



2021: Executive Report

As the pandemic persisted, we continued to do the bulk of our advocacy online. Some highlights from 2021:

- We continued our groundbreaking [Autistic Health Outreach Project](#), educating Canadian medical students about autistic health access needs.
- We collaborated with the Centre for Independent Living Toronto to improve vaccine access for autistic/disabled people through the [Disability Vaccine Outreach Initiative](#).
- We collaborated with Independent Living Canada to work towards ending abusive long-term care and institutional housing.
- We led the annual [Disability Day of Mourning](#) in Ontario, remembering those who were murdered by their parents/caregivers and saying: Never Again.
- We consulted with governments internationally, nationally and provincially on human rights issues in education, housing, school and health care.
- We continued to advocate for a ban on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA).
- We educated employers on inclusive supports and communication access for autistic people through our Autistic At Work presentation.
- We proudly supported Land Back, Black Lives Matter, trans rights, immigrant rights, health care rights, housing rights, climate justice and other social justice issues.

Please see next page for more details on 2021 projects!

The Autistic Health Access Project

This one-hour seminar, created and taught by A4A members at University of Toronto, Queen's University and other institutions in Ontario, is the first program of its kind in Canada. In 2021, it was presented by A4A members Darla and Anne, who covered topics such as: communicating with AAC users; making ERs and clinics sensory-safe; communicating with autistic patients; understanding autistic movement/expressions; and the need to centre the patient in conversations about care—and more.

In July, A4A member Anne wrote more about the project in [Healthy Debate](#): “Initially, there was skepticism about our seminars. A representative of an autism service agency that was also presenting told us: ‘These students are very tired and have to attend a lot of seminars. Don’t be disappointed if some of them pack up their things and leave before the session is over.’ **But nobody left early.** They lined up to speak with us after our presentation had ended. As it turns out, medical students are craving this kind of direct exposure to demographic-specific patient experiences.” It is truly a visionary program and we’re thankful to all those involved.

Vaccine Access: Partnership with Centre for Independent Living Toronto

We were honoured to be asked by the Centre For Independent Living Toronto’s [Disability Vaccine Outreach Initiative](#). Through it, disabled people assist their peers in gaining access to vaccines while also educating practitioners about access needs. The project was a part of the City of Toronto’s [Vaccine Ambassador](#) program. A4A provided webinars to members about the science and safety of vaccines and two vaccine ambassadors—A4A members Gaby and Sam--were points of contact for autistic Torontonians who needed assistance with booking, transportation, on-site accessibility and much more. Thank you to all who worked on this project.

Gaby, who was also an active volunteer with Vaccine Hunters Ontario, praised CILT for recognizing that autistic people face specific barriers to health care, including vaccination clinics. “This is important because autistic people tend to be erased from disability discourse in general despite being considered disabled,” she said. We are glad to have been included as an organization and look forward to more partnerships with CILT in 2022 and beyond.

Taking on the Long-Term Care (LTC) system: Partnership with Community Living Ontario

Community Living Ontario, in partnership with A4A and other community partners, have requested a meeting with the Government of Ontario about the problem of inappropriate placement of younger adults with disabilities in long-term care facilities (LTC) that are designed for the elderly. In our province, there are nearly 5,000 people under age 65 who have been currently placed in LTC facilities. A4A supports independent, supported living in the community and opposes segregating disabled people (including those who are developmentally disabled) from the rest of the community. Additionally, the pandemic has drawn attention to the severe health risk and life-threatening conditions that LTC residents have faced in Ontario.

We are awaiting a meeting with the Government on this issue and hope to have updates on this campaign soon. Many thanks to our volunteers and to Community Living for including us in this important initiative.

Disability Day of Mourning

Once again, A4A held a vigil for the Disability Day of Mourning, a global event where we remember disabled people who were murdered by their parents/caregivers. Due to the pandemic, the vigil was held online. Volunteers read of the names of disabled people who had been killed by their caregivers.

As A4A member Rishav said in his speech: “When covering the murder of a disabled person at the hands of people entrusted to help them live fulfilling lives, the media will often disregard the humanity of the killer’s victim. The media turns the victim into a burden, a caricature, a machine that was no longer worth maintaining. Those who have lost their lives to ableist violence deserve to have their lives, names, and stories remembered.”

Blowing the whistle on residential institutions

Since we first became aware of abuses at the Child Parent Resource Institute, a residential institution in southwestern Ontario, A4A has been actively campaigning to shut it down. In late 2019, we [wrote about](#) abuses there and questioned why the Government of Ontario was allowing this institution--which was the subject of a massive human rights class action as well as criminal actions—to be a leader in upcoming educational seminars on mental health for parents of autistic kids.

The government ended up canceling those seminars, perhaps due to grassroots efforts. But the centre remains open as a residential institution. In September of 2021, the class action lawsuit was settled for \$10 million to victims. Anne, an A4A member, wrote an [investigative piece](#) on the CPRI, highlighting the details of endemic abuse, as documented in the class action hearings and papers and conversations with survivors. With scant coverage in mainstream media (a single, short CBC story), it was crucial to get the word out about this class action and the abuses that continue today. In November, Anne received the *Helen Henderson Literary Award* for this independent journalism.

ABA “research” review

Our [Research Review on ABA](#) summarized new works that outline the human rights issues with ABA as well as how ABA researchers use *unscientific* methods when doing their research. We documented how the ABA industry has a terrible record of sloppy, error-filled and misleading research. In addition, ABA researchers often have conflicts of interest that should have barred them from doing the research at all.

We shouldn't *need* to continue to prove why ABA should be banned in Canada. Policymakers should be acting NOW. But we will continue to document the many reasons why the monopolistic and exploitative ABA industry needs to be stopped. Watch for a new paper in June, 2022.

Consulting internationally

In 2021, several of our members consulted with the UK Standards Authority as part of a consortium of neurodiversity advocates on the issue of ABA. The ABA industry currently receives very little funding from UK governments and is attempting to “penetrate a new market,” in several other countries. **We are united with advocates globally to stop ABA from becoming entrenched in funding structures outside of Canada and the US.**

Consulting federally: CAHS autism policy review

Our policy team wrote 3 in-depth policy papers to the CAHS, on [social inclusion](#), [economic inclusion](#); the [scope of autism pseudoscience](#) and [corruption in current Canadian autism policy](#). Our team worked tirelessly to connect autistics and families across Canada with the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences, which was conducting an arms-length review of autism policy in Canada for a report that will be released early in 2022. Hundreds of autistic people and our families filled out CAHS surveys, sent in feedback and joined in discussion groups led by CAHS staff. These discussion groups took *a lot* of spoons. Thank you to everyone who took part!!

As Darla, an A4A member, [put it](#): “There were nearly a dozen nonspeakers in an official consultation on Canadian autism policy. EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US just tore into ABA. Kids, adults, teens, all of us just explaining how awful and harmful it is. ...Not sure they believed us.” It is difficult to know whether our ideas were heard and will be incorporated into the upcoming CAHS report-- or whether it was all an exercise in tokenism.

Reasons for skepticism include the fact that one of the “autism experts” leading up the CAHS inquiry (Lonnie Zwaigenbaum) [supports the ABA industry](#). (We reached out to him to dialogue, but he never followed up with us). Also, after consultations had concluded, the CAHS lead investigator, Serge Buy, was featured as a keynote speaker at a “gala” held by the federal ABA lobby (CASDA). We reached out to CAHS to try to stop what appeared to be an obvious conflict of interest, but the CAHS ignored our concerns.

Federal action: Opposing the proposed National Autism “Strategy”

A4A is in solidarity with Autistics United Canada in opposing the proposed National Autism “Strategy,” which serves only to enrich the ABA industry. For more on our on-going campaign, see our [2021 Statement](#).

Provincial advocacy: AAC, OT and SLP

We were glad to see that in 2021, the Government of Ontario kept its promise to autistics and our families to continue funding occupational therapy and speech therapy. As some recall, in 2018 and 2019, we had met with the Government to express our concerns that the ABA industry had siphoned all of the funding from these crucial areas of need, which had been defunded for 18 years in favour of an ABA monopoly. Thankfully, the Government responded to the concerns of the community and continues to value AAC, OT and SLP in its funding decisions.

Ontario: Outside oversight for ABA

The Government of Ontario took another step, thanks to the work of neurodiversity advocates: it placed the ABA industry under the [regulatory watch](#) of the Ontario Psychologists' Association (OPA), a health regulating college. This was against the wishes of the ABA lobby (ONTABA) which had wanted to regulate itself through a board of BCBA's. ([Read the Government's Report here.](#))

While we support outside oversight as a welcome alternative to *no* oversight, we continue to advocate for the **banning of ABA in all of Canada**.

Proposed ban on restraint and seclusion in Ontario schools

The Ontario Legislature has yet to pass a proposed Member's Bill by MP Michael Coteau (which A4A members were involved with) to ban life-threatening restraint and seclusion rooms in Ontario public schools. We continue to monitor this, offer our support and question members of the Government as to why it has not gone to vote after nearly two years. *The pandemic is not an excuse for MPPs to avoid controversial policy issues. Our representatives at Queen's Park need to act now to pass this bill and protect children of Ontario.*

Ontario: Proposed change to the definition of "child" (Substitute Decision Act)

A4A was contacted by the Ministry of the Attorney General to give our view on a proposed legislative change of the definition of "child" that would include disabled adults, potentially over-riding the *Substitute Decisions Act*, which governs decision making for developmentally disabled adults in their decisions in housing, health care and more.

We responded with several points, including that the proposed new definition could be used in court proceedings to infantilize an adult who may otherwise be a candidate for independent living and supported decision making. As well, those individuals able to access the resources to appeal a decision that deprived them of supported decision making would have less recourse if the Substitute Decision Act loses its rigour. [Read our Statement here.](#)

Support, community and advocacy

Our social media communities continued to grow in 2021. A4A members Gaby and Izzy launched our Discord server, a dynamic and welcoming space for all members. It is especially valuable to our members who do not support/use Facebook. We continue to be active on Twitter @a4aontario. Our dynamic social media teams work every day to make a safe and equitable environment in our social media spaces. Thank you.

Throughout 2021, our members presented virtually about neurodiversity and autistic accessibility to employers, employment groups, education groups and more. Thanks to all who prepared and presented.

We welcomed two new Board members in late 2021: Nate and Taryn. Both bring amazing skill sets and experience to their roles on the Board. Mandy and Anne resigned from the Board. We are so grateful for all they've done in helping to build the foundations of our organization as co-founders (2017). Both continue as volunteers.

Hope and gratitude

Here's hoping that 2022 will be a better year, where we can once again safely have in-person meetups, protests, meetings and the raising of the Neurodiversity Flag at Toronto City Hall! We have missed irl events and activism, but are constantly amazed by all that our members have done to stay connected in the virtual world throughout 2021—not only that, but to continue political and social advocacy and education.

We're also grateful to every autistic person and ally who has done the right thing and stayed home when needed (and when possible) and got vaccinated as soon as they were able to. We are especially thankful for the efforts of our members who worked with Vaccine Hunters to get vaccines to essential workers and other overlooked, vulnerable populations--and to all who have supported public health measures that saved lives. Thank you.