autism
NOVA SCOTIA

ANNUAL REPORT
2025-2026

Waves of *Action*

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.

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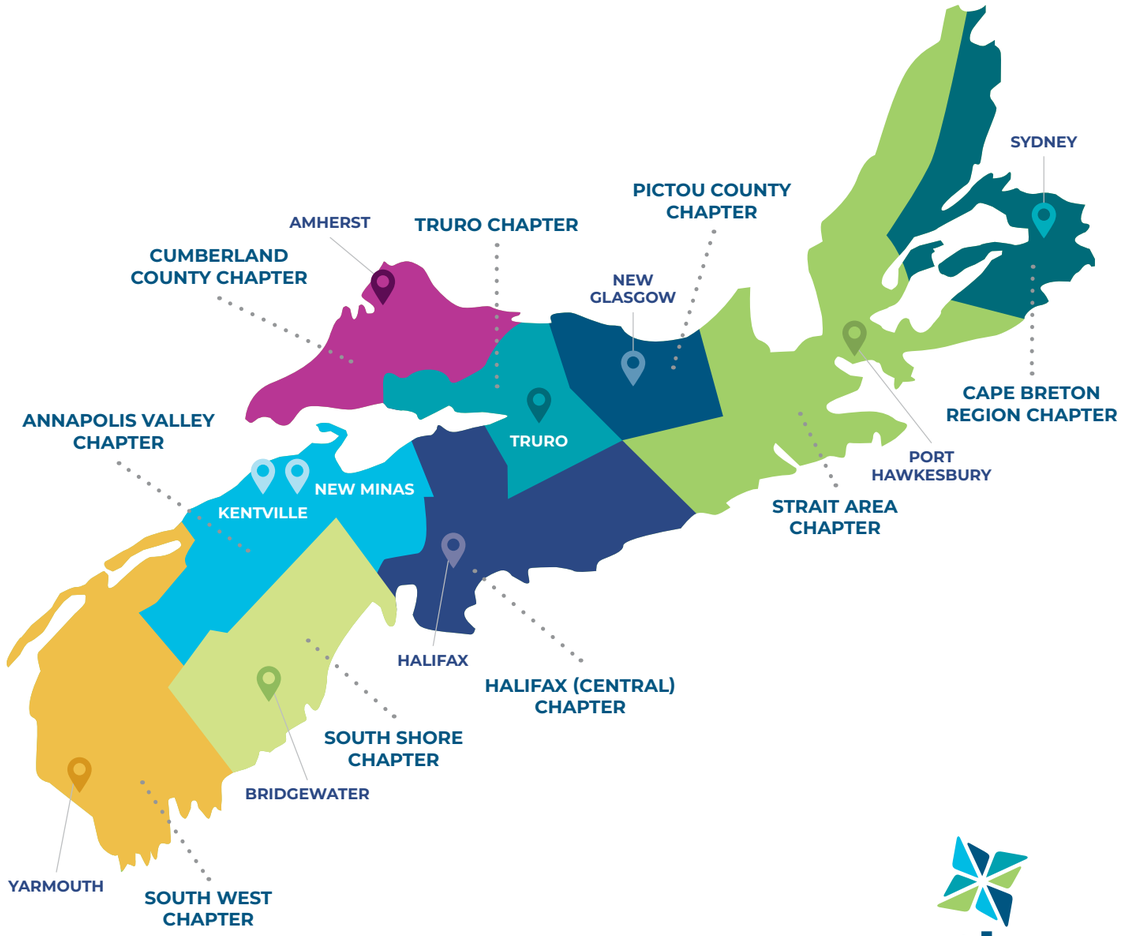

autism NOVA SCOTIA

LEAVE

CAMP STAFF

CELEBRATE
HAPPY BIRTHDAY

autism
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Waves of Action

This year, we reflected deeply on what it means to build belonging – not as a single moment, but as something that grows over time, in waves. Across Nova Scotia, Autistic individuals and their circles of care continue seeking spaces where they feel understood, included, and able to fully participate in everyday life.

At Autism Nova Scotia, belonging often begins with small but meaningful moments – a first program, a first friendship, or a moment of feeling understood. From there, those moments grow outward, strengthening individuals, families, and communities.

As Board Chair, it is a privilege to support this work and the people who continue to shape it. For Interim CEO Vicki Harvey, this work is also deeply personal. Having been part of Autism Nova Scotia since its earliest days, Vicki has witnessed the organization grow alongside those it serves. As a mother to an Autistic son, she understands firsthand the importance of support, inclusion, and meaningful connection.

This year represented an important period of growth and transition for our organization. The opening of our new Central Office created a welcoming space for teams, individuals, and families, while Nova Scotia's first Autism Action Plan continued to take shape through lived experience and community collaboration.

Across our Regional Autism Centres, demand for services continued to grow as teams worked to expand equitable access to programs, supports, and opportunities for Autistic individuals and families across Nova Scotia.

We are inspired by the individuals and families we serve, the dedication of our staff and volunteers, and the partners and supporters helping advance our mission.

As Autism Nova Scotia approaches 25 years of advocacy and inclusion in the upcoming 2026–2027 fiscal year, we remain committed to a future where Autistic individuals and their circles of care feel valued, understood, and empowered to thrive.

Together, we are creating waves of action that continue reaching further into communities across Nova Scotia every year.

Vicki Harvey

Vicki Harvey
Interim Chief Executive Officer, Autism Nova Scotia

Catherine Rahey

Catherine Rahey
Education Consultant, Autism, Neurodiversity & Learning Centre Services

Waves of Action, 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.

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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 guide our organization's overall focus and approach. As we wrap up our current strategic plan, Autism Nova Scotia will embark on the development of a new strategic plan in the 2026–2027 fiscal year to help drive our vision forward.

INCLUSION **COLLABORATION** **ACCEPTANCE** **RESPECT** **COURAGE**

Advancing the Provincial Autism Action Plan

The Provincial Autism Action Plan is a community-driven initiative designed to create a more inclusive, coordinated, and equitable future for Autistic Nova Scotians and their families. Co-led by Autism Nova Scotia and the Province of Nova Scotia, the Action Plan brings together Autistic individuals, families, service providers, community organizations, and government partners to develop a roadmap for strengthening supports, services, and opportunities throughout the lifespan.

Focused on areas such as social inclusion, healthcare and community supports, education and transitions, employment, housing, and financial security, the Action Plan seeks to ensure Autistic Nova Scotians can access the supports they need, participate fully in their communities, and thrive. Guided by the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us," the work remains firmly rooted in the experiences and leadership of Autistic people across the province.

This year marked an important phase in the development of the Action Plan as the work shifted from broad community consultation toward recommendations and implementation planning.

Drawing on feedback from Autistic individuals, family members, caregivers, educators, service providers, healthcare professionals, employers, and community leaders, four working groups were established to:

- Explore barriers impacting Autistic individuals and their families
- Identify gaps in current systems, services, and supports
- Develop recommendations to improve outcomes across four key areas: Social Inclusion, Community and Healthcare Supports, Education and Transitions, and Economic Inclusion

The work undertaken this year has helped establish a clear, community-informed foundation for the next phase of the Action Plan. Alongside the development of recommendations, Autism Nova Scotia continued working with government partners across multiple departments to explore implementation pathways, identify shared priorities, and support a coordinated approach to long-term change.

This past year reinforced the importance of strong partnerships, open dialogue, and a collective willingness to work together through both opportunities and challenges. Building a more inclusive province requires collaboration, trust, and sustained commitment from community, organizations, Autistic leaders, families, service providers, and government alike.

"I am incredibly proud of the diverse voices, lived experiences, and shared commitment that continue to shape the Autism Action Plan. Together, we are helping advance the future of autism supports, services, and inclusion across Nova Scotia."

– **Vicki Harvey**, *Interim CEO*

The Maritime Hub – AIDE Canada

AIDE Canada (Autism and/or Intellectual Disability Knowledge Exchange Network) is Canada's largest online resource platform offering free tools, information, and supports for Autistic, neurodivergent, and intellectual disability communities.

Autism Nova Scotia hosts the Maritime Hub Coordinator for the Atlantic Provinces. Over the past year, our Coordinator developed and facilitated several advocacy-focused resources for caregivers and families, including the webinar *An Advocacy Journey*, which highlighted real-life caregiver perspectives and experiences.

Additional advocacy resources included the creation of two infographics:

- My Life and Story: All About Me
- Tips for advocating for your Autistic family member

Additional webinars included:

- *How to Qualify for the Disability Tax Credit (DTC)*, which provided accessible tips and information about the application process
- *Overcoming Burnout Together: Strong Enough to Care*, focused on recognizing signs of burnout, strategies for self-care, and ways individuals and communities can provide meaningful support

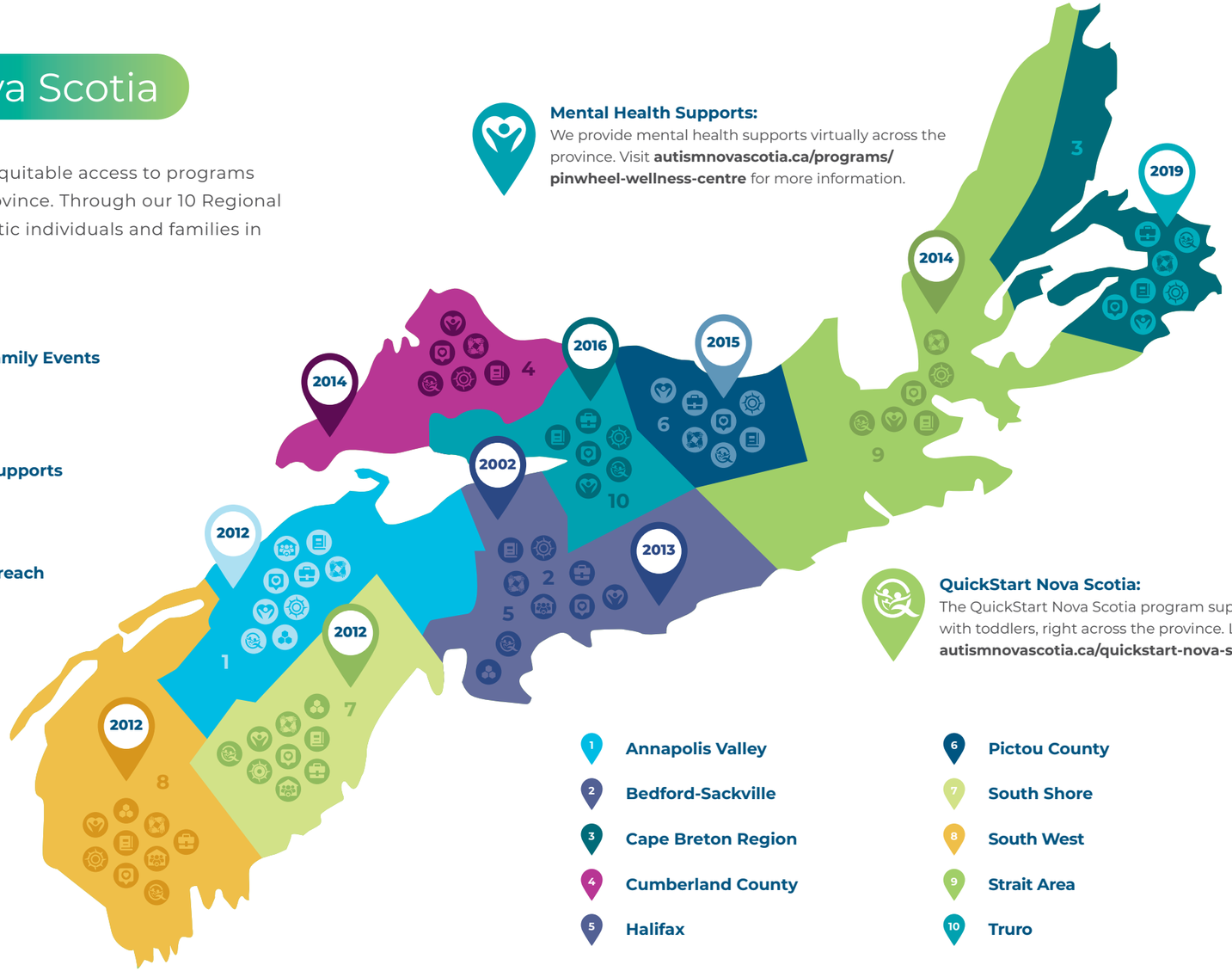
As the Maritime Hub for AIDE Canada, Autism Nova Scotia continues to promote and share evidence-based resources with caregivers, Autistic individuals, community organizations, and service providers across the Maritimes.

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**
- **Community Outreach & Partnerships**
- **Respite**

Mental Health Supports:
We provide mental health supports virtually across the province. Visit **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**!

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**

DID YOU KNOW?

Annapolis Valley partnered with CFB Greenwood to offer **caregiver support groups** and **inclusive recreation opportunities** for military families.

More than 10 sensory-friendly Santa experiences were hosted in partnership with local malls.

Inspiring Impact Across Nova Scotia

DID YOU KNOW?

Cumberland was a partner that supported the start up of **Anchor Youth Space** in Amherst, a **safe** and **welcoming** drop-in space for **youth** in the community.

DID YOU KNOW?

South Shore introduced **monthly outreach sessions** at the Liverpool library, helping families access Autism resources and services closer to home.

Truro's Theatre Project featured an Autistic-led production written and performed by **five Autistic adults**, showcasing first-voice storytelling.

DID YOU KNOW?

Gather & Gab, an Autistic-led **women's group** for Autistic adults 30+, launched in **South West.**

Pictou piloted a **Weekend Rec & Respite Program**, supported by the **Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia.**

Connecting Communities Province-Wide

Autism Nova Scotia's Regional Autism Centres are an important source of connection, support, and resources for Autistic individuals and families across Nova Scotia.

In 2026, Autism Nova Scotia marks eight years of the Regional Autism Centre model, which was created to improve equitable access to autism supports and services across the province.

50%

404
inquiries from families & caregivers

32%

260
inquiries from professionals & service providers

18%

151
inquiries from Autistic individuals

26%
Direct inquiries from Autistic individuals increased by 26%

Autism Support Coordinators remained an important source of guidance, advocacy, and connection for individuals and families across Nova Scotia. Throughout the year, Regional Autism Centres received **814 support inquiries**, averaging **68 calls per month**.

Inquiries from Autistic individuals increased by 26% compared to the previous year, reflecting growing trust and connection with Autism Support Coordinators across local communities.

18,624
connections across the province

Across **10 Regional Autism Centres**, Autism Support Coordinators reached **18,624 people** through programs, supports, and community outreach – helping Autistic individuals and families feel informed, included, and connected closer to home.

1,159
programs, sessions & community events

10,042+
Autistic individuals were engaged

Regional Autism Centres facilitated **1,159 programs, sessions, and community events** over the last year, engaging **more than 10,042 participants**. In addition, **9,706 touchpoints** were made with Autistic individuals formally diagnosed or self-identifying as Autistic.

2,929
people attended outreach & education sessions (84 sessions in total)

Community education and outreach sessions helped increase awareness of Autism, share local resources, and connect individuals and families to supports and services within their communities. **2,929 people** attended **outreach and education sessions** (**84 sessions in total**).

272
12% increase over last year
campers were welcomed at Summer Camps

In 2025, Summer Camps welcomed **272 campers** representing a **12% increase** in participation compared to the previous year. **45 summer students** were hired to support safe, welcoming, and community-based camp experiences across the province.

"What makes camp so special is the people. The staff go above and beyond to make everyone feel welcome, safe, and included. They create an environment full of understanding, fun, and adventure." *– Parent, Pictou*

Walk YOUR Way: Pathways to Inclusion

Autism Nova Scotia's signature fundraising event, ***Walk YOUR Way***, continued to unite communities across the province in 2025 through its theme, *Pathways to Inclusion*. Chapters across Nova Scotia created welcoming and inclusive events that reflected the importance of Autism Acceptance, accessibility, connection, and belonging within their local communities.

At the 2025 Walk, we were proud to recognize Carson Exports as the Presenting Sponsor, celebrating 10 years of Walk partnership and support. More than a fundraiser, Walk YOUR Way is a celebration made possible through the support of local businesses, volunteers, donors, and community partners.

From sensory-friendly spaces and family activities to community connections and shared experiences, each Walk location helped create meaningful pathways to inclusion across Nova Scotia.

Walk YOUR Way
FOR AUTISM NOVA SCOTIA

Holly Nauss – Walk Ambassador

Holly Nauss has proudly supported Walk YOUR Way for more than 13 years, first becoming involved in 2012 after learning about the event in 2009. Holly participates because of the friendships, fun, and strong sense of community the Walk brings each year.

As the 2025 Walk Ambassador, Holly encouraged others to get involved through fundraising initiatives like bake sales, 50/50 raffles, and ice cream socials. She also proudly led the Central Walk alongside her mom while carrying the Walk YOUR Way banner.

We are so grateful for Holly, and for all the dedicated Walk supporters who continue to make Walk YOUR Way so special each year.

Walk YOUR Way 2025 Successes

200
Total number of teams

1,227
Total number of registered walkers

$211K
Total funds raised

9
regions across Nova Scotia

Thank You to Our Lead Sponsors

Worldwide Auto Sales CARSONEXPORTS
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Best of Local: An Inspiring Evening

Autism Nova Scotia's 12th annual ***Best of Local*** gala, presented by Stewart McKelvey, brought together community members, partners, and supporters for an inspiring evening celebrating inclusion, connection, and community impact. Centered around the theme *Waves of Action for Inclusion*, the evening highlighted how collective action can help create meaningful change for Autistic Nova Scotians across the province.

Held at the Cedar Events Centre, the event featured powerful stories connected to Autism Nova Scotia's Summer Camp programs, including heartfelt reflections from Gavin and his camp counsellor, Camryn, who shared the meaningful friendships, confidence, and sense of belonging created through camp experiences. Guests also enjoyed a special performance by The Big Sing, locally inspired dining prepared by Chef Rob MacIsaac and his team, and opportunities to connect with local vendors and community partners throughout the evening, including: Amos Pewter, Benjamin Bridge, Black Harbour Distillers, Burning Flame Candle Company, LN – Eat More Art, The Halifax Honey Company, Knoydart Farm and Shivani's Kitchen.

A special thank you to our sponsors, volunteers, donors, and community partners whose generosity continues to create waves of inclusion and support for Autistic individuals and families across Nova Scotia.

"Autism Nova Scotia Summer Camp has helped me be more confident in myself and others, be kinder as a person, and overall has helped me grow."

- Gavin, *10-Year Milestone Camper & Guest Speaker at Best of Local 2025*

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BEST OF LOCAL
IN SUPPORT OF AUTISM NOVA SCOTIA
Proudly presented by Stewart McKelvey

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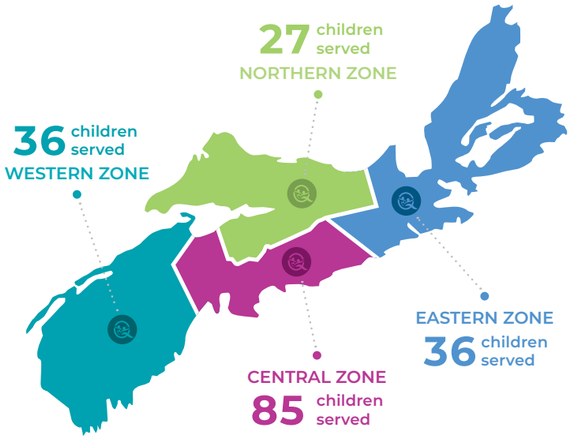
QuickStart: Building Strong Foundations

QuickStart Nova Scotia (QuickStart NS) provided flexible, family-centered coaching for caregivers of toddlers with a suspected, provisional, or confirmed Autism diagnosis across the province. Delivered by an interdisciplinary team of Parent Coaches, Occupational Therapists, Speech Language Pathologists, and Board-Certified Behaviour Analysts, the program focused on building confidence and practical strategies within everyday routines and environments.

In 2025–2026, QuickStart NS reached **184 families across all zones of the province**, exceeding annual participation targets in every region. Since launching provincially in 2022, **645 families have participated in the program across Nova Scotia**.



QuickStart NOVA SCOTIA
PARENT MEDIATED COACHING FOR AUTISM

Summary of Program Successes

184
children registered in 2025/26

125
families received enhanced supports such as ESDM, targeted sleep, and behaviour support

645
families have participated in the QuickStart NS program to date

NOVA SCOTIA

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

Improving Coordination, Reducing Barriers

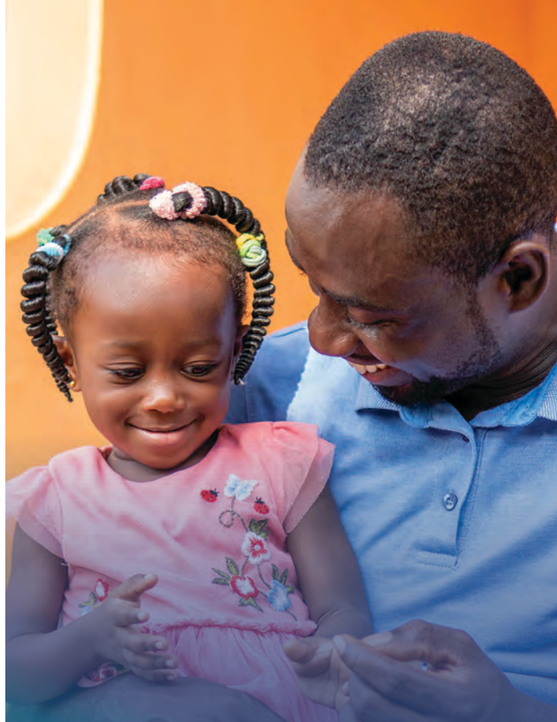
QuickStart NS continued strengthening access and coordinated pathways for families across Nova Scotia through:

- Integration with ***Clinical Intake and Care Coordination*** (CICC), supporting the province's new single-entry intake pathway for preschool autism services.
- An average of **24.5 children matched to services each month** during the 2025–2026 fiscal year.
- Flexible **virtual and in-home coaching options** that reduced barriers for families across the province.
- Interpretation supports for caregivers accessing services in **Punjabi**, **Spanish**, **Arabic**, and **Oromo**.
- Introduction of the Parent Coach, Connections and Engagement role, **supporting 20+ engagement activities** and partnerships with **15+ organizations**, including **African Nova Scotian** and **Mi'kmaw-serving** organizations.

Parent & Caregiver Feedback

Caregivers reported increased confidence, reduced stress, and progress in communication, engagement, play, and daily routines.

- **87% of families** demonstrated measurable improvement
- **80.4% of family-selected goals** progressed during parent coaching
- Families continued rating QuickStart NS highly across family-centred care domains through Measure of Processes of Care (MPOC) data.



"The sessions were tailored to my child and not generalized."

– QuickStart NS Caregiver

"My child is communicating more and engaging in play in ways we hadn't seen before." *– QuickStart NS Caregiver*

Inclusive Recreation Opportunities

Autism Nova Scotia's **Recreation programs** created inclusive experiences for Autistic individuals across the province to build confidence, strengthen social connections, explore interests, and participate in welcoming and supportive community spaces.

Social Group & Supported Social Group

Social Group and ***Supported Social Group*** created opportunities for recreation, peer connection, and community participation through activities including bowling, mini golf, movie nights, nature walks, and community adventures. More than 50 participants enrolled in Social Group programming in the Central region this year, while demand continued growing with more than 35 individuals remaining on the waitlist.

Autism Arts

Delivered in partnership with the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, ***Autism Arts*** provided weekly creative programming for participants ages 5–12, 13–17, and 18+. Participants explored a variety of artistic mediums while building confidence, creativity, and self-expression in a supportive environment. This year, the program proudly reached more than 100 participants!

Bridges to Success

Bridges to Success supported Autistic young adults ages 16–24 requiring higher levels of support through individualized recreation and life skills programming. This year, the program transitioned to a more person-driven model focused on community exploration, social connection, self-regulation, and life skills development. Participants engaged in activities including cooking, volunteering, swimming, and public transportation.

Dungeons & Dragons

Autism Nova Scotia's ***Dungeons & Dragons*** groups created accessible opportunities for connection, creativity, and collaborative storytelling through online programming for youth and adults. Participants engaged in more than 70 hours of gameplay and social interaction across three groups throughout the 2025–2026 season, while 13 new participants joined the program.

Poké Spectrum Social

Launched in 2025, ***Poké Spectrum Social*** created a neuroaffirming and participant-led space for Autistic individuals to connect through a shared interest in Pokémon. Developed alongside community facilitators, the program focused on friendship, belonging, and social engagement in a welcoming environment. Participation grew throughout the year as the partnership expanded.

Video Project Club

Video Project Club brought participants together through collaborative filmmaking and storytelling experiences. This year, participants worked together to write, direct, and film an original production, culminating in a newsroom-themed project inspired by the early 2000s. The program fostered creativity, teamwork, and confidence through participant-led production experiences.

Weekend Recreation & Respite

Weekend Recreation & Respite provided accessible Saturday recreation opportunities for families and caregivers across HRM. Programming expanded into community spaces including libraries, recreation centres, and local facilities to help reduce barriers and improve accessibility for participants and families.

Women's Project

The ***Women's Project*** created supportive in-person and virtual spaces for Autistic women and gender-diverse participants seeking connection, belonging, and shared understanding. Participants engaged in community outings, online discussions, and peer-led conversations focused on identity, support, and social connection across the lifespan.

Yoga for Everyone

Delivered in partnership with Halifax Yoga, ***Yoga for Everyone*** offered accessible wellness programming focused on movement, regulation, and relaxation. Bi-weekly sessions created welcoming opportunities for participants to explore mindfulness, physical activity, and emotional wellbeing in an inclusive environment.

Autism Roundtable: Reducing Barriers to Access

The ***Autism Roundtable*** is a parent-led initiative that reflects Autism Nova Scotia's commitment to improving equitable access to Autism supports within African Nova Scotian, Indigenous, and underserved communities.

Through trusted relationships, peer support, educational sessions, guest speakers, and collaborative partnerships, families connected with Autism Nova Scotia programs, local services, and broader community resources in safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive spaces.

Partnerships with organizations supported educational sessions, resource-sharing opportunities, and direct connections to community-based supports, including:

- IWK Health
- Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech Centres
- East Preston Early Learning Centre
- Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services
- Provincial Preschool Autism Service

I started Autism Roundtable in Preston Township after recognizing a significant gap between autism supports and the Black communities. As a parent navigating my own children's diagnoses, I experienced firsthand how difficult it was to access services without traveling outside of our community, which inspired me to create a space where families feel seen, heard, and supported by someone who truly understands their journey."

– **Nyesha Sparks**, *Founder & Community Outreach and Family Support Coordinator*

Everyday Independence

Independent Living Support (ILS) provides one-on-one, community-based support for Autistic adults working toward greater independence. The program continues to focus on helping individuals work toward meaningful goals while strengthening independence and connection within their communities.

A Person-Directed Approach

Community Living Coaches offered flexible and individualized guidance tailored to participant strengths, goals, and support needs. Through personalized resources, community partnerships, and a person-directed approach, participants built skills, navigated independent living, and worked toward goals connected to their interests, wellbeing, and everyday lives.

Meaningful Life Transitions

Throughout the year, ILS supported participants through important milestones connected to independent living and community participation.

- 7 participant moves were supported throughout the year
- Connections to employment, recreation, education, and wellbeing supports helped individuals work toward personal goals and interests
- Self-advocacy, relationship-building, financial management, safety, and daily living skills were strengthened through individualized support
- Participants developed routines and strategies supporting mental wellbeing and everyday independence
- Some gained employment or lived independently for the first time

2025-2026 Program Impact

17
participants accessed ILS supports across HRM

6
new participants joined the program

6,413
direct support hours were provided

13
Community Living Coaches supported participants throughout the year

FISCAL YEAR 25-26

Relationships, Consent, & Community Wellbeing

Healthy Relationships, Sexuality & Autism (HRSA) provides autism-informed education and resources related to relationships, sexuality, consent, puberty, boundaries, safety, and wellbeing.

Made possible through support from the Government of Nova Scotia, the program helps Autistic individuals, families, educators, and community partners navigate topics that are often under-discussed or not adapted for Autistic learners through practical, respectful, and trauma-informed learning.

The following initiatives advanced education that supports safer conversations, healthier relationships, autonomy, and overall wellbeing:

- HRSA received a $25,000 grant from the Mental Health Foundation of Nova Scotia (MHFNS) to develop a Gender-Based Violence and Intimate Partner Violence (GBV/IPV) module grounded in trauma-informed and autism-specific approaches.
- Autism Nova Scotia team members and subject matter experts presented at the Association of Teachers of Every Child Conference, delivering sessions on sexuality, consent, safety, and student wellbeing to 140 educators.
- Development continued on the Canucks Autism Network cohort pilot, adapting the relationship and sexuality education program from a 16-week format into a more accessible and sustainable 12-week model.
- Training delivered in partnership with AKOMA Family supported culturally responsive, autism-informed learning while strengthening community connection.
- Ongoing collaboration with the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (SIECCAN) supported the development of consent education and resources for Autistic youth.

Celebrating 25 Years of Autistics Aloud

Founded by Danny Melvin, who recognized a vital need for Autistic-led perspectives, ***Autistics Aloud*** began as a grassroots newsletter. Volumes 1 through 9 were published between 2005 and 2016. In his final edition, Danny asked: “Does anyone want my job?”

Disability rights activist and poet Patricia George-Zwicker stepped up. As a long-time subscriber with a vision rooted in the publication’s *“Nothing About Us Without Us”* values, Patricia became Editor in April 2017 and expanded Autistics Aloud’s legacy by introducing a magazine format. In 2025, the publication celebrated an exciting milestone: its 25th anniversary.

Under this format, the Seasons and LifeSpans series gave **more than 60 Autistic individuals** a space to publish their perspectives and experiences. Autistics Aloud later evolved into a 5-Question interview series called Conversation, highlighting advocacy, acceptance, identity, and artwork from Autistic Nova Scotians throughout 2025.

The publication is excited to return for a special edition titled *Not Without Us*, reflecting its longstanding “Nothing About Us Without Us” values. Led by Editor Patricia George-Zwicker, the edition will highlight perspectives from contributors connected to Nova Scotia’s first-ever Autism Action Plan, alongside reflections and hopes for the plan’s outcomes from past contributors.

Autistic-Led Peer Connection

LDX-A-CHAT is an Autistic-led online peer support and discussion group for late-diagnosed and self-identifying Autistic adults. The group proudly entered its third year in 2025 and continued to grow in meaningful ways, offering sessions on Monday afternoons, as well as Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

A major highlight was the launch of a new Tuesday evening 2SLGBTQIA+ group, created to provide a safe, trauma-informed, and peer-supported space for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ Autistic community. The inaugural cohort welcomed 18 registered members and explored the intersection of being Autistic and queer,
Pride history, personal coming-out stories, and ways to make queer spaces more Autistic-friendly.

The Wednesday evening group grew to 23 registered members, while the Monday afternoon group welcomed 11, bringing the LDX-A-CHAT community to a total of **52 participants**.

52 LDX-A-CHAT

late diagnosed/self-discovered Autistics were able to access support through LDX-A-CHAT

Throughout 2025–2026, the group explored topics including:

- Identity
- Masking and Unmasking
- Setting Boundaries
- Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD)
- Autistic Joy

Community connection continued to grow beyond sessions, with members launching a dedicated Discord server to stay connected and build relationships outside of the Autistic-led Zoom groups.

“My inspiration for turning Autistics Aloud into a magazine format was the still-published Highlights magazine. It allowed me to be engaged and participate in ways other kids-focused magazines didn’t. I am dyslexic and have dyspraxia, and I found the combination of many activities kept me entertained for hours. It wasn’t all just words, or all just pictures, and that has made its way into how I style and edit the magazine.” – **Patricia George-Zwicker**, *Editor-in-Chief*

Neuroaffirming Mental Health Support

Established in 2021, ***Pinwheel Wellness Centre*** provides specialized, community-based mental health support for Autistic adults (19+) across Nova Scotia experiencing mild-to-moderate mental health distress.

Using a neuroaffirming, anti-oppressive, and culturally responsive approach, the multidisciplinary team provides **Counselling Therapy**, **Occupational Therapy**, **Wellness Groups**, and **Case Navigation Services**.

Participants accessed support from communities across Nova Scotia, including Halifax, Dartmouth, Cape Breton, the Annapolis Valley, Yarmouth/South Shore, Truro, and the Eastern Shore.

Safe Spaces for Care

The addition of a full-time Counselling Therapist increased access to individual counselling services, while a new full-time Social Worker expanded Wellness Group offerings and strengthened consistent case navigation support.

New programming also included the launch of *Interoception – the 8th Sense*, a Wellness Group exploring the relationship between physiology, sensory experiences, and emotional wellbeing.

As demand for services continued to grow, **new client participation increased by 12%** between the first and second half of the fiscal year, with a total of **192 new clients**, while Wellness Group participation more than doubled to **78 participants**.

"For the first time in my life, things actually started making sense. I wasn't treated like I was broken and I wasn't made to feel dramatic, difficult, lazy, or too sensitive. I felt understood. I felt listened to."

– PWC Client

Throughout the year, Pinwheel remained an important support for Autistic individuals experiencing significant mental health distress, including participants at risk of suicide who required immediate intervention and ongoing care.

Participants highlighted the importance of receiving support in spaces designed to be sensory-considerate, accepting, and grounded in understanding Autistic experiences. Occupational therapy services also helped individuals develop practical tools and strategies related to sensory needs, burnout, emotional regulation, and day-to-day functioning.

Innovation & Community Partnerships

This year, several new approaches were introduced to enhance participant experience and service delivery. This included adopting the *Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS-10), a more neuroaffirming tool for assessing distress in Autistic adults, alongside continued professional development in advanced autism-informed therapy approaches.

The Centre also partnered with *Canadian International Institute for Art Therapy* (CiiAT) to pilot an online Art Therapy Group and continued building relationships with Acadia University through internship opportunities within the School of Counselling.

Pinwheel Successes

247
individuals were supported through counselling & occupational therapy services

78
participants were supported through wellness groups

30
individuals were supported through case navigation services

"I have had a lot of experience with therapy and Pinwheel has been the most comfortable as an Autistic person. It is immensely helpful to go into a situation already having disclosed my autism, without worry of pushback, and knowing there is a base level of understanding." *– PWC Client*

Strengthening Economic Inclusion

The ***Economic Inclusion*** team at Autism Nova Scotia supported Autistic individuals across the province in exploring employment goals, developing workplace skills, and building confidence through individualized and community-based supports.

Grounded in collaboration, accessibility, and participant-informed approaches, the Economic Inclusion team provided opportunities for Autistic youth and adults to strengthen employment readiness, connect with employers, and navigate meaningful pathways toward workplace participation.

Over the past year, programs increased accessibility through virtual services, regional outreach initiatives, expanded community partnerships, and flexible support models that helped meet participants where they are.

Expanding Access & Community Reach

Economic Inclusion initiatives expanded outreach efforts throughout Nova Scotia, including increased engagement in the South West (Yarmouth), South Shore (Bridgewater), and Truro regions.

Programs such as Career Quest, Pre-Employment Coaching, Employment Coaching, and the Employment Support Group (ESG) remained available virtually and at no cost to participants, helping reduce transportation and geographic barriers while increasing flexibility and accessibility.

Open houses in Truro and the South Shore also created opportunities for individuals and families to connect with staff, explore services, and learn more about employment-focused programming.

Supporting Youth & Emerging Job Seekers

Future Ready focused on helping youth strengthen independence, volunteer readiness, and foundational workplace skills through hands-on learning opportunities and community engagement.

This year, the program expanded its eligibility to include high-school students over 18 and increased regional participation opportunities in Truro.

Participants connected with organizations including the Epilepsy Association of the Maritimes, Colchester Food Network, Maggie's Place, NSCC Truro eSports Lounge, and Anchor Youth Space, gaining valuable experience in community-based environments.

Workforce Experience

EmploymentWorks provided Autism-informed employment preparation for Autistic individuals transitioning from post-secondary education into the workforce.

Participants developed communication, teamwork, and workplace navigation skills through placements with organizations including Dartmouth Heritage Museums, Halifax Honey Company, Dartmouth Seniors Service Centre, The Hive Studio + Espresso Bar, Halifax Brewery Market, and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia.

These placements created opportunities for participants to apply practical workplace skills while helping employers build understanding around inclusive hiring and accessibility practices.

"The energy, curiosity, and morale that was brought into our day-to-day operations made a real impact on our team."

– Halifax Honey Company

“I came into this program completely uncomfortable with the job application process. I could barely look at Indeed.ca without having a meltdown. Rod really helped me build confidence by highlighting my strengths and showing me that my weaknesses are not as limiting as I thought.”

– Participant

Individualized Coaching & Peer Support

Pre-Employment Coaching and ***Employment Coaching*** provided individualized support to Autistic job seekers and employees navigating different stages of employment. Participants accessed guidance with resumes, interviews, workplace communication, accommodations, career planning, and employment retention through flexible and participant-informed services. This year, program participation exceeded annual targets by 186%, reflecting the growing demand for individualized employment supports across Nova Scotia.

Career Quest supported participants in strengthening job-search confidence, exploring career pathways, and building greater independence while navigating employment opportunities through accessible virtual programming.

The ***Employment Support Group*** (ESG) was also relaunched this year using a participant-led model facilitated by an Autistic staff member.

The virtual group created space for conversations around workplace experiences, self-advocacy, identity, and career transitions while fostering peer connection across the province. In response to participant feedback, a Women’s ESG group will be introduced for the 2026–2027 fiscal year.

Employer Engagement

Through ***Ready, Willing & Able*** (RWA), Autism Nova Scotia continued supporting inclusive employment opportunities for Autistic individuals and individuals with intellectual disabilities aged 16 and older across Nova Scotia.

Labor Market Facilitators worked alongside employers to strengthen inclusive hiring and retention practices, resulting in:

- **50 jobs** generated and **12 hires** in **Halifax**
- **23 jobs** and **3 hires** in the **Annapolis Valley**
- **16 jobs** and **3 hires** in **Truro**

The Autism Outreach Coordinator connected individuals with opportunities aligned with their strengths and employment goals:

- **92 job seekers** supported
- **360 referrals** facilitated

RWA continues to increase awareness of inclusive workplace practices while helping employers access qualified Autistic job seekers and available accommodation supports.

As an active member of Supportive Employment Collective Nova Scotia (SECNS), the Economic Inclusion team at Autism Nova Scotia helped deliver Pastries and Professionals, an accessible networking event where employers shared available positions, hiring processes, and workplace information in a supportive and interactive environment that encouraged meaningful connection between employers and job seekers.

17
Career Quest participants

61
Pre-Employment Coaching participants

37
Employment Coaching participants

27
Employment Support Group participants

15
EmploymentWorks (HRM) participants

30
Future Ready participants

Exploring the Spectrum: Education Beyond Awareness

Autism Nova Scotia's ***Exploring the Spectrum*** (ETS) program is designed to help professionals, organizations, employers, and community partners build more accessible, inclusive, and autism-informed environments across Nova Scotia.

ETS expands its reach through practical, neuro-affirming education offered both virtually and in-person.

This past year, ETS partnered with organizations across multiple sectors, including:

- Family Service of Nova Scotia
- Halifax Regional Police
- ISANS
- Medavie HealthEd
- Scotiabank

2025-2026 Program Highlights

- **Development of online and micro-learning resources**
- **Expansion of self-paced learning opportunities**
- **Ongoing exploration of licensing, sponsorship, and sector partnership opportunities**
- **Launch of a self-paced Recreation Course**
- **Continued partnership work with the Nova Scotia Career Development Association (NSCDA)**

Together, these efforts positioned ETS as a growing autism education and knowledge-sharing initiative capable of supporting long-term systems change.

"Our drivers and monitors play such an important role in the day-to-day lives of students and their families. Autism Nova Scotia helped our team better understand the needs of students on the autism spectrum and gave them the tools to create calmer, safer, and more supportive bus environments."

– **Regional Director of Operations**, *Southland Transportation*

Autism-Informed Education

ETS developed a three-part Exploring Autism Webinar Series in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education (NSCECE). Hosted through NSCECE's online learning platform and promoted to more than 4,600 learners, the series expanded access to practical, autism-informed education for early childhood educators, early childcare professionals, and families across Nova Scotia.

Training Program Reach

1,000+
direct leaners through ETS

38+
organizations supported

7
sectors reached

Guiding Families Through Support & Advocacy

Autism Nova Scotia's ***Family and Adult Support*** Team continues to provide individualized assistance for Autistic adults and families across Nova Scotia through meetings, phone calls, emails, advocacy, and community navigation. Whether accessing school-related resources, exploring funding and respite options, or connecting with programs and services, the team works to ensure people feel informed, connected, and empowered at every stage of life.

Community Connection

Over the past year, the Family and Adult Support team in Central Region expanded its community reach through classroom presentations, wellness fairs, caregiver education sessions, and community events. These opportunities helped foster greater understanding, inclusion, and accessibility across the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Central Region Support

805 **families** were provided **emails support**

927 **adults** were provided **emails support**

454 **families** were provided **phone support**

339 **adults** were provided **phone support**

108 **families** were provided support through **meetings**

121 **adults** were provided support through **meetings**

57 **Presentations & Community Meetings took place across the province**

Key Community Highlights:

- **More than 25 classroom presentations** delivered in schools across HRM
- Collaboration with Halifax Stanfield International Airport to host **Autism Aviators**, helping participants build confidence and familiarity with air travel, alongside an **on-course activation** at the HIAA Charity Golf Tournament in support of Autism Nova Scotia
- Continued sensory-friendly community experiences through **Sensory Santa** at Halifax Shopping Centre and Mic Mac Mall, alongside **Sensory Shopping** opportunities at Mic Mac Mall
- **Sensory-Friendly Jump** at Get Air supported by the Doug Flutie, Jr. Foundation for Autism
- **Community partnerships** with organizations including the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, SchoolsPlus, Nova Scotia Health, Dalhousie Social Work Clinic, TEAM Work Cooperative and more

"Autism Nova Scotia's presentation opened the door to honest, respectful conversations about differences and social communication in a way that we had not been able to achieve on our own. This service directly supported our school's goals of fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment." – **Emily McGuigan**, *School Counsellor, Sunnyside Elementary School*

"I want to say a huge thank you for investing time and energy into helping our family. This has been an incredibly daunting journey and I am feeling so relieved to have found some support. Thank you so very much!" – *Parent*

Inclusion Soaring to New Heights

Through meaningful partnerships with Halifax Stanfield International Airport and J.A. Douglas McCurdy Sydney Airport, Autism Nova Scotia is helping foster more accessible and inclusive travel experiences for Autistic individuals and families across the province.

Autism Aviators

Autistic individuals of all ages and their families practiced important stages of the travel journey, including check-in, security screening, boarding procedures, and navigating airport spaces in a structured and sensory-friendly environment. These experiences helped reduce uncertainty and build confidence around future air travel.

In the 2025–2026 fiscal year, more than 100 Autistic individuals and their families took part in Autism Aviators experiences across Nova Scotia:

Halifax: More than 75 participants attended Autism Aviators, made possible by Halifax Stanfield International Airport and Porter Airlines. Since launching in 2016, Autism Aviators has continued to demonstrate the meaningful impact of collaboration and accessible community partnerships.

Sydney: Autism Aviators successfully returned in partnership with J.A. Douglas McCurdy Sydney Airport, with more than 20 participants taking part in the sensory-friendly airport experience. The event sold out in less than an hour, demonstrating strong community interest and the importance of accessible travel experiences for families.

Due to growing community interest and demand, Autism Nova Scotia looks forward to exploring opportunities to expand the frequency and reach of Autism Aviators in the future.

Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program

In Summer 2025, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program at Halifax Stanfield International Airport celebrated its one-year anniversary. Autism Nova Scotia continues to collaborate with Halifax Stanfield International Airport to help promote the globally recognized initiative, which supports travellers living with non-visible disabilities, including autism. The sunflower symbol helps discreetly communicate that a traveller may benefit from additional support, patience, or understanding throughout their journey.

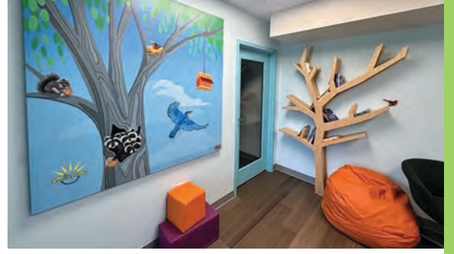
Investing in Accessibility

Autism Nova Scotia was proud to partner with Halifax Stanfield International Airport through the Halifax International Airport Authority (HIAA) Charity Golf Tournament, which raised $34,500 in support of autism programs and services across the province. Through onsite activations, Autism Nova Scotia volunteers welcomed guests and shared information about accessible and inclusive travel experiences.

Through HIAA's Uplifted Program, Autism Nova Scotia proudly entered a multi-year sponsorship agreement supporting Autism Aviators, Summer Camp, and autism education opportunities for airport staff.

Halifax Stanfield's commitment to accessible travel is further reflected through its Rick Hansen Foundation Gold Accessibility Rating, recognizing continued efforts to create welcoming and supportive experiences for travellers.

Autism Nova Scotia is deeply grateful for Halifax Stanfield International Airport's ongoing partnership, leadership, and dedication to creating more inclusive communities across Nova Scotia.



Smilezones: Sensory Friendly Spaces

Through the generosity of ***Smilezone Foundation***, local Tim Hortons owners, and support from the Tim Hortons Smile Cookie Campaign, Autism Nova Scotia introduced **seven new Smilezone spaces within the Central and Cape Breton offices**.

Featuring interactive activities, sensory accommodations, and welcoming design elements, the spaces help individuals and families feel more at ease while accessing programs, services, and supports.

The Smilezone spaces are used across a variety of Autism Nova Scotia programs and activities, including:

- QuickStart NS
- Family and Adult Support
- Recreation Programming
- Community Meetings
- Team Building and Professional Development

They also create opportunities for children and families to engage, play, and connect in accessible and thoughtfully designed spaces.

Autism Nova Scotia is sincerely grateful to Smilezone Foundation and participating Tim Hortons owners for helping create environments where individuals and families feel supported and included.

Local Efforts, Lasting Impact

Businesses and organizations continued to find creative and impactful ways to give back to the Autistic community throughout the year, including:

Autos for Autism

The sound of engines and excitement filled the Annapolis Valley during ***Autos for Autism*** at *Steer BBQ Weekend*. The event brought together car enthusiasts, families, volunteers, and local businesses for a lively day of classic cars, connection, and fundraising — raising $5,545 in support of the local autism community.

Celebrating With Purpose

COBS Bread - Tacoma celebrated their 4th Anniversary by turning the milestone into an opportunity to give back. On a sunny afternoon, families gathered to enjoy face painting, treats, and outdoor fun during a community BBQ fundraiser in support of Autism Nova Scotia.

Sweet Support

During Autism Acceptance Month, ***Aroma Maya Craft Coffee & Artisan Donuts*** launched a limited-edition donut in support of Autism Nova Scotia. Hosted at participating locations across the province, the initiative raised $4,237 while helping spark conversations around autism acceptance, inclusion, and belonging.

Thank You to Our Volunteers

Autism Nova Scotia extends heartfelt gratitude to every volunteer who contributes their time, energy, and care throughout the year. The compassion and dedication of volunteers continue to help create positive and meaningful experiences for the Autistic community.

Inspired by her love of Pokémon, Jemma reached out to Autism Nova Scotia and helped create Poké Spectrum Social, a welcoming space where Autistic adults can connect, build friendships, and be themselves. While building the group has been a lot of work, she says it has been extremely rewarding to see people find a sense of community through the club. Fun fact: Jemma's favourite Pokémon is Phanpy.

"Volunteering with Autism Nova Scotia has been a very rewarding experience. Seeing participants gain confidence, learn new skills, and enjoy themselves has been truly meaningful. Volunteering has allowed me to build lifelong connections and help to create a space where everyone feels included and valued!"

– **Ava Lockhart**, *Volunteer*

Recognition Reception at Government House

Volunteers from across Nova Scotia were recognized at a Volunteer Recognition Reception hosted at Government House in partnership with Their Honours, the Honourable Mike Savage, Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia, and Mrs. Darlene Savage. The afternoon recognized the generosity, leadership, and ongoing contributions volunteers bring to Autism Nova Scotia each year.

The gathering celebrated the many ways individuals contribute through programs, events, fundraising initiatives, outreach, and recreation opportunities. Their involvement continues to help create opportunities for connection, participation, and inclusion for Autistic individuals and families throughout Nova Scotia.

"Through volunteering with Autism Nova Scotia, I have met so many wonderful individuals and families within the community. I value the kindness, respect, and inclusion Autism Nova Scotia offers, along with the safe space it creates for people to have fun, make friends, and be themselves." – *Volunteer*

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Honouring Award Recipients

Joan Craig Trailblazer Award

The ***Joan Craig Trailblazer Award*** is presented to an outstanding individual who champions the autism community, amplifies Autistic voices, and helps trailblaze a path forward for inclusion and accessibility across Nova Scotia.

Autism Nova Scotia proudly recognized ***Allison Kearley*** as the 2025 recipient of the Joan Craig Trailblazer Award. Allison was a remarkable community leader and passionate advocate who worked tirelessly to ensure the autism community was seen, heard, and valued.

Allison also played a significant role in shaping the Pictou Regional Autism Centre and served as Chair of the Pictou County Chapter Program Committee for several years. Her leadership and advocacy created a lasting impact that continues to be felt by individuals and families throughout the region.

The award was proudly presented to Allison's loving family on her behalf, celebrating the extraordinary legacy she leaves behind.

"Allison was a fierce advocate who turned barriers into opportunities. When an Autistic child was excluded from community swimming lessons because the program was deemed "not a fit," Allison responded by helping create a 1:1 adapted swim program with the YMCA and StFX. That program has since been adopted across the Maritimes and has helped hundreds of Autistic individuals learn to swim."

– **Kelsey Robson**, *Autism Support Coordinator*

Sheelagh Nolan Award for Excellence in Teaching

The ***Sheelagh Nolan Award for Excellence in Teaching*** honours the legacy of the late Sheelagh Nolan, a passionate advocate for inclusive education inspired by her son, Patrick. This annual award recognizes an educator who reflects her values of compassion, collaboration, and commitment to student success.

In 2025, Autism Nova Scotia was pleased to present the award to Claire Wight, Learning Centre Teacher at Bible Hill Junior High School. Claire's commitment to neuroaffirming, student-centred education has had a positive influence on students, families, and colleagues alike.

As both an educator and parent of neurodivergent children, Claire brings empathy and lived experience to her work. She collaborates closely with families, specialists, and school staff to create classrooms where students feel understood, supported, and included.

In recognition of her contributions, Claire received a $1,000 honorarium to further support inclusive education within her school community.

Amy Farnell Education Award

Made possible through the generosity of The Craig Foundation and the Farnell family, Autism Nova Scotia was thrilled to once again offer the ***Amy Farnell Education Award***. Named in honour of long-time supporter and cherished friend, Amy Farnell, the award has supported over 80 Autistic students across the province since its launch in 2021, providing more than $265,000 in educational funding toward tuition costs.

The award recognizes the determination, resilience, and potential of Autistic learners as they pursue post-secondary education and meaningful future opportunities.

"I am really happy to receive this award! It came at an important time, as my tuition funding had run out. I will definitely feel more secure going into my graduating year as a BSc Geology student. The award will help cover transportation and tuition costs. Thank you for choosing me!"

– 2025 Award Recipient

NEXT LEVEL
ALL DAY

SUPER MARIO

PPAS

EAST COAST
LIFESTYLE

autism
NOVA SCOTIA
Inclusion Respect Collaboration Courage Acceptance

SHELBY RANCH

autism
NOVA SCOTIA

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Inclusion ✻ Respect ✻ Collaboration ✻ Courage ✻ Acceptance