



ACCESS ALLIANCE ARTS REPORT 2024 – 25



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Access Alliance's Expressive Arts Program began in 2002 as an art therapy initiative for refugee women experiencing violence. Since then, it has expanded to incorporate various expressive arts, including visual arts, music, dance, and embroidery, helping individuals of all ages, genders, and backgrounds foster a sense of community and well-being.

This year (2024 - 25), Access Alliance has focused on four core areas, building on existing strengths to develop new approaches to care:

- **Co-Creation** – Connecting artists with healthcare providers to develop expressive arts initiatives.
- **Organizational Capacity** – Providing training and resources for service providers to integrate expressive arts into their work.
- **Partnerships** – Collaborating with museums and galleries to enhance social prescribing and offer non-medical mental health support.
- **Sustainability** – Using research and evaluation to expand knowledge and best practices in art-based interventions across healthcare, settlement, and the arts sectors.

Each year, we incorporate participant and facilitator feedback to enhance program delivery and develop new models for newcomer mental health support.

Participant Outcomes:

- A stronger sense of belonging through community connections.
- Increased confidence in making informed decisions about their health.
- Greater ability to access health resources and services.
- Expanded awareness of arts and cultural opportunities in Toronto.
- Integration of mental well-being techniques into their daily lives and family routines.

Service Provider Insights:

- Art-making helps participants retain healthcare and settlement knowledge.
- Community artists play a vital role in fostering spaces of belonging.
- Co-creating programs with participants enhances cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed care.
- Integrating arts into existing practices strengthens therapeutic relationships.



Let's take a look at highlights from the year!

COMMUNITY ARTS AS THE BEGINNING OF A HEALTHCARE JOURNEY

“People should be connected to primary care early on in the migration process, even if they are doing well. If things do fall apart, it is much easier to work with someone you already know than to seek out primary care when you are feeling ill” - Dr, Meb Rashid, Crossroads Refugee Health Clinic, Women’s College Hospital.

Nesting Grounds provides a welcoming, creative space where community members can build trust with the agency. By fostering strong relationships, refugees and immigrants feel more comfortable sharing health concerns, enabling proper diagnosis and treatment. Each month, newcomer artists lead various art activities, helping participants develop self- and co-regulation skills to manage stress.



Artist (and art) may be the most important health workers of our time. They help us think differently, and they build community value differently
- Arts for Everybody



Nesting Grounds is a preventative approach. Newcomers are more likely to access health service in an acute manner, emergency room, vs. preventative manner, seeing a general practitioner (Tiagi, 2016). Nesting Grounds offers a safe entry into a healthcare and settlement setting.

Summative participant responses, participants reported,

- the program was filled with friendliness, opportunities to release stress, new learning experiences, meaningful connections with others, uplifting music, and a sense of pride.
- They shared that they learned to manage stress, create new things from recycled materials, explore unique art forms, and build confidence and curiosity to try something new.
- Meeting different community artists was described as exciting and personally meaningful, offering time for self-care and creative expression.
- Feeling more connected to the community, developing a greater interest in mental health, and experiencing increased self-expression and a deeper sense of belonging.



Artists as part of the Interdisciplinary Team



Access Alliance hosts a pilot training program: Mental Health Training for Newcomer Artists in June 2024 for alumni of the MABELLEarts Newcomer Artist in Training Program. This initiative equips newcomer artists to lead art for wellbeing programs at Access Alliance. It also supports the organization's mission to build capacity in healthcare and settlement to work alongside artists as part of mental health practices.

The **Mental Health Training for Newcomer Artists** introduces foundational mental health knowledge to enhance their facilitation in community health settings. The training covers key topics including psychoeducation, trauma-informed expressive arts, mental health awareness, confidentiality, and disclosure. Participants engaged in discussions and learn from subject matter experts on somatic resourcing, arts-based mental health education, and the mind-body connection. As a result, Access Alliance has contracted the following community artist :



- Mery Verdugo - Paper Making & Natural Dyeing
- Chico Togni - collage & print - making
- Diana Galvan Mejia - book binding & journaling
- Jessica Tseng - felt flowers and landscapes
- Daniela Galaviz - theatre and movement
- Natasha McIntyre - children's program
- Maetzin Alvarado - movement
- Ebru Winehard - fabric weaving



Artists are cultural bearers, trusted messengers, creative workers, dreamers, storytellers, and healers. They connect our history, sense of purpose, and wellbeing - Arts for Everybody

ARTS FOR MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING: MODEL OF CARE

Drawing on Access Alliance's two decades of experience in art-based practices, our team has developed a model to enhance newcomer mental health through the arts. By implementing a client-centered approach, we found that many participants were hesitant to engage in one-on-one therapy. This model provides an alternative by allowing individuals to engage in mental health practices, gain knowledge, and build skills at a pace that feels comfortable for them. Participants can take part in activities at their own capacity and readiness.

GETTING COMFORTABLE: Open Group

Participants engage in art-making for wellness activities and micro-learning on healthcare, settlement and mental health topics.

- **Nesting Grounds** weekly community arts sessions
- **Waiting Room Sessions** monthly "pop-up" workshops in clinic waiting rooms
- **Guest Speaking** leading and presenting art mental health content in existing programs
- **Arts & Culture Trips** to galleries, museums and events

1:1 Check Ins

KNOWING MORE: Closed Group

Participants engage in focused mental health learning sessions gaining in-depth knowledge using tailored art based activities.

- **Newcomer Wellbeing Series I** topics include wellbeing market, self compassion, self care, values, seasons of change, friends near and far etc.
- **Newcomer Wellbeing Series II** topics include boundaries, loss, anxiety, depression, emotion identification etc.
- **Service Provider Partnership Programs** connecting service providers with artists

1:1 Check Ins

DIVING DEEPER 1:1 Support & Lead

Participants engage with appropriate service providers to meet individual needs.

- **Access Alliance Service Providers or external Referrals** connect clients with suitable providers to support their health journey
- **Art Assistant Volunteers or participant Led Workshops** clients lead in art-based mental health programs at varying capacities.

SUSTAINABILITY - ONGOING ENGAGEMENT



GETTING COMFORTABLE: NESTING GROUNDS

Nesting Grounds offers a welcoming space where community members can access weekly support, gently engage with mental health topics, and build a sense of belonging. Each session is led by newcomer artists, with our team co-creating activities that integrate creative expression with mental health concepts to increase engagement, reduce stigma, and promote well-being. Open to newcomers of all ages, the program allows flexible, drop-in participation. Its ongoing format provides consistent support, fosters connection, and strengthens access to Access Alliance services.

“Stay open for everyone because we share our experiences, like back and forth. In this rush of life, we must find something to enjoy. I know I'm tired, but I need that time when I attend [this program] and I enjoy the time, I feel like it's a relief.” - Nesting Ground Participant

1:1 CHECK INS BRIEF REFERRALS

All programs in the “Getting Comfortable” phase include one-on-one brief assessments with staff to identify participants’ needs and support their ability to advocate for their health and mental well-being. Based on these assessments, participants are referred to appropriate resources. Nesting Grounds acts as a key community hub, offering information and connections to essential services.



KNOWING MORE: NEWCOMER WELLBEING PROGRAM

The Newcomer Wellbeing Workshops are for newcomers of all ages desiring to learn about mental wellbeing strategies and techniques. By engaging in art-based workshops, participants build skills to manage stress and anxiety, utilize their body as a strength resource, and deepen connection with support resources and the community at large. It encourages self-expression, emotional exploration, and a deeper personal connection to the material.

Art-based activities help newcomers better understand mental health concepts while providing alternative, non-verbal ways to express themselves. This year, we saw an increase in men in mental health programs alongside women supporting a rich environment for learning and understanding across many different identities.

**MANY PARTICIPANTS
REPORTED GREATER
CONFIDENCE AND
EMPOWERMENT TO DISCLOSE
AND MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES
FOR THEIR WELLBEING.**

"I feel calm when I speak, it helped seeing others so the same. When they are talking, it makes me relaxed; this workshop is important for our life. I can join a community. It helps me feel love and peace." - Newcomer Wellbeing Workshop Participant



KNOWING MORE: INTEGRATED SPECIALIZED PROGRAMS

Access Alliance mobilizes interdisciplinary teams to offer programs combining expressive arts, mental wellbeing, and healthcare knowledge.

Access Alliance's **Active Transportation Programs** are vibrant and expanding. At AccessPoint on Danforth, two shipping containers serve as a gathering space for staff, volunteers, and clients. Daniela Galaviz alongside the youth staff led a co-created program (right top photo) collected community-driven images, stories, and symbols, centered around the theme of Active Transportation.

This program explores the connection between active transportation and its impact on mental well-being. It featured storytelling, visual arts, somatic resourcing, and art-based mental health education.

RECLAIM OUR CLAIM: 2SLGBTQ+ PROGRAM

Reclaim Your Claim is a theatre-based program in collaboration with Branch Out Theatre, for youth 2SLGBTQIA+ refugee claimants. The program aims to build confidence to help retell their immigration story to prepare for their refugee court hearings. It mitigates social isolation and increases self-confidence. Participants share their stories to preserve and strengthen their wellbeing, and gain self-regulation techniques.

“Humans have historically used the arts in integrative ways, particularly within the contexts of enactment, ceremony, performance, and ritual.” - Cathy A. Malchiodi



DIVING DEEPER: COMMUNITY LEADERS

Art Assistant Volunteers or participant Led Workshops clients lead in art-based mental health programs at varying capacities.

Sahar has been a dedicated participant in Access Alliance's art programs for many years. Her journey began with the HEAL program, followed by the Newcomer Wellbeing Workshop and Nesting Grounds. Throughout her involvement, she has consistently supported her peers, serving as a valuable community connector.

"Drawing isn't just about art, it's about the feeling. When we are having these sessions, each one of us is like a child again. By re-connecting to childhood memories, this is my energy, the petrol of my soul. Attending these workshops: I feel like it's a relief, recharging me for the next day. [The program] gives us a chance to learn more, like we are human. Every day we learn something—and when we meet different people, we learn more and more. [We are] building a community for me and you learn more about other cultures."



Kiyan has made a significant impact on Access Alliance's art programs, beginning with the HEAL program and later participating in the Newcomer Wellbeing Workshop and Nesting Grounds. She eventually became a volunteer Wellbeing Assistant, supporting the facilitator team and serving as a community leader. Aspiring to become a well-being coach, Kiyan continues to inspire and uplift those around her.

"I am using arts to open my mind and expand in my thinking. It is more effective—I can explain something I can't speak, but is easy to draw using color and all the stuff that you have. Something develops in art; it gives you feelings like you are an artist and doing something special, that you have talent and skill. It gives you confidence. [As a wellbeing assistant] I feel like staff, and this is my goal. I applied for the Humber College Wellbeing Coach program!"

SPOTLIGHT EVENTS & PRESENTATIONS

Textile Museum Gallery Show
Showcase of participant art-work in a gallery display alongside quilt work

Open House Outreach table showcasing art mental health programs offered annually

Family Wellbeing Speaking on self and co regulation for parents

Dentonia Park with Shadowland
Arts in the Park for families

Interpreter Debrief Wellbeing event for Language Services interpreters

OCASI Knowledge Exchange
Community Arts Model for Newcomer Mental Health

27th Metropolis Conference
Artists as Part of the Interprofessional Team

EYET Housing Training
Building a Nest Together Activity

Art Based Practice with Newcomers
Social Work Graduate Courses Ongoing - University of Toronto & University of Virginia MSW

Photo: Access Alliance Youth engaging in Shadowlands Snakes and Ladders Game at Access Point on Jane.



350+ Participants
1,383+ Encounters

149 Art-Based Mental Health Sessions

11 Art-Based Facilitators Contracted

42+ Interdisciplinary Support Staff Engaged



OVERVIEW OF PROGRAMS

Time - Limited Programs (4 - 8 weeks)

- **Women's Wellness** (Dietician Team)
- **Children's World Music** (Family Resource Program)
- **Reclaim Your Claim** (Among Friends Team)
- **Guest Speaking** (Settlement Team)
- **Coffee Chat** (Immigrant Researchers Support Network)
- **Interpreters Self-Care** (Language Services)
- **Service Provider Training** (Health Coaches & Social Workers)
- **Youth Newcomer Wellbeing** (Access Point on Jane Youth Team)
- **Shipping Container** (Access Point on Danforth Youth Team)
- **Light & Shadow** (AccessPoint on Jane Youth Team)
- **Mural Project** (AccessPoint on Danforth Youth and Transportation)
- **Family Services Guest Program** (Family Services Toronto)

Ongoing Programs

- Newcomer Wellbeing Program
- Nesting Grounds
- Waiting Room Sessions
- Arts and Culture Visits





ONGOING LONG-TERM IMPACTS

- **Implementation of the Arts for Mental Health & Well-Being Model of Care** – Continuous participant and facilitator feedback will enhance program delivery and effectiveness.
- **Capacity Building for Healthcare and Settlement Staff** – Supporting the onboarding and co-creation process with art facilitators to develop integrated programs.
- **Knowledge Mobilization** – Sharing program insights and implementation learnings internally and with partner organizations to expand and adapt the model to diverse newcomer contexts.
- **Expanding Arts and Culture Partnerships** – Strengthening collaborations with galleries and museums across Toronto to promote social prescribing and establish cultural spaces as hubs for newcomer mental well-being.
- **Advancing Research on Community Arts and Mental Well-Being** – Conducting research in partnership with the FLOURISH Collective and Immigrant Insight Scholars to build evidence on the role of community arts in supporting newcomer mental health.
- **Developing a Digital ArtsHub** – Creating an online platform to provide healthcare and settlement sectors with tools, resources, and consultations for integrating art-based approaches into mental well-being initiatives

