



CASDA Annual General Meeting  
May 13, 2020

Board Chair's Report

This past year began with a high level of excitement about the direction CASDA was taking and the building momentum in our pursuit of a National Autism Strategy. The Canadian Autism Leadership Summit of 2019 brought this into full focus, as our members and allies worked together to respond to and polish CASDA's Blueprint for a National Autism Strategy (NAS). Together we found language that clarified a way forward. The Summit resulted in a set of documents that all CASDA members and allies could use to advance our advocacy to create a better Canada for autistic Canadians.

We put this to good use during the fall 2019 election. Our members reached out to candidates across the country, in all parties, to make sure they knew just how important it was that autism and a NAS, was on the agenda for the new government. To that end, we were successful in receiving endorsement from each federal party. They all pledged to support the development and implementation of a National Autism Strategy. And with the launch of the new parliament, the Prime Minister included specific language about the commitment and his expectations pertaining to a NAS in the mandate letters of two Ministers – Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health, and Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion.

This was truly historic. After 12 years of effort to bring the autism sector together to reach consensus on the need for a NAS and cohesion in our efforts to advocate with a loud and clear voice about what was needed and how the government could exercise their leadership to begin to address the needs of autistic Canadians, our collaboration moved this into reality.

After a brief period of celebration and congratulations to all those who worked so hard and tirelessly to get to this point, we began a new journey to get this done. If we thought we had worked hard to get here, we knew we would have to work even harder to accelerate the momentum. Immediately after the election, the Board began the important work of keeping the NAS on the federal radar. Building on the feedback from our work on the Blueprint for a NAS, we developed a Road Map for action. Our goal is to provide Ministers Hajdu and Qualtrough with a plan for starting the work on a National Autism Strategy. This includes some quick wins, and both medium- and longer-term actions. This new document, which can be found on the CASDA website, will guide a lot of the work we have ahead of us in the coming year.



Our good fortune continued. We were fortunate to receive a grant from the federal government to support the building of CASDA governance infrastructure, strategic planning and enhanced communications capacity. Dr. Jonathan Lai joined us in the capacity of Director of Strategy and Operations. He jumped into the busy world of CASDA just in time for the election blitz. He also undertook the task of refining and operationalizing a Strategic Plan for CASDA. Under Jon's leadership CASDA has:

- Established a partnership with Kids Brain Health Network to bring 5 research trainees to co-chair policy working groups with CASDA members to produce policy briefs on each of the areas highlighted in the Blueprint
- Worked with the Disability Leadership Coalition and the Canadian Human Rights Commission on the monitoring of CPRD implementation in Canada
- Been part of a CNIB lead United Nations Optional Protocol Awareness project
- Submitted to the Disability Advisory Committee of the Disability Tax Credit reform
- Delivered webinar series giving the community an update on the NAS and related issues; increased the number of communications from CASDA and engagement of CASDA members;
- Spoken at various professional associations and research conferences on ways to bridge evidence, practice and policy

Our successful work with Ready, Willing and Able (RWA), in partnership with Canadian Association for Community Living was also recognized, resulting in additional funding for this ground-breaking approach to supporting employers successfully hire autistic employees.

Prior to becoming Chair of CASDA, I had been a part of CASDA for a number of years and was well aware of just how much effort the CASDA board members put into ensuring the success of CASDA in meeting its goals, building partnerships, strengthening the public understanding of autism and the need for a National Autism Strategy. But I must say, I was not expecting the high-speed ride that this year has provided. Our board members pulled out all the stops to make sure that this most recent election included a broad identification of autism as a national priority. Getting the NAS into the government work plan and a public commitment to working towards implementation was both exhausting and exhilarating. I wish to thank all members of the board for their tenacity and vision. This has truly been a team effort.

I wish to recognize and thank board members who will be leaving this year.

Leslie Peters from Yukon for her hard work and commitment to CASDA, her sensitivity to provincial and territorial representation and her much needed perspective on northern issues. Although Leslie has completed her terms of service to the Board, we expect and hope that she will continue to be an active part of CASDA and wish her well as she takes on other responsibilities.



Amy Lonsberry has provided very much needed support around our governance structure, ensuring our governance documents are in top shape. Amy and I worked very closely on the early versions of the Leadership Summit together and again Amy's real strength in organization and planning have been a significant key success factor in its ongoing success. While looking forward to new adventures for her volunteer time Amy has committed to continue supporting CASDA as needed.

And last, but most assuredly not least, I wish to thank David Mikkelsen, a founding member of CASDA, who is stepping down from the Board. Dave's deep commitment to CASDA has been pivotal in the history of success that we have achieved. Having his depth of experience, political acumen and dogged determination to see a National Autism Strategy really happen has been crucial to the development and success of CASDA. Many heartfelt thanks for all you have given to CASDA over the past 12 years. And best wishes with your new career as a retiree and budding artist/painter.

Debbie Irish, Chair