

A hub for Autism Home Base Durham

Clarington leases space to support adults with autism and their families

COMMUNITY by [Jennifer O'Meara](#) Clarington This Week



Eric Mead lined up the bowling ball at the Newcastle Community Hall on Nov. 8. Autism Homebase Durham wants to lease office space from the Municipality of Clarington to expand its programs for families. - Jason Liebrechts/Torstar

DURHAM — After years of renting and borrowing venues for programs, Autism Home Base Durham has been given a space to create a hub to support adults with autism and their families.

“It’s a safe space. This here is just our guys. Everybody understands their behaviour. Nobody laughs,” said Frances Mallon, who attends Autism Home Base programs with her son Iain. “We need a new place to go, these guys need things to do. Today was a long day, filling it in with things to do.”

Clarington council agreed to lease to Autism Home Base the office space on the second floor of 132 Church St. for at least three years — starting Wednesday, Jan. 1, 2020.

Autism Home Base was founded by parents to serve their children and connect with other families. The organization provides regularly scheduled programming at safe locations for an hour or two every day in rented or borrowed venues. The programs bring in professional arts, music or sports facilitators to create environments where adults with autism can be successful.

CEO Judy Hanson explained that has often worked fairly well. However, organizers can’t control public environments, crowds, noises or changes in schedule — things that are often a challenge for people with autism. That means programs at community-based locations can be extremely difficult for families with members who use nonverbal social communication skills and

experience extreme distress in changing routines or actions. Some families feel it's too risky to try to attend the programs.

A space of their own will help Autism Home Base Durham create a safe, welcoming place for all their members, explained Hanson. That could mean offering headphones, beanbag chairs and occupational therapy balls. The Autism Home Base families will be invited to contribute ideas for the new space so it's fully adaptable for the group's members.

"This group is very much meant to be — and needs to remain — family driven," explained Hanson. "We're a network where families and adult people with autism can support each other."

The new Church Street site could include a range of supports for adults with autism (sensory-sensitive social and recreational programming and drop-in for autism self-advocates with community job board and meetups) and for their families (a resource lending library for parents/caregivers, networking events, information sessions on housing, estate planning, etc.).

When asked what she'd like to see in the new space, Acelynn Mitchell, a 20-year-old member, said "art stuff, I'd like to do art and dancing."

The drop-in hub could be a game changer for the Autism Home Base families. Several families said they struggled to get to the scheduled programming depending on how well their family member on the spectrum was handling transitions that day.

"The things they offer now are really nice, it's a matter of timing," said Betty Midgley, who attends the bowling program in Newcastle with her son Jake. She said it's often a challenge for Jake to leave a program once it's over.



Betty and Jake Midgley lined up the bowling ball at the Newcastle Community Hall on Nov. 8. Autism Homebase Durham wants to lease office space from the Municipality of Clarington to expand its programs for families. - Jason Liebrechts/Torstar

Hanson said these families need a non-judgmental, economically-viable space to call their own. She's excited that soon they'll have it.

Hanson helped launch Autism Home Base Durham to connect with other families after her son, Eric, aged out of school at 21. The parent group was first supported by Clarington, with dedicated swim times in a municipal recreation facility. Then a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation allowed them to hire one full-time staff member and [increase the programming](#).

What began as a Clarington group [now has members across Durham](#). The membership has almost doubled each year over the last three years with 42 families in 2017 and 80 in 2018. By 2019 the group had grown to 160. The founders even helped families in Peterborough establish a similar group.

Along with planning a new hub, Autism Home Base Durham is also launching a peer-pairing initiative thanks to a new seed grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Volunteers will be buddied up with a member based on their interests to attend one of the programs together. Autism Home Base hopes to attract 20 volunteers to match with members on the spectrum.

"We want to see how we can expand the circle of support beyond people on the spectrum and parents/caregivers," said Hanson. "If you like art and my son likes art, it may not matter that one of you has autism."

The local organization is partnering with Trent University on a research survey to gauge the success of the new peer-pairing program.

"We're hoping to get some guys out because a lot of our members are guys," said Hanson. "There's no cost to (the volunteers). We would pay for participation."

Volunteers, 21 and older, can come from anywhere in Durham and need only an hour a week to participate in a Autism Home Base group activity with their buddy. Visit www.homebasedurham.com to fill out a survey on interests and availability.