



Supporting Ohioans with Autism

Across Agencies, Across the State, Across the Lifespan

Annual Report & Recommendations • 2025



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A Note About Language

The terms “person with autism,” “person with ASD,” “autistic person,” “autistic,” and “person on the autism spectrum” are used interchangeably throughout this document. Some members of the autism community prefer one term, while others prefer another. The IWGA respects the different opinions within the community on the use of this language and does not intend to endorse any preference. In addition, the terms “autism” and “autism spectrum disorder (ASD)” are used interchangeably throughout this document unless otherwise noted.

Message from Leadership

Together, We're Building a Future of Belonging

In 2025, Ohio advanced significant initiatives to strengthen accessibility and expand opportunities for Ohioans with disabilities. Guided by Governor Mike DeWine's leadership and supported by the dedication of families, providers, advocates, and communities, we are shaping a system anchored in respect, inclusion, and possibility.

Together, we have achieved meaningful progress, including installing more than 130 universal changing tables statewide, expanding innovative programs like *Keeping Families Together*, and fostering cross-agency collaboration to create employment opportunities. Additionally, two key resources, *Navigation Essentials* and the *Pre-ETS curriculum*, were introduced through interagency collaboration, providing practical, accessible solutions to strengthen support for multi-system youth. These efforts reflect what matters most to Ohioans - practical resources, strong partnerships, and a true sense of belonging.

The Interagency Work Group on Autism (IWGA) has played a vital role in this progress, engaging partners and stakeholders across Ohio and nationally to reach goals and accelerate solutions. **The following pages highlight IWGA's 2025 contributions and its impact on advancing opportunities for Ohioans with autism.** Looking ahead, IWGA will build on these insights to ensure

our collective work continues to amplify the voices and needs of individuals with autism, their families, and our communities.

We are encouraged by the progress we've made to open doors to greater access and opportunities, while positioning Ohio as a leader in assisting people with autism and other developmental disabilities. Continued collaboration and dedication across communities will help build on this momentum and a future of belonging for all Ohioans.



Lyndsay Nash,

Director
Ohio Department of
Developmental Disabilities



Reginald Fields,

Chair
OCALI Advisory Board

Background & Purpose

Ohio's Interagency Work Group on Autism (IWGA) was established in state law "to improve the coordination of the state's efforts to address the service needs of individuals with autism spectrum disorders and the families of those individuals." (ORC 5123.0419). Under the leadership of the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, the IWGA first convened in January 2008. IWGA meets monthly and applies a collective impact framework to achieve its objectives, using data to guide its efforts. Currently, 1 in 31 children aged 8 years is identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Shaw et al., 2025), and 1 in 6 children aged 3–17 has a diagnosed developmental disability (Zablotsky et al. 2019). These figures highlight the importance of IWGA's collaborative work to ensure autistic Ohioans and their families have access to essential services and supports.

In 2025, the IWGA consisted of the following state agencies:

- Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (Lead Agency)
- OCALI (Convener)
- Ohio Department of Education and Workforce
- Ohio Department of Health
- Ohio Department of Job and Family Services
- Ohio Department of Medicaid
- Ohio Department of Behavioral Health
- Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities
- Ohio Department of Children and Youth

Essential to accelerating the work, IWGA values the perspectives of autistic individuals, their families, and their communities. In 2023, the IWGA expanded to include public members. Applications for new public members, including autistic Ohioans, family members, and supporters, will open early 2026.



Advancing Goals and Priorities

In 2025, the IWGA gathered input from Ohioans through surveys, stakeholder engagement, statewide collaboration, OCALI's Advisory Board, and other communication channels to guide its priorities and goals.

2024-2025 Goals and Priorities

During this period, IWGA focused on:

- Making it easier to find a curate, reliable autism-specific information and resources.
- Identifying issues related to the quality, capacity, availability, and funding of services across the state for autistic Ohioans and their families, providing recommendations for improvement.
- Partnering with stakeholders to build healthcare capacity to serve autistic Ohioans and improve health outcomes.
- Strengthening and promoting Ohio's efforts to increase developmental monitoring and autism screening, facilitate referrals, support families, and build statewide capacity for timely autism assessment.
- Identifying opportunities to streamline, simplify, and better coordinate eligibility, planning, and funding across Ohio's service delivery systems, providing recommendations for improvement.

In the upcoming strategic planning year, IWGA will build on insights from 2025 and continue to actively collaborate with Ohioans to review progress and shape goals that truly reflect the needs of autistic individuals and their families.



Insights and Interactions

Throughout 2025, the IWGA proactively sought opportunities to learn, collaborate, and gather insights from stakeholders to inform and further its priorities.



The following pages provide an overview of several 2025 key insights and interactions, serving as a foundation for continued dialogue and strategic planning in 2026.

Key Insights:

Guidance and Resources Driving Better Health Outcomes for Ohioans

In May, the IWGA hosted a public webinar focused on co-occurring conditions and their impact on the health and well-being of individuals with autism. Dr. Laura Sorg, Medical Director at the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, shared the latest research and practical insights to deepen understanding of co-occurring conditions in autism. Research shows that individuals with autism are more likely to experience medical, developmental, and mental health challenges, making early identification and proactive care essential (ARI, 2025). Emerging evidence indicates that nearly 78% of children with autism have at least one co-occurring mental health disorder, such as anxiety, depression, or eating disorders (Kerns et al. 2020), underscoring the need for informed discussions between families and healthcare professionals.

Following the webinar, IWGA members outlined strategies to amplify the information presented and support families and clinicians. Key recommendations included creating two versions of a one-page summary - one for families and another for medical professionals - and developing tools to help individuals and families communicate with healthcare providers, navigate transitions, and prepare for emergencies. Members also emphasized sharing resources through established navigator networks.

To advance these efforts, IWGA plans to finalize drafts, review materials, and complete production with supporting documents scheduled for release in spring 2026 to provide practical guidance and resources aligned with IWGA's priorities.



Key Insights:

Two Gatherings, One Mission: Collaboration and Shared Voices

In April, IWGA partnered with Ohio's Employment First Taskforce (EFTF) to celebrate Autism Acceptance Month. This gathering brought together state agencies and autism organizations to share priorities and spark collaboration aimed at improving the lives of Ohioans with autism and their families. Presentations highlighted initiatives such as competitive, integrated employment, and family-focused resources. Breakout sessions emphasized stronger communication, reducing silos, and creating adaptable employment pathways, underscoring the need for clear, accessible information and two-way engagement.

In October, IWGA and EFTF reunited for National Disability Employment Awareness Month, continuing the momentum of shared voices and collective action. State agency leaders shared initiatives to expand lifelong learning, career pathways, and community engagement. Highlights included partnerships supporting families across the lifespan and the innovative Employment First Workplan introducing self-employment opportunities. Guided discussions centered on five priorities: career pathways, family involvement, cross-agency collaboration, resource access, and accessibility, affirming that when agencies listen and act together, inclusion becomes reality.

Opportunities for the IWGA and EFTF, along with state agency leadership and community partners, to convene will continue in 2026.



Key Insights:

Shaping Future Supports and Resources

In September, OCALI and the IWGA launched a family engagement survey to better understand what matters most to families and to guide the development of relevant resources and initiatives. The survey aims to assess Ohio's effectiveness in supporting individuals with autism and other disabilities, measure progress toward IWGA's goals, and identify opportunities to improve service navigation while fostering a sense of belonging.

Building on these insights, OCALI facilitated a series of collaborative sessions with family organizations and support networks between October and November. Each session focused on priorities identified through the initial survey responses, with the goal of reflecting, aligning, and acting toward meaningful solutions. Key takeaways included creating practical tools and resources to better support families, such as a centralized platform for sharing activities and services. Strengthening cross-agency partnerships, ensuring consistent information, and leveraging navigation supports were also seen as essential.

Although the comprehensive summary is still in progress following the survey's November 30, 2025 close, these initial insights reflect the perspectives and experiences families have shared. The top five areas that matter most include educational programming and school support, social connection and community engagement, access to quality health care and

therapy, finding or keeping good services, and caregiver support, training, and resources.

These insights, along with other findings from the survey, will guide next steps in shaping resources that respond to what matters most to families.



Families feel alone and lost on what is available to their child/young adult to set them up for success.

- Survey Respondent

Allowing my son to advocate, wherever possible, for himself and go along with those choices.

- Survey Respondent

Someone in my child's school that will help them make friends, even though their IEP doesn't reflect this need.

- Survey Respondent

Key Insights:

Strengthening Systems Across States

In 2025, IWGA members contributed to advancing national collaboration by actively participating in key National Autism Leadership Collaborative (NALC) initiatives.

In March, IWGA members responded to NALC's guiding questions by sharing updates on Ohio's progress and identifying opportunities for state and national collaboration. Members emphasized collaborative, multi-agency efforts to improve coordination and resource sharing, with a focus on budget priorities and systemic alignment. Key challenges included addressing co-occurring conditions, trauma, gaps in treatment and diagnostic services, and shortages of behavioral health providers and direct support professionals.

In May, IWGA members joined NALC's virtual gathering, contributing ideas through the *Solutions for Sharing* initiative to promote resource alignment and agency-to-agency collaboration.

In November, IWGA members participated in the National Autism Leadership Summit to strengthen work across states and systems. Members engaged in discussions on emerging needs, training priorities, and resource planning, and helped identify quarterly topics for future collaboration, including resource navigation, evidence-based practices, and lifespan supports, all aimed at creating a more seamless system of care for individuals and families nationwide.

Further opportunities for idea exchange, innovative practices, and coordination of state and federal autism initiatives will continue in 2026.



Accelerating Ohio's Vision

Originally developed in 2022 through the collective contribution of autistic individuals, their families, and community partners, these vision components continue to reflect the aspirations of Ohioans with autism and remain central to informing and guiding IWGA priorities.

- **Members.** Be full, welcome members of their classrooms, communities, place of employment, and houses of worship.
- **Leaders.** Be leaders and decision-makers.
- **Relationships.** Have a variety of safe, healthy relationships.
- **Valued.** Be valued, respected, and have their contributions recognized.
- **Choices.** Have a wide range of choices about where and how to live, work, and be supported.
- **Needs.** Get what they need when they need it consistently and easily.
- **Future.** Talk about and plan for positive, possible futures, throughout life, starting early.

The following pages highlight ways the IWGA member agencies, along with statewide partners and stakeholders, have collaborated to advance Ohio's vision.



Highlight:

Empowering Transition Through Pre-ETS

Everyday activities shape a person's life by establishing valued roles, making decisions, setting goals, and fostering responsibility. In 2025, Ohio took a significant step forward by introducing a new resource designed to support these outcomes, the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) Curriculum for Providers.

Why It Matters

Students with disabilities, ages 14–21, benefit greatly from early exposure to career exploration. Pre-ETS provides this foundation, helping students prepare for life beyond school. Recognizing the need for a consistent, high-quality approach, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) and OCALI collaborated to develop a Pre-ETS curriculum tailored to Ohio's unique needs.

What Is New

The Pre-ETS curriculum is more than a set of lesson plans - it is a free, evidence-based resource designed to support students, including those in Career Technical Education (CTE) programs, postsecondary pathways, or with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It includes flexible, inclusive lessons with videos, visuals, and hands-on activities – all aligned with OOD's Services and Standards benchmarks and requirements – to help providers deliver meaningful, real-world transition services.

Developed with Stakeholder Input

This resource was shaped through extensive stakeholder engagement, including service providers, schools, state agencies, self-advocates, post-secondary institutions, and community partners. Their feedback ensured that the curriculum is student-centered, promoting self-direction and informed decision-making.



People don't see my future the way I do.

– Self-advocate

We're not necessarily checking a box but really trying to engage with the students and individuals to make as much of this self-directed as possible.

- OCALI Lifespan Transitions Center Staff



Highlight:

Expanding Accessibility at the Ohio State Fair

Access to meaningful connections and opportunities fosters friendships, relationships, and a sense of belonging for all. That belief is at the heart of the Ohio State Fair's partnership with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD), and OCALI. Together, they continue expanding accessibility initiatives to ensure Ohioans of all ages and abilities can fully enjoy the Fair.

Sensory-Friendly Morning

On July 24, the Ohio State Fair hosted its annual Sensory-Friendly Morning, creating a calmer environment by reducing lighting and noise levels on rides and games. Designated quiet areas and supportive resources, such as wait cards, social narratives, and visuals from [OCALI](#), along with the [Ohio State Fair's accessibility guide](#), helped guests navigate the Fair comfortably.

Enhanced Accessibility Features

The Fair introduced several key enhancements during its July 23 - August 3 run to make the experience more inclusive. [Communication boards](#), developed by DODD, were available to assist individuals with complex communication needs. To support sensory regulation, a new quiet room was added and available throughout the Fair, with a second quiet space available

during concerts. Through [OOD's Accessible Ohio program](#), guests could access a discount coupon for electric scooter rentals, helping individuals with physical or mental conditions navigate the fairgrounds more easily. Additionally, OOD's mobile services unit was on-site to provide accessibility information and engage visitors with interactive activities.

Growing Commitment to Accessibility

The Ohio State Fair's dedication to providing a more accessible and welcoming experience continues to grow through strong partnerships. This year, the Fair expanded its offerings with more American Sign Language (ASL)-interpreted shows, mobility device charging stations, universal changing tables, Aira services for real-time visual assistance, and other accessibility features.

Collaboration Across Agencies

Additionally, IWGA member agencies and state partners hosted booths at the Fair to share resources and information. Among these efforts were interactive exhibits to engage learners of all ages and a focus on mental health through RecoveryOhio Mental Health Day, information on the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline in Ohio](#), and 4-H Health Day.

By prioritizing accessibility and information sharing, the Ohio State Fair sets a strong standard for inclusion and community engagement. These efforts reflect a shared vision of making the Fair a place where everyone belongs.

Highlight:

Proactive Strategies for Complex Needs

Proactively promoting safe, secure, and healthy living through individualized supports, resources, and choices embodies a vision for empowering youth and fostering lifelong success—a vision strengthened by the creation of Navigation Essentials. Developed through collaboration among OCALI, the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, and the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, along with providers, county boards of developmental disabilities, school teams, families, and subject matter experts, this comprehensive series of evidence-based toolkits help address the complex needs and supports for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and behavioral health needs, particularly those in intermediate care facilities.

Purpose and Features

Navigation Essentials serves as a centralized resource to strengthen collaboration and communication across multiple systems of care, including education and healthcare. The online toolkits offer practical features, instructional videos, and tools to build skills at the individual, team, and leadership levels.

Why These Toolkits Matter

The importance of these resources is underscored by research showing a 34.6% increase in childhood mental illness prevalence between 2012 and 2018 (Tkacz & Brady, 2021), the CDC's recognition of co-occurring conditions that exacerbate mental health symptoms (CDC, 2025), and findings from a 2022 study highlighting educators' need for increased mental health resources (Nygaard et al., 2023). Additionally, children living away from family face unique challenges in accessing quality education, making coordination between school districts critical during transitions.

Evidence-Based Strategies

Recognized as effective and evidence-based, the strategies and interventions within the Navigation Essentials toolkits proactively address complex needs and foster environments that enable youth to self-regulate and engage in learning activities.

One toolkit is specifically designed to help leaders implement these strategies as part of their teams' professional development, ensuring that training becomes embedded in organizational practice.

Impact and Engagement

In its first six months (April-October 2025), Navigation Essentials has gained strong traction across Ohio, generating 14,832 page views from 2,738 unique active users, with the highest engagement in toolkits focused on Trauma and Resilience, Medical: Health and Wellness, Understanding Behavior: A Framework for Intervention, and Sensory: A Focus on Interoception.

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