

# Autism and Mental Health Public Service Provider Resource Scan



Canucks Autism Network (CAN) and Autism Nova Scotia (ANS) collaboratively conducted a resource scan across British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia to gain a better understanding of publicly funded mental health services available for individuals on the autism spectrum.

The goal was to identify gaps and barriers that these individuals may encounter when trying to access publicly funded mental health services, and identify where further training and resources for service providers may be required.

## What



A **survey** was distributed via email and phone to over 300 contacts across provincial health authorities.

The online survey was divided into three sections: **Demographic Data, Service Data, and Autism Experience and Professional Development Data.**

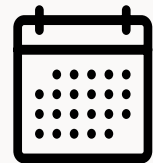
## Why



Build from the initial scoping review and gain a more **in-depth understanding of a public mental health service provider's ability** to support Autistic youth and adults.

**Identify gaps and barriers** in service areas and make recommendations for further training and support.

## When



The survey was live between **June and September 2021.**

Data was then analyzed, and the final report was submitted in **October 2021.**

## Who

**117** mental health professionals in the public sector

- 22 Counsellors
- 20 Social Workers
- 18 Case Managers
- 13 Occupational Therapists
- 12 Mental Health Nurses
- 11 Behaviour Consultants
- 11 Psychologists
- 8 Navigators
- 7 Nutritionists
- 4 Speech and Language Pathologists
- 3 Outreach Workers
- 3 Recreational Therapists
- 3 Vocational Counsellors
- 2 Psychiatrists
- 1 Family Physician



*Some survey participants selected multiple professions (e.g., indicating they were a case manager and navigator) which resulted in more professions indicated than participants who completed the survey.*

## Where

**45 clinicians**  
British Columbia

**26 clinicians**  
Nova Scotia

**46 clinicians**  
Ontario



# Survey Findings

# Recommendations

## \* Criteria Barriers

**Age, diagnosis, assessment and geographic requirements** prevent many Autistic individuals being able to access services.

- ▶ Reduce or eliminate **criteria barriers** for Autistic individuals (i.e. based on dual diagnosis or IQ)
- ▶ Increase **navigation services** for Autistic youth and adults to be able to easily identify appropriate autism-informed supports
- ▶ Research **implications of criteria restrictions** in terms of how they may be infringing on accessibility and human rights legislation

## \* Cost Barriers

**Publicly funded services that are accessible to Autistic youth and adults are limited**, leaving many Autistic individuals the only option to access costly private fee-based services.

- ▶ **Compensate clinicians** appropriately for treating Autistic adults (i.e. if additional treatment is required, funding should be available accordingly)
- ▶ Provide **subsidies for private diagnoses or increase the number of clinicians** able to provide adult autism diagnostic services in the public sector
- ▶ Reduce or eliminate **cost barriers** where possible

## \* Access Barriers

**Referral from a health clinician (i.e. General Practitioner) is often required to access services**, however many are unsure whether or where autism-informed services exist.

Autism services are disproportionately **geared towards children**.

Where services do exist, **long wait times** are very common.

- ▶ Provide **centralized resources** (websites, 'hotline' etc.) to inform accessible and appropriate delivery of mental health services to Autistic youth and adults
- ▶ Increase **navigation services** for Autistic youth and adults to be able to easily identify appropriate autism-informed supports
- ▶ Acknowledge that **autism is a lifelong condition beyond childhood** to create and tailor services accordingly (i.e. lifespan approach)
- ▶ Further research the **effectiveness of mental health peer support formats**, specifically for Autistic individuals

## \* Knowledge Gaps and Training Barriers

Many clinicians are **unsure of autistic mental health supports** in their communities and are untrained in how to support individuals on the spectrum.

- ▶ Increase **confidence and competency among existing clinicians**, as well as **post-secondary students and emerging professionals** in the mental health field (ie. social work, counselling, and occupational therapy)
- ▶ Further investigate the **high percentage of clinicians who are 'unsure'** of community-specific autism supports and assessment services
- ▶ Further examine **survey data on the most common areas where clinicians rated their confidence as 'low'** in supporting Autistic youth and adults: *knowledge on how to support someone on the spectrum, autism and substance abuse, autism and trauma, providing strategies to family members and friends of those with ASD, and knowledge on how to support Autistic women*

# An Autistic Youth's Journey: Accessing publicly funded mental health services



**Sam needs help.**



**Sam asks a general practitioner for a referral.**



**Practitioner is not aware of specific services to refer to.**



**Sam resorts to private counselling service.**



**Sam does not meet the criteria for public service due to their dual diagnosis.**

**(i.e., mental health condition needs to be primary diagnosis, not ASD)**



**Sam finds mainstream services online.**



**Counsellor is not trained in autism specific support.**

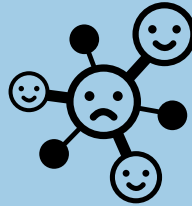


**Sam is still unsupported and moving towards crisis.**

# An Autistic Adult's Journey: Obtaining an autism diagnosis



**Tamara is experiencing mild anxiety and has no formal autism diagnosis but has reason to believe she is on the spectrum.**



**Tamara goes to join a community-based autism group.**



**Tamara is denied because she has no formal autism diagnosis.**



**Tamara goes to the private clinician for diagnoses.**



**Her doctor is unaware of any publicly funded clinicians who diagnose autism and instead provides the name of a private clinician.**



**Tamara goes to her doctor to talk about a diagnosis.**



**The assessment cost \$2,000 and has a 6-month waitlist.**



**Tamara is still unsupported and her anxiety worsens.**