

## HONEST CONVERSATIONS

### Episode 2 - Economic Inclusion

**HOST:** Ally Garber

**SPEAKERS:** Corey Walker, Dr. Jonathan Lai

You are listening to the second episode of “Honest Conversations”, a podcast about Canada’s Autism Strategy. After the Federal Government’s Commitment in 2019 to produce a national plan to improve the lives of people with autism, the Autism Strategy was announced on Sept 26th. The objective of this series is to share the Autism Alliance of Canada’s expertise and reflections, with our members, as key leaders at the national level, now that the Strategy has been released.

#### **Ally Garber 00:00**

Hello and welcome. You’re listening to *Honest Conversations*, a podcast about Canada’s National Autism Strategy. I’ll be your host. Ally Garber.

Really excited to chat today on *Honest Conversations*. Canada’s first Autism Strategy about the second pillar, Economic Inclusion.

The vision for this priority area within Canada’s first Autism Strategy is a Canada where Autistic people have tailored financial support and access to education, employment and housing throughout the life course.

So there’s a number of different items within this priority area that are identified, and I’m going to just provide a summary of a few of them, so people can get a sense of what is being focused on in this priority area.

But of course, to get the full scope, I do encourage you to have a look at the at the full Strategy, and you can find that within the notes of this podcast episode. A few of the items that the federal government has identified are leveraging existing actions in the National Housing Strategy to help address autism priorities in Canada, including that housing is socially inclusive and sustainable through factors such as accessible housing, housing with supportive wraparound services and housing located close to services, transit and employment, promoting and sharing housing solutions across Canada through interdisciplinary communities of practice and targeted knowledge sharing, move forward with the implementation of the accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada, which includes the commitment to hire 5000 employees with disabilities in the public service by 2025. Undertaking research to better understand the additional costs associated with autism over the life course and on the accessibility and completion of post secondary education for Autistic people.

They’ve also identified the need to raise awareness about resources available to support neurodiverse persons and their families through the registered disability savings plan, including the Canada Disability Savings grant and bond as well as other Canadian and provincial territorial tax measures and benefits, develop materials to promote autism inclusive workplaces and ensure that employers and coworkers understand the needs and strengths of Autistic workers. These could include evidence based guidelines for human resources and employers, employer awards and incentives for training and recommendations on long-term inclusive hiring practices. And lastly, another one of the highlights that have been identified is supporting mentorship

opportunities for Autistic adults and young adults in the workforce to strengthen skill sets and support community building, job acquisition and retention.

Again, this is just a sampling of the different focus areas within this priority area. I encourage you to read more, and I'm really excited to talk to both Corey and Jonathan about this today, because they both have a specific expertise in this area and great background and knowledge. So without further ado, we'll get right into it.

I am so excited to welcome Corey Walker and, of course, Dr. Jonathan Lai, who I've worked with for a number of years now. Thank you so much for taking part in this discussion. Obviously, we're here to discuss the National Autism Strategy. Corey, I'm going to start with you. I'm hoping that, you know, you can chat a little bit about yourself and your background. You and I have had the pleasure of knowing each other for a number of years now.

We were involved in the Canadian Autism Partnership Project together, and, of course, worked on that for over a year. I think we had meetings in a number of different Canadian cities, having consultations and working sessions with a group of phenomenal Autistic advocates, you being one of them. And of course, that project, unfortunately, did not see the light of day at the end of it. And so that was a heartbreaking experience for all of us.

**Corey Walker 04:37**

Absolutely.

**Ally Garber 04:38**

And certainly, yeah, part of our journey to get to where we are today. So I'm hugely grateful for the advocacy that you do on a daily basis. As a parent of a child who is Autistic. I, you know, I'm so grateful there are people like you out there, Corey, who are paving the way and being such a phenomenal voice. So I wonder if I can ask you to share a little bit about yourself and the work you do with the Alliance.

**Corey Walker 05:06**

Sure. So my name is Corey Walker. I'm currently actually living in Dawson Creek, but for much of my life I lived in Prince George, also in British Columbia. I was diagnosed with what was originally called Asperger Syndrome, which is now sort of an updated clinical diagnosis term back in 2001 by a neuropsychiatrist in UBC. I had absolutely no idea what that term was, what it meant at the time. So my mom and I did what I guess most people do these days.

We went on the internet, we searched it out. We found it was a form of autism, and the light bulb started going off in my mom's head. My mom's been on my journey, this journey, with me, since I was, you know, born. And she mentioned to me that 1985 I would have been, like, seven years old. We went to Children's Hospital in Vancouver, living in Fort St. John at the time.

And my parents, you know, I was diagnosed with ADHD and other stuff going on. But my parents are told I met all the signs of autism, except I could talk. And that was '95; obviously, our diagnostic criteria changed over the next 16 years, and they recognized that, and that whole diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome as existed in the DSM-4 has now been replaced with the DSM-5. It was basically like classic autism, but with no verbal delay, and that's where I got that.

So I started doing some research and learning a little more about it, but I still didn't poke around it into a great adapted I didn't really pay a lot of attention to it. I wasn't really focused on it. In the fall of 2006 I moved to Terrace for a year, one of our major universities in BC, used to do a teacher education program at Terrace. Well, I wanted to be a high school English social studies teacher. That was kind of my dream for several years at that point.

Going into university, I majored in English and History for the purpose of becoming a teacher. And basically, in November of 2006 I guess it was, I had disclosed my Asperger's to the teacher that was supervising me taking my first placement, and one of the symptoms of autism is sometimes we lack a social filter, and that's been a struggle with me; getting better, but definitely a struggle at that time in my life.

**Ally Garber 07:12**

Right.

**Corey Walker 07:13**

I made a comment under my breath. She overheard it. She got offended. Went to the principal. The principal met with me the next day, along with someone from the university, and said, you know, they didn't want me back in the school. And then he proceeded to tell everybody in the Coast Mountains and Princeton school districts not to take me on as a student teacher because of my autism.

**Ally Garber 07:35**

Wow.

**Corey Walker 07:35**

And so that really got me to start looking into this, like, my autism just cost me my career dream at the time, you know, and that got me on a journey. And I guess it never really stopped, learning more about autism and how it impacted me, and then therefore learning how it impacted others. Fast forward to December 2012, I started working with Autism BC, then called the Autism Society of BC. I was there for seven and a half years as a Northern Regional Coordinator in Prince George.

I learned so much of the time I connected with Autistic families, like, you know, families of Autistic kids. I connected with Autistic adults, or some of them are self-advocates, some who hadn't really stepped in that role yet. I met Ally and others with the Canadian Partnership Project. We had meetings in Halifax, Ottawa, Montreal and sorry, sorry, Ally, but I think Montreal tops Halifax. Sorry.

**Ally Walker 08:27**

You're not wrong. I think you're, I love Halifax, but I think you're not wrong.

**Corey Walker 08:32**

Halifax is a close second, though.

**Ally Garber 08:35**

I'll take it.

**Corey Walker 08:36**

Anyway, then I was in Autism BC for seven and a half years. I worked for other autism organizations after that, in different projects related to employment, as well as a toolkit for Autistic employees. Well, basically for employees of Autistic employees, with the Sinneave Family Foundation, work for the Canucks Autism Network and the Pacific Autism Family Network in their Employment Works program.

And then, more recently, I got kind of out of the autism community. I was a job coach in a Disability Employment Program at an employment agency in Prince George, and now I'm actually a chaplain for the Salvation Army in Dawson Creek, where I suspect that we'll come across some Autistic people through the work I'm doing in Family Services who are launching a new program called Path As a Whole.

They're not going to get into all the details, but basically designed to transfer lives, address the root cause of poverty. You know, the old saying you can give a person a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a person to fish and you feed themselves for life. That's kind of what we want to do. A large part of that is that they teach them how to fish. And I imagine sooner or later, I'll probably come across someone who's Autistic, you know? I'm on the Board of Directors for Autism Alliance of Canada, as a volunteer role as one of three Autistics that we actually have on our board. I know we actually have four now.

After four, I forgot about our newest one, so that's maybe more than I can't remember. We know we have at least four, which is wonderful. Yeah, that's been, you know, quite a journey as well. I've been a little bit distant the last few weeks, because I've been busy moving, but really looking forward to diving back into the great work that we're doing now that we're now the Strategy's been announced and how we've got kind of a new phase of our existence.

**Ally Garber 10:13**

Thank you for that, Corey, I think that that really helps to paint the picture of your journey, how you got into the work that you're doing today. I can't think of anybody better to be able to do exactly, you know, what you just described, to support people in building the skills that they need to become more independent and self-sufficient.

**Corey Walker 10:34**

Thank you.

**Ally Garber 10:34**

I also want to take a moment to say, I'm sorry that you had that experience. You know, I didn't know that, actually, about that. That was your dream. I think that obviously you ended up in an incredible spot, and you're making a huge, huge impact.

And in many ways, Corey, I think that you are a teacher. You have taught me. And I think John would say the same thing; you've taught us so much about autism, I know that many of the lessons that you shared and the experiences you shared throughout the Canadian Autism Partnership journey has really helped me as a parent in understanding and supporting my son, and you've certainly helped those in the health field and the academic field.

So throughout this podcast, we're going to be talking to a number of different experts within the autism field. But I think that no one would argue that first hand experience is the most important. And so thank you for sharing your thoughts today, on where we are with the Strategy, we're going to need your voice more than ever, I think.

**Corey Walker 11:45**

Yeah.

**Ally Garber 11:45**

And Jon, do you mind telling us a little bit of your background and how you're involved with the Alliance?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 11:53**

Yeah, happy to and thanks, Corey. I knew quite a bit about you, but some of that story, it's really touching to see how this is really, and this topic specifically has really impacted you and really passionate and close to your heart.

My name is Jonathan Lai. I'm the executive director at Autism Alliance of Canada. That's my day job in this organization, and working with a great Board of Directors and great staff and great teams and members across the country. So, a really exciting place for me to be surrounded by great people all across this country.

I also have a faculty position at the University of Toronto in the School of Public Health and the Institute of Health Services, policy research, but my day job is at Autism Alliance of Canada, really helping guide and steer and direct the organization, the network of our members as the National Strategy was announced leading up to that, the advocacy behind that, and now, as Corey mentioned, we're pivoting towards what implementation looks like with this launch of the Strategy. Just a couple weeks back.

**Ally Garber 13:00**

I was actually going to make a joke when you referenced your day job, I was like, what's your night job? But you actually do have another job, and I apologize, didn't know that you had a faculty position. Thank you for that.

So I guess you know, if the two of you don't mind, we have a couple of questions that we want to pose to you, because we obviously, you know, we could spend two hours or more going into the experience the three of us have in advocating for greater autism supports and resources across all government levels, federal, provincial, municipal in the areas where we live.

But I really want to focus on, you know, the monumental announcement of the federal, National Autism Strategy and where we go from here. And so I think, you know, I'll start with Corey, if you're okay to ask, you know, after taking a look at the Strategy and reading through the priority areas in the Strategy, is this what you hope to see?

**Corey Walker 14:02**

Not really like, you know, some stuff is okay. You know, it's not a complete waste of paper. There's some positives there. Definitely, I think it's lacking. I think it's lacking in some teeth. I know what the Alliance and what the autism community has been pushing for. A lot of that did not end up in there, and not in this version.

You know, they've done some work in employment, in terms of funding extension Really, Willing and Able and for employment, which is good, but Ready, Willing and Able really needs to kind of expand, if they're not in a major center, in some of the provinces, and you're really not benefiting from that. So there needs to be more of that.

Another thing, I really was unhappy to see that there was really no major change with the Disability Tax Credit. It is very difficult to qualify for Disability Tax Credit, not impossible. I did manage to qualify for, I did manage to get to requalify, but it's very convoluted, and the criteria that the CRA has set is very restrictive. And so rather than simply being based on 'you have a diagnosis of a permanent disability', this disability is going to be with you the rest of your life. Hey, you qualify. Congratulations.

It's, you know, you've got all these specific restrictions. You've got to be markedly restricted, or significantly restricted in these different areas, and it's just so stupid, because there's, pardon the bluntness. But there are a lot of people out there who have a permanent disability and that disability impacts their life, and they don't qualify for the tax credit. And some people say, what's

the big deal about the Tax Credit, especially if you're not even working somewhere. But without that Disability Tax Credit, you can't open a registered displaced savings fund.

**Ally Garber 15:49**

Right.

**Corey Walker 15:49**

And so that is an opportunity to save for retirement. The government contributes as well, depending on your contributions, your income and stuff. And so that was a major disappointment, and another really thing is like, you know, we all know that for an adult legal diagnosis, I know it is in BC, and pretty much the same across the province or across the country, there's not any real provincial or federal funding for adult diagnosis at this time.

Sometimes you can find other funding organizations. That just means, say that UBC, their disability center, will work with students to try and find funding so that they can get, you know, an assessment for a disability, because they need documentation.

But for a lot of people, you know, it is a few \$1,000 or \$4,000 or more, to get an autism assessment as an adult by a psychologist, the one psychiatrist we had here in BC that did assessments, diagnosed anyway, and was covered by Medicare. Dr. Tony Bailey is now retired, and so there's really, like, that is not in the Strategy. That's a really big piece that's missing. You know, it's really disappointing.

**Ally Garber 16:56**

Yeah, no Corey, thinking, I'm gonna, I'm gonna come back to you for more. But Jonathan, can you think of any other diagnoses that has that significant of a barrier to access, I guess the diagnosis as an adult like I can't think of any other you know, condition or disorder or disability that that would have, you know, that much of a challenge to navigate a diagnosis as an adult?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 17:23**

Yeah, no, that's good. That's a good question. I think, you know, I can't think of any. And partly, as you think about how our healthcare system is set up in the specialties, autism really doesn't, in the adult space, autism doesn't really fit into a purview of one specialty.

**Ally Garber 17:40**

Right.

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 17:40**

You know, as a kid, you think about, oh, you have a pediatrician, you have a developmental pediatrician, something very specialized, and you that's sort of your go-to thinking in our system and how things are set up and how people are trained. So there's this whole space about what we call health, human resources.

How do we build capacity within both diagnosis and in services, especially in the adult space, which we haven't really sorted as a country, and it requires that leadership from the government. So, you know, coming from what Corey's saying, you know, overall, when we look at the Strategy, there are a few gaps that we were hoping to see. You know, this is, it's great, you know, it's a platform. It's, you know, the government's at least shown official and signaling official commitment.

But really, it's just a foundation. But it's been 17 years since the Senate initially asked for a framework on autism, 17 years, and we're still at the point where we're building a foundation like we could have moved a lot quicker in society, and it'd be much more inclusive society, much more supported individuals, if we were able to move a little quicker than what we're seeing now. So echoing what Corey is saying, yeah, folks on the ground are very disappointed about some of some of the missing pieces that we're seeing, and changes being very, very slow, almost glacial, and not incremental at this point.

**Ally Garber 18:55**

It's interesting. I was thinking today, as I was driving in to chat with the two of you. A friend of mine, who's a mother of an Autistic son, I remember when, when Prime Minister Trudeau was doing a, I think it was like, a town hall tour of Canada, and he came to Halifax, and she asked him, she said, you know, when will you? This was years ago, but she said, when, when will you be proceeding with a National Autism Strategy? And the comment that followed, she said, it's going to be too late for my son, but I hope that it is enacted or or put in place in time to help others. And that really stayed with me that, you know, my son was diagnosed, I guess, 11 years ago, and we're still having the same conversation, and it's so demoralizing, for lack of a better word.

And you know the other point that I think that you know Corey raised is, you know, we're still, I think, you know, you know we have Autism Awareness Month, but we're still lacking an awareness that this is a condition that is across the lifespan. You know, it impacts children and adults, but yet we focus so much on still the resources and supports for children, which are still not adequate, but, you know, we still have adults who can't access, you know, a diagnosis to give them some answers. So those are really good points that you both made, I guess.

Corey, I'd like to follow up and go back to you. You know, we talked about the gaps. Is there anything that you saw in this Strategy that you think will improve your life and the lives of other Autistic Canadians?

**Corey Walker 20:52**

The fact that they are, the governments can commit to, so far, continue to commit to Ready, Willing and Able and the Employment Works program, don't really benefit me, but they will benefit, you know, other Autistics. That's a good thing.

**Ally Garber 21:07**

The Employment Works program you're referring to.

**Corey Walker 21:10**

Yeah, the Employment Works program.

**Ally Garber 21:11**

Okay, m-hm.

**Corey Walker 21:12**

And so that's the, you know, I have worked for, the Employment Works program, for a while. It's a really good program, but I still think there's really not a lot there.

**Ally Garber 21:24**

So Jonathan, I'm going to go to you. So obviously, the Alliance has done a significant amount of work over the years. And I am biased, because, of course, I've been involved with the Alliance, but I can't think of another organization who has, you know, provided so much, you know, quality content and results of thorough consultations. You know, package that up for the government to say, you know, here, take this. This is what we've, you know, compiled based on, you know, conversations with a vast and diverse range of experts within the autism field, and so, you know, I'm thinking specifically of the Blueprint for a National Autism Framework that the Alliance created. When you look at those two documents, the Blueprint that the Alliance developed and the National Autism Strategy that was announced last week, what are the biggest gaps that you're seeing?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 22:25**

Yeah, yeah. And particular to, you know, this part of your Economic Inclusion, like we look at that, the vision is great that the government put together. I think we can all agree, it's there. It's very aspirational. You know, it says a Canada where Autistic people have tailored financial support and access to education, employment and housing throughout the life course. So those are key buckets. So we're thinking about education, we're thinking about employment and housing throughout the life course.

So they're really capturing that idea of, you know, it is something across the lifespan we've got to think about, and it's tailored supports, and it's financial supports. And that those are, those are really important words. And going back to what we were saying earlier, it's the mechanics of how that actually plays out. So great vision. Now, what do we do to get there?

So when I look at what the government has put forward as the immediate actions in this version of the Strategy, there are some good places. So you know, we are going to make sure we're aligned with the National Housing Strategy. And we know in Canada, housing is a big topic, and there's a lot of parts in there. So it's great to have an autism lens on housing.

We need that, we've asked for that in our Blueprint, in our roadmap. And then, you know, there's things like, okay, let's get more research to understand the cost of autism across so some evaluations say, hey, where do we want to put investments about education and accessibility for Autistic youth and adults. There are things about mentorship, things about the Disability Inclusion Action Plan, the Employment Strategy. So there are pieces which I'm like, hey, you know, this looks good. It aligns with what we've been asking for in these documents. But really outside of what the government is already doing. What's the extra piece that the strategies are acting on? It's not just a collection of what we've already been doing and what they're currently doing, but are there new commitments?

Those are the things we're not seeing. Like, we're talking about the DTC, we're talking about other financial supports we've been thinking about in the Blueprint, in the roadmap, things like, you know, the Child Care Expense Deduction. Thinking about things like the Canada Workers Benefit, you know, the disability piece of that, thinking about the Disability Tax Credit, on the tax side, on the financial supports, a lot more can be done. And that was missing.

On the employment front, you know, how do we make sure there's the correct training, there's correct, there's ways to invest, and continue to invest in these pre-employment programs, these employment programs to get people working. And on the housing front, are the real, firm commitments, rather than saying just an autism lens. But what's the money? What's the amount of new units you're going to build for people with disabilities? Developmental disabilities.

**Ally Garber 24:58**

Right, those key targets.



**Dr. Jonathan Lai 24:59**

Those key targets, those benchmarks, that's what's needed, and that's what's missing right now, and that's what we need to as a community, continue to guide and push and educate, sometimes policymakers to say, hey, this is what's really needed on the ground.

**Ally Garber 25:15**

Are you hopeful we'll get there? I'll start, Jonathan, I'll start with you. Are you? Are you hopeful that you know the vision that that you outlined at the beginning of your comment, are you hopeful that we'll get there?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 25:26**

Yeah I think so. I think we have the skills. We have the work that's going on already in the community. We have solutions. We just need to make sure we have the, I want to say almost the government is willing to work, is ready, willing and able, is able to work with us to do that. We can, we can bring people together. And we've done that, you know, through the various projects the Alliance have done over the years, over the last decade, and we can continue to do that. I think we have good solutions. We just need to make sure we can bring those to life across this country, so every single person has equitable access to these supports. I think it's going to take a while, because things have been moving so slowly.

**Ally Garber 26:17**

We've talked a lot as an organization and Corey, I'm going to ask you for some input on this. I'll go back to the Canadian Autism Partnership Project and the feelings that came out of that decision to not proceed with what was proposed.

You know, when the government ultimately did not vote to proceed with the Canadian Autism Partnership Project, and I know among the group that I worked with, which was the group of Autistic advocates representing different regions across the country, I don't think it's too dramatic to say that people were heartbroken, devastated.

One member said it felt as though, you know, a significant amount of money had been invested in this initiative. You know, ultimately it lacked the political leadership and political will to see it through. I'd love to get your thoughts on, you know, we have a lot of promises that are coming through, but yet we get past the elections. And you know, when mandates are in place, we're lacking the actual action, and that's heartbreaking -

**Corey Walker 27:30**

Yeah.

**Ally 27:30**

For people who are fighting on the sidelines.

**Corey Walker 27:34**

Yeah, I know I was very, very disappointed about the chaos and Partnership Project not being funded. It felt kind of like a political decision, because the original funding for the Canadian Autism Partnership Project came from a previous government with a different political party.

And so even though you know, when there was an election and the new government came in, they continue to support the work of CAP and even broaden the mandate a little bit, which is

good, but it didn't really, they didn't support it, I guess, because they figured it had a previous Prime Minister's fingerprints on it that's kind of what I thought, I could be wrong. But yeah, I was very disappointed. And even my Member of Parliament, I met with my Member of Parliament for Prince George's riding in at the time, and he was very in favor of the, he was in opposition, very in favor of what we're proposing.

And he actually even stood up in Parliament, mentioned my name. My name is actually in the Hansard from several years ago, and for the Federal Government House of Commons because he stood up and mentioned my name and said, we need to do this, and it didn't get done. That was very upsetting.

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 28:46**

It's interesting this new Strategy, or not the new Strategy, but the only Strategy, this framework that the government has put together, they had this thing called the National Autism Network, which is in the framework for it. And it's their, almost their version of what CAP was. So they really want to have a place where, hey, I can go to one place for advice. It's going to be called the National Autism Strategy. So I think, as an Alliance, we think that, you know, it's good that the government recognizes there is one place to go for advice, and there's an official meeting place between society and communities on a specific topic and government for action.

That's a great thing. The question is always, what should that look like? Right? We all, for every issue. It's good. You need a door, you need a window to kind of speak to the government. But how do we make this work? And coming back to my original comment about the document, in general, the details are lacking, and I think that's where we're concerned. You know that, you know, we do welcome that there's an idea that, hey, let's identify that there needs to be a touch point, there needs to be an interface, but let's flesh this out. What does this look like, and can it really affect the PT tables and the provincial territorial negotiations that need to happen because a lot of the services and supports, even around employment, although it's federal, there are some things that are at the provincial level. So, you know, does this new interface, this National Autism Network, and are we going to be able to do that? Is it going to be enough power vested in this organization to do that? How does that work? Those are really important questions that we have.

**Ally Garber 30:22**

In terms of the, I'm glad you raised the provinces, because, of course, you know the Alliance and others use the saying that, you know, the services that are offered should not be different or exclusive based on the postal code you have, and by that you know, if you know the stories of families who move from one province to another, because you know they perhaps may live in New Brunswick, but what's offered in Manitoba is more conducive for the types of supports that their child or family member needs.

And so, you know, that is why there was this push for a National Autism Strategy. Is because, you know, the provinces for decades have been working in silos. You know whether it's addressing early intervention, child care, inclusive education, employment, housing, etc. And so Jon, before I go back to Corey, do you have hopes and what have you been hearing too, for some of the provincial organizations about their hopes of what this Strategy might achieve in terms of better collaboration and cohesion?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 31:33**

Yeah, yeah. And you know what it requires to get the provinces on board and territories on board. You know, when this is something on their health file, we have these health accords, we have these bilateral agreements. Okay, So if the federal government's going to take leadership, you

know, the provinces have got to see some money, some benchmarks, something's got to flow through to incentivize them. That's going to come from the government side and on the community side. Are we preparing our provincial and territorial counterparts?

The leaders at the provincial territory level say, hey, an Autism Strategy is now enacted. What's your province going to, are we ready to receive whatever's there? So there's got to be some alignment. And I think that's where all of us can get involved in guiding and in educating some of the government officials at the provincial levels, territorial levels, to do that. I think that's really important work. It's something that we have to coordinate, almost, to make sure the conversation happens at that level. Because it's so important we, at the Alliance, have to have some provincial territory, we call them PT scans, for short, scans about employment, about health services, about wait times, to really try to get a sense of where things are. Because, you know, not every province is very transparent or transparent about their numbers, or, you know, their wait times, but, you know, numbers may drive action, and that's what we're trying to push for. Some more transparency at that level, if it's not from the governments, from sites that are able to share these, that we can really get you know, some hard numbers about what's going on in the country, because some of these is anecdotal, but we've got to move forward and whatever is the next thing to drive that change, this is what we're out looking for.

**Ally Garber 33:08**

No, that's helpful. Corey, you know, overall, I think, you know, I would really hope that you know we again, we talk a lot about Autism Awareness Month, Acceptance Month. I think back to the story you told at the outset of this discussion, where you feel as though there was a lack of understanding about autism, and, it was used against you, and it was seen as a deficit and a reason why you could not pursue the career path that you wanted to choose. I still think that type of thinking exists today. You know, I know examples in the education system, certainly in the workforce. What role do you think the federal government, through this Strategy, could play to better educate Canadians in general about autism and autism acceptance? And I know that's a really kind of, I'm throwing out kind of a big question, but what are your thoughts in terms of how we can be better at this, at this conversation in education?

**Corey Walker 34:19**

Yeah, a good question. I think one of the things the federal government can do is actually hear more from self-advocates, you know, and I love what my dream would be. This would be, how amazing we'd be, actually have a group of self-advocates across the country present, speak directly to the House of Commons and the Senate, not just to a committee, not just take an annual, this doesn't happen very often. It can. It has, occasionally. It would be lovely to have a group of delegates just have a chance to speak, even if it's not, you know, maybe not informal. Have a chance to have the entire House of Commons there, and the entire center, you know, maybe in one room, and just have a chance to lay out. And this is what, this is where our needs are, and this is what our issues are. I think that would be profound. We don't want everything to be adversarial. We don't want to always have to go to Canadian rights or provincial human rights, you know, to deal with these things. We want them just to be dealt with, because people recognize it's good.

And I think if the federal government actually stepped up and and really did more from, they do all these public service announcements and so on, and if they did more or less sort of thing about autism and about the benefits that Autistics can bring to the workforce, you know, I think it would be a step in the right direction, and have the provinces do it too.

**Ally Garber 35:39**

There's a perfect opportunity for members of parliament to show up at the Summit in the spring, where we always have a fantastic group of self-advocates there. Jon, I'm going to throw it to you for the last minute. Where do we go from here? We have the Strategy. We have a willingness from organizations like the Alliance to continue to work together. What are your hopes for, for the short- and medium- and long-term future?

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 36:08**

Yeah, the key is to make sure this doesn't sit on a shelf, right? It's got to be, as Corey said, you know, I think you're saying it's going to be worth the paper it's printed on. And what that means is, okay, it's a platform. It's a step, right? So how do we make this live? And I think we're committed to working alongside the government to make this better through helping implement what's there, through guiding, you know, it's an evergreen document the government has told us. So how do you, what's the next version looking like? And you know, it's five years down the road before the other report, but we've got to start today. We move slow as a country.

We're a big country across so we've just got to keep coming together, keep bringing up the priority issues, keep figuring out what are the practices that are out there that others need to know about across this pillar, economic inclusion is a huge part of this country, and there's really good ways to align it with what government's trying to do already, and really push for those things in this pillar. So I think, I think there's hope. We just have to keep pushing hard.

You know, when the government fails, the community prevails. And this is an opportunity for us to step it up and keep going forward. Don't let this discouragement, you know, sometimes we read these documents and parts can be discouraging, but you know, we can't lose the momentum that we've done over these years. We always pick up and keep marching forward.

**Ally Garber 37:26**

This is a community that I know will prevail. Has been continuing to get up and dust ourselves off for well over a decade. And, you know, I think I'll end with Corey again. Thank you for the story you told at the beginning and talking about, you know, when you learned about your diagnosis and that you didn't know much about it, but you quickly learned, and I think that's similar to everybody's story, whether it's, you know, getting the diagnosis as an adult, as a, you know, as a family, learning that your child is Autistic, you quickly learn there are challenges, but there's also, it opens your eyes to a whole new world, a whole new way of thinking and your point about the opportunities that exist if we just look at things differently for Autistic Canadians to provide those skills in the community, in the workplaces, in the school setting, you know, it is a matter of, you know, breaking down some of the rigid thinking that we have, and, you know, working towards that greater awareness and then acceptance.

So I want to thank both of you for this conversation. You know, we are going to be chatting with other experts across the country to get their reaction with the National Autism Strategy. And I'm very, very excited that the two of you obviously were involved in this conversation, because you're key leaders in the community and in the movement. And I thank you both for all of the work that you do. It's making a significant difference in impact.

**Corey Walker 39:01**

Thank you.

**Dr. Jonathan Lai 39:02**

Thank you. Thanks. Ally.

**Ally Garber 39:10**

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