



**ausm**<sup>®</sup>

autism society of minnesota

# 2023 Annual Report



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Looking back on another impactful year for the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM), my mind tries not to linger too long on the past – because the present and future more urgently compete for our attention. We’re proud of what we’ve accomplished, but with so much yet to do, we resist complacency. Every story in this annual report needs a successful sequel, and then another. Keep watching – and come with us. Our mission is fueled by your engagement and support.

We’re honored and humbled to be in a position to help people who need our programs and services, and it’s our privilege to respond to the needs of our shared community. Knowing that we’re in this together sharpens our resolve, and buoys our spirit. Our work is a team sport, and we are so glad you’re on our team. We’re grateful for your engagement in our cause and our community.

If the important disability rights issues being discussed at the Capitol feel personal to you, we can connect you with others looking to make actionable change. If you or a family member have been diagnosed but are unsure of next steps, we’ve walked many others through this, and we’ll be with you. Connect with us and we’ll connect you with compassionate people who’ll understand your experience, and share their hard-earned empathetic wisdom. Even if you just need to be heard, reach out. You are not alone; we are each other’s community.

The autistic leadership we see emerging throughout our community inspires us. Your energy toward helping build inclusivity quickens our pace as we chase change for the better, working toward a Minnesota where all of us can thrive. Our nonprofit organization has served as Minnesota’s First Autism Resource for well over a half-century; by now, you can count on our resilience – and our readiness to keep finding new ways to improve the lives of people throughout our community.

-Ellie Wilson, AuSM Executive Director



# Who is AuSM?



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.

## WE SEEK TO

**Advocate** for legislation and policies that lead to improved services, increased opportunities, and greater self-determination for people with autism.

**Educate** and inform individuals, families, professionals, and the broader community about autism and effective strategies for support and inclusion.

**Support** individuals and families through quality programs, counseling services, and resource information.

**Collaborate** with organizations and individuals who share our commitment to enhancing the lives of those affected by autism.

**Build community** and provide a welcoming and accessible environment for autistic people to connect and form their own social bonds.

## AuSM Board of Directors

- Jenna Matteson-Laabs, President
- Keith Guggenberger, Vice President
- John Skillings, Treasurer
- Jon Ruzek, Secretary
- Paul D'Arco, Past President
- Laura Detloff, Autistic Community Liaison
- Tom Cox
- Joyner Emerick
- Nick Engbloom
- Deequaifrah Hussein
- Michelle Law-Pink
- Paul May-Kramer
- John Pribyl
- Nichole Thomas
- Tamonna Combs



# Our Programs by the Numbers



## Counseling

AuSM provided neurodiversity-affirming therapy services to over 350 clients in 2023, totaling over 4,570 hours of counseling.



## AuSM Classes

Through our workshops, Understanding ASD classes, and Direct Support Certification program, we educated 486 community members about autism.

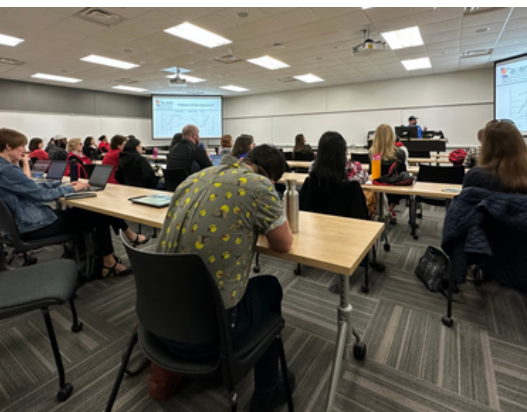


## Summer Camps

For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, AuSM Summer camps were held at full capacity. We ran six sessions of camp during summer 2023, hosting 266 campers.

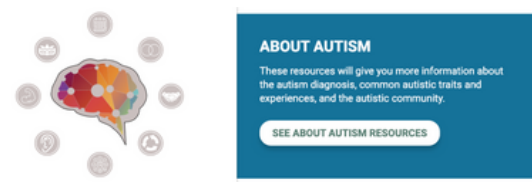
“Camp Hand in Hand and the staff are simply amazing! This is an experience that Matthew does not get anywhere else. Absolutely unbelievable! Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

–Sally Fields, Mom of Camper



## Training

Our Education department provided over 100 training sessions to approximately 50 different organizations across the state of Minnesota, reaching hundreds of community members with vital information about autism.



In the resources section of the AuSM website, you'll find all kinds of supports, from social narratives to toolkits, informational articles to interactive resources. You can browse by topic or by type.

Browse by Type

- Social Narratives
- Videos
- Informational articles
- Worksheets and interactive tools
- Technology, apps, and databases
- Infographics
- Toolkits

## Online Resources

We created 28 new online resources that are available for free on our website, and added links to dozens of others created by community organizations.



## Community Events

1,155 people attended our community events, including the Minnesota Autism Conference, Steps for Autism, Cocktails for a Cause, the Autistic Community Summit, and the AuSM Jigsaw Puzzle Competition.

“[The Autistic Community Summit] was AMAZING! Thank you for organizing it. It was my first time attending and I felt like I truly belonged there.”



## Information and Resources

Information and Resources is one of AuSM’s core programs, and we offer it for free to anyone who contacts us. In 2023 we responded to hundreds of emails, texts, and phone calls through our Information and Resources. This was the first year we were able to offer text services.

## Social and Recreation Programs

Over 100 students were part of our social and recreation programs throughout 2023, with another 140 adults who attended our Adult Coffee Club, which launched in 2023.

## Support Groups

440 people attended our Support Groups in 2023, including Women’s Support Group, LGBTQIA+ Support Group, Independent Adults with ASD Support Group, and Family Members of Adults on the Spectrum Support Group.

“AuSM has been really helpful for my best friend (and by extension me) over the last several years. She attends the support groups regularly and often tells me how much she enjoys socializing with people who accept her without reservation. They help her understand herself and others.”

–Support Group Participant



# Our Values: Living Our Mission in 2023

Throughout 2023, AuSM has worked to bring our mission to life through new programs, initiatives, and improvements. Check out the work we've been doing to empower everyone in the autism community with the resources needed to live fully.

## Advocacy

### AuSM is a Neurodiversity-Affirming Clinic

In recent years, autistic adults have shared how important it is for them to receive care from neurodiversity-affirming providers. Neurodiversity refers to the fact that human beings have a wide variety of minds, sensory systems, and ways of processing the world. To be a neurodiversity-affirming provider means not simply accepting the fact of neurodiversity, but embracing it. Neurodiversity-affirming providers do not try to change the way their clients' brains work. Instead, they focus on supporting a person as they are, provide support to exist in a neurotypical-dominated world, and focus on helping clients find fulfilling and effective strategies for their own lives.



In 2023, AuSM proudly added a statement to our therapy materials sharing that we are a neurodiversity-affirming clinic. While we have taken this approach to therapy for many years, we felt that it was important to openly and clearly state this value, both for our current clients and for potential future clients. Sharing our values makes it easier for people seeking neurodiversity-affirming care to find us, a process that can be challenging and stressful, as well as full of guesswork. This statement also makes our values public, putting the full weight of AuSM's history and reputation behind the affirmation that our neurodivergent clients are worthy of respect and care as they are. Finally, we feel that positioning ourselves as a neurodiversity-affirming clinic makes it clear that we welcome the input of autistics themselves about their own needs, desires, and care.

Here is the final statement we shared:

#### **AUSM IS A NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMING CLINIC**

Neurodiversity refers to the fact that human beings have a wide variety of minds, sensory systems, and ways of processing the world. AuSM embraces this diversity: we won't try to change your mind to fit a particular mold. We'll work with your needs and your unique mind to create personalized goals and supports that are right for you. You are not broken.

We acknowledge that there are challenges and difficulties created both by the world we live in and by lack of accessibility. Autism is a disability, and we know that it isn't easy to be autistic. Our goal is to support the navigation of the world with these differences in mind and to acknowledge that everyone is worthy and brings value to the world.

## AuSM's Advocacy On Subminimum Wage for People with Disabilities

Minnesota's 2023 legislative session brought historic progress from lawmakers in the ongoing work to eliminate subminimum wage in Minnesota, advocacy that AuSM supports. The Task Force on Subminimum Wages – co-chaired by Jillian Nelson, AuSM's Community Resource and Policy Advocate – made several funding recommendations for the governor's bill. Nearly all the task force's recommendations passed – except for establishing an exact sunset date for subminimum wage in Minnesota, which advocates continue to work toward. Not insignificantly, this bill establishes the major objectives recommended by the task force, including funding to track employment outcomes by reporting on people being paid subminimum wage.



Also, a Technical Assistance Center was established to assist providers to transition away from subminimum wage employment. Lead agencies will get grants to build capacity in supporting people with competitive integrated employment options. Funding also will go toward training for case managers, and changes to the MnCHOICES assessment to ensure people are offered true, informed choices in employment and services.

In October, AuSM's Jillian Nelson was interviewed in the subject of subminimum wage by Judy Woodruff for this PBS Newshour story as part of the Newshour's Disability Reframed series.

## Education

### AuSM Therapists Show Thought-Leadership in Presentations



After her presentation at the Minnesota School Social Workers Association's 2023 fall conference, AuSM Therapist Sara Lahti was approached by audience members who made a point of saying how neurodivergent-affirming her presentation was. Sara's presentation, "Helping Autistic and Neurodivergent Children Through Trauma," was a discussion on the how the intersection between autism/neurodivergence and trauma is not a new concept, but is a relatively new focus of research. She discussed how trauma presents differently in those who are not neurotypical – and therefore need different supports. Her presentation provided information on evidence-based supports, with attention paid to potential traumatic situations and lifespan development. Sara has since been contacted by school districts asking for similar presentations for their staff.

In November, AuSM Therapist Beth Pitchford traveled to Baltimore to speak at the Annual International Conference on ADHD2023. Beth's presentation, "The Nuanced Interplay of ADHD and ASD," elaborated on recent researching finding that there's up to a 70% comorbidity rate between the two neurodivergences – with some shared characteristics, but also many differences. Beth discussed the importance for therapists, educators, parents, and self-advocates to be knowledgeable of all respective traits of each – and the common traits when they are comorbid – in order to apply the right techniques and interventions.



## AuSM’s Professional Networking Group Returns in More Accessible Format

In 2019, AuSM’s Counseling and Consulting Services saw a vital need in our community: an opportunity for professionals serving the autism community to connect with each other, provide feedback and support, and to work together to improve the services they provide. This was the birth of AuSM’s Professional Networking Group, which ran for the second half of 2019. The group struggled to find members, and with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, was put on indefinite hiatus.



In 2023, our therapy team knew it was time to bring the group back. “We often hear from clients that they have challenging experiences with providers who are not familiar with the way autism presents in adults,” shared Barb Luskin, AuSM therapist. “As a group of practitioners with decades of experience in supporting autistic clients, we feel that it’s essential for us to share what we know with other providers.”

Thanks to multiple years of providing virtual events and services, AuSM staff knew that there were more accessible ways to offer the group that would lead to higher participation. We kicked off the process with a survey of providers, asking them what they were looking for, when they could attend, and whether they were interested in virtual or in-person offerings. It was important to us to meet providers where they are: we know that mental health professionals in particular have minimal spare time, and to successfully build the community knowledge we sought, we needed their input.

“AuSM’s Professional Networking Group is designed to allow mental health practitioners and other professionals share their knowledge and their questions concerning how to best support autistic clients,” said Monica Toledo, Director of Counseling and Consulting Services at AuSM. This group creates a stronger community of professionals, which helps our autistic clients have more options for care and shorter waitlists for quality providers.

In October of 2023, our therapy team held their first virtual, lunchtime Professional Networking Group, with over 20 participants all hungry to learn more about best practices. “We had an overwhelmingly positive response to our first meeting,” said Toledo. The group was so popular that for the second session, it was limited to only therapists in order to help focus the discussion. Thanks to the popularity of these first groups, AuSM’s therapy team has created monthly dates for all of 2024, with options for clinical providers and administrative providers.

## Support

### Information and Resources Team Adds Services, Expands Communicative Availability

As a free service to our community, AuSM provides practical advice for individuals and families struggling to navigate systems, understand options, and obtain services and support to fit their needs. In 2023, we added a vital component to our Information and Resources services: texting. This option expands our services through improved accessibility, and also allows our staff to respond to more requests for information.



“Many of our community members struggle with phone calls due to anxiety and executive function,” shared Jillian Nelson, AuSM’s Community Resource and Policy Advocate, as well as a core member of the Information and Resources team. “While email exists, texting is more immediate and can feel less intimidating. This new service is essential for making us truly accessible.”

## Vaccine Education Initiative: National Initiative Making Local Impact

As an affiliate of The Autism Society of America, AuSM shares the national org’s belief that improving the vaccination experience is a critical step toward achieving more equitable healthcare for people with autism and all neurodiverse individuals. As part of our strategic partnership on health equity, the Vaccine Education Initiative (VEI) is a national program that AuSM implements locally to address systemic barriers while promoting vaccine education, confidence, and access.



With an emphasis on providing a more sensory-friendly experience for patients, we’re creating a path for increased vaccination rates for autistic individuals and those with disabilities and complex support needs. Participants in AuSM-assisted vaccination clinics can expect:

- longer appointment times, allowing patients to take their time
- availability of support tools to help prepare for the appointment
- a private, sensory-friendly area for vaccine distribution
- availability of sensory-friendly tools for comfort and engagement
- patient and family guidance from onsite experts in autism, disability, and accommodation

Here’s an outline of our shared commitment through the VEI to providing the resources and connections that improve outcomes for patients, providers, caregivers, and our community:

- Breaking down barriers: Address the health equity challenges faced by people with autism across their lifetime – specifically around accessible, inclusive healthcare.
- Educating and vaccinating: Ensure anyone in the autism community has access to info, resources, support systems, and specialists – especially to expand access to vaccinations an overall health.
- Training healthcare providers: Bridge the gap so that healthcare providers are equipped with training and resources needed to address the unique healthcare needs of the autism and disability community.
- Creating access: Ensure that all individuals and families who want a vaccination are able to receive a vaccination in safe and supportive environments.

In Minnesota, AuSM’s VEI partners include The Kid Experts at Children’s Minnesota, The Olmsted Medical Center, RT Autism Awareness Foundation, and Multicultural Autism Action Network (MAAN), with 2023 vaccine clinics in Brooklyn Park, Maple Grove, Rochester, and St. Paul.



# Collaboration

## Multicultural Communities Experience AuSM Camp Through Pilot Family Camp Program

In October 2023, AuSM piloted a family camp session for Somali and Oromo families affected by autism. Anyone who's been to camp knows it's



a powerful experience, but we now know that summer-camp feel comes on just as strong in the fall – during just one long weekend. For a glimpse into how AuSM's multicultural work played out at camp, watch this video. AuSM carefully pre-planned this camp experience – for autistic campers, siblings, and accompanying parents and grandparents – with our partners at Multicultural Autism Action Network (MAAN), Camp Knutson, and the DHS Innovations department through our ongoing DHS grant. Special attention was made to make sure that all spaces, meals, and activities felt welcoming and familiar to guests. Some facets of programming separated children and adults to create space for parents to dialogue about their experiences more deeply, and all adult sessions were, in part, facilitated by autistic adults.

Culturally, open dialogue about autism was relatively new to many of our participating families. “This is the first time I’ve talked about my autism in my own language – Somali,” said one of our autistic adult presenters, realizing in the moment that he was in new territory with and his community.

After gaining greater understanding of common characteristics of autistics, one camper’s parent said, “I think I might be autistic myself” – a lightbulb moment of acceptance shared by another mother who shared that she likewise intended to seek a diagnosis.

Kids and siblings were supervised by expert camp staff, and introduced to popular camp activities, many of which were new experiences for Somali and Oromo campers. Each day of program also prioritized time for families to enjoy programming together, so that we might center our experience around inclusive and judgment-free joy. One parent cautioned staff early on that their son didn’t like bikes – just before this camper self-regulated by hopping on and biking for over an hour.

## Educational Partnership Furthered with Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin

AuSM furthered its collaboration with the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin throughout 2023 as co-hosts of virtual conference content in April and as co-presenters of our popular workshop, Language Development in Neurodivergent and Other Gestalt Language Processors in December. Beginning during Autism Acceptance Month, AuSM and the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin worked together to record breakout sessions from each of our separate, in-person conferences to be made available as a virtual package online. With diverse topics including plain language writing, sexuality, classroom management, and grief, these sessions were incredibly popular.



Following up on this success, we partnered once again in December. Presented by Marge Blanc, a speech-language pathologist for 45 years, our collaborative workshop explained how gestalt language development differs from analytic language development, and how to support it in clients and students. This workshop was well-received by our large, virtual audience of SLPs, OTs, PTs, teachers, support staff, parents/family members, and autistic adults from throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin. Response from our community was so strong that AuSM brought Marge back for a follow-up workshop in 2024, with a deeper dive into the nuance of gestalt language.

# Community

## Jean Bender Honored with AuSM's Inaugural Changemaker Award

Jean Bender's profound impact on the autism community was heralded by many of her colleagues at AuSM's annual meeting of its Board of Directors, staff, and community in February 2023. Jean stepped away from AuSM's Board after a decade of compassionate service during which she held nearly every board-officer position and grew into a fierce-but-friendly force in advocating among legislators for disability rights as human rights. We surprised Jean by presenting her with AuSM's first-ever Changemaker Award for her extraordinary legacy of service.



**Ellie Wilson, AuSM's Executive Director:**

"You have incredible knowledge of our state's many systems, their budding leaves, and their deep roots. Your fingerprints are all over every blossoming example of our evolution as a community, and I am profoundly grateful that you have worked so hard on this landscape before us, creating the very context in which we currently advocate for change. So many people stand on your strong and sturdy shoulders. You certainly deserve to be its first recipient, but for years to come, we will be celebrating AuSM's best advocates and deepest supporters in honor of you."

**Joyner Emerick, AuSM Board Member:**

"Jean, I don't know how to express what you've meant to me as a friend, mentor, parenting coach, advocate, community connector, opportunity manifester, and thought partner, but I can tell you that you are family. There is no way to adequately thank the person who shows up tirelessly on behalf of your vulnerable child, and yet I know it's just a tiny piece of what you give to the Minnesota Disability Community. You walk through this world and leave a trail of open doors behind you. It's a legacy that drives and inspires me. I am so grateful to know you and to have been touched by your work. Thank you, Changemaker Jean Bender."

## Introducing: AuSM Coffee Club

AuSM's Coffee Club launched in 2023, providing regularly-scheduled opportunities for autistic adults in our community to socialize, create and build bonds, and meet new people on an ongoing basis at Dogwood Coffee in St. Paul.

"It was instantly popular," said Daren Howard, AuSM's deputy director, in this story by Minneapolis Star Tribune. "AuSM works hard to provide accessible and inclusive events. This includes modes of accessibility people usually think of, like wheelchair access. But the autism community's access needs are a little different. Autistic people benefit

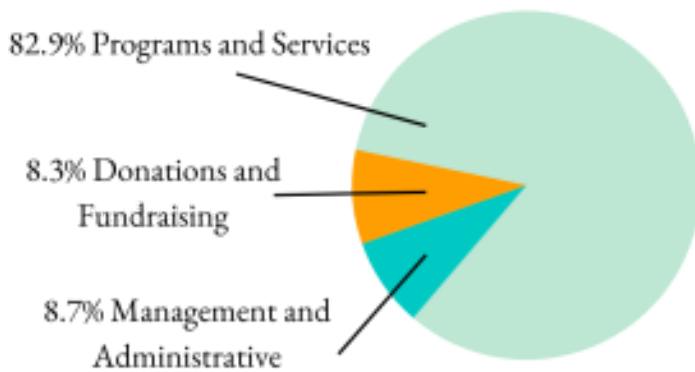


from sensory-sensitive lighting, quieter venues, room to fidget and stir and social narratives. The idea behind the social narrative is not unlike when a neurotypical person looks at a menu before visiting a restaurant. It provides some insight into what to expect from the experience."

Autistic adults are welcome to bring items that make them feel comfortable, can stay as long as they'd like, stim, and parallel play. AuSM provides a concierge staff person to assist with questions, check-in, help with ordering, and manage any issues that arise during the club. Coffee Club is generously supported by Best Care, an AuSM Premier Partner.

# Financials

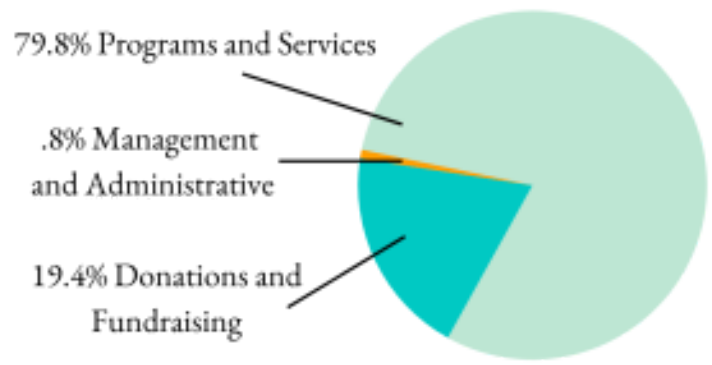
AuSM is dedicated to transparency, accountability, and financial health. All donations given to AuSM support programs and services for our local autism community. In 2023, no further COVID-19 relief funds were received by AuSM. Our operational income and expenses are noted in the chart below. AuSM’s 2023 AFR (administrative and fundraising rate), which is the sum of fundraising and administrative expenses divided by total revenues, was 18.5%.



## 2023 Expenses

### 2023 EXPENSES:

Programs: \$1,985,438 = 82.9%  
 Fundraising: \$199,288 = 8.3%  
 Admin: \$209,304 = 8.7%  
**TOTAL: \$2,394,030**



## 2023 Income

### 2023 INCOME:

Programs: \$1,759,290 = 79.8%  
 Fundraising: \$427,186 = 19.4%  
 Admin: \$17,958 = 0.8%  
**TOTAL: \$2,204,434**

All financial information provided at the time of the annual report is tentative, pending our annual audit. We will file the IRS 990, the primary source of public information about any nonprofit’s financial activity, after our audit. When these records are finalized, they will be posted at AuSM is dedicated to transparency, accountability, and financial health. All donations given to AuSM support programs and services for our local autism community. In 2023, no further COVID-19 relief funds were received by AuSM. Our operational income and expenses are noted in the chart below. AuSM’s 2023 AFR (administrative and fundraising rate), which is the sum of fundraising and administrative expenses divided by total revenues, was 18.5%..

# Our Community

AuSM is made up of people: people we serve. People who volunteer. People who support each other. People who work to make Minnesota a better place every day. Thank you to our community for making AuSM the place it is!

15

**Board  
Members**

23

**Staff  
Members**

11

**Grants  
Awarded from  
Foundations  
and  
Organizations**

950

**Donors**

129

**Community  
Members  
with  
Fundraising  
Pages**

45

**Corporate and  
Organizational  
Sponsors**

3500+

**Clients, Participants, and  
Recipients of Our Work**



## Take Action

Want to be a part of AuSM's mission and empower everyone in the autism community with the resources needed to live fully? Here are actions you can take!

- **Donate:** your gift sustains the work that helps the Minnesota autism community. Donations stay local, and every dollar counts.
- **Fundraise:** take your impact further by hosting a fundraiser for AuSM.
- **Volunteer:** Share your time with AuSM through volunteer opportunities connected to acceptance and fundraising events, special office projects, and more.
- **Advocate:** Part of AuSM's mission is ensuring that our laws and public policies support individuals and families living with autism. AuSM is committed to helping your voice be heard.
- **Become a Member:** AuSM membership connects you to a common community that acts without judgment, nurtures potential, advances knowledge, and builds awareness.
- **Sign Up for Our Newsletter:** Keep on top of everything AuSM is doing by subscribing to our twice monthly newsletter

# Thank You 2023 Premier Partners

AuSM Premier Partners are organizations that have committed to supporting and reaching Minnesota's autism community throughout the year in many ways. These organizations sponsor events, programs, print pieces, and more!

