



AutismONTARIO



Poppies, painting by Julie M. Green

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-2021

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Our front cover artist is Julie M. Green is an autistic self-advocate, parent, artist, and freelance writer. She resides in Kingston, Ontario. Our back cover artist is Carl Parker, an autistic self-advocate, artist, and writer. He resides in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario.

Board of Directors 2020-2021

Autism Ontario is guided by an elected Board of Directors composed of parents, autistics and respected professionals. They provide governance, expertise, and direction, to the organization on a volunteer basis.

- Pamala Agawa Anishhianaabe-kwa
- Susan Boehnke
- Tizianna Bontempo
- Dr. Barry Bruce, Treasurer
- Hadley Koltun
- David Moloney, Secretary
- Kim Moore, Vice President
- Susan Morris, President
- Sharon Smile
- Sophia Tsouluhas
- Lisa Vezeau-Allen



Annual Report 2020/2021

Autism Ontario's Values

Autism Ontario is guided by its vision, mission, and values.

Our vision: Best life, better world, making autism matter!

Our mission: Creating a supportive and inclusive Ontario for autism.

Our values spell CARE and encompass what we stand for and how we strive to operate:

- **Collaboration** - We believe in the power of working side by side with individuals, families, and communities to make informed choices about autism.
- **Accountability** - We hold ourselves and others responsible for achieving successful outcomes through high standards of integrity and fiscal responsibility.
- **Respect** - We value equity, diversity, and inclusion—and we listen to understand.
- **Evidence-informed** - We use and create knowledge to guide our decisions and work.

We support and advocate for all autistic individuals across the province, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, religion or gender identity. This past year, we continued our work of embracing the more diverse voices of the autistic community in Ontario, including those that have been traditionally underserved. We continue our outreach to Black, Indigenous, and people of colour communities, providing spaces of support and advocacy for those groups.



From the President and Executive Director

Despite the major challenges brought to all people and organizations during this full pandemic year, Autism Ontario was able to quickly respond to direct feedback from our Ontario community—from caregivers, autistic people and partners—to continue providing the best supports possible to families, children and adults with timely information, socially distant activities and new resources that addressed current needs.

We engaged our community through a large, province-wide survey about school experiences and created specific resource material to assist families in navigating their children's return to school.

As changes to the Ontario Autism Program continued to unfold, Autism Ontario responded in growing its OAP Service Navigation program for a second year, the results of which supported thousands of Ontarians and noted in this report in "Autism Ontario by the Numbers" on page 13. We continued to support the OAP Provider List and grow our professional resources list for caregivers through the web-based Community Connect program. With grants from Public Health Canada for mental health projects related to adult supports, from AIDE Canada to be the lead for the Ontario Hub for educational webinars and connections for self-advocates, we were able to expand our reach and capacity to achieve our ends.

Anticipating the declaration of the changes to the Ontario Corporations Act, our members approved substantive changes to Autism Ontario's Bylaws on September 26, 2020. Notably, the members approved a new model of support to our volunteers that regionalizes our chapters for greater volunteer engagement and local community impact both now and in the years to come.

We are so grateful to our numerous donors, financial supporters, volunteers and staff, without whose support none of this year's work would have been achieved.

More importantly we feel hopeful that we are close to the beginning of a post-pandemic world, where we will continue to work toward establishing secure but flexible practices to help us live with the Covid virus, ensuring that autistic children, youth and adults, along with their families, can thrive and participate in a more inclusive community that better reflects all aspects of our diverse lives in Ontario.

Best life, better world, making autism matter!



Marg Spoelstra, Executive Director



Susan Morris, Board President



What is Autism?

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the way a person communicates and relates to the people and world around them. It can affect body language and posture, social interactions and relationships, how you engage with your interests, and sensory processing capacities. Autism exists in all cultures, ethnicities, races and gender identities. While the clinical model classifies autism as a disorder, many autistic people prefer the terms, neurological “difference” or “condition,” which remove the negative associations with the word, “disorder.” Being autistic means that your brain may process information differently than non-autistic, or neurotypical, people.

Autism exists on a spectrum, which means that while all people on the spectrum will experience some of the differences mentioned above, the degree to which each autistic person experiences them and the amount of support they need, will vary.

However, what remains constant is the need for Autism Ontario to advocate for autistic people and work to make the province more supportive and inclusive for autism. Your continued financial support can help ensure this.

Prevalence:

- 1 in 66 Canadian children and youth (ages 5-17) have autism¹
- 1 - 2 % of the Canadian population are on the autism spectrum²
- There are approximately 135,000 autistic people in Ontario.

¹National Autism Spectrum Disorder Surveillance System (NASS), March 2018

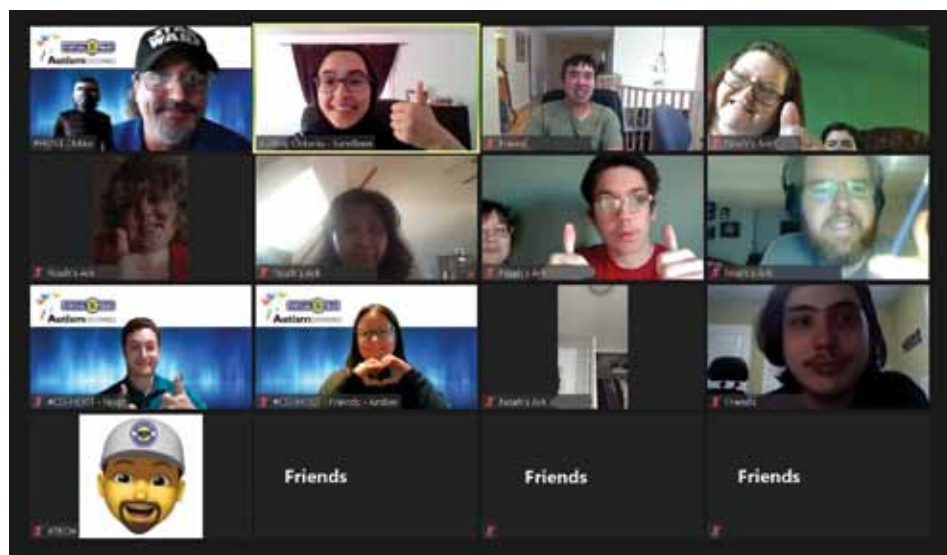
²Canadian Medical Association

Thank you! Merci! Grazie! 谢谢 Miigwech

This year, as the pandemic began to take hold in communities across the province, your support proved vital. Autism Ontario wants to thank our many donors: the foundations, ministries, individuals, and companies. We acknowledge the more than 2,245 individual donors, 203 organizations, and 53 foundations who donated this past year, allowing us to support over 135,000 children, teens and adults, and their families.

Who is Autism Ontario?

Now in its 48th year, Autism Ontario (legally incorporated as the Autism Society of Ontario) is the province's leading source of information and referral on autism, and continues to be one of the leading voices of advocacy in the autism community. We are made up of knowledgeable and caring parents and professionals, researchers and self-advocates who can address the issues that affect Ontarians with autism, their families and caregivers.



The Year in Review

The 2020-2021 fiscal year was one of change as we continued to evolve new models of service delivery dictated by the ongoing pandemic. During this time, the safety of our staff and the communities we serve remained paramount. Staff worked remotely and met virtually. Board meetings were carried out in the same way. Volunteers also continued their tireless support in whatever ways they could.



"There is no doubt that our camp changes lives, it will forever impact anyone who is able to visit or attend. I am so lucky to be a part of our AO family and can't wait until we are able to hug one another again soon."

- Alex Gardner, York Camp & Staffing Director

"We just wanted to thank you for the chocolate nacho kit. It was very easy to do and absolutely delicious. We added some fresh fruit to ours and saved some of the candy for our next batch.. What a fun activity and delicious treat! Thanks again."

- Karianne, parent Toronto



Service Navigation

The year 2020-2021 witnessed the continued growth and success of Autism Ontario's Service Navigation Program under challenging conditions. Throughout the pandemic, Service Navigators provided families with innovative supports and services. As programs and workshops pivoted to online, our Service Navigators connected with businesses who provided unique Social Learning Opportunities (SLO) that our families relied on for connection and respite. SLOs are unique opportunities for parents and caregivers of autistic children to focus on the learning needs of their children and support caregiver education so they feel more empowered. Some of these creative offerings provided to families this past year included take-home pizza kits, which taught basic cooking skills; mail-order mystery kits which entertained recipients with hours of mystery-solving fun; online

trivia for children for youth and parents that tested their skills on a variety of subjects; and a variety of science-based programming and virtual fitness events that included exercise and dancing.

Outreach continues to be pivotal to the Service Navigation Program. Our team works closely with many community groups to ensure that we are meeting the needs of those groups who have been traditionally underserved by Autism Ontario. We have established partnerships with Indigenous communities through our NAN (Nishnawbe Aski Nation) committee work and have worked to deliver numerous dedicated events. Through our partnership with SAAAC (South Asian Autism Awareness Centre), we have delivered our CARES program—an evidence-based eight-week curriculum support group for Caregivers that focuses on mental wellness, enabling parents and caregivers to be

better able to support their children. We have also partnered with SOCH (South Asian Mental Health Resources) and The 519 to offer 2SLGBTQIA-based programming, the Black Legal Action Centre, and other Black caregiver support groups. Autism Ontario offered Introduction to Autism workshops in Mandarin, Cantonese, Arabic and Spanish. Autism Ontario ensures that families seeking our support have an opportunity to connect in whatever way possible. The Service Navigation team continues to work tirelessly to design supports and events to ensure that our community of families feels connected.



Our Volunteers Media Review

Over the last year our family of over 300 volunteers remained at the heart of what we do. From pivoting to run online programs, arranging take-home activity kits, and connecting with families virtually, our volunteers made their presence known. Our volunteers also continued to dedicate time to sitting on their Chapter Leadership Councils, various regional committees and as SEAC (Special Education Advisory Committee) representatives across the province. We thank them for their continued hard work.

“Volunteering means being able to create a lasting impact on another person’s life... My experience with volunteering has instilled a sense of purpose in me—to help others, “
- Jasmeet, a volunteer with Autism Ontario Central West

During 2020-2021, Autism Ontario was fully engaged with the media on a number of issues, perhaps most pointedly during the trial and subsequent verdict of the individual responsible for the 2018 Toronto van attack. Over the course of the trial and before and after the verdict was read, Autism Ontario Staff were interviewed by major media outlets such as CBC, CITY-TV, and the Canadian Press, and appeared on radio, television, and in print to sympathetic and supportive audiences, where we stated the organization’s views.

While not an active participant in the proceedings, Autism Ontario nonetheless was well-prepared to be the primary media respondent once the verdict in the case was announced. This was done by having our statements largely prepared in advance and by sending out a media advisory prior to the verdict to our media contacts. By doing so, we were able to seize the media high ground in advance and ensure that our message was the one being heard.

On a more positive note, Autism Ontario’s *Readiness for Safe and Successful Return to School: Findings from the 2020 Autism Ontario Education Survey* also received good media coverage, resulting in articles appearing in eight regional Ontario papers and Autism Ontario’s Margaret Spoelstra being interviewed by a Niagara, Ontario radio station.

March Break and Summer Reimbursement Fund



Autism Ontario continued to reach out to families to help them with expenses. In 2020-2021, 500 children received summer funding, while 4,236 children each received reimbursement for March Break, to help with some of the cost outlay during that time.



Fundraising Activities

With the pandemic firmly established in early 2020, Autism Ontario quickly adapted our approach to fundraising, switching from in-person to virtual events, online campaigns, and collaborating with partners. Because of your generosity in a most challenging time, Autism Ontario can continue to help create a better world for people on the spectrum and make autism matter.

During the year, we worked with different groups and staged charitable events, including:

- **Federated Health Charities (FHC)**, a workplace charitable campaign that allows the over 60,000 members of the Ontario Public Service (OPS) to support up to 21 health-related charities. In 2020, Autism Ontario was invited to join this select group of charities. We are the only group supporting people on the spectrum on the list. Employees can contribute through payroll deduction, one-time deductions, or at special events. Funds raised by FHC and the OPS support our work in communities across Ontario.
- **The Scotiabank Charity Challenge**, organized in conjunction with the annual October Toronto Waterfront

Marathon is an event in which we have a long history of participation. However, this year, rather than cancel or postpone, the event organizers adapted and extended the event for the entire month, allowing more of our Regions and Chapters to form teams, and walk, run, cycle—any mode of movement—to raise almost \$32,000.

- Autism Ontario, with our partners **Noble Estates Wine & Spirits** and **La Ferme Black River Game Farm**, hosted “A Taste of Italy” in November 2020, virtually touring the wine regions of Italy along with 125 food and wine lovers. Webcast over the Streaming Network, the evening featured learning and tasting Italian wines with Joe Alberti, and the selections of the best cheese and charcuterie pairings, with Lisa McAlpine. We raised almost \$11,000 for our adult programs. We are grateful to all our donors, small and large. You are making a difference in more ways than you can possibly count. You can read more stories in our quarterly newsletters, or on our website at www.autismontario.com.



Readiness for Safe and Successful Return to School

Findings from the 2020 Autism Ontario Education Survey

By late March 2020, the pandemic had shut down schools across the province and the provincial educational system went into remote learning mode. It forced parents and caregivers of children on the autism spectrum to become teachers and therapists. Autism Ontario gathered information from parents or caregivers of Ontario children and youth on the autism spectrum in the education system regarding their experiences of the COVID-19 school closure in the spring of 2020 and their concerns and perspectives for the return to school in the context of COVID-19 in the fall of that year.

We had a total of 2,413 caregivers responding to the online survey, completing questions that covered 2,610 children. Of all respondents, 4.1% indicated that they speak French most often at home. Proportions of visible minority and Indigenous groups were close to those of the larger Ontario population.

Of prime concern to parents and caregivers were the at-home and online education program in which their children participated during this time. A majority of respondents (60%) felt that their child was insufficiently engaged, with 45% of parents and caregivers either being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the experience. Many parents cited losses to their child's social functioning and setbacks to development.

French Language Services



In October 2020, Autism Ontario received the French language designation for its Service Navigation program. The Order in Council to include the partial designation of the Autism Society of Ontario (legal incorporation name) in the French Language Services Act, Ontario Regulation 398/93, was recommended by the Minister of Francophone Affairs, the Honourable Caroline Mulroney, concurred by the Executive Council of Ontario and approved by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Honourable Elizabeth Dowdeswell on October 22, 2020. The partial designation as outlined in Number 16 of the Ontario Regulation 398/93 came into force on October 30, 2020.

Autism Ontario's commitment to the Francophone autism community began many years before any formal discussion about designation. What started as one or two Francophone staff members has blossomed into a full team, accessible to Francophones across the province. French language services are knitted into the fabric of Autism Ontario, autistic Francophones, their parents, caregivers, and families, as well as the professionals they interact with can benefit from the support and multitude of resources in their preferred language of communication.

During 2020-21 the number of Francophone families served by Service Navigators increased by 30.30% from Q1 to Q4.

Advocacy and Promoting the Rights of People with Autism



Autism Ontario remains committed to advocacy on behalf of people with autism in Ontario, their families and caregivers. In 2021, we participated in the prebudget 2020-2021 consultation process, where we laid out our concerns in front of the Minister of Finance, and during the year, continued to engage with the relevant ministries. Despite a year where the situation has continued to be dominated by the pandemic, we kept our agenda front and centre with the province. Among our recommendations:

COVID-19 Vaccinations:

As people with developmental disabilities, such as autism, have been identified to be more vulnerable to the COVID-19 infections, we successfully asked that priority be given to them and their caregivers with the roll-out of the province's COVID-19 vaccination program.

Ontario Autism Program:

We continued to urge the province to reduce the waitlists that families waiting for access to OAP services face. Reduction of these waitlists remains one of Autism Ontario's Top 5 Priorities. Our 2018 province-wide parent survey indicated that 73.6 % of caregivers identified waitlists as a large or a very large barrier.

Implementation of the Education Committee:

As found in our 2020 Readiness for the *Safe and Successful Return to School Survey*, many autistic students have lost educational gains during the pandemic as they could not participate in online learning. We asked the Ontario Government to immediately implement a new Autism Education Committee as recommended in the OAP Panel Report.

Health and Mental Health:

We urged the province to provide supports and incentives to build provincial capacity for mental health professionals who understand autism and to also implement the Mental Health Committee as identified in the OAP Advisory Panel's Report.

Older Teens and Adults:

We asked the province to pay particular focus to older teens and adults with autism. Autism's prevalence rates are not only an alarming statistic for children and youth, but we are now seeing these numbers grow along with the children as they become teens and adults. More importantly, these students are now beginning to exit high school unprepared and unsupported for life as adults in higher numbers than ever before.

We also made recommendations concerning continuing education supports, special services at home, ineligibility for Passport funding, mental health, employment and housing needs.

We closely continue to monitor events that impact the rights and lives of autistic people.

World Autism Day 2020



On World Autism Day, we rallied together to promote the understanding, acceptance and celebration of autistic people and their supporters, and to inspire a more inclusive world.

The pandemic continued to change the way we celebrated World Autism Day, but we kept the day and its meaning close to our hearts. From Sault Ste. Marie to Goderich, in homes, schools, businesses, and community centres across Ontario, people had their own Raise the Flag for Autism Ceremonies (virtually, with masks, or socially distanced). Some used official flags from Autism Ontario, while many others printed and decorated their own flags. Every ceremony was special, and every ceremony brought us closer to a more supportive and inclusive Ontario for autism.

New this year was the production of our video, *What Autism Means to Us*. We asked the autism community: *What does autism mean to you?* The answers we received from autistic adults, advocates, artists, children, and students, as well as from family members and loved ones of people on the spectrum, are insightful and inspiring. An important message conveyed by the range of answers is that autism means something different to everyone.

Adult Services

In 2020–2021, Autism Ontario partnered with key stakeholders in the Ottawa area including autistic adults, family members of people on the spectrum, and community service professionals under the Ottawa Adult Autism Initiative, through an Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant, to complete a large gap analysis regarding services and lived experiences of autistic adults, caregivers, and allies in Ottawa. In the process, we met with numerous focus groups and received approximately 600 surveys from key stakeholders.

During the pandemic, Autism Ontario—in conjunction with PHAC (Public Health Agency of Canada)—continued to provide an online version of our *Living Life to the Full* course to autistic adults and caregivers and families of people on the spectrum.

Autism Ontario continued to support autistic youth and adults as they transitioned to adulthood, post-secondary education or as they required funding for greater involvement in recreation, learning or volunteerism in their communities through our Building Brighter Futures Fund, Education Scholarships, and the David Conforti Volunteer Award.

We also initiated the Autism Ontario Adult Media panel, comprised of a group of adult autistics, which looked at how people on the spectrum were portrayed in popular media and the stereotyping they face. These conversations were posted online at Autism Ontario's website and published in edited form in *Autism Matters*.

Autism Ontario also worked in conjunction with Brock University in the SENS-CAPS (Strengths, Experiences, and Needs of Canadian Autistic Post-Secondary Students), carrying out vital research into the lived experiences of post-secondary students with autism. With the pilot research phase completed at Brock, the goal is now for the study to be rolled out on a provincial basis and then on a pan-Canadian basis.

We remain grateful for the support of our partners at PHAC, Ottawa Adult Autism Initiative, and at Brock University, and those donors who continue to support autistic youth and adults through our scholarship programs.

Autism-Related Service Listings

OAP Provider List

Autism Ontario continues to host the OAP Provider List, which currently includes over 300 Clinical Supervisors of Applied Behaviour Analysis. We are in the process of working to expand the OAP Provider List to include Occupational Therapists and Speech Language Pathologists.

Community Connect

In 2020–21 Autism Ontario launched its Community Connect database, which includes the contact information of experienced autism workers, regulated health professionals such as dentists, massage therapists, and physiotherapists. It includes hundreds of professionals who have expressed an interest in working with persons on the autism spectrum. Community Connect is Autism Ontario's newest one-stop-shop where families and individuals with autism can find all of our educational resources including webinars, past magazine issues, event listings, and our professional listing service.



"I am beyond excited. I hope that in the future that I'll be able to use my creativity and passion for art in my everyday life along with being able to inspire others to follow their dreams."

- Cornelia, winner of Eleanor Ritchie Scholarship for autistic students entering their first year of post-secondary education.

Autism Ontario by the Numbers

8,452

new families served (Q1-Q4),
increase of **86.16%** (Q1-Q4)

1

recipient of the McDonald Family
Educational Scholarship, for children of
a parent on the autism spectrum who is
entering the first year of a post-secondary
program.

50%

increase in number of families served
with Non English/Non French languages
spoken at home (Q1-Q4)

500

Summer 2020 Funding applicants
reimbursed

7

recipients of the Jeanette Holden
Educational Scholarship, for siblings of a
person on the autism spectrum who are
entering the first year of a post-secondary
program.

258

Francophone families served (Q1-Q4)
increase of **30.30%** (Q1-Q4)

1,478

virtual and take-home events
held (Q1-Q4)

51

Full-time staff

7

recipients of the Eleanor Ritchie
Education Scholarship, awarded to autistic
individuals for their first year of post-
secondary education.

94

autistic adults attended a *Living Life to the
Full* course;

419

calls from caregivers, autistic adults and
professional for services/supports,

177

via online webform

166

caregivers of people on the spectrum
attended the course

21

autistic adults each awarded \$500
through the Building Brighter Future
Fund, to pursue a variety of recreational,
vocational or leisure activities.

4,236

March Break 2021 applicants reimbursed

Donations from
2,245 individuals,
203 organizations and
53 foundations

48

webinars (Q1-Q4)



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2020/2021 Financials

AUTISM SOCIETY ONTARIO

Statement of Financial Position (from Audited Financial Statements 2021)

Year ended March 31, 2021 with comparative figures for 2020

ASSETS			2021	2020
	Provincial Office	Chapters	Total	Total
Current Assets				
Cash and Cash Equivalents	6,543,257	2,364,453	8,907,710	7,059,638
Amounts Receivable	393,935	112,863	506,798	494,081
Short-term Investments		214,479	214,479	297,751
Prepaid Expenses and Other Assets	45,971		45,971	34,959
	6,983,163	2,691,795	9,674,958	7,886,429
Capital and Intangible Assets	180,126	196	180,322	222,755
Totals	\$ 7,163,289	\$ 2,691,991	\$ 9,855,280	\$ 8,109,184
LIABILITIES AND FUND BALANCES				
Current Liabilities	2,482,122	42,844	2,524,966	2,517,928
Deferred Membership Fees	1,750		1,750	1,625
Deferred Capital Contributions	154,593		154,593	171,588
Fund Balances				
Unrestricted	2,104,276	2,067,423	4,171,699	3,833,644
Restricted	2,420,548	581,724	3,002,272	1,584,399
Totals	\$ 7,163,289	\$ 2,691,991	\$ 9,855,280	\$ 8,109,184

AUTISM SOCIETY ONTARIO

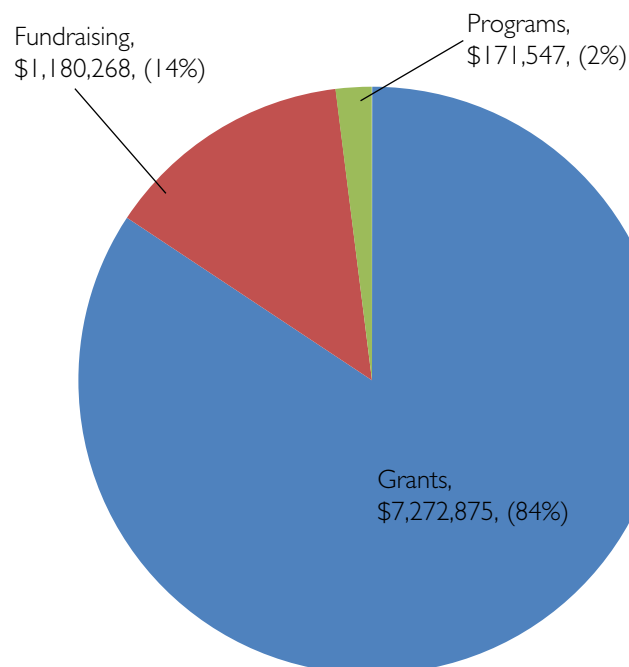
Statement of Revenue and Expenses

Year ended March 31, 2021 with comparative figures for 2020

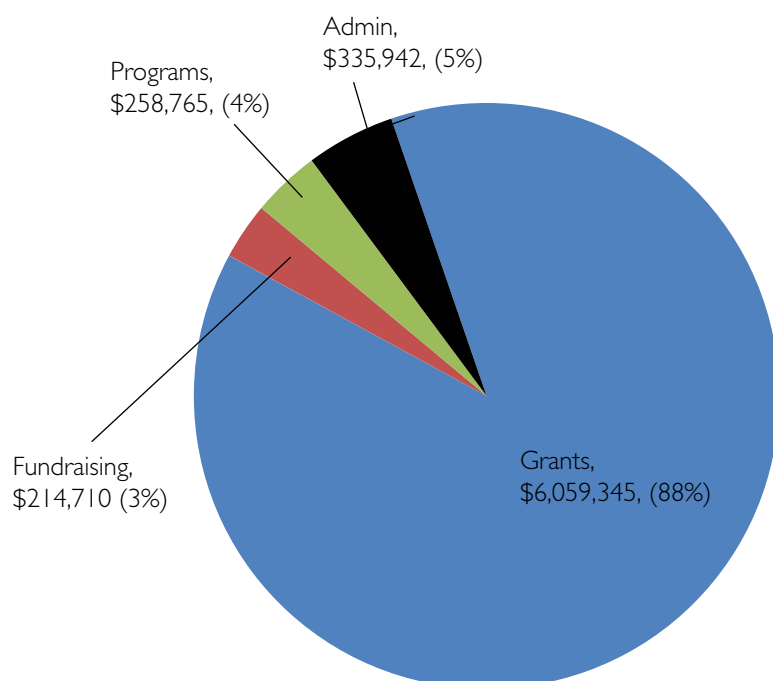
			2021	2020
	Provincial Office	Chapters	Total	Total
Grants	6,936,750	336,125	7,272,875	7,005,840
Fundraising	629,233	551,035	1,180,268	1,876,889
Programs	168,781	2,766	171,547	633,426
Total Revenue	\$ 7,734,764	\$ 889,926	\$ 8,624,690	\$ 9,516,155
Grants	5,665,566	393,779	6,059,345	7,138,878
Fundraising	165,629	49,081	214,710	426,890
Programs	23,839	234,926	258,765	295,052
Administration	214,984	120,958	335,942	352,379
Total Expenses	\$ 6,070,018	\$ 798,744	\$ 6,868,762	\$ 8,213,199
Excess of revenue over expenses	\$ 1,664,746	\$ 91,182	\$ 1,755,928	\$ 1,302,956

Provincial Office and Chapters Consolidated 2020/2021

Revenues



Expenses





Among the Mighty, painting by Carl Parker

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AutismONTARIO
1179 King Street West, Suite 004
Toronto, ON M6K 3C5