

# 2022 AISM

**aism**

autism society of minnesota

Minnesota's First Autism Resource®

## Annual Report



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**Having served Minnesota's autism community for over a half-century, AuSM continues to innovate how we advocate on behalf of individuals and families affected by autism. The pandemic taught us to connect virtually with our community – and to meet people where they are. We continue to listen, learn, and grow while providing services and programs that give people with autism opportunities to thrive.**

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**Backed by your support, we work to deliver new programs and services while enhancing existing offerings to meet the evolving needs of our neurodiverse community. Together, let's build on our 2022 success, including:**

- Trained 50+ organizations, including 12 police departments covering about 40 percent of Minnesota
- 11 Autism Acceptance Month Partners helped us move the conversation beyond awareness
- 87 community members responded to our survey on resource needs, informing new AuSM Celebrates Interdependence resources and adult programming
- Served more than 100 students in our social and recreation programs, and 225 campers at our overnight camps
- Held classes and training throughout Minnesota, including Austin, Duluth, and Rochester
- Tested a new registration option to empower people to pay it forward by buying tickets for those less fortunate – now standard practice thanks to our generous community
- Some support groups met back in person for the first time in over two years, with some still preserving safe distance as they support each other
- Hosted 315 participants in our free Understanding Autism sessions
- Hired and promoted neurodiverse staff, including our first-ever Deputy Director, Daren Howard (pictured, right), who found his autism diagnosis after his son was diagnosed. “This experience was life-changing and solidified my commitment to the pursuit of disability justice,” said Daren. With over 15 years of experience in nonprofit organizations, Daren comes to us from the San Francisco Bay Area. “I was introduced to AuSM by a friend who welcomed me to the Minnesota autism community when my family and I relocated here from California. This has been the most welcoming community!”



## A Note From Our Executive Director

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Looking back on the last year as we continue to come out of the blur of pandemic years, the end of 2022 felt noticeably brighter, healthier, and more hopeful than when the year began. We started seeing more of each other – we even saw each other’s faces again, and were reminded that, oh yeah, that’s what a smile looks like, as we emerged from behind worn-out facemasks. As COVID precautions loosened, many of AuSM’s events and programs carefully returned to in-person, but we kept the lessons we learned about connecting virtually with our community by adopting a hybrid model for events to suit everyone’s comfort level. Seeing so many of you again was joyous. Being in our community is a constant reminder to me of what a privilege it is to lead an organization whose impactful work continues to grow, connecting people with autism and their families with the services and support they deserve. It helps to ground me in the knowledge that our mission is all about showing up for you. Wherever you are, we’re here for you. We serve the whole state, the whole spectrum, for the whole lifespan. I have enormous gratitude for our entire team’s commitment to moving our mission ever-forward, fueled by the passion of our staff, board of directors, members, donors, volunteers, partners, and other supporters. Thank you all, and here’s to the best 2023 that we can make of it, working together.



*Ellie Wilson*  
**Ellie Wilson, AuSM Executive Director**

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### OUR MISSION

The mission of the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM) is to create connections, empowering everyone in the autism community with the resources needed to live fully.

AuSM seeks to enhance the lives of all who are part of the Minnesota autism community, with a fundamental commitment to advocacy, education, support, collaboration, and community building.



## SOCIAL AND RECREATION PROGRAMS

Our social and recreation programs are rooted in a neurodivergence mindset that helps kids and adults build skills naturally, in ways that work for them, while building community. In 2022 we stopped using the term social skills classes in favor of a more comprehensive term: social and recreation programs. Many social skills programs focus on explicitly teaching communication tactics, whether that be eye contact or conversational approaches. AuSM does things differently. Our experienced staff focus on acceptance and friendship-building through patiently supported experiences. We work with community partners to ensure that our participants are building their skills right where they'll use them: in the community.

Our social and recreation programs serve a wide range of needs, abilities, and ages – with increasing opportunities for autistic adults. We've also increased our support for outside organizations and venues that host sensory-friendly activities and programs of interest to our community.



### AUSM CELEBRATES INTERDEPENDENCE

No one lives entirely independently because everyone relies on others – farmers grow our food while the electricity company keeps our lights on. This is interdependence. We depend on each other. We all have needs, but we also all have something to give. To recognize this connected nature of our community, AuSM continued to grow our “AuSM Celebrates Interdependence” initiative throughout 2022.

Interdependence resources we created include a social narrative about managing ableism in the workplace paired with a resource for employers, a guide on dating, and an infographic about autistic burnout. We continue adding social narratives to our website, including templates that can be adapted to guide people with autism through wide-ranging situations. These resources are available at no cost to anyone in our community at any time.

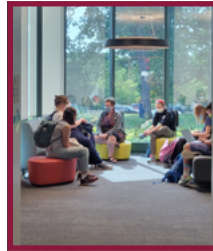


## AUTISTIC COMMUNITY SUMMIT



The Autistic Community Summit returned for a fifth time in September. “Our Autism Community Summit was created by people with autism and for people with autism – people like me,” said AuSM Director of Marketing and Communication Zephyr James. AuSM’s Community Summit centers autistics and allows them to share what they’ve learned,

overcome, and continue to persevere through in their lived experience. All event decisions are made by a committee of autistic AuSM staff, board, and members of our autistic community. This year’s committee created our most inclusive Summit yet, including support resources for speakers and increased access to our diverse community. To help spread this model of inclusivity, we’re creating a blueprint that other organizations can use to ensure their events are more accessible for organizers, volunteers, speakers, and attendees.



## MINNESOTA STATE AUTISM CONFERENCE



With a powerful focus on serving our most marginalized communities, our 27th annual State Autism Conference was a solid three days of engaged discussion, meaningful connection, and knowledge sharing. Beyond an accomplished slate of keynote speakers and

thought-leading breakout presenters, we reached more people in more places through 13 virtual sessions presented in partnership with the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin.



## STEPS FOR AUTISM



A cool spring day graced our 22nd annual Steps for Autism in Minnesota in May. For the first time in three years, the event was back to fully in-person at Como Lakeside Pavilion, where families

gathered info and resources between walks in the park and other activities. It was another successful fundraiser that also raised plenty of community awareness of our work, including news coverage from three of four local TV channels.



## PUZZLE FUNDRAISER



At our fifth-annual Jigsaw Puzzle Competition in November, teams crowded into Mall of America’s rotunda while our virtual division had teams competing from 12 states and the District of Columbia. Puzzle Twist donated puzzles for our competitors, and Games by James donated a portion of their puzzle sales. Hosting AuSM’s Puzzle Competition at such a

busy public place helps us meet more people we can help. In 2022, parents of two recently diagnosed kids were visiting MOA and stumbled upon our event’s built-in autism resource fair. These parents didn’t know AuSM, nor were they aware of services our exhibiting partners provide. This was all new to them – they learned a lot and made meaningful connections. They found a community. Contact info was exchanged, as were a few tears that felt alright. For our sponsors and colleagues, it was gratifying that even though this family wasn’t intentionally there for our event, we’re here for them.





## SENSORY FRIENDLY VACCINE CLINICS

The Kid Experts™ at Children's Minnesota partnered with AuSM and Multicultural Autism Action Network (MAAN) for three days in December to vaccinate autistic children against COVID-19 and the flu.

“Doctor visits for vaccination can be especially stressful for autistic kids, and we're particularly grateful to our friends at MAAN for helping Children's Minnesota reach out to multicultural communities to better serve families affected by autism throughout our diverse community. No one should have to go without a vaccination because of fear, and our intent is to help Children's Minnesota remove the barrier of intimidation by fostering a sensory-friendlier clinical experience for young people with autism.” – AuSM Executive Director Ellie Wilson

Trained specialists from AuSM and MAAN served onsite at Children's Minnesota's primary care clinics in St. Paul, Maple Grove, and Brooklyn Park to provide support and sensory-friendly tools for children during the vaccination process.



For this one day we flip the script a bit on what goes on in a clinic. We don't care how long each appointment takes, we don't care what it is a kid needs. If there is a way to help a child do this hard thing, we will do our best to provide it. We try to approach each child from a place of support and compassion, and try to leave any judgement and ideas about how things "should be done" at home.

The lesson we learn over and over again is that when we make a deliberate choice to de-prioritize efficiency in favor of agency and autonomy of the child, most (but certainly not all) of the time, we can help the kid get where they need to go in a way that feels safe to them.

-Maren C.  
Multicultural Autism Action Network



## AUSM COUNSELING & CONSULTING SERVICES



While many therapists and clients have largely returned to in-person sessions, some who've come to prefer online convenience continue to engage virtually. This greater access paired with growing need inspired us to grow our counseling team in 2022 to serve more people. Our interdisciplinary team of therapists is committed to helping

the most underserved patients, including those hindered by poverty, as well as teens, adults, and women who are not well served by typical systems in seeking diagnosis. Our counseling team leads support groups serving adults, women, the LGBTQIA community, and parents and care providers.



## Grants for Multicultural Outreach

In 2022, AuSM received two grants from Minnesota Department of Human Services to help Somali and multicultural families better understand autism and access services. We'll work with our nonprofit partners to overcome cultural barriers and societal stigma for these respective grant projects:

- Somali American Community Autism Partnership, in partnership with Somali Parents Autism Network (SPAN)
- Toward Inclusion: Integrated Outcomes for People with Disabilities in Multicultural Communities, in partnership with Multicultural Autism Action Network (MAAN)



## THANK YOU, AUSM PREMIER PARTNERS

- Accra
- Allegra Downtown St. Paul
- Autism Advocacy & Law Center
- Best Care
- Minnesota Independence College & Community
- St. David's Center for Child & Family Development





## OVERNIGHT SUCCESS: AN AUSM CAMP STORY



*Jackson is a nonverbal autistic child who in the summer of 2022 became a first-time camper – which also marked the first time he's been away from family for multiple days. AuSM talked with Jackson's mom, Amber Bluhm, as well as camp counselor Lucas LaFostecasse and camp staff Kristy Anderson about working closely together to help Jackson have a positive camp experience.*





## JACKSON'S STORY

**Amber:** “If we tell Jackson, ‘We’re going to drop you off at camp and you’re not going to see us for five days – are you going to be OK?’ then we don’t get an answer. We wanted to start with day camp, but with COVID nobody was doing that. AuSM said if we could be flexible about overnighting, they’d put his name in the lottery for Camp Hand In Hand.”

**Kristy:** “Jackson’s parents were worried about him spending the night, so we came in with the goal of preparing him to stay at least the last night.”

**Amber:** “Everyone at camp was very well organized in their process. As soon as we arrived, they said, ‘Oh yes, Jackson, he’s with Lucas,’ and gave me a lot of info about this counselor. They all just *got* it. If you’re the parent of a kid with special needs, when you go to a doctor appointment, by the time the doc sees you you’ve told the receptionist his story, then nurses. It’s needed, but it’s exhausting. I thought I’d again tell his life story four times, but everyone at camp already knew it. It made me feel comfortable that they all took the time and gave Jackson so much thought.”

**Lucas:** “My goal is always to study each camper to see what accommodations they might need. I did a lot of social narrating with Jackson, including about staying overnight. You never want to blindside a camper – always make sure they understand the plan. He showed me he wanted to sensory seek, pushing his proprioceptive and vestibular senses while hanging out in hammocks, with me pushing and pulling as hard as I could, keeping him engaged.”

**Kristy:** “Jackson was able to get into his bunk at relaxation time, so we could tell he was comfortable. Lucas noticed Jackson enjoyed the pressure of being pushed in the hammock and continued to make sure he got that sensation in different ways. I never really thought of a hammock as a way to get vestibular sensory need. You work with one person with autism, and you’ve worked with one person with autism.”

**Lucas:** “We were seeing that Jackson transitioned easily into naps, indicating a comfort level that led me to recommend that staying over was a safe risk to consider.”

**Amber:** “Lucas gave us updates that Jackson likes to go from activity to activity. He said he knows when Jackson’s done and wants to do something else, but also that he’s not trying to leave. I didn’t know how he’d sleep overnight, but I was 15 minutes away and said I didn’t care if they called at 2 in the morning. My husband agreed. So, I didn’t come that third night, and didn’t get a phone call and didn’t see him for the last couple days. We were getting updates and pictures, saw he was smiling and having fun.”

**Lucas:** “It was about showing up for Jackson and his family, and finding ways for him to enjoy himself at camp. Camp’s training directors cultivate a feeling of allowing yourself to become a vessel for what someone else needs. An unconditional version of care. Camp is one of the only places where you can show unfiltered care and accommodations for people who need it, and I greatly value that.”

**Amber:** I think the new experiences were good for him. He did a great job. He gained independence. It helped that he had a buddy who would push him in a hammock all day. To have Lucas push him, as much and as long as Jackson wanted – who wouldn’t want someone personally doing that for you?”

**Kristy:** “Lucas really paid attention to Jackson’s facial features and his sounds, understanding that without words he’s still saying something. I’m so glad Jackson was able to get the experience of staying overnight, and enjoying it.”

**Lucas:** “Having something outside of home that Jackson can look forward to is a big win for him and his family. We’ve shown there are flexible ways to do camp, for a kid who’s never spent a night away from family.”

**Amber:** “I’m super impressed with the camp. They got it, and that’s something that worries a special needs parent – will they have it together? We mostly don’t know what Jackson thinks and that’s hard for mom and dad, especially with his situation, but I think we all gained some independence and knowledge. I’m so proud of him and think he did awesome. I saw him take on something and wasn’t sure how it would go, but he was open to it. Gaining a sense of independence is great for these kids. This camp experience starts structuring that independence that he’s going to need more and more as he gets older.”



## ADVOCACY

Led by autistic adult Jillian Nelson, our advocacy work in 2022 focused on accessibility and inclusion through various bills. On the national stage, Jillian spoke at rally at the U.S. Capitol and moderated a panel of federal staff on equity and disability policy in Washington DC. She also served as Co-Chair of Minnesota's task force on eliminating sub minimum wage, working with a diverse and

passionate team to create a plan for wage equity focused on making sure all Minnesotans have the services and supports they need. We're working with other disability advocates to create a safe and equitable world by changing the dialogue on accessibility and inclusion beyond just physical needs.



## INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

We responded to hundreds of calls and emails from people throughout Minnesota seeking essential information and trusted resources, serving individuals, families, and organizations who rely on our compassionate expertise. We helped inform people about obtaining fair and accessible services that improve their quality of life while reducing stigma and stereotyping in our community. We also answered the call when a theater production asked us to consult on how a leading actor should portray an autistic character in their upcoming play. We put ourselves in the conversation by being there to have it.

### 2022 AUSM'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jenna Matteson-Laabs, President  
Keith Guggenberger,  
Vice President  
John Skillings, Treasurer  
Jean Bender, Secretary  
Paul D'Arco, Past President  
Laura Detloff,  
Autistic Community Liaison

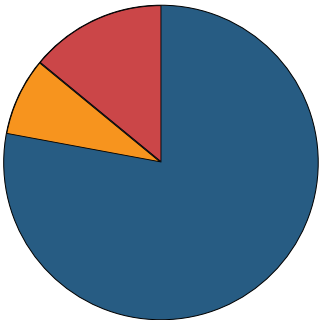
Tom Cox  
Nick Engbloom  
Noah Gerding  
Anne Harrington  
Deequaifrah Hussein  
Michelle Law-Pink  
Paul May-Kramer  
Laura Nisi

John Pribyl  
Jon Ruzek  
Megan Reiger  
Nichole Thomas





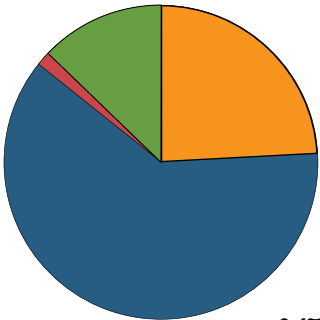
AuSM is dedicated to transparency, accountability, and financial health. All donations given to AuSM support programs and services for our local community. In 2022, AuSM applied for and received an Employee Retention Credit (ERC) from the IRS, which is a credit against federal employment taxes paid during 2021, as part of the government’s ongoing efforts to help businesses keep their workforce employed during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these funds were not yet included in AuSM’s 2021 annual report, they were included in our final audited 2021 financial statements which were reported in August 2022. This assistance is noted in the below chart along with AuSM’s income and expenses.



**2022 Expenses**

- Programs and Services | 78.4%
- Donations and Fundraising | 10.4%
- Management & Administrative | 11.2%

78.4% Programs and Services	\$1,568,679.34
10.4% Donations and Fundraising	\$ 208,120.84
11.2% Management & Administrative	\$ \$224,524.06
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Total	\$2,001,324.24



**2022 Income**

- Programs and Services | 60.3%
- Donations and Fundraising | 20%
- Management & Administrative | 0.4%
- ERC (received in 2022, recorded to 2021) | 19.3%

60.3% (74.7%) Programs and Services	\$1,198,915.95
20% (24.8%) Donations and Fundraising	\$ 398,869.35
0.4% (0.5%) Management & Administrative	\$ 7,981.96
19.3% Employee Retention Tax Credit	\$ 383,693.82

Total	\$1,989,461.08 (with ERC)
Total	\$1,605,767.26 (without ERC)





# CONNECTED IN COMMUNITY

AuSM is a community organization, and together we will help create a stronger, better society through the transformation of social service, mental health support, and disability rights at the intersections of autism, race, and our neurodivergent LGBTQ community. We show up for you no matter where you are: virtually or in-person, at the beginning of your journey or as an expert, as an autistic or as a supporter. AuSM is an organization of doers – we're advocates, teachers, community builders, counselors, and connectors. We listen intently to the autistic community and act on behalf of people with autism and their families – because *this* is who we work for.

