3. Development and Promotion, and**
- 4. Support and Environment**

Each pillar contains specific initiatives, measurable objectives, and a proposed timeline for implementation.

Recruitment – Expanding the Referee Pool

Objective:

Increase the total number of registered small-sided and entry-level referees by 15% year-over-year, aiming for a consistent pool of 500+ active officials across the province by 2030.

Initiatives:

1. Targeted Youth Recruitment (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description:



Implement aggressive recruitment drives within local clubs specifically targeting players aged 12-16. Highlight the benefits of refereeing, such as earning money, staying involved in soccer, learning life skills (leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution), and fitness.

Actions:

- Identify "Youth Referee Ambassadors" (current young referees) to share their experiences.
- Develop engaging promotional materials (posters, social media campaigns, club presentations).
- Offer "Come Try Refereeing" introductory sessions.
- Specific for Small-Sided Referees: Promote the small-sided course (age 12+) as an accessible entry point to gain experience without the pressure of 11-a-side games.

2. Diverse Recruitment Streams (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Look beyond traditional player pools to attract new officials, including parents, coaches (retired or current), former players, and multi-sport officials (*e.g.*, from hockey, basketball) seeking off-season involvement.

Actions:

- Partner with local community centres, high schools, and post-secondary institutions.
- Offer flexible course scheduling to accommodate working adults and students.
- Actively recruit female officials through dedicated campaigns and mentorship.

3. Streamlined Onboarding Experience (2026-2027)

Description: Improve the initial experience of new recruits from interest to first game.

Actions:

- Create a clear, user-friendly online registration and information portal.
- Provide a comprehensive "Welcome Pack" including law books, uniform guidance, and a contact list for assignors/mentors.
- Ensure new officials are assigned to appropriate, lower-pressure games for their initial assignments, often with an experienced mentor present.

Retention – Keeping Referees in the Game

Objective:

Reduce annual referee attrition by 10% by 2028 and establish a stable, experienced referee base.

Background

Referee retention is a challenge everywhere. In Canada about 40% of registered referees do not return the following year - meaning an equivalent number of new referees need to be trained every year just to maintain numbers. In many jurisdictions the retention rate is lower.



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Data from 2022-2025 indicates that the average retention rate is 48.8%.

Year	Total Registered	Returning	Percentage
2022	385	-	-
2023	277	179	46.5
2024	475	127	45.9
2025	529	255	53.9

At the NLSA about 50% of referees don't return the following season, based on existing data. The reasons are numerous. Some are not preventable *e.g.*, referees move from the province or simply decide refereeing is not for them. Other reasons are preventable *e.g.*, abuse experienced on the field. Well over half of our young referees (aged 12-14) have experienced either coaches or spectators verbally disputing their decisions on the field, based on National data. Nationally, 87% of officials have experienced abuse at various levels. Reducing or eliminating any form of referee abuse will go a long way to increasing our referee retention rates. Referee safety/ abuse is discussed further in Section 4.



Source: Ontario Soccer <https://www.ontariosoccer.net/take5>



Retention is critical if we want to continue to train and develop referees. Referees make between 137 and 250 decisions in a soccer match¹, many of which are boundary decisions (goal kicks, corner kicks, throw ins), while others involve misconduct – was that a fair tackle? Should there be a sanction? What's the correct restart? Many of these decisions go unseen because there is no stoppage in play. The vast majority of decisions a referee makes in a match are correct, although it is obviously difficult to quantify given the speed of the match, the level of play, the referee level and so on. Referees need time to develop before they can advance to higher levels of the game, where the speed increases, as does player size, intensity and skill levels.

On the surface, a roughly 50% rate appears reasonable; however, in comparing data year over year we only have 67 referees across the province who have registered for each of the 4 years between 2022 and 2025. Of these, several are instructors or assessors, and 14 are over 40 years old.

Refereeing should ideally be a team effort. Refereeing 11/side soccer should involve a team consisting of a referee, two assistant referees and sometimes a fourth official. Having a refereeing team offers many advantages over and above having assistants dedicated to offside and ball in and out of play. Having experienced assistant referees support young or inexperienced referees on the field is an easy means to support, mentor and develop the less experienced referee. In challenging situations involving coaches or spectators more eyes and ears help put together a better-rounded report of the situation. It also avoids the situation where a referee reports one version of events only for it to be denied by the perpetrator- so it is one person's word against the other. Being a member of a team brings camaraderie, and an opportunity to discuss the game before and after.

For those refereeing small-sided soccer, they are commonly alone – there are no assistant referees. In these divisions, mentoring becomes a critical part of referee development and retention.

Mentoring describes a process by which referees are assisted in their development by a more experienced individual. It is the most important referee development tool for clubs and leagues. A mentor is a trusted advisor who is used to transfer knowledge and experience from one person to another. A referee mentor will:

- Guide, coach, and train referees throughout their soccer refereeing career, especially in the first few years of refereeing, as well as mentoring senior officials wanting to improve.
- Observe referees while they referee and offer suggestions, comments, and instructions in a positive manner.
- Be a resource person for all referees to ask questions and seek guidance.

Mentoring is currently an informal activity within some clubs/ leagues. Most clubs/ associations have no mentoring programs to assist the development of their match officials.

Referees can only be developed if they carry on refereeing. It is thus important to recognize them as an important part of your club and league to help with retention. Recognition takes many forms:

- Pay. Ensuring a reasonable rate for match fees. The minimum wage is a good guide here. A referee officiating a one hour small-sided match needs to be there well before the game and will have paperwork afterwards. Therefore, the lowest rate that should be considered is for 90 minutes at or above minimum wage for an hour-long game, with an escalating scale based on referee level, length of game, and level of game.

¹ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10513314/>

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- Awards. Many clubs feature a player of the week. Consider featuring a referee of the week and incorporating referees into annual awards.
- Referee attire. Make sure referees are supplied with, at minimum, a professional-looking referee shirt when they start out. A referee who looks the part goes a long way in contributing to respect. In contrast, a referee who does not look like a referee has an uphill struggle before they even blow the whistle.
- A simple thank you for a job well done from board members, the president or others goes a long way.

Increased communication, education, promotion opportunities, reduced abuse on the field, a sense of being part of a team and a general recognition of their efforts will all contribute to increasing our retention rates amongst referees in the NLSA.

Initiatives:

1. Robust Mentorship Program (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Pair new and developing referees with experienced officials for guidance, feedback, and support. This needs to be a club-driven initiative.

Actions:

- Recruit and train a pool of dedicated mentors.
- Implement a structured mentorship curriculum (pre-game, during game observation, post-game debriefs).
- Ensure mentors are approachable and offer constructive, positive feedback.
- Encourage peer-to-peer mentoring among District and Regional officials.

2. Flexible and Fair Scheduling (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Improve the assignment process to accommodate referee availability, preferences, and development needs.

Actions:

- Implement a modern referee assigning system (if not already in use) that allows officials to set availability and receive timely assignments.
- Prioritize fair distribution of games, considering travel, experience level, and avoiding burnout.
- Establish clear communication channels for assignors and referees regarding game changes.

3. Positive Game Day Environment (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Reinforce NLSA's zero-tolerance policy for abuse and actively promote respect for officials.

Actions:

- Launch a "Respect the Whistle" campaign directed at players, coaches, and spectators, emphasizing the importance of officials.
- Empower referees with clear protocols for dealing with misconduct from the sidelines.



- Ensure rapid follow-up and visible consequences for incidents of abuse, demonstrating support for officials.
- Provide resources and training on managing difficult game situations and maintaining confidence.

4. Recognition and Appreciation (2027-2030)

Description: Regularly acknowledge the contributions of referees.

Actions:

- Continue an annual "Referee of the Year" award across different levels.
- Implement small tokens of appreciation (*e.g.*, year-end social events, personalized thank you notes, small gear upgrades).
- Feature referee profiles in NLSA communications.
- Host an annual referee social event (possible awards, recognition, *etc.*)

Development and Promotion – Pathways to Excellence

Background

Ongoing education and on-field evaluations are critical components in the development of any referee.

The responsibility for referee training belongs to the NLSA, in cooperation with Canada Soccer. This includes training programs for referees, for referee assessors, and for referee instructors. It is the responsibility of the Canada Soccer Referee's Committee to provide the provincial associations with material for referee courses.

The NLSA arranges introductory referee training courses, and courses for upgrading referees from District class to Regional class.

The NLSA Executive Director in cooperation with the Referee Development Officer recommends candidates for upgrading from District- to Regional- class. The Executive Director and RDO recommend candidates for upgrade from Regional- to Provincial-class; these courses are generally held annually on the mainland by Canada Soccer.

The NLSA offers educational opportunities, mostly aimed at the more advanced referees looking to move up from district level. These can be supplemented by education at the grass-roots level, offered by clubs and leagues. Education can take many forms, including:

- Regular e-mails with updates on league or club procedures and issues.
- Sessions at the beginning of the season on club or league rules and regulations, and referee expectations.
- Education sessions held in person or virtually on aspects of game management.
- Post-season debrief on what went well, and areas to be worked on.
- Updates on changes to the Laws of the Game.



In addition, clubs and leagues take responsibility for hosting small-sided and entry level courses. The NLSA, through the RDO, supplies instructors, but the club/ league takes responsibility for facilities, registration and collecting fees.

On-field evaluations (assessments) are a formal review of a referee's performance in a match. An assessment can only be performed by a trained assessor, and results in a formal report and mark, shared with the referee and the NLSA. The process is not appropriate for small-sided soccer. Most assessments are performed to evaluate a referee's potential for promotion to the next level (successful assessments are required to advance from district to regional level, and from regional to provincial level).

Assessments are also performed on senior referees to assist them when they step up to a more challenging level, or to check if their performance merit appointment to important matches. Assessments can also be performed if a league, region or the NLSA has concerns about a referee's performance or ability.

Objective:

Increase the number of officials successfully promoted to the next level by 20% by 2028, with a clear focus on identifying and supporting Provincial and National-level candidates.

Initiatives:

1. Structured Development Pathway (2026-2027)

Description:

Clearly define the requirements, expectations, and training opportunities for advancement through District, Regional, Provincial, National, and FIFA levels.

Actions:

- Create an accessible "Referee Advancement Handbook" outlining criteria for fitness, assessments, courses, and game counts for each level.
- Partner with Canada Soccer to align Provincial development with national standards.
- Implement a "Performance Pathway" for high-potential officials and a "Community Pathway" for those seeking continued involvement at local levels, as seen in other provincial associations.

2. Advanced Training and Education (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Provide ongoing, high-quality training beyond entry-level courses.

Actions:

- Regularly offer Regional and Provincial upgrade courses, focusing on advanced interpretations of the Laws of the Game, game management, and positioning.
- Incorporate video analysis sessions (individual and group) for post-match review and constructive feedback.
- Host workshops on specific topics such as offside, tactical fouls, handball, advantage, and difficult game scenarios.



- Utilize online learning modules for ongoing education and law updates.

3. Robust Assessment and Feedback System (2027-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Implement a standardized and regular assessment program to evaluate performance and provide targeted feedback.

Actions:

- Develop a pool of certified referee assessors.
- Ensure regular assessments for officials aspiring to higher levels, including fitness tests (as appropriate for the level).
- Provide detailed, constructive written and verbal feedback after each assessment, including areas of strength and areas for improvement.
- Establish a system for officials to review their assessment reports and discuss them with assessors.

4. High-Performance Referee Program (2030)

Description: Identify and fast-track officials with National-level potential.

Actions:

- Create an "NLSA Elite Referee Pool" with dedicated training, coaching, and exposure to higher-level games (*e.g.*, senior leagues, provincial championships).
- Facilitate opportunities for these officials to participate in Canada Soccer's national development camps and programs.
- Provide support for travel and associated costs for elite officials attending national events.



Support and Environment – Fostering a Healthy Community

Background

Any organization needs policies and procedures to administer its members. These policies and procedures need to be vertically aligned – National – Provincial - Club level. Accessibility to these policies and procedures should be clear and transparent and regularly communicated to the organisation's members.

The NLSA has a series of referee-focused policies and procedures which are readily accessible via the NLSA website. This is not the case in most clubs around the province.

In terms of organization structure, there needs to be one individual on the organization's board or organizing committee that has responsibility for referees and refereeing. Some clubs appoint a Director of Officials, and this is the ideal way to go, but in a smaller club, one of the other Directors may take on this role along with other responsibilities. Administration of refereeing is sometimes given to summer employees as a responsibility, and this can be effective with the right person involved, but there needs to be a clear line of communication to a responsible board member.

Possible policies that should be in place in every club/association include:

- Officials' development policy or handbook.
- Harassment and discipline policies that cover official's issues.
- Pay and compensation.
- Safe sport needs to cover officials, particularly youth officials.
- An organizational code of conduct that includes respect for referees.

The safety of our match officials, particularly our young officials is of primary concern at the NLSA.

In a fast-paced game, quick decisions are imperative, and mistakes can happen. Some decisions are straightforward, but many will likely please one team, but not the other. Unfortunately, this can result in the referee being singled out for making an "unfavourable" call with dissent, abuse, or harassment.

Such behaviour would not be tolerated in the workplace and should not take place on a Newfoundland and Labrador soccer field, no matter what the level of game, or age of the referee. More extreme levels of unacceptable behaviour, when directed by an adult towards a youth, are effectively child abuse. If a teacher acted this way in a school, there would be serious consequences; we need to consider behaviour on the soccer field in the same way.

There is a range of behaviours that will not be tolerated from an adult engaging with a young referee. These range from, at the lowest level, simple dissent- verbally disagreeing with a decision; through aggressive and intimidating behaviour; up to physical assault.

It is important to recognise that what might be seen by the perpetrator as a polite questioning of a decision in a manner designed to help can still have a major impact on the confidence of a young referee learning their craft. They are used to looking at adults as authority figures (parents, teachers, coaches),



so when an adult brings their ability and judgement into question within a stressful environment, this is harmful.

Canada Soccer has a detailed description of harassment and a harassment policy; some of the behaviour reported can fall under these definitions, and every organization needs to have a harassment policy in place to deal with these serious incidents.

Those responsible for grassroots soccer need to do their part in getting out the message that any form of referee abuse is not acceptable.

There have already been initiatives established by the NLSA. The 'purple shirt' campaign is one, and the development of the Zero Tolerance for Abuse of Match Officials policy is another. Discussions need to continue on effective and appropriate ways of reducing referee abuse. Similarly, many of the initiatives discussed in this 5-year plan may help in the retention of match officials (discussed further below), but this issue remains of major concern within the referee program.

Objective:

Create a safe, supportive, inclusive, and professional environment that prioritizes the well-being of all officials.

Initiatives:

1. Dedicated Referee Program and Staff (2026)

Description: Ensure sufficient resources and personnel are dedicated to the referee program.

Actions:

- Strengthen the NLSA Referee Program with diverse representation (experienced officials, youth officials, assignors, educators).
- Have a full-time Referee Development Coordinator role to oversee the implementation of this plan.

2. Technology Integration (2027-2028)

Description: Leverage technology to improve efficiency and development.

Actions:

- Utilize an advanced referee management platform for scheduling, communication, and performance tracking.
- Explore video recording of key matches for review and self-analysis by officials.

3. Mental Health and Well-Being Resources (2028-2030)

Description: Acknowledge the pressure of officiating and provide support for mental resilience.

Actions:



- Offer workshops on stress management, conflict resolution, and maintaining mental toughness.
- Provide access to confidential resources or contacts for officials experiencing significant challenges.
- Promote a culture where officials feel comfortable discussing challenges and seeking support.

4. Annual Review and Adaptation (2026-2030, Ongoing)

Description: Regularly review the effectiveness of the plan and adapt initiatives as needed.

Actions:

- Conduct annual surveys of referees (recruits, current, departing) to gather feedback.
 - Track key metrics: number of new officials, retention rates, promotion rates, and game coverage.
 - Hold annual committee meetings to assess progress and make adjustments to the plan.
-

Projected Outcomes by 2030

- **Increased Numbers:** A 50% increase in the active referee pool compared to 2025, with a healthy balance of small-sided and 11-a-side officials.
- **Stronger Pathways:** A clear and well-utilized pathway for referees to progress from District to Provincial and beyond, with a consistent pipeline of officials aiming for National and FIFA status.
- **Enhanced Quality:** A higher standard of officiating across all leagues due to improved training, mentorship, and assessment.
- **Positive Culture:** A more supportive and respectful environment for referees, reducing abuse and increasing job satisfaction.
- **Sustainable Growth:** A self-sustaining referee program with effective recruitment and retention mechanisms in place for future years.