



SINGING TOGETHER REPORT 2023 – 2026

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Photo: Children engaging in chalk drawing at AccessPoint on Jane Summer Splash community event.

Music for newcomer mental health

Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (AAMHCS) is a Community Health Centre dedicated to improving health outcomes for vulnerable immigrants, refugees, and their communities by addressing systemic inequities.

The report highlights how singing and music-making can support newcomers' mental health, social connection, and sense of belonging during settlement. Participatory music programs create low-barrier spaces where language is not required, reducing isolation and supporting emotional expression in culturally safe ways.

Evidence suggests that sustained, community-based music initiatives may help strengthen wellbeing over time, particularly when embedded within broader healthcare and settlement services rather than offered as one-off activities. Expanding these programs as part of standard newcomer healthcare pathways could help address both social and emotional dimensions of health more holistically.

“It helps me feel less alone and forget about some of that hardship. I feel free from any worries. I feel happy all day; even if you're sick, it makes you happy.”

- “Singing Together” participant



Photo: Kate Keenan and Rieko Asaba lead “Singing Together” program on AccessPoint on Danforth rooftop garden.

| Singing Together: What Is The Evidence?

Many newcomers face isolation, language barriers, disrupted social networks, and the ongoing stress of settlement. In this context, accessible community-based supports that foster connection and well-being are especially important. The wider evidence helps explain why group singing is such a valuable practice for newcomers: it brings together social connection, emotional expression, and embodied regulation in one shared activity. Research from SingWell, a Canadian initiative exploring the links between singing, health, and well-being, has been especially relevant in showing how community singing can support connection, communication, and belonging. (torontomu.ca)

Research suggests that group singing offers more than social contact alone. Singing together engages breath, voice, rhythm, listening, memory, and coordination all at once. Studies have found that when people sing together, their breathing and heart-rate patterns can begin to synchronize, creating a form of physiological attunement across the group. In the Vickhoff study, the structure of the singing shaped respiration and heart-rate variability so that participants' bodies moved into shared rhythms. (frontiersin.org)

There is also evidence that singing together affects bonding and emotional state in ways that go beyond simply being with other people. In a study comparing singing together with speaking together, group singing led to greater improvements in self-perceived emotional state and social connectedness, along with more favourable oxytocin-related results than group speaking. Related findings from SingWell are also striking: while both group and individual singing lowered cortisol, only group singing was associated with increased oxytocin, and only group singing significantly improved mood. (sciencedirect.com)

“When we sing, stretch, and dance, we’re not just expressing ourselves, we’re caring for our bodies. Movement through music supports our health, even strengthening the heart.”

- “Singing Together” participant



| Continued...

This is especially relevant in newcomer contexts because singing allows people to participate even when spoken language is limited. It creates connection through a shared vocal and physical experience, rather than relying only on conversation. Toronto Metropolitan University's newcomer-focused singing research reports that community-based singing is associated with improved social connectedness and communication function, and that there is growing evidence for singing as a support for second-language learning and integration. (torontomu.ca)

Taken together, this evidence suggests that group singing is a particularly relevant practice for newcomer well-being. It can help reduce isolation, support belonging, and create opportunities for voice, connection, and shared regulation in ways that are both simple and powerful. In this sense, Singing Together reflects a growing body of evidence that community singing can be an important part of newcomer mental health support. (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

“It feels like we are giving each other gifts and receiving gifts. We are sharing our culture and everything.”

- “Singing Together” participant



Photo: Kate Keenan and Rieko Asaba lead “Singing Together” program on AccessPoint on Danforth rooftop garden.

Featured programs

This section of the report will feature five programs facilitated at Access Alliance using music for newcomer mental health and wellness. This includes:

- Singing together
- Seniors music program
- Children's music program
- Collective drumming
- Tuesday tunes community arts

The programs were hosted at AccessPoint on Danforth and Jane sites by a team of interdisciplinary staff members (e.g. health promoter, community health worker, volunteers, placement students and guest speakers). In addition, contracted community artists, expressive arts therapists, and music therapists were hired to lead the programs.

“Singing feels friendlier to others and makes me want to join in with others. I feel like I belong to this community and we enjoy meeting here. We are getting to know each other.” - “Singing Together” participant

Photo: Senior singing program at AccessPoint on Danforth.



| Singing Together

Singing Together is rooted in the unique power of community singing to build connection, belonging, and mental well-being through shared voice. Songs are taught by ear using call-and-response, physical actions, simple harmonies, and rhythm, making participation accessible without requiring musical experience, English fluency, or the ability to read music or lyrics. The circle offers an active, enjoyable way for participants to sing together, share with one another, and experience music as something made in the moment — not for performance, but for connection, expression, and collective joy.

Rieko Asaba is a community song leader, musician, and expressive arts therapist whose work is grounded in cultural sensitivity, relational practice, and collective care. As co-facilitator of Singing Together, she brings a warm, responsive approach shaped by her experience immigrating to Canada from Japan and her sensitivity to belonging, transition, and cultural exchange. She is also the founder of Held in Song, a song circle for caregivers and helpers.

Kate Keenan is a community song leader, composer, performer, screenwriter, and expressive arts therapist. As co-facilitator of Singing Together, she brings a warm, participatory approach to newcomer community singing. Her work spans original music with Space Chums, interactive family musicals through Shrimp Magnet, and writing for children's television, including Cracké and Luna, Chip and Inkie. She is also co-founder of Songbirds and a song leader with Singing Mamas Toronto.

Photo: Kate Keenan and Rieko Asaba lead "Singing Together" program on AccessPoint on Danforth rooftop garden.



| Singing together feedback

Community connection: Participant feedback indicates that *Singing Together* has had a meaningful impact on newcomer participants' mental well-being, social connection, and sense of belonging. All evaluation respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt connected with others in the group, felt a greater sense of belonging in their community, gained knowledge related to mental health and well-being, and became more aware of well-being resources available around them.

Increased understanding and engagement in diverse communities: Participants described the program as a welcoming, multicultural space where singing together helped them meet people, learn songs from different cultures, practise English and pronunciation, and feel more connected to others. A participant shared, "I came here to enjoy multiculturalism, meeting others who are different from me. I love to come here because of the different countries and languages." Another said the program "changed my view regarding multiculturalism," while another described the group as feeling "like a family."

Reduction of stress and improved mood: Participants also described reduced stress, improved mood, increased motivation, and relief from loneliness. One participant reflected, "I don't sing on my own much, but when I come here, it motivates me to sing... I am glad I came out. Otherwise, you don't even leave the house." Another participant, whose husband had died, shared, "When we sing all together, I don't feel that I'm alone."

Increased confidence: The program also appears to support confidence and participation. One participant said, "Before, I was feeling shy... I feel comfortable doing it now. I had to overcome the shyness because I wanted to sing." Another shared, "I never sang before. This is the first time to sing... now I can sing loud."

Overall, the feedback suggests that *Singing Together* supports newcomer mental well-being through the simple but powerful experience of singing with others. Participants described feeling happier, less alone, more confident, more connected across cultures, and more motivated to take part in community life.

"I love these songs; they are really touching and meaningful for us. They give us a sense of what life is to enjoy. When we sing, the mind is very high. We never had this opportunity before; now we know that we can sing."

- "Singing Together" participant

Quantitative Snapshot

100% strongly agreed
Sense of belonging in community

80% strongly agreed
Gained knowledge to express needs

80% strongly agreed
Awareness of mental well-being resources

60% strongly agreed / 40% agreed
Positive connection with others

0 neutral or negative responses
Across all rating questions

| Community stories

"I'm a reserved person and a little shy, but this program helped me get out of that. I don't sing much on my own, but when I come here, it motivates me to sing. **I'm glad I came out otherwise, you don't even leave the house.** I like learning about different cultures and new songs. I feel the happiness. It's the connection, and getting along with others."

"Before, I was feeling shy, but now I feel comfortable. **I had to overcome the shyness because I wanted to sing.** Singing with others has helped my pronunciation and my confidence. During the break, I talk with people, and I've learned a lot. It has changed my view of multiculturalism. Day by day, I feel less stress."

"I feel like we are one, like a family. I feel like I belong to this community, and we enjoy meeting here. **We are getting to know each other, sharing our culture, and giving and receiving gifts from one another.** Before, sometimes we felt shy, but now we really enjoy singing and communicating. We never had this opportunity before; now we know that we can sing."

"My husband passed away, so I am alone. But when I come here and a lot of people are singing together, we are so happy. **When we sing all together, I don't feel that I'm alone.** I really enjoy it, and I forget some of the sadness and hardship. It helps me feel less alone. Hopefully, we sing more and more and more."

"Joining this singing program, I am very much delighted. We sing together, I can talk with everybody, and I can learn different things from different cultures. **It helps with English and sharing my Bengali culture.** I sing these songs to my grandkids, too. Singing and dancing is good for health, we need to move our bodies. I hope the program will continue."

"I came here to enjoy a multicultural community and meet people who are different from me. In my area, most people speak Chinese, and I cannot speak Chinese, so I came all the way here. **I never sang before; this is my first time singing. Now I can sing loud, a little bit.** Staying home alone is not good. Coming here, I meet different people, sing in different languages, and I have become more active and made new friends."



Children's music program

The Children's Music Program, delivered in partnership with the EarlyON program, supported newcomer parents, guardians, and children aged 6 months to 3 years through interactive music-making focused on connection, play, and cultural expression.

Parents and guardians shared overwhelmingly positive feedback, highlighting the facilitator's warm, creative, and engaging approach. Favourite activities included dancing, instrument play, and interactive songs. One caregiver noted that her child with special needs was consistently excited and socially engaged during the sessions. Families also shared that the songs supported learning at home, including language development and emotional regulation.

Overall, the program strengthened parent-child connection, supported well-being, and left many families hoping the program would continue. Data was collected from 19 parent evaluations across two program phases: Pilot #1, October–November 2023, and the June–July 2025 program.

Tiffany Music Therapy (TMT) is a therapy practice supporting children, teens, and adults on their wellness journeys through music-centred care. TMT offers support for anxiety, emotional well-being, self-discovery, and personal growth in a compassionate and creative environment.



Photo: Music therapist, Tiffany, engaging with the Access Alliance children's program at the Barrington site.

| Children's music feedback

Improved emotional well-being:

Participants described the program as supporting mental improvement, positivity, happiness, reduced stress, and relief from anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts through singing, art-making, and group participation.

Reduced isolation and increased motivation:

Participants shared that the program helped them get out of the house, stay active, meet people, and feel less alone. One noted that without the program they would "stay in bed and sleep all day," but with the program they get up, eat breakfast, get ready, and come.

Social connection and belonging:

Participants reported feeling positively connected with others and a strong sense of belonging in the community. Singing, talking, and sharing time together helped participants feel more open to joining in.

Confidence, communication, and language development:

Participants described singing as helping them overcome hesitation, practise using their voice, improve language and pronunciation, and feel more confident.

Cultural and personal meaning:

Participants valued learning songs and activities connected to different cultures, and noted that some songs felt personally meaningful, uplifting, or connected to faith.

Positive facilitation and atmosphere:

Participants described the facilitators as energetic, kind, cheerful, helpful, and easy to learn from, creating a warm and enjoyable atmosphere.

High program satisfaction: Participants recommended that the program continue, especially for seniors, with suggestions for more frequent sessions, new activities, and teachers from different cultural backgrounds.

"When I stay for an hour and a half, I can't understand where the time went, time goes by."

- "Singing Together" participant

"I learned patience and songs for my kids. It is useful for my kids; they learn to listen, have patience, and pay attention. I feel more connected because I can sing new songs with my child."

- Children's music program parent

"Music therapy improved my relationship with my child. We dance. We both enjoyed a lot. We sing the song, poetry."

- Children's music program parent

Seniors music program

The Mind, Music and Mood Program, hosted by Access Alliance, was a continuation of the seniors' music program designed for newcomers aged 55 and older. Running every Thursday from March 6 to April 27, 2023, at AccessPoint on Danforth, the 90-minute program created space for music, connection, and well-being among older newcomer adults. A total of 13 participants attended the program, with an average of 10 community members participating in each session.

The program was then implemented twice following the first pilot. An on-the-ground Head, Heart, Hands, and Feet Survey was used to gather qualitative feedback from 10 participants. This evaluation helped assess program quality, identify opportunities for growth, and centre participants' voices. Two participants also shared reflections on how the program impacted their mental health and daily lives.

Tiffany Music Therapy (TMT) is a therapy practice supporting children, teens, and adults on their wellness journeys through music-centred care. TMT offers support for anxiety, emotional well-being, self-discovery, and personal growth in a compassionate and creative environment.



Photo: Music therapist, Tiffany, engaging with the Access Alliance seniors program at AccessPoint on Danforth.



Seniors music feedback

Tool for emotional well-being, connection, and self-expression.

Participants highlighted how music can improve mood, reduce stress, and promote calmness and happiness, while also supporting brain health, memory, and mental awareness. Many noted a strong connection between music and the mind, emphasizing its ability to influence emotions. The program also fostered creativity through activities like songwriting and making music together, which participants found enjoyable and fulfilling.

Feelings of comfort and positivity.

Participants described feeling comfortable, content, and happy within the program, highlighting a positive and uplifting group atmosphere. The experience of singing together fostered a strong sense of connection, love, and community, especially among seniors. Many noted feelings of joy, relaxation, and emotional soothing, along with moments of playfulness, laughter, and lighthearted fun. The program created a supportive environment that encouraged interaction, awareness of others, and appreciation for positive energy.

Integrating music into their lives.

Participants expressed a desire to continue integrating music into their lives, noting a deeper appreciation for its meaning and impact. Many shared intentions to listen more, both to music and to themselves, while practising positive self-talk. They also highlighted the importance of connection, planning to spend more time with others in similar programs. Additionally, participants mentioned learning new skills, such as playing an instrument, and extending care to their environment, including valuing plants for their well-being benefits.

Program growth areas. Participants expressed interest in having more singing and less talking, extending the program length, and incorporating more music overall. Some suggested adding opportunities to learn instruments and including a wider range of cultural music. Participants also valued social aspects like meeting new people and group sing-alongs. Minor suggestions included improving group communication (e.g., taking turns speaking), involving more seniors, and addressing crowding, while still recognizing the strong efforts of the program staff.

“I learned about The connection between music and mind and how one can influence the other, how music can affect mood and connect us all and adds colour to our lives”

- Senior participant

“I felt joy and relaxation, community gathering amongst the seniors. I am trying to be more aware of how people interact with others even plants will thrive with positive affirmations”

- Senior participant

“The program brought out a sense of playfulness, connection, and soothed my soul” - Senior participant

| Community stories

“Because of my husband passing away, I used to get anxiety. Coming to this program, I feel a lot better. I enjoy the way you [facilitators] are teaching us and making these new songs. I love that. **Every person is free to say how they feel, and people are able to speak from their heart.** Most people are seniors, and everybody has a little pain, so it is nice to express yourself. Can you see how the people talk when they get together? Everybody is happy here today because they are singing a song. You feel good!”

“I learned that music can give you so much comfort. Music can make you feel happy. **It's not easy when you lose a husband, living alone, but I remember a song and start singing, and it makes you feel good.** To be in a group, it's kind of a healing thing. It is helping me fall back in love with music. When people come and get together, I just feel like getting up and dancing.”

“The connection with others is a beautiful memory I have from this group. A lot of folk are single or isolated, and it is great that we get to connect with each other in the space. **It is a happy space that helps me manage worries.** My partner is experiencing some health issues right now, and this program helps alleviate and manage some worries.”

“I learned a lot about the therapeutic quality of plants, and how they respond to kindness, like a child! **I enjoyed the activities where we played instruments and rewriting songs.** It helped me feel grounded, helped maintain a sense of normalcy, instead of being worried about things you cannot control!”

“I learned how music can elevate mood by the way you feel after listening to music” - Senior participant



Tuesday Tunes at AccessPoint on Danforth



Rishi leading a music session on AccessPoint Danforth rooftop garden.

On AccessPoint on Danforth, newcomer community artist, Rishi facilitated community singing programs. Participants engaged in composing a song about “life wisdoms” and led rhythm making activities. Each session began with a nature meditation walk observing the rooftop plants and species.

Rishikesh Sharma (Rishi) is a community-engaged artist facilitating inclusive workshops that foster dialogue and creative participation. He works with Arts4All with seniors in Davenport and is a Newcomer Artist Ambassador at Mabelle Arts.

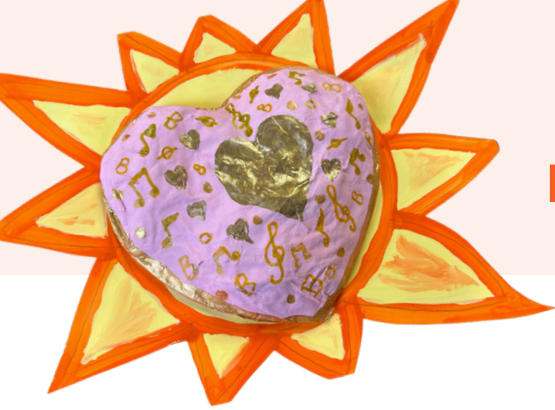
Drumming workshops at AccessPoint on Jane



Sam, drumming facilitator, leads collective drumming at AccessPoint on Jane.

On AccessPoint on Danforth, newcomer community artist, Rishi facilitated community singing programs. Participants engaged in composing a song about “life wisdoms” and led rhythm making activities. Each session began with a nature meditation walk observing the rooftop plants and species.

Sam Liu is the founder and drum circle facilitator with DRUMIN.CA who supports wellness across Canada through community-based drumming programs. A Board Certified Music Therapist, he facilitates drum circles for caregivers, seniors, adult day program participants.



Discussion

Participant feedback suggests that community singing meets an important need for newcomers by providing accessible opportunities for connection, belonging, and emotional well-being in a community setting.

Many participants described experiences of isolation, shyness, grief, language barriers, or difficulty leaving the house. Within this context, the singing circle offered a consistent reason to come out, meet others, and engage in something joyful and welcoming.

The program's impact is a combination of group singing, cultural exchange, gentle movement, and informal social connection. Participants described singing not only as only a musical activity; rather, they experienced it as something that helped them feel happier, less alone, more confident, gain greater life meaning and more connected to people from different cultures and themselves.

Learning songs together also reduced pressure and made participation accessible for individuals with varying levels of English, literacy, confidence, and musical experience. These findings align with broader research on community singing, which shows that singing together can support mood, connection, communication, and a sense of belonging.

Unlike many wellness activities that rely heavily on verbal discussion, group singing engages voice, breath, rhythm, memory, listening, and social attunement all at once. This may help explain why participants experienced the program as both emotionally uplifting and socially connecting.

The Multicultural aspect of the program was especially important. Participants valued learning songs from different cultures and sharing their own languages, stories, and traditions.

This positioned participants not only as recipients of support, but as contributors to a shared community space. Several participants described the group as a place where people were “giving and receiving gifts” through song and culture.

Participants reported that community singing has relevance beyond arts programming alone. Participants connected the program to mental health, social participation, language development, confidence, grief support, and motivation.

For some, it functioned as a gentle bridge back into community life.

Overall, community singing demonstrates how community-based arts programs can support newcomer well-being in ways that are practical, relational, and culturally responsive. **The program's strength lies in its simplicity: people come together, sing, move, talk, listen, and gradually begin to feel more connected and healthier.**



Recommendations

1

Singing and mental health and wellness knowledge

Combining singing and movement with mental health and self-regulation practices helped reduce stress and anxiety while giving participants new wellness vocabulary to express themselves. Knowledge was better retained when participants actively practised self-regulation through music.

2

Attention to environment of programs

Hosting singing programs outdoors in nature, in open spaces with chairs arranged in a circle and room for movement, proved highly effective. Allowing sound to resonate through the environment added a sensory dimension that enriched adjacent healthcare and settlement programming.

3

Integrate social prompts and discussions

Integrating social prompts and song-based discussion helped participants reflect on words, feelings, and memories. Songs about gratitude, landscapes, and cultural identity sparked engagement, while ongoing dialogue created space for participants to use their voice after singing activities.

4

Take home resources and tools for sustained use

Providing take-home resources such as songbooks with QR codes, lyric sheets, and information on music and mental health helped participants share learning with family and community. This extended singing and knowledge beyond sessions and equipped participants with practical tools to use and share.



Photo caption: Participants engaging in a meditative walk on AccessPoint on Danforth rooftop garden prior to singing together.



Recommendations

5

Expand opportunities for multicultural song-sharing

Participants valued learning songs, languages, and cultural traditions from one another. Inviting participants and guest artists to share songs from their own cultures, histories, and intersectional identities can deepen language learning, cultural exchange, and connection.

7

Continue singing programs beyond pilots

Piloting singing and music programs generates valuable feedback and strong momentum. Data collected can be used in reports, grant applications, and social media to build visibility and support further investment. Future planning should prioritize sustaining programs beyond one-time or episodic funding so participants can continue building connection, predictability, and belonging.

6

Strengthen referral pathways from health and settlement

Participants described the program as a welcoming place to meet people and to feel more connected. Agencies seeking low-barrier mental well-being supports need clear information on how clients can access singing programs. Strengthening referral pathways would help agencies connect newcomers to these programs more easily.

8

Prioritize skilled, culturally sensitive arts facilitators

The program's success depended on skilled artists and song leaders who could design high-quality, inclusive sessions while holding a welcoming and culturally aware space. Future programming should continue to prioritize artist-led facilitation so participants feel safe, connected, and able to join in.



Photo caption: Drumming session at AccessPoint on Jane



Calls to action

Use singing programs as an accessible first point of entry in health and settlement support.

Newcomers may face barriers to healthcare and settlement services due to stigma, fear of judgment, and unfamiliar systems. Singing groups offer a welcoming, low-pressure space where participants can build trust, connection, and openness, helping humanize health and settlement supports.

Integrate community singing into social prescribing pathways for newcomers

Arts-based community programs are increasingly recognized as part of mental-health and settlement support, especially when they reduce isolation and build belonging. Low-barrier community singing can support newcomers' emotional well-being, social connection, and daily motivation before people reach crisis.

Support frequent, sustained community singing programs

The benefits of community singing build through trust, routine, and repeated participation. Long-term, frequent programs are better positioned than short-term or occasional offerings to foster lasting well-being, connection, and resilience. Larger funding streams, creative arts partnerships, and music therapy collaborations where appropriate could help sustain and expand these initiatives over time.

Photo caption: Children engaging in chalk drawing at AccessPoint on Jane Summer Splash, 2025.

Additional resources

[Access Alliance Arts for Family Health](#) digital platform Advancing arts integration in health and settlement in Toronto, Canada.

[SingWell](#) A Canadian initiative focused on the health, communication, belonging, and well-being benefits of group singing, includes a Canada-wide group singing map and best-practice resources.

[Canadian Institute for Social Prescribing](#) A national hub for social prescribing in Canada, with resources on connecting people to community-based supports that improve health and well-being.

[Jameel Arts & Health Lab](#) An international arts-and-health research hub with resources, research projects, and an Arts and Health Evaluation Toolkit for artists and communities.

[World Health Organization: Arts and Health Scoping Review](#) A pivotal evidence review on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being.

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