



WATERLOO REGION
Family Network

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

2023- 2024



500 Hallmark Drive
Waterloo, ON



wrfn.info



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Info@wrfn.info

Vision

An accepting and embracing community where all exceptional families feel connected, supported, heard and understood.

Mandate

WRFN fills a gap in Waterloo Region, by facilitating peer connections and sharing community resources. Through our innovative community partnership model and strong network, we support individuals both with and without a diagnosis, creating life-long impact.

Mission

As a peer-developed and peer-driven network, WRFN is uniquely able to help exceptional families and individuals thrive. Through education and meaningful connections, we offer support in making informed decisions for now and through all life stages.

Values

WRFN has three core values that guide how we resonate with exceptional individuals and their families.

- 1 First is **experience**; we are built by families for families, ensuring we truly understand and can empathize with each journey. **We get it!**
- 2 Second is **empowerment**, which equips families with the tools to make confident decisions.
- 3 Third, we uphold **respect**, supporting each family's unique choices and recognizing that every path deserves respect.

Waterloo Region Family Network Board of Directors 2023/2024

Karen Klink – Chair

John Gilbert – Vice Chair

Samantha Brewer – Treasurer

Jen Arseneault – Director

Lorie Cochrane – Director

Debbie Hoekstra – Director

Lina Caputo – Director

Kirk Irving – Director

Janet Greener – Director

Taylor Walker – Director

Tammy Mayne – Director

Susan Simpson – Secretary; Ex-Officio

Message from the Executive Director

At WRFN, we continually strive for an accepting and understanding community where all exceptional families and individuals feel connected and experience an authentic sense of belonging.

2023/2024 was an incredible year as we were able to bring families together more often, whether in person or virtually. Throughout the year, we directly supported 390 new families. As of June 30, 2024, WRFN had supported 4005 unique families since we began in 2009. We are extremely proud of our amazing team for supporting so many families, connecting them to vital resources and to each other.

WRFN welcomed a new face to the team in April 2024. Keenan O'Donoghue joined our team to cover a maternity leave in the Communications and Marketing Coordinator role. With a background in journalism and communications, Keenan is passionate and dedicated to working for an organization that helps individuals and families with exceptionalities and other challenges. His mission is to be a role model and inspiration for children who, like him, face disabilities. We are thrilled to have Keenan on board and are already witnessing the positive impact he is making collaborating with team members and community organizations.

After being on hold for four years, WRFN Camp Day returned in October 2023 and was a highlight of the year. In partnership with YMCA of Three Rivers, WRFN Camp Day is an opportunity for families to experience camp activities and connect with other families. S'mores and smiles reflected the enjoyment experienced by all.

Similarly, the Social and Recreation Info Fair event, hosted at the end of November 2023, created a space for service providers and families to come together to learn about available social and recreation programs and to identify gaps and barriers. It was heartwarming to see participants who hadn't seen each other in years reconnect with each other and to see new connections being made.

WRFN is grateful for the following generous grants along with the amazing support of donors and partner organizations.

- United Way Waterloo Region Communities (Program Stream) enhancing our Parent Mentor program
- Waterloo Region Community Foundation (Federal Government Community Services Recovery Grant) creating a fulsome Fund Development Strategy
- Ontario Caregiver Organization (Capacity Building grant) providing information sessions to families and building capacity within our network.
- The Essentials Fund (held at the WRCF) provides unrestricted funds to support clients' essential needs like food, transportation, personal hygiene items, etc.
- The Brown Family Fund (held at WRCF) supporting areas of most need within the organization.
- Lyle S. Hallman Foundation (General Operating Support) providing unrestricted funds for a fourth year and celebrating a successful new application for GOS funding for the next two years assisting in overcoming obstacles, attracting talent and creating value for all stakeholders.

The ongoing support and commitment of the board of directors, volunteers and staff team have been integral to the success of WRFN this past year. Without their dedication, we could not support families in the unique ways we do. Establishing partnerships with families, not only in lending assistance and making connections for them, but also by learning from them has created mutually supportive and beneficial relationships.

With gratitude,



Sue Simpson
Executive Director

Message from the Board Chair

As we wrap up another year at Waterloo Region Family Network (WRFN), I am continually amazed by the dedication and passion of the staff who work to support the thousands of families relying on our extensive programs and resources.

WRFN's impact wouldn't be possible without the ongoing support of our partners, volunteers, and donors. Your contributions ensure we remain a vital resource for families across the Waterloo Region. Thank you!

This year was marked by outstanding achievements in our programming and events, a testament to our collective efforts. It was a year of deep engagement, helping families navigate various support systems and services. We were particularly delighted with the tremendous response to our annual fundraiser, Evening of Elegance, featuring a moving keynote address by Becky Verdun.

The Board engaged with Capacity Canada on a Strategic Plan to guide WRFN over the next three years. The Board remains focused on maintaining an engaged Board of Directors to foster a culture of inclusion.

I take great pride in serving on the WRFN Board for over five years now, and I am honoured to continue supporting this remarkable organization and the families who depend on our programs and supports.

With heartfelt thanks,



Karen Klink,
Board Chair

Financial Report from Board Treasurer, Samantha Brewer

WRFN completed the 2024 fiscal year with a total operating deficit of \$50,786, thus bringing the total cumulative surplus as of June 30, 2024, to \$222,353. The overall deficit is in line with the annual prepared budget and is a crucial part of WRFN's forecasted strategic planning.

WRFN continues to receive most of its funding through our extensive partnership model and foundation funding, with additional amounts received from corporate and personal donations and our annual Evening of Elegance event.

2024 continued to be another year that WRFN was able to focus on its strategic objectives, including focusing on future strategic planning. WRFN successfully received an additional \$30,000 grant to allow us to focus on a new fund development strategy.

Final cash balances for 2024 and 2023 are included in the financial highlights for reference.

Financial Highlights:

	2024	2023
Revenues		
Contributions and grants	\$305,278	269,978
Donations and other	73,565	68,318
Fundraising	34,357	32,891
	\$413,200	\$371,187
Expenditures		
Wages and benefits	\$362,965	\$308,210
Overhead and other	79,774	45,271
Event expense	12,035	15,499
Programs and workshops	9,212	7,949
	\$463,986	376,929
Cash and cash equivalents	\$349,833	\$441,766

Evening of Elegance



Evening of Elegance, WRFN's signature event, took place on April 19, 2024, at St. George Banquet Hall in Waterloo. We were grateful to Becky Verdun, renowned musician and advocate, as our special guest presenter for the evening. Becky captivated the audience with her musical talents on the piano, creating a beautiful ambiance that enriched the event. She also shared her personal journey as the sibling of an individual with Down syndrome and the daughter of devoted parent advocates, offering profound insights that resonated deeply with attendees.



We were privileged to have her wisdom and experiences illuminate the importance of inclusivity in our community. Brock Greenhalgh, serving as our Master of Ceremonies for the first time, skillfully guided the evening's proceedings, encouraging active participation in our silent auction with his engaging presence.



The silent auction featured a variety of generous donations from local businesses, and we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who contributed. A special acknowledgment goes to Dave Rutherford and the KW Woodworking and Craft Centre crew for their exceptional handcrafted donations, which added a unique touch to our auction for the second consecutive year.

We are proud to announce that Jodi Purdie and Leslie Huys were honored with our 2023/24 Matthew MacGregor Award for Volunteerism, recognizing their unwavering commitment and dedication to the Evening of Elegance planning group over the past eight years.

Next year, 2025, will mark the 10th anniversary of Evening of Elegance. It will surely be memorable, and we hope you can join us for a grand celebration!



2023/2024 Highlights

Individual Education Plan (IEP) Workshop

Our annual workshop held in September in partnership with Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) and Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB); the workshop covered the purpose of the IEP (what it is and isn't), the development of the IEP, and the implementation of the IEP. Parents/caregivers highly anticipated the opportunity to meet personally with school board representatives to address their questions and concerns following the presentation.

Social and Recreation Fair

In November 2023, WRFN hosted a unique opportunity for families and self-advocates to learn about the social and recreation opportunities in the region for youth and adults with a developmental and/or physical disability. At the event, families had the opportunity to visit info booths. Two self-advocates and their parents joined us, speaking about their creative recreation option and helped us lead a conversation about identifying gaps.



IEP
WORKSHOP

Wednesday, September 27
6:30 PM

WRDSB Education Centre
St. Jacobs Learning Hub
51 Ardelt Ave, Kitchener ON N2C 2R5

Register at:
info@wrfn.info



**Waterloo Catholic
District School Board**
Quality, Inclusive, Faith Based Education



2023/2024 Highlights

Housemate Mixer

In May 2024, WRFN was proud to collaborate with Developmental Services Ontario and Sunbeam Developmental Resource Centre to host an informative housemate mixer. The mixer included a brief presentation and a social component where guests could ask questions and interact with each other. One of our Family Resource Coaches, Leah Bowman, helped organize and run the session. The focus was on helping community members locate resources that would allow them to find a housemate capable of handling their living situation. This event helped facilitate and engage community members in finding a housemate. Leah indicated that the turnout and feedback were reassuring. WRFN plans to continue collaborating on events like these in the future to help our community and bring people together.



HOUSEMATE MIXER

Are you or someone you support looking for a Housemate? Join us as we strategize how to make connections while mingling with others who may be in a similar situation and looking for a housemate.

Your Housing Navigator will lead a discussion on how we can facilitate a process for meeting potential housemates.

TOPICS COVERED

- How to look for a housemate
- How DSO Housing navigators can play a role
- What are families looking for

HOSTED BY:

Amber Noseworthy (Sunbeam Developmental Resource Centre), Christina Hall (DSO Housing Navigator), Leah Bowman (Waterloo Region Family Network)

Refreshments provided! Join us: May 29, 2024, 6:30 - 8:30 PM, 2749 Kingsway Dr Kitchener ON

TO REGISTER PLEASE EMAIL: Christina Hall at: c.hall@sunbeamcommunity.ca

sunbeam DEVELOPMENTAL RESOURCE CENTRE

DSO Developmental Services Ontario

Waterloo Region Family Network

Developmental Services Ontario (DSO) helps adults with developmental disabilities find services and supports in their community.

CONNECT WITH US! dsontario.ca

Building Community: Advancing Anti-Ableism in Education

WRFN served as a community partner on the Waterloo Region District School Board's "Building Community: Advancing Anti-Ableism in Education" Symposium Planning Committee, which started in November. WRFN's Communications and Marketing Coordinator, Rachel Cave, created the logo!

The event itself occurred at Wilfrid Laurier University on May 30, and five WRFN staff members attended and participated in various workshops. The symposium provided a vital platform for attendees to explore the pervasive nature of ableism in educational settings.

Keynote speakers and workshop hosts shared personal and professional insights, highlighting how ableism manifests in practices within professional environments.

Speakers emphasized community-centred approaches and advocated for valuing the lived experiences of individuals facing ableism.



BUILDING COMMUNITY

Advancing
Anti-Ableism
in Education
Symposium



2023/2024 Highlights

Coffee Club

Coffee Club began in late 2011. It was started by two self-advocates, one of whom is Carmen Sutherland, who still facilitates the group today. It was envisioned as a place where older teens 16+ and adults can gather in person and online to have fun and build community. At the time this group began, there were not many social opportunities for those with disabilities in this age group.

Today, the club continues to be a space where everyone does their best to support one another and accept each other for who they are. Many friendships have formed within Coffee Club, and some thrive outside of it as well.

A New Chapter

This monthly support group is for parents/caregivers interested in preparing for the future of their youth/adult family member with a lifelong disability. Over the past fiscal year, this group engaged in conversations and presentations on the following: Sharing of Community Resources, Wills and Estate Planning, the Vulnerable Persons Registry, RDSPs, Income Tax and the Disability Tax Credit, Insights for Expanding Choice and Aging Your Way, Journey to Belonging, and the F-Words for Living – Function, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends and Future. A small working group has also dedicated time to creating a Caregiver Guide. Most parents who have the honour of caring for someone carry fears and concerns about what might happen when they can no longer care for their loved ones temporarily or permanently. The Caregiver Guide is being created to help with the difficult task of training others to provide caregiving in the future.



2023/2024 Highlights



Camp Day 2023

We were thrilled to host Camp Day, held at Camp Ki-Wa-Y in partnership with the YMCA of Three Rivers, for the first time since 2019. Camp Day has allowed children and youth with exceptionalities to try out the summer camp experience. Importantly, this day provides families with a comfortable and controlled environment, ensuring their safety and bringing families, children and parents alike to try new activities and socialize in a less formal setting. It allowed WRFN to connect with a large number of the families we work to help every day.



2023/2024 Highlights

Parent Mentor

“What I have come to learn is while, yes, I am a mentor, I am also always a mentee. So often when I am helping a family, I come away with something I can use in my own life. I learn as I offer advice. I feel understood as I offer understanding. I feel supported as I offer support. WRFN's parent mentor program has shown me how much we, as parents, need each other and can be there for each other like no one else.”

- WRFN Parent Mentor



Parent Mentor Program

A core aspect of our work at the Family Network is connecting parents/caregivers with similar experiences. Through our Parent Mentor program, WRFN provides a means for parents/caregivers to interact with each other to guide, support and help empower each other to work through the highs and lows that make up their journeys.

Through the support of United Way Waterloo Region Communities, WRFN received funding to update and enhance our parent mentor training, engage new mentors and acknowledge the dedication of our amazing mentors.

Mentors participated in training sessions throughout the year, and parent, author, and educator Amy Baskin facilitated a workshop in June focused on Beyond Life Balance—Well-being in Complicated Times.

Five new mentors were engaged over the course of the year for a total of 18 active mentors.

Virtual Camps Fairs

In January and February 2024, in collaboration with WRFN and Supporting Kids in Camp (SKIC), KidsAbility hosted a Virtual Camp Fair in early 2024. This series of fairs featured camps from Waterloo Region, Guelph-Wellington, and beyond that provided programming and support for campers with special needs. At these camp fairs, attendees could explore various camp options, gather information, and directly address their questions to the camp representatives.

2023/2024 Highlights

Spectrum on the Spectrum

In 2023, Spectrum (Waterloo Region's Rainbow Community Space) and WRFN conducted a survey and focus groups on the need for trans-autistic supports in the region. After responses were collected, WRFN and Spectrum partnered to create a new drop-in program which started in November 2023. The program – Spectrum on the Spectrum – is a monthly drop-in group for queer and trans people in the autistic community who are 18 and over in Waterloo Region. The group provides a supportive environment for activities like board games, crafts and discussions. Attendees praise the welcoming atmosphere, enjoy activities and value the opportunity to connect with fellow neurodivergent individuals. Facilitators have been commended for creating a comfortable space and sending helpful reminders. Feedback strongly supports the program highlighting the community, diverse activities, and safe connections it fosters.

Kaleidoscope Kids

At the end of February, Kaleidoscope Kids returned through a collaboration between WRFN, KidsAbility, and EarlyON. This drop-in programming is now available for families with children 8 years old and younger at EarlyON Roger Street in Waterloo.



Strategic Priorities

2021-2024

1

BE A VOICE FOR THE NEEDS OF EXCEPTIONAL FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

We will be purposeful in our goal to fairly and equitably support the needs of all families who are part of our network, with or without a diagnosis.

2

WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH PARTNERS TO ENSURE NO FAMILY IS LEFT BEHIND

Through our unique and trusted relationships with our service partners, we will take a systems-level approach to improving the lives of exceptional families in Waterloo region.

3

STRENGTHEN WRFN'S CAPACITY TO ENHANCE THE LIFESPAN OF SUPPORTS AVAILABLE TO EXCEPTIONAL FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS

We will strive for operational excellence in order to build upon our reputation as a trusted partner, parent advocate and community organization.

Strategic Plan Update

Highlights From Year Three

During year three of our 2021 – 2024 Strategic Plan, WRFN continued to bring the voices of families to levels of government and policymakers. Areas of focus included regional transportation, concerns related to Registered Disability Savings Plans (RDSPs) and lack of supported decision-making in Ontario, as well as concerns related to Developmental Services regarding inconsistencies in funding and lack of collaboration between the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

Family voices were amplified through the Social and Recreation Information Fair WRFN hosted in November 2023. The fair recognized and showcased existing programs while also highlighting gaps and barriers shared by families attending through their table conversations. This information is helping to inform future services and programs.

WRFN developed an annual marketing and communications plan to build on the Marketing and Communications Strategy created in Year 1.

We listened to and learned from families about their needs through surveys and event feedback forms, which helped to inform resource planning. Resource planning is ongoing as we continually learn from families about their needs. In particular, the overwhelming increase in demand to support school navigation for families identified the need in the spring to move toward shifting our delivery model from 1:1 support to a workshop format for the coming year.

The lack of secured funding hindered our evaluation of the partnership model's collective value and impact and our ability to communicate it broadly. We will continue to source funding for this over the next year.

Earlier this year, WRFN engaged Capacity Canada to facilitate and guide us through a new strategic planning exercise to culminate in a new three-year plan for 2024 – 2027.

The board and leadership team gathered in April and May for two sessions to develop a shared vision for the future and to identify strategic directions for the coming three years.

Conversations continued in late June and this fall, resulting in draft strategic priorities which will be further refined to include objective measurable outcomes.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

WRFN continues to build diversity, equity and inclusion within our workplace, board and program delivery. Together with families and community organizations, we are working toward a more inclusive future where all forms of identity and diversity are respected and celebrated.

Director board vacancies and employment postings reflect a DEI lens. Over one-third of the directors on our board bring lived experience as a parent or caregiver of a family member with a disability and/or mental health challenge. We have been actively engaging with individuals to enhance cultural diversity on our board, recognizing that the diversity among our board members may not always be immediately apparent in a visible way.

Many on our staff team bring lived experience as individuals with visible or invisible exceptionalities or as parents/caregivers. Different cultural backgrounds exist within our staff team, although they are not always visible. Volunteer parent mentors come from diverse experiences as caregivers of family members with a variety of physical, developmental, communication, and learning disabilities and mental health challenges.

As an organization, we have experienced new opportunities with grassroots organizations to learn and unlearn how to support diverse families best. DEI education opportunities were made available to staff throughout the year.

WRFN continued to offer our Thinking Differently: DEI Through the Lens of Disability presentation personalized for each audience. Over the past year, we shared our presentation seven times with various organizations taking proactive steps to ensure their programming and practices were inclusive and accommodating for families and individuals with exceptional needs.

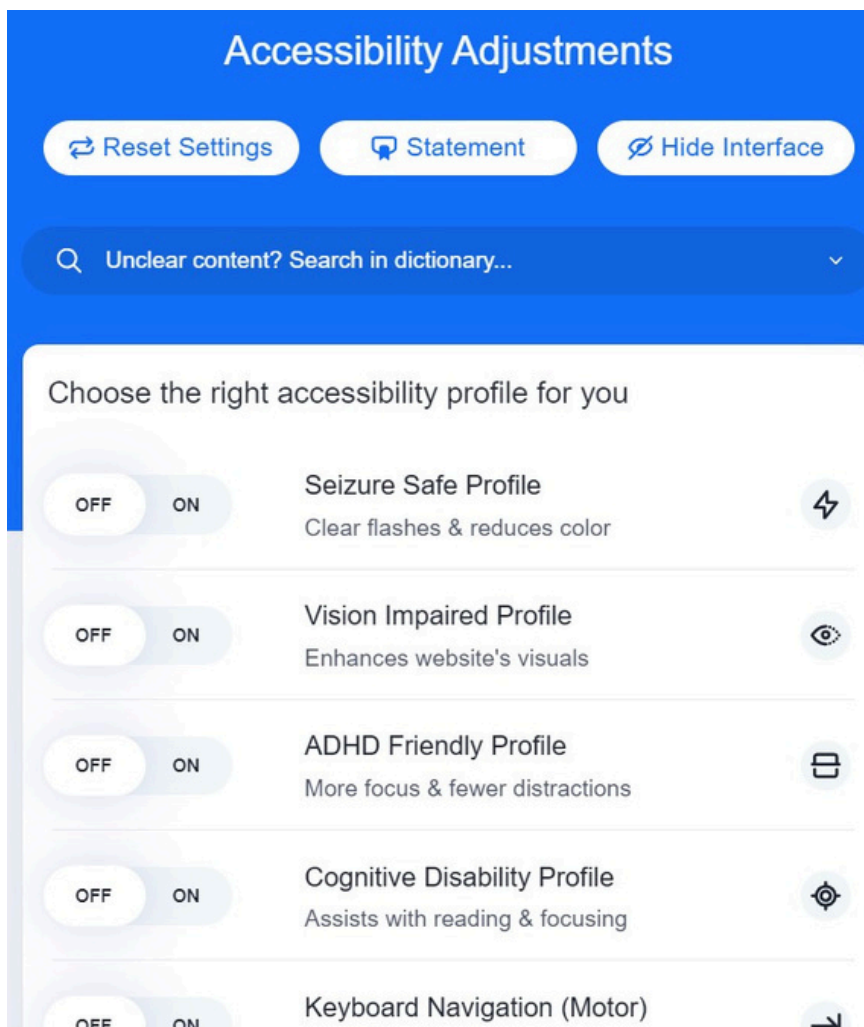
Diversity is at the core of everything we do. Serving a wide range of families and individuals, we strive to ensure our communications reflect the rich diversity of those we support. We foster an inclusive and authentic connection with every community we support by embracing different perspectives and experiences in all aspects of our work.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Update

As AODA compliance continues to evolve, WRFN has been keeping track of developments looking for ways to improve all our communications and for new tools we can employ to make our website and communications accessible to as many as possible.

In September 2023, WRFN added an accessibility widget (from Accessible) to our website. The widget allows users to select their viewing preferences to meet their accessibility needs. Once a preference is selected, our website can be altered for that user.

Tools are available to support a Seizure-Safe profile, Vision-Impaired profile, ADHD-Friendly profile, Cognitive Disability profile, Keyboard Navigation, Screen Reader for Blind users, font size, alignment, colour adjustments, etc.



Program Delivery

PARENT MENTOR PROGRAM

Parents of children with special needs share a unique bond – one only they can truly understand. Through our Parent Mentor Program, we provide a means for parents to connect as well as guide, support, and help empower each other to work through the highs and lows that make up their journeys.

FAMILY RESOURCE COACH PROGRAM

Navigating the list of local services and supports available to people with disabilities and their families is much easier when you have a helping hand to guide you. Our Family Resource Coaches provide this support – connecting families, caregivers, and self-advocates to services, programs/activities, and valuable information on a variety of topics. Support is provided in all life stages – NO diagnosis is needed.

SCHOOL ISSUE NAVIGATION

WRFN offers school navigation support. We offer support in a variety of ways including: a monthly support group; WRFN Workshops on specific topics and workshops in partnership with the WRDSB & the WCDSB to promote successful collaboration between home & school.

A NEW CHAPTER

This peer-led group is for parents/caregivers interested in preparing for the future of their youth/adult family member with a lifelong disability.

COFFEE CLUB

Coffee Club gives youth and adults a place to connect with friends and create community. This drop-in social group is open to people with disabilities who are age 16 and older.

ASK A SELF-ADVOCATE

The Ask A Self-Advocate program serves those who self-identify with an exceptionality, families, and service providers. Our Self-Advocacy Liaison provides insights/ideas based on her lived experience in this open-ended, client-directed service.

EVENTS, SEMINARS & WORKSHOPS

Our events, seminars and workshops equip families with knowledge and offer opportunities to connect with others who understand. Opportunities are shared through our monthly newsletter, Family Pulse, and on our Events Calendar, wrfn.info/events.

Partnership Group

