

FINDING ABILITY WITHIN DISABILITY CONFERENCE

*A Community Health and Inclusion Report:
Stories, Strategies, and Solutions*

OVERVIEW

On April 10, 2025, the Finding Ability Within Disability Conference gathered over 150 caregivers, service providers, and advocates in Hamilton. The conference focused on building bridges between practitioners and newcomer families caring for children with developmental disabilities. The event combined expert insight, community storytelling, and general recommendations. It was hosted in partnership with the following organizations:

- SMILE Canada Support Services
- Refugee Newcomer Health
- Developmental Services Ontario (DSO)
- Somali Community in Hamilton
- Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre
- Deen Support Services
- Hamilton Health Sciences
- Disability Justice Network

Each speaker brought valuable knowledge about immigrant health equity, barriers in system navigation, and family-centered care strategies. Participants appreciated the authenticity, cultural humility, and resource-focused delivery of each presentation.



SPEAKERS

- Dr. Ihsan Fagiri – A senior caregiver of an adult son with Down syndrome, who shared her emotional journey navigating Canada's healthcare system.
- Dee Hopkins – Spoke on systems change and long-term care planning.
Kristen Emery – Shared insights on navigating developmental service systems and supporting families across Ontario.
- Dr. Sukaina Dada (SMILE Canada) – Pediatric occupational therapist and disability rights advocate, focused on culturally informed services.
- Dr. Andrea Hunter (McMaster Children's Hospital) – Pediatrician with a specialization in newcomer health and developmental disabilities.

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OUR IMPACT

150+ participants engaged in live storytelling and policy dialogue

8 translators ensured accessibility across Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Somali, and English

- Caregivers shared stories of resilience, frustration, and hope.
- Key outcome: demand for ongoing peer support and institutional collaboration



“
| We need this every year, just to feel heard. |
-participant —”

CAREGIVER VOICES AND THEMES

- Fear for children’s future care after parent’s death
- Lack of knowledge about services like DSO or ODSP
- Language barriers with healthcare, schools, and paperwork
- Cultural stigma and isolation
- High financial strain and lack of respite
- Deep appreciation for Arabic-speaking physicians and interpreters

“We don’t know where to go for help, we only speak Arabic.”

“I cannot read English. I ask friends to help with ODSP papers.”

“She’s lucky to only have one child with a disability. I have three.”

“I am scared. Who will care for my son when I die?”



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HEALTH RIGHTS AND MEDICAL NAVIGATION TIPS

- You have the right to a medical interpreter – always ask.
- Appointments should be confirmed in advance – request via email if needed.
- Bring a support person or request help with filling out forms.
- Keep a contact list of your child's medical providers.
- Ask about what's covered under OHIP or IFHP before agreeing to procedures.
- You can access your own or your child's medical records by written request.
- Make sure instructions are provided in a language you understand.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

- 100% of attendees want to be contacted for future events and support groups.
- All participants rated the conference as Excellent or Good.
- Suggested improvements included: real-time interpretation, diverse table questions, and transportation support.
- Requests for ongoing education sessions, especially in Arabic and Farsi.



REFLECTIONS

"I didn't know I had a right to ask for translation – now I will."

"It felt like we were all one family here."

"I now understand what DSO is and how to apply."

*"Thank you for giving us a voice.
Please don't stop."*

These voices shape the future of our community programming. They inform not only how we support, but also how we advocate at the policy level.

“
Everyone has challenges but we still have hope.

-participant

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MOVING FORWARD

- Expand Twilight Connections – a monthly support circle for parents and caregivers.
- Distribute multilingual caregiver tip sheets across schools, clinics, and community centers.
- Establish an advisory committee of caregivers to inform service development.
- Continue cross-sector partnerships for culturally inclusive care.
- Host the 2026 Finding Ability Within Disability Conference with broader outreach and bilingual sessions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all our community partners, speakers, volunteers, and families who made this conference possible. Your stories, expertise, and presence are shaping a more inclusive and compassionate future.

