



autism  
NOVA SCOTIA

ANNUAL  
REPORT  
2024-2025

United for *Inclusion*

---

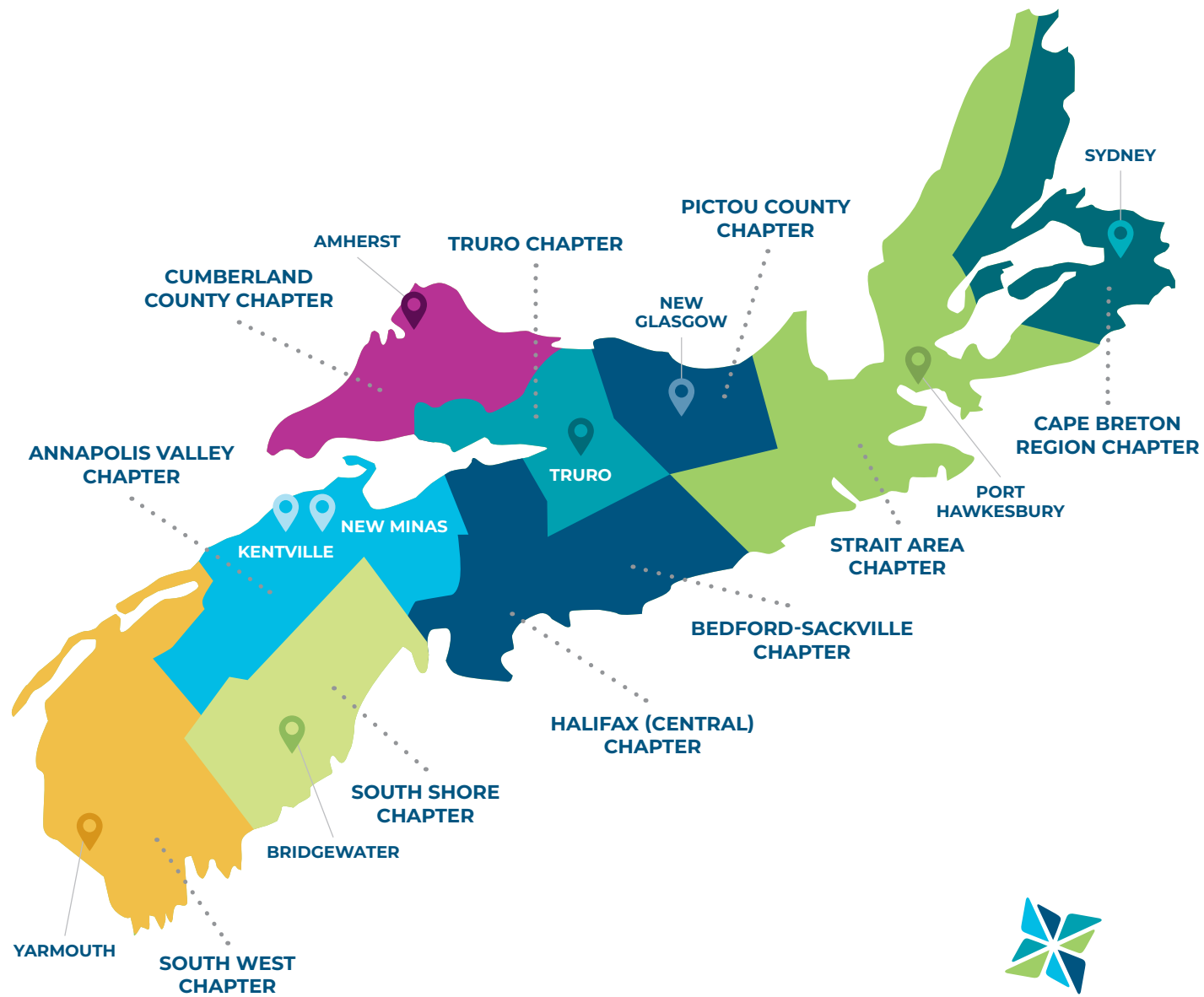
Autism Nova Scotia acknowledges that we operate in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq. We recognize that the Mi'kmaq are a distinct people whose histories, legacies, and contributions have enriched this land.

We acknowledge that people of African descent have lived in Nova Scotia for more than 400 years, and we honour and express our gratitude to the ancestors who came before us and helped shape this province.

We also recognize the Acadian community whose deep roots and vibrant culture that has thrived despite adversity. Your spirit of perseverance and community continues to enrich the heritage of Nova Scotia.

---





## Board of Directors

### BOARD CHAIR

**Catherine Rahey**  
Autism Consultant  
Complex Cases and Learning  
Centre Consulting Services

**Allison Garber**  
Owner  
Allison Garber Communications

**Ian Sutherland**  
Partner  
Stewart McKelvey

### VICE CHAIR

**William Lahey**  
President & Vice-Chancellor  
University of King's College

**Janean Marshall**  
Director of Academic Services  
Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey

### PAST CHAIR

**Dave Nicholson, FCPA, FCMA**  
Chief Financial Officer  
Atlantic Subway

**Dr. Robert Strang**  
Parent

### TREASURER

**Greg Smith, CPA, CA**  
Director of Finance  
Payzant Building Products Ltd

**Dr. Abraham Rudnick, BMedSc, MD, MPsych, PhD, FRCPC, CCPE, CPRRP, MCIL, DFCPA, mMBA**  
Professor, Departments of Psychiatry and Bioethics and School of Occupational Therapy, Dalhousie University  
Clinical Director, Nova Scotia Operational Stress Injury Clinic, Nova Scotia Health Authority

### HONORARY MEMBER

**Joan M. Craig, C.M.**  
Founder  
Autism Nova Scotia

**Paul De Wolfe, B.A., CFA, FRM**  
Retired Banking Professional; Former Senior Vice President, Corporate Banking; Mentor in Financial Literacy Initiatives

### MEMBERS AT LARGE

**Sarah Boyne, MSc. S-LP (c)**  
Speech-Language Pathologist  
Hearing & Speech Nova Scotia





# Table of Contents

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	7
INCLUSION FOR EVERYONE	9
ADVANCING CHANGE THROUGH THE PROVINCIAL AUTISM ACTION PLAN	11
BUILDING AWARENESS THROUGH AIDE CANADA	13
PROGRAMS & SERVICES ACROSS NOVA SCOTIA	15
BUILDING BELONGING ACROSS NOVA SCOTIA	17
INCLUSION CLOSE TO HOME	19
WALK YOUR WAY: 15-YEAR MILESTONE	21
BEST OF LOCAL: AN EVENING OF COMMUNITY & CELEBRATION	22
EARLY SUPPORT, STRONG FOUNDATIONS	27
CREATING INCLUSIVE SPACES FOR CONNECTION AND WELLBEING	29
SUPPORTING GOALS, BUILDING PATHWAYS	33
SUPPORTING AUTONOMY AND EVERYDAY LIFE	34
CONVERSATIONS THAT CELEBRATE AUTISTIC VOICES	35
ADVANCING ECONOMIC INCLUSION	37
EMPOWERING AUTISTIC STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION	41
EXPANDING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT	43
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE: EXPLORING THE SPECTRUM	47
EMPOWERING FAMILIES, BUILDING CAPACITY	49
AUTISM AVIATORS: TAKING FLIGHT WITH CONFIDENCE	51
COMMUNITY BUILDERS	52
CELEBRATING 14 YEARS OF IMPACT AND COMMUNITY	55



# United for Inclusion

At Autism Nova Scotia, we believe that meaningful change is built on a foundation of inclusion, collaboration, and bold action. Over the past year, we have undergone an exciting period of transformation – one that has strengthened our organization and deepened our commitment to the Autistic community across the province.

One of the most significant transitions this year was the appointment of Amanda Alexander as Autism Nova Scotia’s new

Executive Director. Amanda brings a wealth of experience in inclusion, advocacy, and community engagement – and a deep-rooted passion for social change. As Board Chair, I am confident in Amanda’s vision and leadership, and I look forward to the continued growth and impact of our organization under her guidance.

This year also marked the ambitious development of the Autism Action Plan – a multi-year, community-driven roadmap

designed to transform how supports, services, and opportunities are delivered across Nova Scotia. The Plan is rooted in the voices and leadership of Autistic individuals and their families, whose lived experiences and expertise have shaped every step of the process. It reflects a collective vision for a more inclusive, equitable province, and one that meets the diverse and evolving needs of our community.

Guided by this momentum, our team has worked tirelessly to expand programs, build capacity, and strengthen partnerships, especially in rural and underserved regions. By listening deeply and acting with intention, we aim to create more accessible and responsive systems of support across the lifespan.

Our work is grounded in a broader commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As we move forward, we will continue to build relationships, challenge systemic barriers, and advocate for a future where every Autistic

person, regardless of geography, age, or identity, can live a full and meaningful life.

We are proud of all we have accomplished this year, and we know there is still important work ahead. Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we are united for inclusion and united for change.

*Amanda Alexander*

**Amanda Alexander**  
Executive Director,  
Autism Nova Scotia



*Catherine Rahey*

**Catherine Rahey**  
Chair, Autism Nova Scotia  
Board of Directors



# Inclusion for Everyone

Autism Nova Scotia will continue to advocate for lifelong investments in autism supports and services, collaborating with the autism community, government and partner organizations to ensure equitable access and inclusion for all throughout the province now and into the future.



## Our Vision

A world where autism is understood, accepted, and everyone is living their lives fully.



## Our Mission

We are a community-based organization that builds understanding, acceptance, and inclusion for Autistics/individuals on the autism spectrum and their families through leadership, advocacy, education, training, and programming across the lifespan.



## Our Strategic Pillars

Delivering Innovative Education & Training • Advocating with the Autism Community • Building Capacity in Our Communities • Programming Excellence • Legacy Planning



## Core Values

These core values are used to determine the approach of our organization's overall focus. With our current strategic plan wrapping up in 2025, over the next year, Autism Nova Scotia will embark on the development of a new strategic plan to drive our vision forward.



INCLUSION



COLLABORATION



ACCEPTANCE



RESPECT



COURAGE

# Advancing Change Through the Provincial Autism Action Plan

In 2024, Autism Nova Scotia marked a historic milestone: the provincial government's commitment to co-developing Nova Scotia's first-ever Provincial Autism Action Plan. This achievement is the result of more than two decades of advocacy, driven by the voices and leadership of Autistic individuals, families, service providers, and community allies across the province.

The Autism Action Plan represents a bold and necessary step forward—an opportunity to build a more inclusive and equitable future where all Autistic Nova Scotians can access the supports and opportunities they need to thrive across their lifespan, no matter where they live in this province.

## A Community-Led Vision for Change

From the very beginning, the Autism Action Plan has been guided by community. It is grounded in the lived experiences of Autistic people and shaped by a commitment to accessibility, transparency, and first-voice leadership. The goal: to identify

and address long-standing gaps in services, while promoting acceptance, inclusion, and belonging for Autistic individuals in every part of Nova Scotia, including rural and under-served communities.

This work would not be possible without the dedication and insight of those who have shared their experiences, advocated for accepting communities, and reimagined what true inclusion can look like.

### Key components of this engagement process include:

- Public Consultations held across the province to gather local and regional perspectives.
- A province-wide survey that reached Autistic individuals, caregivers, service providers, and community partners.
- A Community Advisory Committee, composed of Autistic individuals, caregivers, and representatives from diverse communities.

### Working Groups: Centering Autistic Leadership

In early 2025, four provincial working groups, each made up of at least 50% Autistic members,

began meeting virtually to co-develop the content and priorities of the Action Plan. These groups are exploring key areas that impact quality of life and long-term wellbeing:

- Social Inclusion: Tackling stigma and discrimination; improving access to recreation, peer support, childcare, and transportation.
- Economic Inclusion: Addressing employment barriers, housing, financial stability, and income supports.
- Education & Transitions: Supporting transitions within the education system, into post-secondary education, and from school into meaningful employment.
- Community & Healthcare Supports: Enhancing access to diagnosis (especially for adults), healthcare, mental health, respite, justice system navigation, and caregiver support.

The development of Nova Scotia's Autism Action Plan is a multi-phase, community-led process. Following province-wide consultations and input from working groups and advisory committees, 2025 marks a pivotal year in the development of the plan.

***“Trailblazing is not easy—you stand before a space with no path and create one, not knowing where to start or how wide to make it. But you keep going, because that’s what the humane part of humanity entails: working together, leaving no one behind. By combining first-person lived experience with the resources of our provincial partners, we can create meaningful change for Autistic Nova Scotians and their families.”***

*– Patricia George-Zwicker, Autistic Advocate and Coordinator, Provincial Autism Action Plan*

# Building Awareness Through AIDE Canada

Autism Nova Scotia is proud to serve as the Atlantic Canada regional hub for the Autism and/or Intellectual Disability Knowledge Exchange Network (**AIDE Canada**), a national initiative launched in 2019 in partnership with the Public Health Agency of Canada as part of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Strategic Fund.

Last year, we completed a provincial awareness campaign focused on improving doctor visits for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). As part of this initiative, we created and distributed posters highlighting:

- Existing billing codes available for general practitioners in Nova Scotia
- The importance of annual physical exams for adults with IDD

This resource is intended for physicians, provinces without these billing codes, and individuals with IDD, their families, and caregivers. We collaborated with multiple health professionals and organizations to ensure the resources were made available through internal healthcare platforms.

## AIDE Canada Webinars

Autism Nova Scotia also hosted three province-specific webinars to share information and practical tools with the community:

- How to Qualify for the Disability Tax Credit
- Respite Support and Navigation Services throughout Nova Scotia
- Preparing for Employment: An Introduction for Autistic Jobseekers

These webinars are part of our continued commitment to delivering accessible, inclusive resources that meet the needs of Autistic individuals and their families.



© 2018 Freepik diana brysku



# Programs & Services Across Nova Scotia

For almost 25 years, Autism Nova Scotia has worked hard to expand equitable access to programs and services within the scope of our mission and vision across the province. Through our 10 Regional Autism Centres, Autism Nova Scotia supports more than 32,000 Autistic individuals and families in communities from Yarmouth all the way to Sydney, Cape Breton.

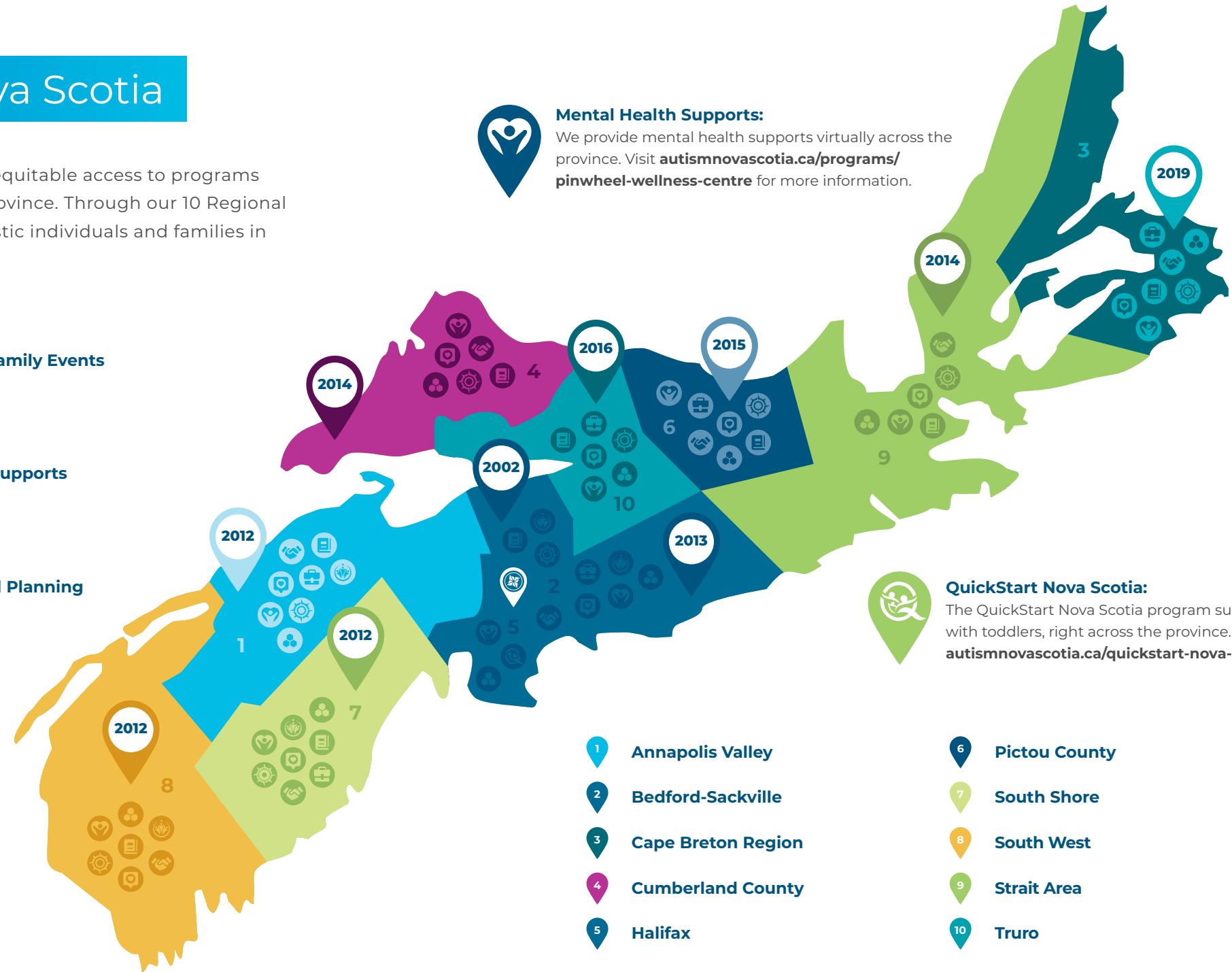
-  **Navigation Services for Family & Individual Support**
-  **QuickStart Nova Scotia**  
(Toddlers & Families)
-  **Social & Community Inclusion for Youth / Adults**
-  **Education & Training**
-  **Employment Programs & Services**

-  **Community & Family Events**
-  **Mental Health Supports**
-  **Person Directed Planning**
-  **Respite**



## Mental Health Supports:

We provide mental health supports virtually across the province. Visit [autismnovascotia.ca/programs/pinwheel-wellness-centre](https://autismnovascotia.ca/programs/pinwheel-wellness-centre) for more information.



## QuickStart Nova Scotia:

The QuickStart Nova Scotia program supports families with toddlers, right across the province. Learn more at [autismnovascotia.ca/quickstart-nova-scotia/](https://autismnovascotia.ca/quickstart-nova-scotia/)

-  **1 Annapolis Valley**
-  **2 Bedford-Sackville**
-  **3 Cape Breton Region**
-  **4 Cumberland County**
-  **5 Halifax**
-  **6 Pictou County**
-  **7 South Shore**
-  **8 South West**
-  **9 Strait Area**
-  **10 Truro**



Building Belonging Across Nova Scotia



DID YOU KNOW? 

Every region hosted **inclusive summer camps**, thanks to support from River Philip and Windsor Foundations and many others.



DID YOU KNOW? 

**Virtual Caregiver Support Groups** launched - no travel or childcare needed.

DID YOU KNOW? 

Sydney's space was selected by **Smilezone Foundation**, to make a brighter, more welcoming environment for all ages.

DID YOU KNOW? 

Cumberland launched ASAP, a **drop-in life skills program** for youth focused on social growth and independence.



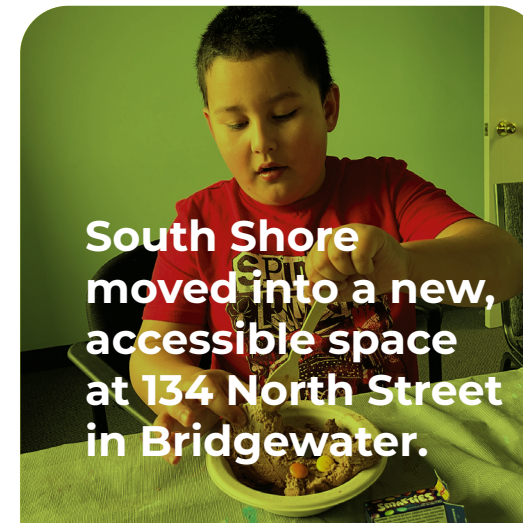
DID YOU KNOW? 

Pictou piloted **Equine Wellness**, offering therapeutic sessions with "It Takes a Herd."



DID YOU KNOW? 

South West hired its **first part-time Program Facilitator**, thanks to a Community Fund Grant.



South Shore moved into a new, accessible space at 134 North Street in Bridgewater.

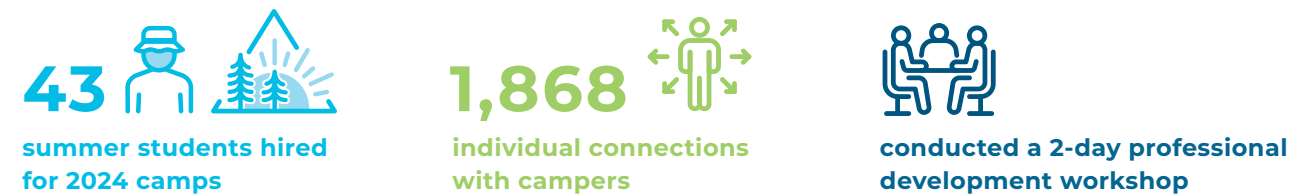


# Inclusion Close to Home

Autism Nova Scotia's **Regional Autism Centres** continue to be trusted, community-embedded resources for Autistic individuals, families, caregivers, and service providers across Nova Scotia. Last year, our Autism Support Coordinators connected with **18,793 people** through programs, supports, and community outreach.



Thanks to summer camps across the province, this past year was the largest to date:



**“This [centre] is such a great resource to have in our community. To have a place where you know your child is safe, accepted and well supported feels so great as a parent!”** – Parent, Yarmouth

ALMOST **19,000** connections across the province



When combining data from all areas of support, Regional Autism Centres engaged with almost **19,000 people!** Almost half of these connections (**8,000+**) were directly with those who are diagnosed with autism or self-identify as Autistic.

## Average 78 calls per month

Regional staff responded to **938 support inquiries**, averaging 78 calls per month. While the overall call volume remained consistent, we saw a rise in inquiries from Autistic individuals and professionals—reflecting growing awareness of and trust in our services.

Regional Autism Centres facilitated **1,144** programs, sessions, and community events over the last year, a 13% increase from the previous year. These included social groups, recreational programs, life skills training, and support groups. In total, there were **7,839 touch points** with Autistic individuals who are formally diagnosed or self-identify as Autistic, reflecting not just participation, but the trusted relationships built within communities across Nova Scotia.

Community education efforts also expanded significantly, with regional centres leading **107 outreach sessions** and reaching **3,690 people**, a 59% increase over the previous year. These sessions helped build local capacity, foster acceptance, and promote inclusive practices where Autistic individuals live, learn, work, and play.



# Walk YOUR Way: 15-Year Milestone

Autism Nova Scotia's signature community engagement event, **Walk YOUR Way**, presented by Carson Exports celebrated its 15th year in 2024 in nine locations across the province. We walked united with Autistic individuals, families, and community members, both virtually and in-person, to raise funds to support Autism Nova Scotia programs and services.


More than just a fundraiser, Walk YOUR Way is a powerful celebration of inclusion, featuring local businesses, partners, volunteers, and participants who make it all possible. From facepainting and sensory spaces, to exclusive Walk T-Shirts in collaboration with East Coast Lifestyle – every detail made for an unforgettable experience. Together, we continue to make strides towards a more inclusive province.



## Walk YOUR Way 2024 Successes

**214**   
Total number of teams

**1,036**   
Total number of registered walkers

**\$176K**   
Total funds raised

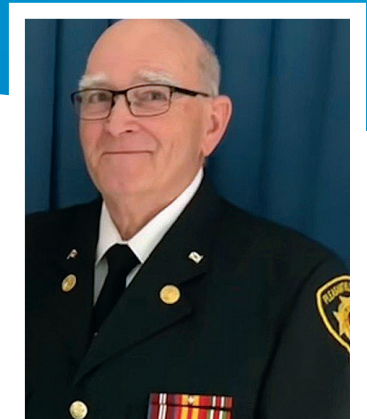
## Thank You to Our Lead Sponsors



## Honouring Al Sullivan's Legacy

Autism Nova Scotia remembers Al Sullivan, a devoted volunteer whose generosity and passion for community made a lasting impact. His efforts helped create inclusive spaces for individuals and families in Lunenburg and Queens County.

To honor his legacy, the South Shore Regional Autism Centre established the **Al Sullivan Award**, given to the top fundraising team at the Bridgewater Walk YOUR Way event. The award debuted last year with Al's family in attendance. We are grateful for Al's contributions and proud to carry forward his spirit of dedication and community support.





# Best of Local: An Evening of Community & Celebration

Autism Nova Scotia's 11th annual **Best of Local** gala, presented by Stewart McKelvey, was a memorable evening in celebration of the Autistic community. With over 170 attendees, the event, and raffle supported by the Air Canada Foundation raised more than \$120,000 for Autism Nova Scotia's programs and services.

Held at the Cedar Events Centre, the evening featured inspiring stories from Owen Poirier, who spoke about his experiences with EmploymentWorks, and Conlin Harvey, who shared his journey with Autism Nova Scotia and the impact on his life. Their powerful stories highlighted the importance of inclusive employment and programming.

Guests were treated to culinary demonstrations by renowned Chef Ivan Chan and Chef Gabrielle LeGuerrier, followed by a locally inspired dinner prepared by Chef MacIsaac and his team. The evening concluded on a sweet note with dessert by LN Chocolatier and musical performance by Leona Burkey. A special thank you to everyone who contributed to making this evening a success, including our sponsors, supporters, and volunteers. Your generosity makes a genuine impact.

*"My work experience is going very well. I have good support from my colleagues, and I am looking forward to my future. I have loved trucks for as long as I can remember, so getting to be closer to them has been great. My favorite part of my job is when I get to go on test drives with the mechanics to help diagnose what the problem is. Overall, I get to be close to my passion."*

– Owen Poirier, EmploymentWorks Participant



## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS

### PRESENTING SPONSOR



### MEDIA PARTNER



### GOLD SPONSOR



### SILVER SPONSORS



### BRONZE SPONSORS





## Generous Donation of E-bikes from Carson Exports

Autism Nova Scotia was thrilled to receive a generous donation of 76 e-bikes from Carson Exports, opening new opportunities for Autistic individuals across the province. This incredible has empowered recipients to explore their communities, enhance independence, and embrace active transportation.

The **Autism Nova Scotia E-Bike Program** – created to prepare and distribute the bikes to Autistic applicants – was further supported by Carson Exports, Cyclesmith, iA Financial, and Long Alley Bicycles. Thanks to these community partners, each recipient received a road-ready e-bike, a helmet, and essential cycling education to help them embark on their journeys with confidence.

---

***“I cannot thank you enough for bringing some life back into our son. He looks forward to learning how to ride the e-bike and taking on some new adventures, which is a big deal as he hasn't left the house in 14 months. Words will never be able to express the difference you have made in his life.”***

– Mother of E-Bike Applicant

---



## Honouring a Trailblazer: Brandon Boyd

We were proud to present the 2024 Joan Craig Trailblazer Award to **Brandon Boyd**, a passionate advocate, artist, and community leader.

This award celebrates a change-maker who builds inclusion, amplifies Autistic voices, and collaborates to trailblaze a path forward for everyone. Brandon exemplified these values through his work, leadership, and creativity.

An award-winning local filmmaker, Brandon advanced Autistic representation in the film industry by creating work that challenged stereotypes and portrayed autism with accuracy, depth, and authenticity. His storytelling helped shift public understanding and foster more inclusive narratives.

In addition to his artistic achievements, Brandon served as an ambassador for organizations such as Independent Living Nova Scotia, REACHABILITY, and others, using his voice to promote accessibility, equity, and empowerment.

We were honoured to recognize Brandon's powerful contributions with the Trailblazer Award. His impact continues to inspire and drive change in the community.



## Sheelagh Nolan Award for Excellence in Teaching: Celebrating Inclusive Education

The Sheelagh Nolan Award for Excellence in Teaching honours the legacy of the late Sheelagh Nolan—a passionate advocate for inclusive education and community. Inspired by her son Patrick, Sheelagh championed opportunities for Autistic learners and their families. This annual award recognizes an educator who embodies her values of compassion, collaboration, and commitment to student success.

In 2024, Autism Nova Scotia was proud to present the award to **Marylee Kozera**, teacher in the Enhanced Support Program at Central Kings Rural High School. With over 20 years of experience, Marylee is known for creating inclusive, supportive classrooms where Autistic students can thrive. Her work is grounded in evidence-based practices, trauma-informed care, and deep collaboration with families and school teams.

Marylee's dedication reflects the spirit of this award: fostering growth, belonging, and dignity for every learner. In recognition of her outstanding contributions, Marylee received a \$1,000 honorarium to further support inclusive education in her school community.



## Summary of Program Successes

**184**   
children registered in 2024/25

**47**   
families received enhanced supports such as ESDM, targeted sleep, and behaviour support

**461**   
children have participated in the QuickStart NS program to date



QuickStart Nova Scotia is made possible with support by the Government of Nova Scotia

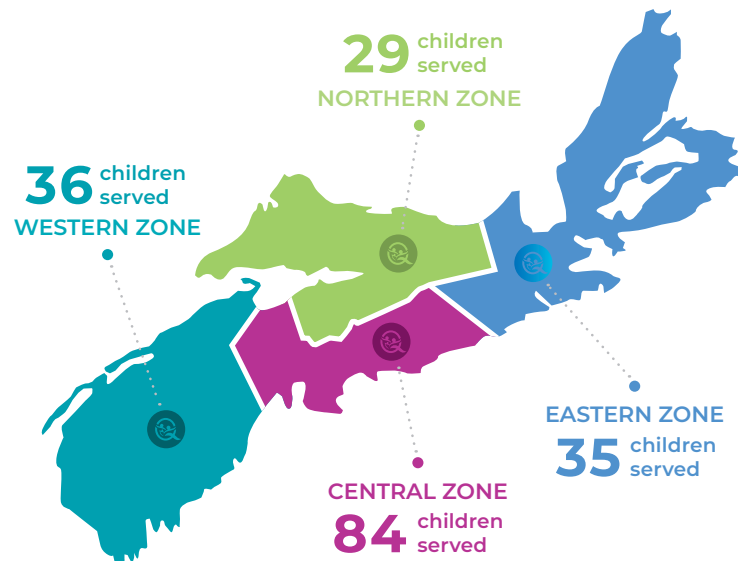
# Early Support, Strong Foundations

This year, **QuickStart Nova Scotia** (QuickStart NS) marked its five-year milestone, continuing its mission to empower families through individualized early intervention. Since the provincial expansion in 2022, the program has supported 648 families, exceeding its initial target of 450.

In 2024–2025, 184 children participated in the Parent Coaching Program, while an additional 47 families accessed supports such as Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) coaching, sleep, and behaviour services.

## Reaching Families Across the Province

QuickStart NS continues to deliver province-wide access through a hybrid of in-home and online services. Regional reach increased again this year:



## Flexibility Through Online Delivery

Online delivery continues to offer reliable support for families. Since the program began, **537 families** have accessed at least one virtual session. This year, **197 families** benefited from online flexibility, reducing cancellations and enabling greater collaboration

## Parent & Caregiver Feedback

QuickStart NS provides both practical tools and emotional reassurance at a critical time in a family's journey. Parents consistently highlighted:

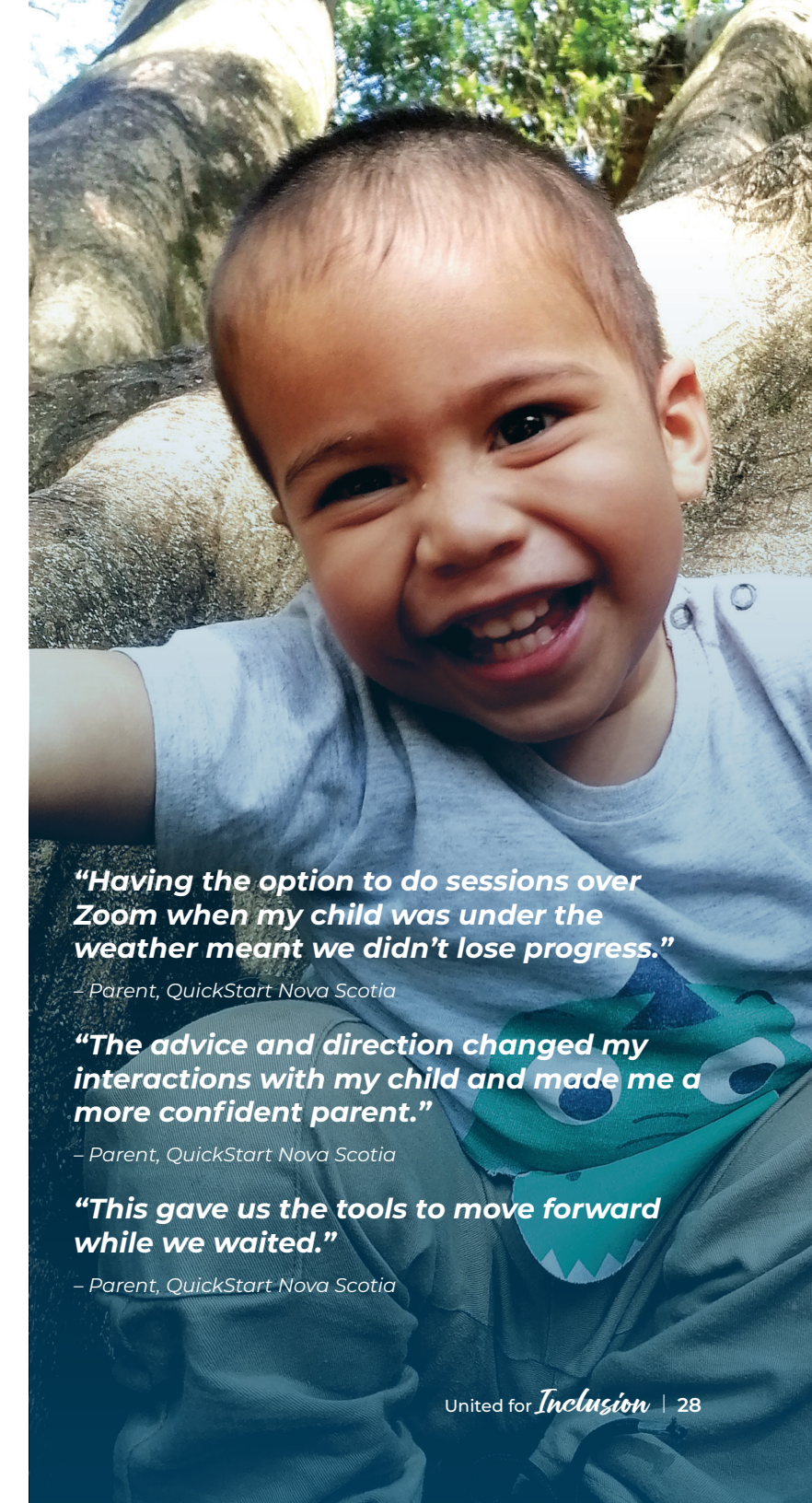
- In-home convenience and comfort
- Personalized coaching tailored to each child
- Improved confidence in daily routines and parenting
- Support while waiting for a diagnosis

## Looking Ahead

As QuickStart NS continues to grow, families have identified opportunities to enhance the program:

- Earlier access for families on long waitlists
- More time to apply learning
- Additional access to specialists and peer support

With continued investment, QuickStart NS is positioned to become a truly comprehensive early intervention model—building stronger families and brighter futures across Nova Scotia.



**“Having the option to do sessions over Zoom when my child was under the weather meant we didn’t lose progress.”**

– Parent, QuickStart Nova Scotia

**“The advice and direction changed my interactions with my child and made me a more confident parent.”**

– Parent, QuickStart Nova Scotia

**“This gave us the tools to move forward while we waited.”**

– Parent, QuickStart Nova Scotia

# Creating Inclusive Spaces for Connection and Wellbeing

Autism Nova Scotia's **Recreation Department** continues to offer a diverse range of social, creative, and leisure programs for Autistic individuals of all ages across the province. Whether in-person or virtual, our weekly and bi-weekly programs are grounded in the belief that recreation is essential to mental health, community connection, and quality of life.

With a focus on person-directed, community-led spaces, our programs promote autonomy, build confidence, and offer meaningful opportunities to connect, learn, and have fun.

## Social Group & Supported Social Group

Our Social Group model empowers participants to sign up only for the activities that interest them, leading to stronger engagement and natural socialization. The program now supports 97 participants across teen and adult cohorts and continues to attract dedicated volunteers across the province.

The Supported Social Group offers a more structured option for individuals with higher support needs, where each participant attends with a respite worker. In 2024, we introduced a teen cohort, which filled capacity.



## Dungeons & Dragons (Virtual)

This popular program continues to run online, removing transportation barriers and offering consistent access throughout the year. Participants report high satisfaction with the virtual format.

## Women's Autism/Autistic Project

This fast-growing program provides an affirming space for Autistic individuals who identify as women, femme, or non-binary. With 47 participants and strong interest in both adult and teen sessions, it has become one of our most requested programs. Sessions combine discussion-based learning with creative and social activities, supported by staff and volunteers.

## Bridges to Success

With ongoing support from the Department of Community Services, this program supports Autistic young adults with higher support needs through skill-building and community-based volunteer placements. Participants contribute to organizations such as Feed Nova Scotia, SPCA, and Mission Mart, while building independence and confidence.





### Autism Arts

Delivered in partnership with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, this expressive arts program filled every cohort in 2024 within an hour of registration. When needed, programming transitioned seamlessly to community partner spaces—ensuring uninterrupted access for participants.

### Weekend Recreation & Respite (R&R)

Thanks to the generous and ongoing support from the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia, Weekend R&R continues to provide no-cost, meaningful programming to families who do not receive provincial respite funding.

This year, 29 participants received personalized, flexible support in a welcoming, community-focused environment. As we look ahead, we're excited to explore a new mobile model that will rotate locations to better serve families in underserved communities across the province. We are deeply grateful to Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia for making this vital support possible—and we look forward to continuing this impactful work with their partnership.

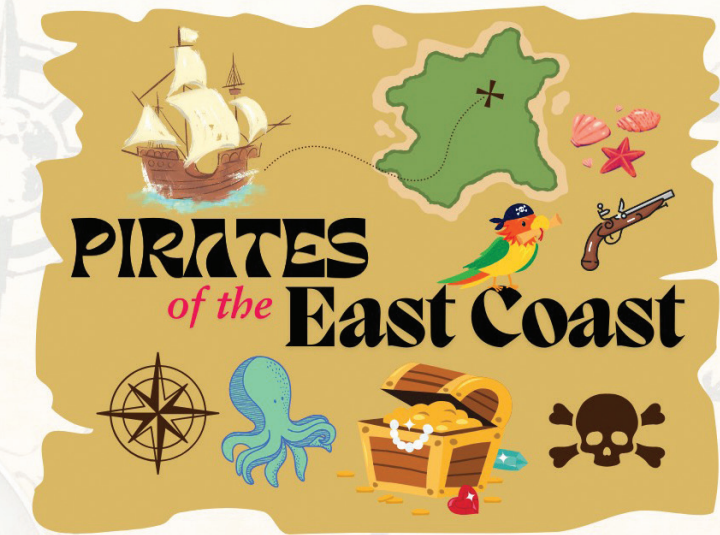


### Video Project

This long-standing Autistic led, and creative program continues to thrive, bringing together participants to collaborate on creating a film. The 2024–2025 season concluded with our annual Red Carpet Premiere at the Halifax Public Library, in celebration of Autism Acceptance Month.

### Yoga for Everyone

Launched in Fall 2024 through a partnership with Halifax Yoga, this inclusive wellness program welcomed 20 participants in its first season. This model offers strong potential for future collaborations with yoga and wellness providers in other communities.



---

***'This was a very support program to transition my son into ANS' programming options. It was his first time, and he felt safe and embraced things fully. Thank you!'***

---



# Supporting Goals, Building Pathways

**The Person Directed Planning Program (PDPP)** supports individuals who self-identify as having a disability to build toward a life that is personally meaningful. Through individualized support from a Person Directed Planning Facilitator, participants worked to define and pursue goals aligned with their values—focusing on self-determination, connection, and long-term wellbeing.

Offered in the Central and Western Regions of the province, the program connected participants to both formal and informal supports, helping them explore options and build stronger ties within their communities.

---

**“The PDPP facilitators were there to help to source information and resources that are hard to navigate in your own self-advocacy journey. Facilitators help lift the weight that you just can’t carry as a disabled person living through life as an Autistic.”** – PDPP Participant

---

## Impact and Focus Areas

Participants in the PDPP worked on personalized goals in areas such as:



**employment & skill development**



**recreation & leisure**



**social connection & belonging**



**mental health & wellness**



**life skills**  
(e.g., budgeting, organization, time management)

The program emphasized the use of natural supports (such as family, friends, and community groups) as well as broader networks, empowering individuals to take the lead in shaping their future.

## Program Transition

As of March 31, 2025, Autism Nova Scotia’s Person Directed Planning Program concluded following the non-renewal of funding. While the Department of Community Services’ Division of Opportunities and Social Development intends to assume delivery of the program, a start date has not yet been confirmed. We are proud of the work accomplished by participants, facilitators, and communities over the course of the program.

# Supporting Autonomy and Everyday Life

Autism Nova Scotia’s **Independent Living Support** (ILS) program provides one-on-one, community-based support for Autistic adults working toward greater independence. Through a person-directed approach, participants are supported by Community Living Coaches to pursue goals that matter to them, at their own pace and in the community of their choice.

## Promoting Independence and Choice

In 2024, the ILS team supported 12 participants, many of whom moved into their own apartments for the first time. With the program at capacity, Autism Nova Scotia hired an additional ILS Coordinator to support planned expansion in 2025.

Participants worked toward a wide range of goals, including:

- Budgeting and household management
- Employment and community engagement
- Mental and physical wellbeing
- Building relationships and social connections

Coaches also helped participants build a circle of support that includes family, friends, health professionals, and community-based services.

# Strategic Partnerships

## GEO Nova Scotia

Provided internet access and technology to participants who otherwise would not have connectivity in their homes.

## Department of Community Services – Disability Support Program

As the primary referral pathway, the Disability Support Program (DSP) enables participants to access financial and wraparound supports that promote autonomy and improved quality of life.

## Autism Nova Scotia Programs

ILS participants also benefit from referrals to Autism Nova Scotia’s broader offerings, including:

- PASS
- Employment Supports
- Pinwheel Wellness Centre, including access to an Occupational Therapist through an established collaboration



## Conversations that Celebrate Autistic Voices

Originally a newsletter and later a magazine, **Autistics Aloud** entered a new chapter in 2024 with the debut of the Conversation Series—a five-question interview series featuring Autistic Nova Scotians.

The first edition welcomed back three amazing Autistic youth who spoke about their artwork, Autistic representation, misdiagnosis, advocacy, and their hopes for the future. For Autism Acceptance Month, Autistics Aloud published a special edition that featured several Autistic voices reflecting on what autism means to them.

The series also reconnected with Hugh Garber, first featured in the LifeSpans Series. Now 15, Hugh is into making beats, anime, and continues his advocacy work around autism and mental health. The series also welcomed Jaime Coolen, a first-time contributor.

Autistics Aloud is proud to be a space grounded in the belief that Autistic voices matter and remains committed to the principle: “Nothing About Us Without Us.” We thank the Halifax Youth Project for being long-term supporters and making Autistics Aloud possible.

**“I’m just happy to have this space where I can lower my mask, speak out, and share my experiences while also listening to other Autistic individuals.”**

– Madisyn Snow



## A Place to Connect, Share, and Belong

Now entering its second year, **LDX-A-Chat** has continued to grow and evolve in exciting and meaningful ways. With members ranging in age from 21 to 72 and living across the province—from Yarmouth to Cape Breton—this virtual group offers a much-needed space for late-diagnosed Autistic adults to connect, reflect, and build community.

### In 2024–2025, the program expanded to meet rising demand:

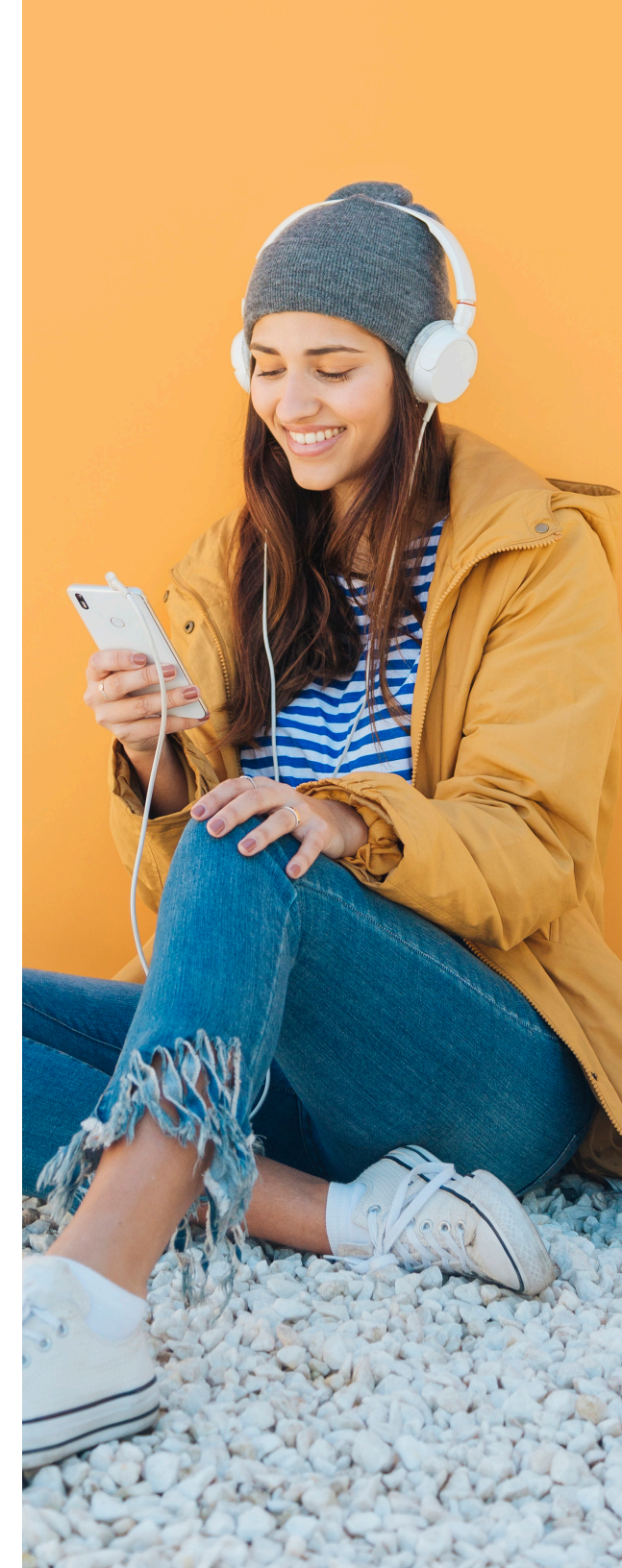
- A new Monday afternoon group
- Wednesday evening sessions extended to 90 minutes
- 63 applications received over the year

Session topics included Autistic burnout, masking, mutual aid, relationships, employment, boundaries, and processing the emotions that come with a late diagnosis. For many participants, especially those in rural communities without access to third spaces, LDX-A-Chat offers something rare: a space to connect with others who understand.

LDX-A-Chat continues to be a space where Autistic adults can get to know each other, ask questions, share life experiences, and feel a genuine sense of belonging.

**“This program is the only opportunity I have to connect with other late-diagnosed Autistic people. I’m grateful it exists.”**

– Shared by several group members



# Advancing Economic Inclusion

Autism Nova Scotia is deepening its commitment to **economic inclusion** by supporting Autistic individuals in building the skills, confidence, and connections they need to pursue meaningful employment and community participation. Our focus is on creating clearer pathways to success, from skill development to job placements and ongoing career growth, with an emphasis on reducing systemic barriers—especially in rural and underserved communities.

By fostering stronger connections between programs, employers, and individuals, we are creating a more deliberate, supported journey toward long-term inclusion in the workforce and community life. This work is about more than finding a job—it's about supporting Autistic individuals to build futures of their choosing, with the right tools, supports, and opportunities in place.

## Empowering Workforce Readiness and Career Exploration

Our workforce preparedness programs reach individuals across the province, offering coaching, training, and group-based support.



## New initiatives and Pilots

- **ForestND**, in partnership with the Forestry Sector Council and funded through the Department of Labour, Skills, and Immigration, will provide short-term job placements in forestry occupations for neurodiverse adults.
- A **Reverse Job Fair** held in Truro connected 70 attendees and led directly to three hires and a new employer partnership with Cineplex.
- **Inclusive Voting Partnership:** Through a signed agreement with Elections Nova Scotia, Autism Nova Scotia advised on accessible voting practices and promoted opportunities for diverse job seekers.

## Fostering Inclusive Employment Through Innovation and Partnership

The Economic Inclusion Department continued to deliver programs such as EmploymentWorks ANS, Career Quest, and Pre-Employment Coaching, while cultivating new partnerships to support inclusive hiring.

### Notable employer partnerships and community highlights included:

- **Lake City Cider** co-hosted an EmploymentWorks cohort and fundraiser.
- **Cobs Bread** joined as a new employer partner in Bedford and Dartmouth.
- **Friends For Life Childcare** and Lake City Cider were both featured in Best of Local 2024.

## EmploymentWorks:

**31**   
participants

## Career Quest:

**28**   
participants

## Paid Employment Connections:

**272**   
participants

*“EmploymentWorks has been incredibly beneficial for building my workplace confidence... It really took away the stigma of the workplace being a scary place for autistic individuals.” – Tia Quartermain*



## Empowering Youth Leaders

Autism Nova Scotia's **Community Leadership Program** continues to empower Autistic youth aged 14–18 by building skills, confidence, and meaningful pathways toward workforce participation. Thanks to a generous \$100,000 commitment from ScotiaRISE, the program will expand to Truro, furthering its reach into rural and underserved communities.

This year, 34 youth participated in Community Leadership across five communities: Halifax, New Germany, Chester, Bridgewater, and Sydney. Through this program, participants explored goal setting, teamwork, and community engagement while building skills that prepare them for employment and leadership.

The program also established 20 new partnerships with not-for-profit organizations across the province—offering diverse, community-based opportunities that foster inclusion and connection.



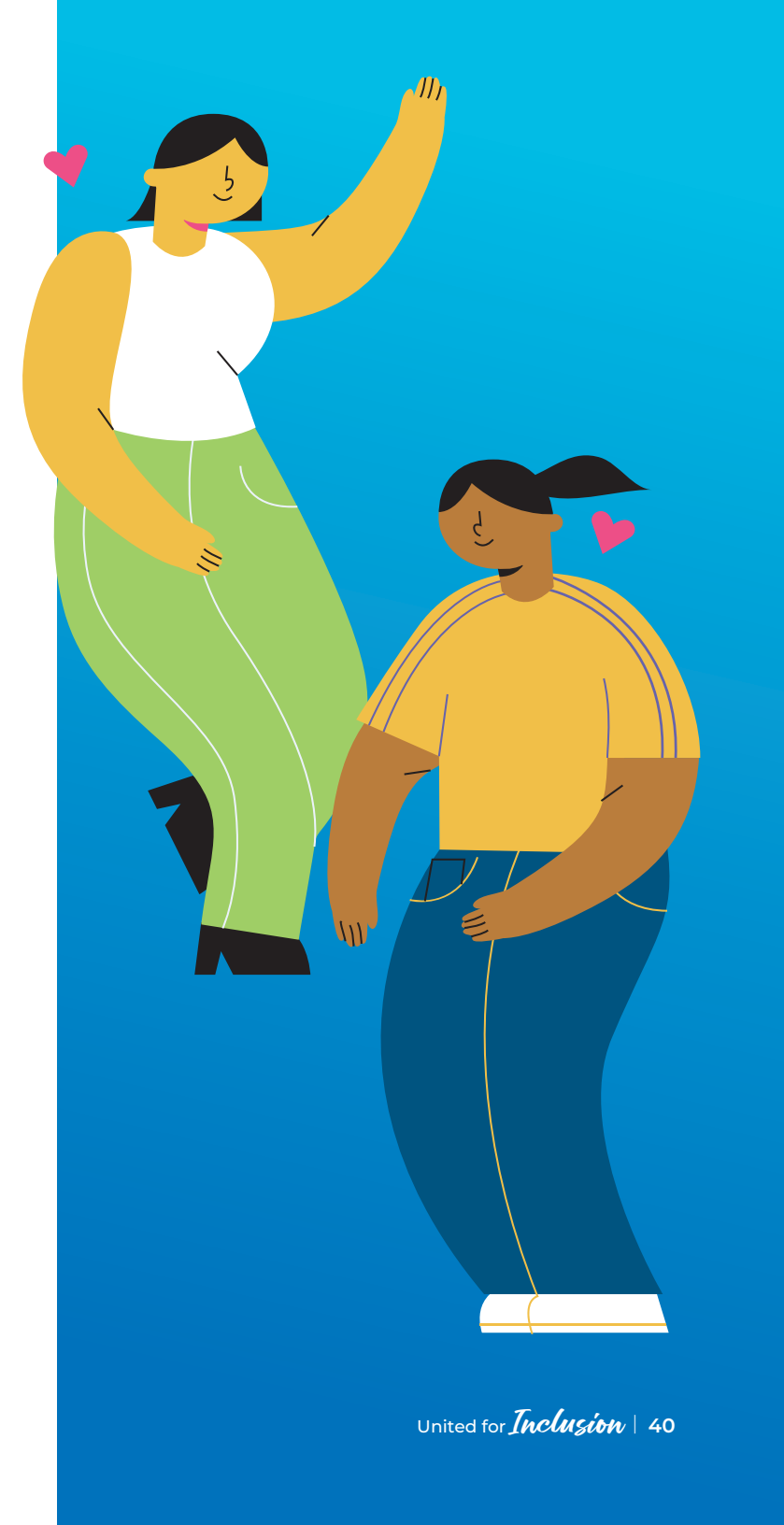
## Advancing Inclusive Sexuality Education

Last year, Autism Nova Scotia continued its leadership in inclusive health education through two key initiatives focused on healthy relationships, consent, and sexuality.

Through a national partnership with the Sex Information & Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN), Autism Nova Scotia hosted a focus group with Autistic youth to provide feedback on new consent education resources in development—ensuring Autistic voices are central to the design of inclusive materials.

Additionally, Autism Nova Scotia led the **Healthy Relationships, Sexuality, and Autism** Youth Program in partnership with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD). This year-long initiative addressed a critical gap in Nova Scotia's education system by:

- Developing curriculum-aligned learning outcomes for grades 4–9
- Creating professional development tools for educators
- Producing a video series for families and educators on autism, gender, sexuality, and healthy relationships



# Empowering Autistic Students in Higher Education

Navigating post-secondary education presents unique challenges for many Autistic students. Autism Nova Scotia's **Post-Secondary Autism Support Services** (PASS) program offers individualized, person-directed support from the summer before students begin their post-secondary journey until graduation.

PASS helps students build independence, reduce anxiety, strengthen executive functioning, and work toward personal and academic goals—all while putting student voice and choice at the centre of the process.

## Personalized Academic Navigation

PASS participants identify the goals they want to pursue and how they want to work toward them. Areas of support include:

- Campus navigation
- Study and organizational skills
- Group work and communication
- Social skills and anxiety management
- Practicum planning and career exploration

The PASS team also supports students in understanding and advocating for academic accommodations, including help reviewing documentation, preparing for meetings, and participating in discussions with Accessibility Services or instructors.

***“I wish I knew about PASS sooner; it would have been very beneficial to have PASS support when I started school in September.”***

– PASS Student

***“This is a good program for Autistic people who need help in post-secondary school. There should be more awareness of this program so people would know about it when they are starting post-secondary school.”***

– PASS Student

***“Personally, I entered the program to see what it could offer me. Many of the skills it goes over are never explicitly taught to people, so working on these skills may increase my quality of life.”***

– PASS Student

## Summer Program for High School Transitions

Created to address the gap between high school and post-secondary, the **PASS Summer Program** continues to grow. Delivered in partnership with **NeonTrain** via the **Brightspace platform**, the program offers an orientation and eight weekly sessions to support students entering college or university in the fall.

Student feedback continues to shape the program's delivery. In 2024, Week 4's student-led panel on post-secondary life was expanded into a full session due to overwhelmingly positive feedback.

**In 2024–2025, PASS expanded its collaboration with:**

- St. Francis Xavier University
- Nova Scotia Community College
- Dalhousie University's Centre for Psychological Health

These partnerships are key to increasing inclusion and strengthening the post-secondary system for Autistic students across the province.

## Amy Farnell Education Award

In partnership with the Craig Foundation and the Farnell family, Autism Nova Scotia was thrilled to once again offer the **Amy Farnell Education Award** in 2024 to eligible Autistic Nova Scotians pursuing post-secondary education. Named in honour of long-time supporter and cherished friend Amy Farnell, the award has now supported 68 Autistic students across the province since its launch in 2021, providing over \$215,000 in education funding toward tuition costs.



***“Being selected as an Amy Farnell award recipient allows me to focus on starting college without the stress and worry of funding some of my***

***tuition. I am grateful to not only be selected but that there are awards such as this to help support autistic individuals like myself.”***

– 2024 Award Recipient



## Expanding Access to Mental Health Support

At **Pinwheel Wellness Centre** (PWC), we believe that everyone deserves access to mental health care that respects who they are. That's why we exist—to support Autistic adults (19+) across Nova Scotia who are experiencing mild to moderate mental health challenges.

PWC was created in direct response to the voices and lived experiences of Autistic individuals and their support networks. Through those voices, we heard a clear message: there is a critical need for specialized, accessible, and affirming mental health care. Pinwheel is our response to that call.

Our approach is grounded in a neurodivergent-affirming, person-centred philosophy. We focus on building trust, fostering autonomy, and working collaboratively with each individual. Whether someone prefers to connect in person, by phone, or through secure telehealth, we strive to meet them where they are—literally and emotionally.

Over the past year, as we have deepened our relationships and expanded our services, one



recurring challenge became clear: many of the individuals we support face overwhelming barriers when trying to access essential systems—like housing, employment, income support, or healthcare. These challenges often leave people feeling isolated and unsupported.

In response, we introduced **case navigation services**—a vital part of our wraparound care. Because we know that mental wellness isn't just about therapy or diagnosis—it's also about ensuring that basic needs are met, systems are navigable, and no one is left to figure it out alone.

### Core Services

- Counselling Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Case Navigation
- Wellness Groups
- Life Skills Workshops

Over the past year we have been able to grow responsively to the emerging trends we see in our clients' needs.

### Wellness Programming

In an effort to increase access to those who may be on a waitlist, or not quite in need of one-to-one support, we hired a new Wellness Groups Coordinator to facilitate expanded group-based programming including Anxiety and Depression Groups, Sleep Workshops, and **Sibs CONNECT**.

### Counselling & OT Services

The demand for one-to-one therapy at Pinwheel continues to grow. In an effort to reduce wait times for those seeking help and limit the experience of unsupported mental distress, PWC expanded its counselling team to include two full-time and two part-time therapists, increasing service capacity.



Occupational Therapy also grew to two full-time clinicians, significantly reducing waitlists.

### Case Navigation & Social Work

Wrap-around care includes breaking down barriers to essential support, a struggle we see clients experiencing all too often. For many, the interpersonal stamina and masking required to navigate access is daunting, humiliating, and overwhelming. Expanding the social work lens at Pinwheel has been energizing for our team and our clients alike. Social workers now support clients in intake, navigation, and therapy—broadening the lens of care across the Centre.

### Practicum Partnerships

Pinwheel’s mandate includes expanding neurodiversity-affirming practices in mental health practitioners in Nova Scotia. One way to achieve this is through hosting interns in various the various diciplines Pinwheel. In other years we have hosted Occupational Therapy and Social Work interns. In fall 2024, PWC hosted its first counselling intern from Acadia University—supporting student development while co-facilitating wellness groups.

### Education & Professional Development

Pinwheel’s interdisciplinary team remains committed to continuous learning:

- **Interoception Training** with Kelly Mahler
- **Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)** training with Drs. Attwood and Garnett
- **First Voice Initiative** launch, inviting Autistic reviewers to refine curriculum content for accessibility and neuro-affirming alignment

### Community Engagement & Systems Advocacy

This year, Pinwheel continued to stand alongside the people we serve—not only in therapy sessions, but in the many systems they navigate every day. Our team provided hands-on case navigation, collaborated with healthcare providers, and supported clients through essential documentation for mental health leave and benefits claims.

We also deepened our partnerships across both the mental health and justice sectors, a reflection of the growing recognition of Pinwheel’s unique and essential role in the landscape of adult Autism care in Nova Scotia.

With referrals steadily increasing from both public and private providers, Pinwheel is emerging as a trusted provincial hub for specialized, neurodivergent-affirming mental health support. It’s a responsibility we hold with care, and a reflection of the strong, collaborative relationships we continue to build—one person at a time.

**“The services at Pinwheel have been pivotal for me as a late diagnosed autistic woman.**

**Being seen, heard and acknowledged for who I truly am (for the very first time) with such compassion and empathy has helped me learn about myself through a lens of self-compassion and self-exploration.**

**It has provided a healthy platform for me to live authentically with meaning and purpose. It has sincerely been a life changing experience.”**

– PWC client

# Building Knowledge: Exploring the Spectrum

Autism Nova Scotia's **Exploring the Spectrum** (ETS) program continues to play a vital role in educating professionals, service providers, and community partners across Nova Scotia. Through both in-person training and virtual education, ETS helped build community capacity to better support and understand Autistic individuals in a wide variety of settings.

Over the last year, ETS delivered impactful training to 30 organizations and saw strong uptake of our self-paced online learning, reflecting the growing demand for inclusive, autism-informed professional development across sectors and regions—particularly in rural communities.



## Expanding Reach Through Training and Collaboration

ETS proudly delivers sessions to a diverse range of organizations, from social service agencies and government departments to private employers and community-based programs. Highlights from this year's partnerships include:

- East Preston Daycare
- Mi'kmaw Friendship Society
- Sipekne'katik First Nations Recreation Program
- Halifax Transit
- Department of Community Services Foster Care Program
- Halifax Independent School
- Boys and Girls Club of Preston
- Southland Bus
- IKEA
- 211 Nova Scotia

These sessions created safer, more welcoming spaces for Autistic individuals and sparked meaningful conversations on how to foster accessibility and belonging in work, care, and community environments.

## Innovation and New Opportunities

This year, ETS formalized its first-ever licensing agreement with the Nova Scotia Career Development Association (NSCDA). Through this partnership, NSCDA now hosts our "Autism and Employment Supports" modules on its learning management system, allowing professionals province-wide to access high-quality autism-informed training on demand.

This milestone underscores our growing influence in the professional training space and signals a future focus on expanding our digital education offerings, including sector-specific modules delivered year-round.

## Training Program Reach (April 2024 - March 2025)



**In-Person & Virtual  
Training Sessions**

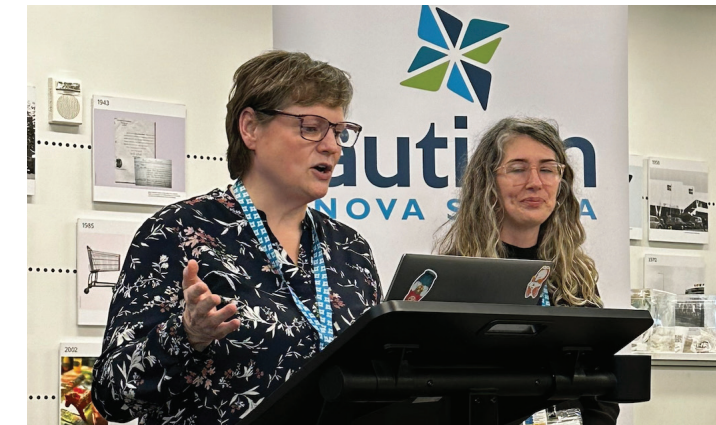
**30** organizations served



**Self-Paced Online  
Courses**

**94** courses purchased via eCampus

**"Debbie did a fantastic job explaining how we can be more accepting and what we can do to be more inclusive of individuals with Autism."** – Staff Member, Nova Scotia Museums





## Empowering Families, Building Capacity

Families are at the heart of Autism Nova Scotia’s mission. This year, our **Family Support Team** continued to provide essential education, advocacy, and navigation services, helping Autistic individuals and their families across the province feel supported, informed, and connected.

### Community Education & Advocacy

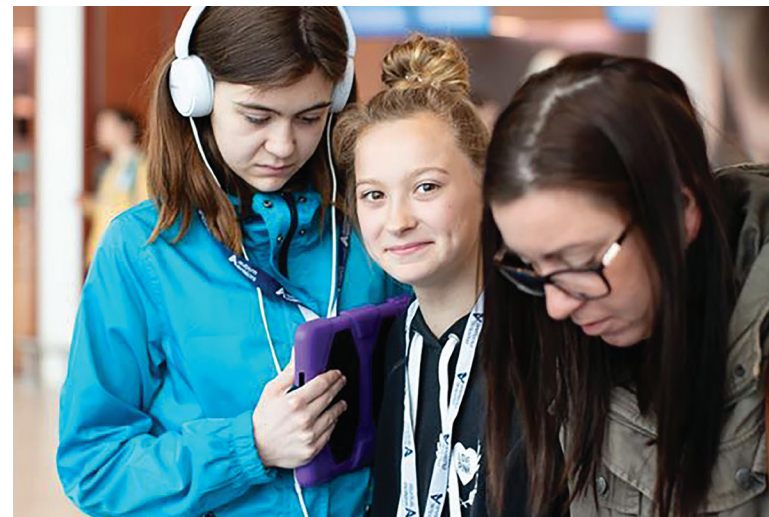
In 2024–2025, the team delivered over 35 community and school presentations, primarily in the Halifax region, supporting caregivers, educators, and professionals. Collaborating with our Education & Training team, we updated and standardized

school presentation content for use by Chapter Coordinators across the province.

We also partnered with community organizations and contributed to AIDE Canada webinars on respite, employment, and Disability Tax Credit access, while hosting inclusive educational events like a Lunch & Learn with the Halifax Regional Police Hate Crimes Unit.

### Supporting Navigation & Systems Change

This year, we expanded our network of community connections, including PPAS teams, SchoolsPlus, Inclusion Nova Scotia, Community Health Teams, and the Department of Community Services. We participated in key forums and conferences and provided feedback to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on changes to the provincial School Code of Conduct, working in collaboration with families and community partners.



### Inclusive Community Experiences

We were involved in a wide range of sensory-friendly and inclusive events across HRM and beyond:

- Sensory Santa/Bunny (Mic Mac Mall), Carson Exports Car Show, Get Air trampoline event (with the Doug Flutie Foundation)
- Neptune Theatre relaxed performance
- Autism Aviators at Halifax Stanfield International Airport, with 75 participants exploring air travel in a supported environment. We also plan to offer the Autism Aviators program at the JA Douglas McCurdy Sydney Airport.

In addition, we helped launch the Sunflower Program at Halifax Stanfield and participated in its recognition event as a Rick Hansen Centre of Excellence.

### Direct Support & Connection

Over the past year, the Family Support Team supported over 160 families and individuals, assisting with new diagnoses, navigating assessments, education planning, funding, and access to clinical and community resources. We also continued to manage the GEO (Get Everyone Online) initiative, connecting more individuals to internet access and devices.

***“Thank you so much for the information and for sending along those resources! That has been incredibly helpful, and I know the family will be so grateful for the feedback!”***

– Clinical Interventionist IWK

***Thanks so much. I am just about to meet virtually with the young fella' in question for his yoga. I feel so much more hopeful going into today's appointment knowing the angels at Autism NS have heard my cries and are willing to connect to explore possible avenues to maintain essential support for this talented, vulnerable being. Your organization and the people who work hard to sustain it are heroes! I'll gladly fill you in on his success with yoga during our chat tomorrow at 11 - Can't wait!”***

– Trauma Informed Yoga Specialist

***“My daughter is on her very first flight today. A great dream come true for her. I want to thank Autism Nova Scotia for their support and information. A shout out to Jill and Jeffrey.”***

– Parent

# Autism Aviators: Taking Flight with Confidence

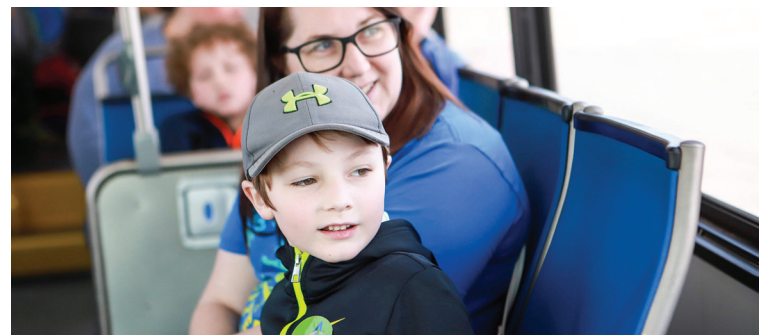
Halifax Stanfield International Airport hosted the fourth annual **Autism Aviators** event in partnership with Autism Nova Scotia and Porter Airlines. This initiative is designed to make air travel more accessible for Autistic individuals and their families by offering a guided, sensory-aware walkthrough of the airport experience.

Last year, 75 participants, from preschoolers to adults, took part in the event. Attendees practiced checking in, going through security, navigating to the gate, and boarding an aircraft—many for the very first time. The day ended with refreshments and a chance to reflect together in the airport’s observation area.

This event continues to demonstrate the power of inclusive, community-driven partnerships in reducing barriers and building confidence in public spaces.

**“We are so grateful for the chance to experience the processes and environment of air travel prior to the real deal so we are all better prepared. We are hoping to reschedule a trip soon and are very hopeful it will be positive for everyone now that we know exactly what to expect!”**

– Parent of participant



# Community Builders

Autism Nova Scotia extends immense thanks to the dedicated volunteers across the province who bring energy, compassion, and creativity to our programs and events each year. As a non-profit organization, we depend on the generosity of volunteers whose contributions help create inclusive spaces where Autistic individuals can thrive.

Volunteers played essential roles in programs such as **Social Group, Autism Arts, Dungeons & Dragons**, and the **Women’s Autism/Autistic Project**, helping to foster community connection, creativity, and meaningful social opportunities.

From mentoring and facilitation to behind-the-scenes support, every volunteer helps build a more inclusive Nova Scotia—one interaction at a time.



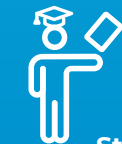
In 2024–2025, we saw strong volunteer interest:



**60** Total Active Volunteers



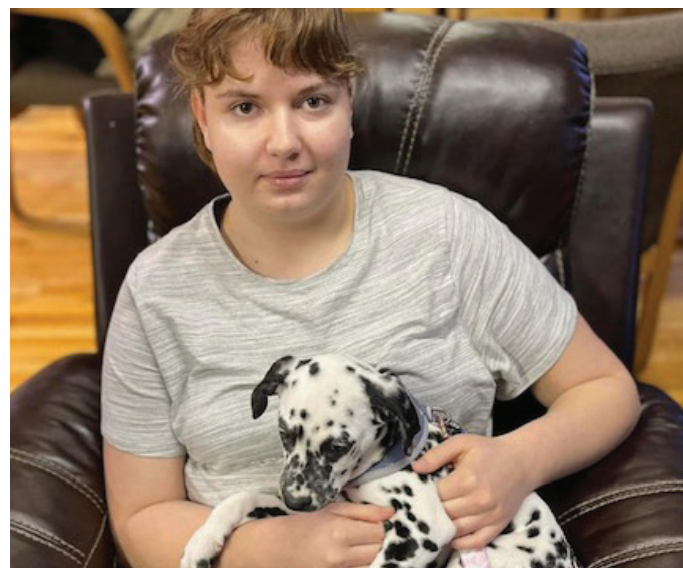
**118** Volunteer Applications Received



**11** Student Applications Received



**4** Volunteer Fairs Attended





## Celebrating 14 Years of Impact and Community

For 14 years, **The Pearl** has been a place of creativity, connection, and belonging—a social enterprise rooted in dignity, opportunity, and inclusion. Through handcrafted products, meaningful employment, and community engagement, The Pearl empowered Autistic makers while sharing a message of acceptance and ability in communities across Nova Scotia.

With deep gratitude and pride, we closed The Pearl's doors this year. This social enterprise has shaped lives, sparked important conversations, and created a space where Autistic individuals could connect, contribute, and be celebrated.

We extend heartfelt thanks to the many customers, community members, and partners who supported The Pearl over the years—especially the Halifax Seaport Market and our fellow vendors. Their encouragement and collaboration helped build a vibrant, supportive community that made this work possible.

The legacy of The Pearl will continue in the spirit of Autism Nova Scotia's work, reminding us of the power of community-driven spaces that foster inclusion, leadership, and opportunity for all.



***“I am so proud of The Pearl, the team, and the huge impact this program has made over the years. Bravo to what has been, and all the best in the unquestionably excellent AutismNS adventures to come!”***



**autism**  
NOVA SCOTIA

[AUTISMNOVASCOTIA.CA](http://AUTISMNOVASCOTIA.CA)

**Inclusion ✨ Respect ✨ Collaboration ✨ Courage ✨ Acceptance**