

How to Guide: Art Assistant Volunteer



Learn It, Lead It!

Integrating Art-Based Practice
in Settlement and Healthcare



Access Alliance
Multicultural Health and Community Services

Who can be an art assistant volunteer

- **Attend 3 Art Program Sessions:** Have participated in at least three expressive arts sessions to gain familiarity with the activities and approach.
- **Interest in Arts for Wellbeing:** Show enthusiasm for learning how art can support mental health, self-expression, and community connection.
- **Commitment to Supporting Others:** Be willing to assist facilitators in creating a welcoming, inclusive, and safe space for participants.
- **Positive Attitude and Curiosity:** Bring a willingness to learn, explore new creative methods, and engage with participants in a supportive way.
- **Team Collaboration:** Be ready to work alongside facilitators, staff, and other volunteers to enhance the success of art programs.

What are your next steps?

Step 1: Contact art based community health worker or a staff at Access Alliance inquiring to become a volunteer at the agency.

Step 2: Staff will connect you with Access Alliance volunteer coordinator to support onboarding process. Be ready to share your availability and interest in volunteering.

Step 3: Once onboarding is complete, art based community health worker will reach out with available opportunities to support art programs that are suitable based on strengths, language needs, and capacity of team.

Step 4: Begin volunteering in art programs (some programs may require additional training). More details about programs will be shared prior to first day of volunteer position.



Expressive Arts Programs at Access Alliance

Drawing on over two decades of experience in art-based practices, Access Alliance has developed a client-centered model to support newcomer mental health through the arts. Recognizing that many participants may be hesitant to engage in one-on-one therapy, this approach provides an alternative space for learning, skill-building, and mental health practice at a pace that feels comfortable for each individual. Participants can engage in activities according to their own readiness and capacity. These are some art programs art volunteers can be a part of, not limited to:

Nesting Grounds Weekly Community Arts Sessions offers 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, supporting proper diagnosis and treatment. Each month, newcomer artists lead art activities that help participants develop self- and co-regulation skills for managing stress.

Newcomer Wellbeing Workshops are designed for newcomers of all ages who want to learn about well-being through interactive activities, including art and somatic resourcing. Participants gain strategies to manage stress and anxiety, practice setting boundaries, explore self-care, and more.

Arts & Culture Socials provide opportunities for newcomers to explore Toronto's arts scene, fostering a greater connection to Canadian culture. Activities include Arts in the Parks, museum visits, gallery exhibitions, and other cultural experiences.



Art Assistant Volunteer Tasks

Below are the four main ways an assistant volunteer can support expressive art programs. The art-based facilitator team will train and equip volunteers with relevant art-based practice knowledge. More tools and resources visit: <https://artsforfamilyhealth.accessalliance.ca/>

1. Guiding Participants Through Art Activities

Support participants through the art-making process so they can engage with the activity.

- Demonstrate art-making process slowly and clearly, going step by step alongside the participant
- Support participants, if needed, by helping with completion of a challenging step. This could be as simple as holding one side for them, or direct their actions verbally
- Be patient! Everyone learns at a different pace

2. Sharing Mental Health Strategies

Engage in peer-to-peer support through sharing of wellbeing strategies as needed. These will be simple, easy-to-learn strategies that can be integrated at any time in a session.

- You will be trained on the strategies beforehand
- Ex. 5 finger breathing
- Ex. Orienting to your surroundings
- Ex. Progressive muscle relaxation

3. Nurturing Small Group Discussions

Help spark conversations with the participants you are sitting with! Ask questions about the topic we are engaging with during the session, or be a listening ear to someone who needs to share!

- Ask relevant questions
- Encourage participants to speak with one another
- Language support as needed and if you have the capacity

4. Supporting Set-Up and Clean-Up of Program

Help get the program ready to go, from snacks and refreshments to art materials and tables.

- Tables and chairs
- Snacks and refreshments
- Participant artwork gallery
- Art materials for activity
- Putting up activity signage



Participants to Community Leaders

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."



Kiyon 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 wellbeing coach, Kiyon 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!"



Mindful Art Implementation

What not to do	Suggested Practice
<p>Imposing own Interpretation</p> <p>"Wow, that is a beautiful red horse, its so pretty."</p>	<p>Be mindful NOT to impose our own interpretation about a participants art creation. It can cause invalidation and embarrassment, instead use gratitude.</p> <p>"Thank you for engaging in the art activity today"</p>
<p>It's all about the outcome</p> <p>"Let's hurry and finish the art-piece" "We need to have a complete art piece by the end of the session"</p>	<p>Expressive art therapy programs is NOT about the outcome, but the process. Art-making is used as a tool and experience to foster self-expression and reflection. It's not about the product, but the meaning the participants has made about the product.</p> <p>"We have 30 minutes to engage in the art-making process, remember to observe how it is making you feel."</p>
<p>This is an art class</p> <p>"Today I am going to teach out how to pain and use the colours in the proper way"</p>	<p>Although expressive art therapy programs use many different art forms. Facilitator are NOT art teachers. They can introduce the art-medium, but should not prescribe how it is to be used to create.</p> <p>"Today we will use clay to respond to the question, what does home look and feel like to you?"</p>
<p>Need prior art experience</p> <p>"What is your experience in art? Have you done this before"</p>	<p>No one needs to have previous art experience to engage. Expressive art programs are not about art skills, it's about meaning making and self-expression.</p> <p>"Thank you for being willing to engage in this art activity"</p>
<p>Facilitators cannot engage in art-making</p> <p>"As a facilitator I will watch and observe you while you make the art"</p>	<p>Facilitators are encouraged to also interact with the art-making process. This challenges hierarchy between facilitator and participant. It demonstrates safety and trust. Facilitators may not necessarily draw an image, but showing playfulness is helpful.</p> <p>"Everyone can take a piece of clay and begin squishing it in their hands. How does it make your feel? Observe what are the sensations?"</p>
<p>Art will heal you</p> <p>"Do you feel healed from art-making today?"</p>	<p>As facilitators we need to accept that a program may not change someone's life, but it can be a catalyst towards their goal of an improved mental health. Especially for trauma survivors, it is a life long journey. Art is a tool for managing difficult emotions and processing.</p> <p>"How did today's art making make you feel?" "What colour is your mood?"</p>