

# Unpacking Priority Area #4 of Canada's Autism Strategy - Public Awareness, Understanding, and Acceptance

What we heard from the 11th annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit participants.



This brief was created following Autism Alliance of Canada's 11th annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit. It summarizes key ideas and reflections shared by attendees during World Café discussions after a panel presentation on *Public Awareness, Understanding, and Acceptance*.

## How you can use this brief

### As a Policymaker

This brief offers valuable community perspectives on public awareness, understanding, and acceptance. Whether you're working at the federal or provincial level, these insights can help inform policies and programs that support a more inclusive Canada.

### As a Researcher

This brief highlights gaps and community-identified needs related to creating a more inclusive Canada through public awareness, understanding, and acceptance. It can help spark new research questions and guide studies that support meaningful real-world improvements.

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## As a Community Leader

This brief can spark local conversations and provide context for national efforts to create a more inclusive Canada through public awareness, understanding, and acceptance - so you can bring your community's perspectives to the national conversation.

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## As an Advocate

This brief can support your efforts to engage with policymakers and other advocates in your region. It offers a starting point for conversations about building a more coordinated national approach to creating a more inclusive Canada through public awareness, understanding, and acceptance.

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## Panel and World Café Engagement

The panelists first explored how to build greater public understanding of Autistic people, highlighting both challenges and opportunities. They noted that outcomes, such as reduced stigma and greater inclusion, would indicate progress toward autism acceptance. Attendees then discussed what they heard and gave their input, which is summarized below with select quotes for illustration.

Panelists: Polly-Anna Francis, Munira Khilji, Damon Kirsebom, Theodore (Teddy) C.K. Cheung, Rhonda N. McEwen

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## What we heard: reflections from attendees

1. **Move beyond awareness to true understanding and acceptance.** Awareness is a starting point, but public education must focus on promoting understanding, acceptance, and valuing of the diversity of Autistic people and their perspectives.

*"Awareness is not sufficient - seems like a low bar.  
Understanding and appreciation should be the goal."*



2. **Normalize and represent autism through media and everyday contexts.** Avoid stereotypical archetypes, and normalize Autistic traits through inclusive media, children's programming, community spaces, and ensuring diverse representation (including non-speaking).
3. **Adopt community-led and needs-based rather than diagnosis-gated approaches.** Service providers should be sensitive to individual and community needs, and not require a formal diagnosis; professionals should adopt de-medicalized, proactive, and flexible attitudes and approaches.
4. **Promote understanding and acceptance of Autistic diversity.** Public education should promote understanding of diverse narratives, including those of older adults and people with complex communication needs.
5. **Amplify marginalized voices to address structural barriers in social inclusion and service access.** Promote the social inclusion of Autistic people and families from Indigenous, northern, and newcomer communities through co-created strategies, consistent service delivery, and linguistic and cultural accessibility.

**Box 1. Supporting Evidence from the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) Autism Report, from Addressing Stigma and Ensuring Human Rights (p. 97)**

“Promoting autism acceptance and inclusion by the Canadian public can be motivated and reinforced through pan-Canadian, multi-pronged strategies such as knowledge-raising campaigns, positive media portrayals, education and training, and lasting peer engagements with Autistic people.”

## Taking action on this priority

Here are some clear steps that policymakers, service providers, researchers, and community leaders can take based on what attendees shared with us.

1. **Embed Autistic-led and lived experience training across sectors.** Initiate training led by Autistic people for public-facing professionals (e.g., educators, transit, police). Scale, standardize, and mandate such training across sectors and regions.

2. **Launch targeted, community-produced public education campaigns.** Begin short-term outreach through trusted community influencers and culturally relevant platforms (e.g., Discord for youth), produce and circulate Autistic-led media content nationally.
2. **Build infrastructure for inclusive representation and leadership.** Engage recognized Autistic professionals as stakeholders, formalize partnerships that embed Autistic leadership into policy and service design.
3. **Strengthen early years supports in Indigenous communities.** Co-develop training placements in Indigenous communities for service providers, implement early-years programs that are locally governed and aligned with cultural contexts.
4. **Develop national standards for accessible public services.** Convene interprovincial working groups to create unified principles and standards for accessible public services.

**Box 2. CAHS Report, Key Finding, from *Enhancing Community Participation and Accessibility* (p. 124)**

“Broadening universal design beyond physical accessibility to also encompass safety, sensory, and cognitive barriers better supports equitable community participation and accessibility of public spaces for a diversity of Autistic people.”

## Gaps that need attention

During the discussions, participants raised important issues that are often overlooked in policy and practice. By highlighting these gaps, we can include a broader range of voices and better address the diverse needs of our community.

1. **More focus on Autistic adults, especially the late-diagnosed and 50+.** Support post-diagnosis workplace accommodations, privacy, and tailored services are urgently needed by late-diagnosed and older adults.

*“We need more research done on adults. Too much research is being done on children, and the rest of the population is being ignored.”*

2. **Genuine inclusion of marginalized voices and lived experience.** Prioritize inclusion and representation of racialized, Indigenous, francophone, and non-speaking Autistic people. Centre lived experience in policy, media, and research.
3. **Shift from awareness to acceptance - and begin structural change.** Awareness campaigns must evolve into efforts that shift attitudes, transform systems, and promote respectful, neuro-affirming language, while challenging harmful stereotypes.

*"We need to stop the 'awareness' language which is non-actionable and move to acceptance, appreciation, and understanding."*

4. **Support families and caregivers to participate in public life.** The cost of caregiving often excludes families from consultations and public discussions; concrete respite options and accessibility must be built into engagement.
5. **Improve coordination, transparency, and accountability across sectors.**  
**Break down jurisdictional silos.** Publish clear maps of who is doing what, where funding goes, and how different organizations can collaborate to drive change.

## The National Autism Network: Engaging Community for Impact

Attendees shared ideas on how the new Network can meaningfully involve autistic people, families, and communities to advance this priority through trust, collaboration, and shared action.

*"Sponsor campaigns / podcasts / documentaries BY Autistics highlighting Autistics from all around the world to broaden the narrative."*

1. **Build and fund Autistic-led structures and campaigns.** Create paid Autistic advisory panels, support Autistic-led media, fund neuro-affirming content creators, and ensure diverse Autistic representation across all outreach and campaigns.
2. **Engage meaningfully with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities.** Use OCAP principles, hold nation-to-nation consultations, foster self-advocate networks within Indigenous communities, and co-develop culturally grounded inclusion initiatives.
3. **Standardize high-quality, inclusive education and training.** Nationally coordinate training for public service professionals, develop accreditation models, ensure alignment with disability rights frameworks, and prioritize sensory accessibility.
4. **Map, connect, and leverage community organization resources across Canada.** Develop interactive tools to map existing supports and gaps regionally, share knowledge between large and small community organizations, and clarify who is involved and who is missing from coordination efforts.
5. **Ensure Autistic community participation through accessibility and compensation.** Pay Autistic participants for input, sponsor attendance at national events, and hold virtual and in-person consultations to ensure full participation from underserved and distant communities.

*"Hold regular paid focus groups to seek the input of Autistics."*

**Box 3. CAHS Report, Key Finding, from *Addressing Stigma and Ensuring Human Rights* (p. 97)**

"Standardized, mandatory autism training (professional development) tailored to the full range of service providers, including those in healthcare, social services, public safety, and other community sectors, is a key enabler towards the provision of quality care and service for Autistic people and their families.

Successful training programs:

- Are developed and implemented in partnerships with Autistic people, their families, and end users
- Focus on evidence-based content
- Have multiple components and sessions commensurate to the roles of the service providers, and their interactions with Autistic people
- Incorporate independent evaluation and quality assurance
- Involve partnerships amongst organizations and governments, for example, across health, education, and social sectors."





## Acknowledgements

We are deeply grateful to all the Summit attendees who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights. Your contributions are at the heart of our work and continue to shape the path toward more inclusive and responsive autism policies in Canada.

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