



Autism Alliance  
of Canada



Alliance canadienne  
de l'autisme



# HOUSING THROUGH AN AUTISM LENS

Autism Alliance of Canada |  
Housing through an Autism  
Lens Solution Lab

## POLICY BRIEF: HOUSING THROUGH AN AUTISM LENS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: HOUSING THROUGH AN AUTISM LENS

**PURPOSE:** To recommend to experts and decision-makers on actions related to housing and autism in Canada within the context of the upcoming National Autism Strategy (NAS) and Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP).

**SUMMARY:** Across Canada, there is a lack of access to affordable housing. Autistic people living in Canada have the right to housing that is safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable.

**OPPORTUNITY:** The development of Canada's first ever NAS in conjunction with the National Housing Strategy, DIAP, and the appointment of the Federal Housing Advocate, Marie-Josée Houle, presents an opportunity to advance evidence-based, systems-level policy change.

### SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **Issue #1: Housing**

1. Increase access to affordable housing by increasing supply.
2. Promote accountability by improving measurement and reporting mechanisms.
3. Promote integration of the principles of inclusive design into new developments and facilitate building connections between affordable housing developers, service agencies and Autistic people.
4. Direct Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to utilize the work of Solutions Labs in their policy and programs.

#### **Issue #2: Employment, Workforce Development, And Social Development**

1. Enhance and expand investment in employment programs so many more Autistic people living in Canada are successfully employed.
2. Fast-track legislative approval and implementation of the Canada Disability Benefit to quickly bring thousands of disabled Canadians out of poverty.
3. Ensure desired policy outcomes for housing and employment are aligned.

#### **Issue #3: Disability Inclusion**

1. Ensure the large group of Autistic people living in Canada are proportionally represented on federal initiatives, e.g. on the National Housing Council and Accessibility Standards Canada Board of Directors and Technical Committees.
2. Address the urgent need for a spectrum of support required for Autistic adults to live independently by promoting and funding a variety of support models, and invest in funding models that allow for on-site support, as well as models that allow choice in both provider and home.
3. Maintain momentum on the DIAP and the development of accessibility standards to more quickly address structural and attitudinal barriers to inclusion for disabled Canadians.

## POLICY BRIEF: HOUSING THROUGH AN AUTISM LENS

### PURPOSE

To recommend experts and decision-makers on actions related to housing and autism in Canada within the context of the upcoming National Autism Strategy (NAS) and Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

### SUMMARY

Autistic people living in Canada have the right to housing that is safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable. Canada's federal, provincial and municipal governments have declared adequate housing as essential to one's sense of dignity, safety, and inclusion. However, the current multifaceted and multi-jurisdictional housing system is complex and does not allow equitable access to housing. Housing through an Autism Lens is a project funded by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's (CMHC) National Housing Strategy, and develops recommendations for creating secure housing options in Autistic communities.

### CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY

Autistic people living in Canada experience multiple barriers to securing suitable and stable housing. There is an urgent need for solutions that combine affordable housing with varied levels and types of support.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disability that affects an individual's social interaction, communication and behavioural skills. 1 in 66 Canadians are diagnosed with autism, and recent data from the Government of British Columbia suggest that the prevalence rate has increased to 1 in 39. Research has shown most people on the autism spectrum live at home with family members well beyond the age when most adults leave their family home. Families function as the main source of support, well into adulthood.

Research has also identified a "double cliff" in the lifespan of Autistic adults where significant housing vulnerabilities arise. The first cliff is at the transition to adulthood (age 18–30) due to lack of access to affordable housing. The second cliff is at the transition from mid-life into later years (age 50–55) when there is a need to sustain housing when the original primary caregivers are no longer able to provide support and where a broader circle of support is lacking.

Three programs under the National Housing Strategy have responded to the lack of suitable and affordable housing by increasing the supply of rental units. Despite this effort, the supply fell short of the goal set by the NHS, and was concluded to be insufficient in meeting the housing needs of

Autistics in Canada. This stresses the dire need of a comprehensive strategy to address the housing crisis.

**The development of Canada's first ever NAS in conjunction with the National Housing Strategy, along with the DIAP and recently appointed Federal Housing Advocate presents a unique and important opportunity to advance evidence-based, systems-level policy change.**

Although there are efforts in accelerating the development of the NAS, we want to ensure that there are clear recommendations to advance this strategy and ensure that housing for Autistics in Canada does not fall through the cracks. Work on housing equity is currently underway through the development of the NAS and DIAP, which provide a unique policy window and timely opportunity to implement change in housing.

This brief informs housing policy improvements by synthesizing community-driven and policy-relevant research from the [Housing through an Autism Lens Solutions Lab](#) and [Kids Brain Health/Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance Policy Working Groups](#). Ten policy recommendations targeting the federal policy areas of *Housing, Employment, Workforce Development, Social Development and Disability Inclusion* are included in the brief. These recommendations address profound and systemic inequities to accessing suitable housing for Autistic people living in Canada.

For more information on the National Housing Strategy (NHS) and the Housing through an Autism Lens (HAL), as well as past recommendations on current housing strategies for autism, please refer to appendices A and B.

## ISSUE 1: HOUSING

### CONTEXT

Despite targets for affordable housing being set by all levels of government, across Canada there are long waitlists to access affordable housing. Housing is considered “affordable” if it costs less than 30% of a household’s before-tax income. Affordable rent for a person receiving income assistance for a disability is around \$500. Average housing rental rates across Canada far exceed \$500. An increase in the supply of affordable housing that can be accessed by Canadians with low incomes is urgently required.

### SOLUTION

We propose new models and greater awareness of autism-specific housing needs to lead the way toward increasing access and inclusion of Autistics in Canada in housing. We identified specific opportunities to respond to the needs of Autistics in Canada, including pan-Canadian collaboration, inclusive design, and data collection.

**Table 1: Benefits of Implementation**

Benefit	Description	Proof from HAL Documents
Inclusive design is good design	Not just a benefit for Autistics in Canada, but for everybody	
Decreased strain on mental health sector	The ability to find suitable housing, which grants agency to Autistics in Canada, is tied to improved mental health. A shift towards autonomy and proper housing fit will decrease the current strain faced by the understaffed healthcare sector	<p>“Negative housing situations and instability compounded existing mental health issues in particular exacerbated anxiety and depression.” [Phase 2 Challenge Brief pg 15]</p> <p>“Positive housing situations determined access to positive mental health-enhancing conditions including support, social interactions, feeling safety, protection, and calming sensory environments.” [Phase 2 Challenge Brief pg 16]</p> <p>“[Positive] Social relationships helped mitigate stressors associated with change and transition and feeling safe and understood in relationships led to reduced anxiety and depression.” [Phase 2 Challenge Brief pg 16]</p>
Inclusive Design: Hiring supports for Autistics in Canada is an opportunity to create more jobs	Better support creates a better economy	“Access to support increased autonomy, helped Autistics secure employment, and reduced social isolation and mental health issues.” [Phase 2 Challenge Brief pg 17]

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1:** Increase access to affordable housing by increasing supply.

Avenues that can be leveraged to increase supply are:

- Increase collaboration between all levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal) to accelerate and add certainty to the process of adding new supply.
- Collaborate with all levels of government on a clear plan to increase affordable housing for renters and owners at all income levels using taxation, spending and regulatory levers.
- Increase flexibility of funding models so federal investments can be better leveraged by non-government partners in regions where there is low provincial or municipal government investment in affordable housing.

**Recommendation 2:** Promote accountability by improving measurement and reporting mechanisms so that regular, progress reports on the status of affordable housing are publically available, as well as ensure data collection and reporting includes metrics for accessibility and inclusion.

**Recommendation 3:** Promote integration of the principles of inclusive design into new developments and facilitate building connections between affordable housing developers, service agencies and Autistic people.

**Recommendation 4:** Direct Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to utilize the work of Solutions Labs in their policy and programs.

Solutions Labs led by disability organizations (linked below) have generated valuable community designed approaches to inclusive housing. We invite readers to learn more about these approaches at the link below.

- [A Home in a Neighbourhood Where I Belong](#)  
A project that focuses on developing inclusive housing models for folks with intellectual and developmental disabilities
- [Affordable Housing for Social Inclusion](#)  
A project that focuses on creating housing options for folks with medical complexities and developmental disabilities
- [Housing through an Autism Lens: A Pathway from Crisis to Solutions](#)  
A project that focuses on developing affordable housing options for Autistic adults, and identifying services, funding and supports throughout an Autistic person's lifespan
- [Developing easy-to-use community decision-making tools to help achieve National Housing Strategy Goal](#)

A project that focuses on evidence-based approaches in addressing house affordability, security and suitability challenges in the Autistic community to help achieve the NHS goal

- [Accessible, Affordable, Inclusive: Housing Solutions that Meet the Needs of People with Developmental Disabilities](#)

A project that focuses on expanding the amount of inclusive housing options through integration of feedback from people with developmental disabilities and their families

- [Let's Talk... Home and Community](#)

A project that promotes social and economic inclusion of new Canadians and people with developmental disabilities through adequate housing

- [Exploring the RDSP for Homeownership and Housing Stability](#)

A project that explores ways in which the Registered Disability Savings Plans could be modified to optimize its practical use in the context of housing

## ISSUE 2: EMPLOYMENT, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### CONTEXT

Adequate income is critical to ensuring full participation in society. Autistic adults have the lowest employment rates of Canadians with disabilities, with many not participating in the labour force and therefore relying on government supports.

The average income achieved by Autistic people living in Canada through employment, income support programs or a combination, is below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> In every province and territory in Canada, there is a shortfall of several hundred dollars per month between income received from disability support programs and the actual cost of living. As a result of very low incomes, housing is often unsuitable, unsafe and insecure.

### SOLUTION

We propose new strategies to reduce the financial barrier faced by Autistics in Canada during their search for suitable housing. We identified actionable changes to respond to the needs of Autistics in Canada, including investment in employment and benefit programs, as well as policy realignment.

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<sup>1</sup>Berrigan P, Scott CWM, Zwicker JD. Employment, Education, and Income for Canadians with Developmental Disability: Analysis from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability. *J Autism Dev Disord*. 2020 Jul 13. doi: 10.1007/s10803-020-04603-3. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 32662052. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32662052/>

**Table 2: Benefits of Implementation**

Benefit	Description	Proof from HAL Documents
Decreased strain on mental health sector	<p>Precarious employment and stream of income is a direct factor to housing instability, each of which are tied to negative mental health outcomes. Low income is also tied to physical health concerns due to a lack of safety and proper subsistence.</p> <p>Supporting Autistics in Canadas in securing stable employment will decrease the strain faced by the health sector as a whole.</p>	<p>“Unstable income led to increased housing instability for Autistic adults, exacerbating during times of transition and changing life circumstances.” [Phase 2 Challenge Brief pg 17]</p> <p>As we know, unstable housing can lead to negative mental health outcomes.</p>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 5:** Enhance and expand investment in employment programs so many more Autistic people living in Canada are successfully employed.

**Recommendation 6:** Fast-track legislative approval and implementation of the Canada Disability Benefit to quickly bring thousands of disabled Canadians out of poverty.

**Recommendation 7:** Ensure desired policy outcomes for housing and employment are aligned. For example, to support *both* sustainable housing and employment outcomes, design and adapt affordable housing programs so that rents are quickly responsive to income fluctuations.

## ISSUE 3: DISABILITY INCLUSION

### CONTEXT

Autistic adults face unique housing-related risks due to heightened social, sensory and stress vulnerabilities; significantly higher than average co-existing mental illness and chronic health problems and specific pain points along the lifespan. There is also significant variability across the autism spectrum that impacts related support needs. Seventy four percent of Autistic adults report receiving help with at least one type of everyday activity and that support is often provided

by families.<sup>2</sup> Autistic adults also face extra housing scarcity because of restrictive eligibility rules for the limited amount of supportive housing that does exist.

## SOLUTION

We propose new strategies to ensure that Autistics in Canada have a voice in self-advocacy. We identified strategies to respond to the needs of Autistic Canadians, including proportional representation, offering diverse supports, and addressing structural barriers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 8.** Ensure the large group of Autistic people living in Canada are proportionally represented on federal initiatives like the National Housing Council and Accessibility Standards Canada Board of Directors and Technical Committees.

**Recommendation 9.** Address the urgent need for a spectrum of support required for Autistic adults to live independently by promoting and funding a variety of support models, since there is no one size fits all approach to housing and support. Invest in funding models that allow for on-site support, as well as models that allow choice in both provider and home.

**Recommendation 10.** Maintain momentum on the Disability Inclusion Action Plan and the development of accessibility standards to more quickly address structural and attitudinal barriers to inclusion for disabled Canadians.

## CONCLUSION

The pandemic has made it clear that suitable housing is foundational to health and well-being. This brief provides policy makers with a synthesis of credible community-driven research in order to inform, prioritize and implement policy recommendations that will improve housing outcomes for Autistic people living in Canada.

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<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada. Infographic: Autism Spectrum Disorder – Highlights from the Canadian Survey on Disability. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/infographic-autism-spectrum-disorder-highlights-canadian-survey-disability.html>

## Autism Alliance of Canada

### Housing Through an Autism Lens

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## APPENDIX A

Table A: NHS Innovation & Research Streams and Potential for Autism Focus<sup>3</sup>

Program	Description	Potential for Autism Focus	Opportunities
<b>NHS Demonstrations Initiative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide a demonstration platform to showcase innovative technologies, practices, policies, programs and strategies in the affordable housing sector that are aligned with the priority areas and vulnerable populations of Canada's NHS</li> <li>Focus is on showcasing and building awareness, knowledge and acceptance of promising innovations</li> <li>Project support of \$25k up to \$250k, up to 18 months</li> </ul>	High	<p><b>Potential opportunities:</b> Call for autism-specific proposals (in tandem with or after current open call)</p> <p>Identify housing innovations for people with autism as a priority in current round application materials and scoring</p>
<b>Solutions Labs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides housing stakeholders with funding and expert innovation lab consultants to help solve complex housing problems using innovation methods and tools</li> <li>Will support labs ranging in duration from 1-3 days lab sprints to longer-term labs of up to 18 months. Projects support of \$25k up to \$250k</li> </ul>	Medium	<p><b>Potential opportunities:</b> Coalition of autism and housing stakeholder(s) to submit application to lab</p> <p>Micro-grant to support development of solutions lab proposal</p>
<b>Collaborative Housing Research Network</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supports enhanced research under Canada's National Housing Strategy</li> </ul>	Low	<p><b>Potential Opportunities:</b> Explore for potential autism lens in Stage 3 of project, or partnerships in next iteration of NHS</p>

<sup>3</sup> Abel et al. (2020). Housing Brief #3: Early Win Opportunity for the National Autism Strategy. [CASDA-KBHN-Briefs-Compendium- 28102020-docx.pdf](https://www.autismalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CASDA-KBHN-Briefs-Compendium-28102020-docx.pdf)



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Joint initiative between CMHC and the Social Sciences and Humanities Council</li> <li>Available to researchers at post-secondary institutions in partnership with community organizations/NFPs, etc.</li> </ul>		
<b>NHS Research &amp; Planning Fund</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides funding for NFPs and NGOs (housing providers, charities, Indigenous governments/organizations, etc.) to undertake housing-related research or research planning activities</li> <li>Will fund up to 75% of program costs (up to \$100k for individual projects, \$250k for a research program, \$50k for a planning or knowledge mobilization project); duration of up to 2 years</li> </ul>	High	<b>Potential opportunities:</b> Identify research related to autism & housing needs as a priority area for 2020/2021
<b>CMHC Housing Research Scholarship Program</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides financial assistance to post-doctoral fellows undertaking housing research through partnerships with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council</li> <li>\$3.65 million is available</li> </ul>	Low	<b>Potential opportunities:</b> Encourage applications from individuals working on housing needs for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders
<b>Housing Research Awards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize world-class housing research being conducted in Canada and provide funding for research</li> </ul>	Low	<b>Potential opportunities:</b> Encourage focus on meeting housing needs of Canadians with disabilities and especially neurodevelopmental disorders

	teams to promote and expand their work		
<b>National Housing Conference</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Showcase new ideas and innovations in affordable housing at an annual, multi-stream conference</li> </ul>	High	<b>Potential opportunities:</b> Use conference session to highlight autism housing issues/need for affordable housing project pipeline that meets the needs of people with autism
<b>Housing Needs Data</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Works with a wide range of partners to identify, communicate and fill data gaps to better understand housing conditions.</li> <li>Focuses on the housing needs of Canada's most vulnerable populations.</li> <li>Increases the ability to develop housing policy in anticipation of changing housing needs, conditions and market forces.</li> </ul>	High	<b>Potential opportunities:</b> Partner to develop comprehensive data on diverse housing needs for Canadians with disabilities and work to ensure an autism lens is incorporated
<b>Expert Community on Housing (ECOH)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A collaborative, online network of housing experts for sharing housing knowledge and contributing to the development of housing solutions.</li> <li>Applicants to all Innovation and Research programs are encouraged to be part of this network</li> </ul>	Low	<b>Potential Opportunities:</b> Work to raise awareness of autism housing needs within community
<b>Affordable Housing Innovation Fund</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>\$200 million fund to encourage new funding models and innovative building techniques in the affordable housing sector</li> </ul>	Medium	<b>Potential Opportunities:</b> Call for autism-specific proposals

## APPENDIX B

Autistic adults experience the world differently than the general population and therefore suitable housing must consider more than just bricks and mortar. In 2021, The Housing through an Autism Lens Project captured over 200 stories from Autistic adults, families, care providers and service agencies from across Canada. Their voices have informed a [Housing Blueprint](#) that identifies eight elements requiring consideration when planning suitable housing for Autistic adults.

These eight elements can be used as a guide to planning for positive outcomes in housing for an Autistic person no matter where they are in their adult life:

1. Self-determination
2. Medical and mental health
3. Community care, positive relationships and social connection
4. Financial and economic stability
5. Housing infrastructure and suitability
6. Physical, emotional and social safety
7. Support systems, including natural and paid support
8. Technological support and other tools

These eight elements are useful for practical planning in the hands of families, but they also frame an ecosystem approach that will advance housing equity for Autistic adults for policy makers to consider.

## **Language**

Language is a powerful mechanism in shaping our understanding of the world around us and it influences how people perceive themselves and others. The words we use to talk in conversation with and about Autistic people can have a powerful impact in either advancing or undermining disablist attitudes. Based on the literature and the strong preference of the Autistic members of Autism Alliance of Canada, we recommend either using identity-first language, or more neutral terms such as "person on the autism spectrum." In order to respect the agency and diversity of voices within the community, Autism Alliance of Canada uses such terms interchangeably.

## **Autism Alliance of Canada**

Autism Alliance of Canada's vision is that all Autistic people living in Canada and their families have full and equitable access to the resources they need across a lifespan, where and when they need them. Autism Alliance of Canada's members are committed to ensuring the creation and implementation of a comprehensive National Autism Strategy that addresses critical gaps in funding and policies, which are preventing Autistic individuals and their families from exercising their equal rights as Canadians.

## **Housing through an Autism Lens Solutions Lab**

The Housing through an Autism Lens Solutions Lab (HAL) was funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's (CMHC) National Housing Strategy. Solutions Labs use an innovative approach to tackle complex societal challenges that require changing a system. Based on extensive research, HAL develops relevant and immediately usable pathways to secure housing options for Autistic adults that include supports, services, and resources.