

January 30, 2026

Honourable Peter Bethlenfalvy
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat,
Frost Building North, 3rd floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto ON M7A 1Z1

Dear Minister Bethlenfalvy,

Autism Ontario continues its mission of creating a supportive and inclusive Ontario for autism. Autism Ontario advocates for a province that recognizes the need for seamless supports across the life course, reflecting the diverse nature of Ontarians with autism, their unique lived experiences, and the needs of their caregivers and families who love and support them as they grow from infancy to adulthood.

We are pleased to provide our recommendations for the 2026-2027 Ontario Budget. We welcome an opportunity to provide verbal comments at the next available opportunity to ensure that our province reduces the systemic barriers that prevent many autistic individuals from realizing their potential and living meaningful lives.

Sincerely,

Marg Spoelstra, CEO of Autism Ontario

Key Recommendations for the 2026-2027 Ontario Budget

1. Children's Services & the Ontario Autism Program (OAP)

Autism Ontario is encouraged by the \$175 million increase in funding to the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) in the 2025 Provincial Budget. These increases help to move more children from the waitlist and allow them to access much needed core clinical services and programs, which directly support thousands of people in Ontario. Families have repeatedly told us that OAP-funded supports matter to them and have a positive impact on their children's lives. However, we also acknowledge the ongoing needs of the autism community who continue to wait for access to services.

We recommend:

- Invest further in OAP funding to reduce wait times, provide earlier access to diagnostic assessment, and expand core services and programs. Investments that support autistic people and their families make life more affordable and support the return to work for parents and guardians who wish to, but who must remain at home as primary caregivers for their children. This represents an investment in Ontario's tax base and its citizens' well-being.
- Continue to invest in the health, mental health, recreational and informational/training needs of children and adults and the families who remain the primary caregivers of their loved ones. Programs such as AccessOAP Care Coordination that provide access to provincial community events have demonstrated benefits for children and families. Investing in similar supports for teenagers after age 18 and beyond can lead to better health and quality of life outcomes.
- Eliminate the waitlists for Special Services at Home and respite funding.
- Continue to fund the ECHO Ontario Autism program which provides virtual training and capacity building to equip providers and organizations with the knowledge and support they need to diagnose autism and provide ongoing care. Evidence supports a much faster pathway for families to access services when a clear diagnosis is required. The potential to reduce waiting lists for a diagnosis is vital.

2. Education & Mental Health

Parents of autistic children consistently tell us that Educational Supports are their leading concern. Despite notable gains over the past decade, support for Special Education remains insufficient to meet the assessed needs for autistic students as outlined in their Individual Education Plans, even as currently defined in Ontario legislation and education policy. The fast-tracked passage of Bill 33 was marked by limited consultation despite significant impacts on students, families, educators, and school boards.

We recommend:

- Structured, transparent and ongoing consultation with families, students, educators, school boards, unions, Special Education Advisory Committee (SEACs), and community organizations before and throughout implementation to ensure that students have access to high-quality, effective, and safe services.
- Clarity on how the new Student and Family Support Offices and ministerial powers will work under the *Education Act* with existing vehicles and personnel, including school board trustees and SEACs. Autism Ontario has volunteer representatives on SEACs with 42 school boards across the province, bringing forward priorities and concerns from the autism community. They play a key role in advising school boards on policies and helping students and families address issues in a timely and collaborative manner.
- Rigorous accountability and external evaluation of measurable results on identified goals. Consistency, measurability and accountability at every level would build the groundwork required for successful transition out of the K-12 education system and toward lives with dignity, autonomy, and opportunity for people with disabilities.

We are concerned about the mental health of both students and educators. Exhaustion and the lack of essential supports are pushing teachers and health professionals out of their professions.

We recommend:

- Collaboration across the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and allow regulated health professionals to collaborate & share knowledge about autistic students' development and effective strategies that center students' learning needs.

- Provide supports and incentives to grow provincial capacity for mental health professionals who understand autism, such as our successful partnership with Children’s Mental Health Ontario to provide training for Ontario professionals to support the mental health needs of autistic children.
- Expand investment in the Mental Health Committee identified in the OAP Advisory Panel’s Report to address the many gaps in providing health and mental health supports to people on the autism spectrum and their caregivers.
- Continue to financially support the world-class research efforts of the Province of Ontario Neurodevelopmental Disorders Network (POND). The growing body of knowledge through POND supports the need for a comprehensive, cross-sector approach to supporting people with neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism.

3. Adult Services, Housing & Income

The Ombudsman of Ontario’s 2025 report, [*Lost in Transition*](#), confirms what we have long raised: there is a severe shortage of deeply affordable, appropriate care and housing for adults with complex needs, including autism and co-occurring mental health conditions. As a result, many are warehoused for months or years in hospital psychiatric wards, isolated from their families with a shamefully poor quality of life.

We recommend:

- The adoption of all the recommendations contained in this report. Urgently, and at a minimum, the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Health must establish a standing joint forum to engage in proactive system planning for individuals with developmental disabilities and complex needs.
- Expand training investments to include healthcare practitioners and direct service providers (health, housing, and social workers, long term care and nursing staff), who support autistic adults and adults with developmental disabilities, including those who are designated alternative level of care.

In the absence of increasing supportive housing options and given the findings from the [Lost in Transition](#) report as described above, the number of adults with autism who are in crisis will continue to grow. Supporting a model that is primarily crisis driven is a far more costly proposition than focusing on prevention of the circumstances that result in more restrictive responses. We also worry about seeing young adults with disabilities, including autism, in long-term care facilities, effectively replicating an institutional model of care which is costly, and neither appropriate nor necessary.

We recommend:

- Invest in and collaborate with various disability and neurodevelopmental disability groups and all levels of government to plan for the short, medium, and long-term affordable and unique supportive housing needs of autistic people and people with developmental disabilities.
- Support the work of the Housing Through an Autism Lens project blueprint in realizing the creation of affordable, flexible, desirable, supportive housing which necessarily includes genuine choices based on individualized and changing living requirements throughout adult life. This process must be less daunting for individuals and families.
- Invest in high school and transition programs that directly assist students on the autism spectrum with their transition to adult life including successful transition to work, college/university, building adaptive skills for greater independence, and access to supported and meaningful daily activities.
- Extend eligibility for Passport Funding to include more autistic adults who desperately need these services and broaden the criteria for eligible use of funds. Currently, autistic transition-aged youth eligible for AccessOAP may not be eligible for Developmental Services Ontario and comparable, much-needed financial and program supports are not available to them after the age of 18.
- Current Ontario Disability Support Payments are insufficient to meet the living needs of people who have disabilities. We support the work of the ODSP Action Coalition in their current submission to the Minister of Finance.

- Serious gaps in the administration of Registered Disability Savings Plans (RDSPs) are putting people's RDSP investments at risk and preventing many people from opening a RDSP. As a member of the RDSP Action Coalition of Ontario that has been advocating for changes to RDSP administration in Ontario for more than a decade, we acknowledge that there is still work to be done and look forward to continuing our consultations with the Ontario government on supporting greater, equitable access to RDSP's in Ontario.
- Establish national collaboration and knowledge sharing mechanisms between provinces and territories within a framework of a National Autism Strategy, where lessons and collective evidence can be shared to inform policy decisions related to autism.