Empower Simcoe

BE · BELONG · THRIVE

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25

Behind every number and story is connection. Together, we're weaving a pattern of impact— aligning people, families, and communities to spark change and create brighter futures.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MESSAGE FROM LEADERSHIP	1
BOARD OF DIRECTORS	2
MESSAGE OF VALARIE SCOTT	3
CORE VALUES	4
BY THE NUMBERS	5 - 6
STRATEGIC PLAN	7 - 8
FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS	9
STORIES OF SUCCESS	10 - 13

- Setting the table for Success:
- Jackleen Givens' Story of Love and Perseverance
- An unwavering commitment to Community Service
- Caring for Caregivers

FOUNDATION	14
BOARD OF TRUSTEES	15
MESSAGE FROM FOUNDATION LEADERSHIP	16
FINANCIAL HIGHLIGHTS	17
DONOR'S STORY	18 - 19
GIFT OF THE HEART	20 - 21
PEOPLE THAT MAKE DIFFERENCE	22
FUNDING AND PARTNERS	23

Annual Message From CEO Dr. Claudine Cousins

Join Dr. Claudine Cousins in a special setting as she reflects on our journey together and looks ahead to new opportunities for impact.



Our Board of Directors

Protecting stakeholders' interests, establishing management policies, overseeing the organization, and making decisions on key issues facing Empower Simcoe.



VALERIE SCOTT
President



ROMA CZECH
Vice-President



DR. CLAUDIA COUSINS
Secretary to the Board



TIM BERRY
Treasurer



ASHISH CHAURASIA
Director



DEBORAH NEARY
Director



ALLISON BOBBETTE
Director



LILLIETTE DAVIDSON
Board Member



CRAIG LILLEY
Director



DANISHA ALLEN
Director

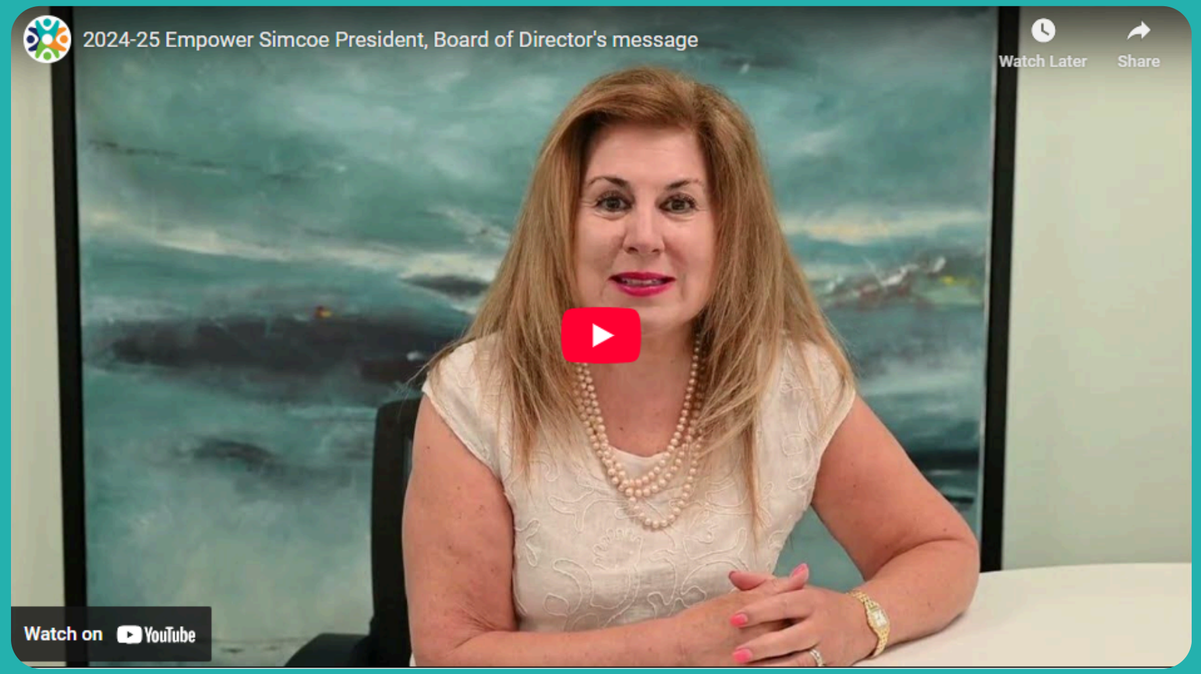


MIRIAN VILLAMIL PALLISTER
Director

VALERIE SCOTT

President, Board of Directors

As Board President, Valerie Scott reflects on a year of transformation, collaboration, and progress for Empower Simcoe. In her message, she highlights the launch of our new five-year Strategic Plan, our leadership in Ontario's evolving developmental services sector, and the vital role of volunteers, employees, and community partners. With gratitude and optimism, she shares how together we are building a future where everyone has the opportunity to Be, Belong, and Thrive.



CORE VALUES

Core Values Represent Our Highest Priorities And Core, Fundamental Driving Forces.

01

Driven:

We strive to constantly move forward, while celebrating successes.



02

Accountable:

We work mindfully to empower every individuals goals.



03

Community:

We are accepting of all people and give each a voice.

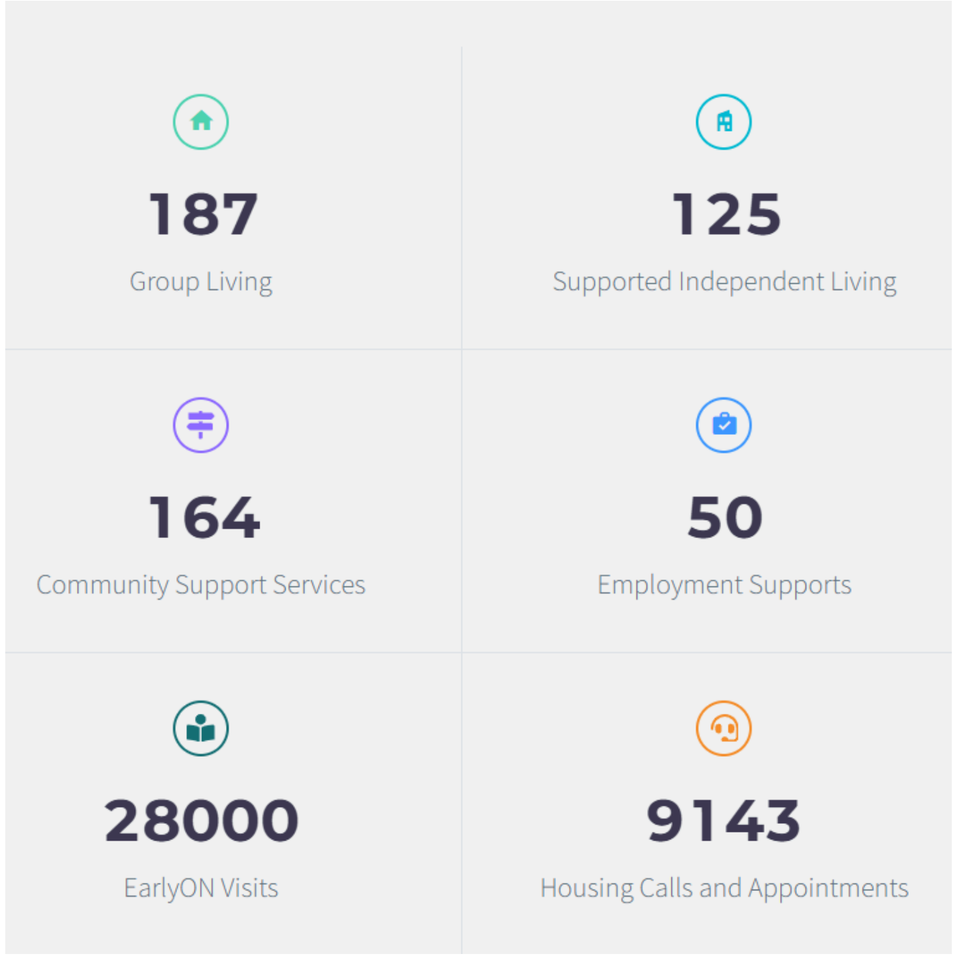


04

Respect:

We treat everyone with dignity, deserving of our full attention and commitment.





Empower Simcoe BY The Numbers

Each year, Empower Simcoe supports more than 1700 children, youth, and adults of all abilities with an intellectual disability to access a variety of services and supports.

This section highlights the scope of our impact for the year ending March 31, 2025, capturing the people we support, the programs that empower them, and the community connections that make it all possible.



8
Job Readiness Participants

21
Family Home Program

205
Family Relief Program

98
Respitality Experiences

213
Respitality Applicants

93
Family Support Program

117
Transitions Services

61
Youth Program

108
Housing Supports Provided

104
Infant and Child Development Families

76
Children in OAP Entry to School

4
Lakeshore Ridge Residents



Empower Simcoe
BE•BELONG•THRIVE

Strategic Plan

Where We're At - Closing Out Our Strategic Plan with Purpose and Pride

As we wrap up the final year of our three-year strategic plan, we reflect with pride on the meaningful progress we've made across our three strategic pillars: Service Excellence, People and Culture, and A Strong Partner. Together, we've launched impactful initiatives that have enhanced the lives of the people and families we support, strengthened our workforce, and deepened our relationships with community partners.

Looking ahead, I'm excited to build on this momentum as we begin shaping our next strategic plan for 2025–2030. Together, we will continue to drive our mission forward and create lasting, positive change.

Thank you to every member of our organization for the dedication, compassion, and heart you bring to your work every day. Your efforts truly make a difference in the lives of people of all abilities.

Dr. Claudine Cousins,
Chief Executive Officer
Empower Simcoe

Strategic Plan

2024 / 2025 Update

Championing Accessibility and Inclusion

Meetings with MPs, MPPs, and municipal leaders in Simcoe County to address accessibility bylaw barriers and advance inclusive policies to strengthen community-based supports for people of all abilities.

Advancing Housing Strategy

Empower Simcoe implemented its housing strategy by closing two supported living homes and initiating a strategic review to optimize properties for future community-based use.

Empowering Voices Through Forums

Listening Forums gathered input on community participation for people supported. Insights will guide an action plan, empowering individuals to shape services based on their goals and preferences.

Transportation Program Launched

Reliable transportation introduced for participants in Community Support Services and Employment programs, improving access and supporting greater community participation.

Technology in Recruitment

Recruitment processes were modernized through digital tools that improved applicant tracking, streamlined reference checks, and enhanced the overall candidate experience.

Enhanced Rights & Abuse Training

The Believe in Yourself Committee updated Rights and Abuse Training repositioning for fee for service

Direct Support Leadership Training

In partnership with Georgian College, program cohorts helped employees develop leadership skills and enhance their knowledge.

Inclusive Leadership Training

Partnered with Sisonke Inc. to deliver Anti-Racism and Unconscious Bias training, equipping leaders to foster a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

Partnership Review and ROI

A comprehensive review of Empower Simcoe's partnerships led to the development of a new ROI framework, guiding future collaboration and ensuring measurable value for the agency.

Multilingual Website Access

Implemented translation options on empowersimcoe.ca for top Simcoe County languages, improving accessibility and inclusion for diverse communities.

Promoting DS Careers

Partnered with the Provincial Network and Skilled Trades Ontario to promote developmental services careers to students in grades 7 to 12..

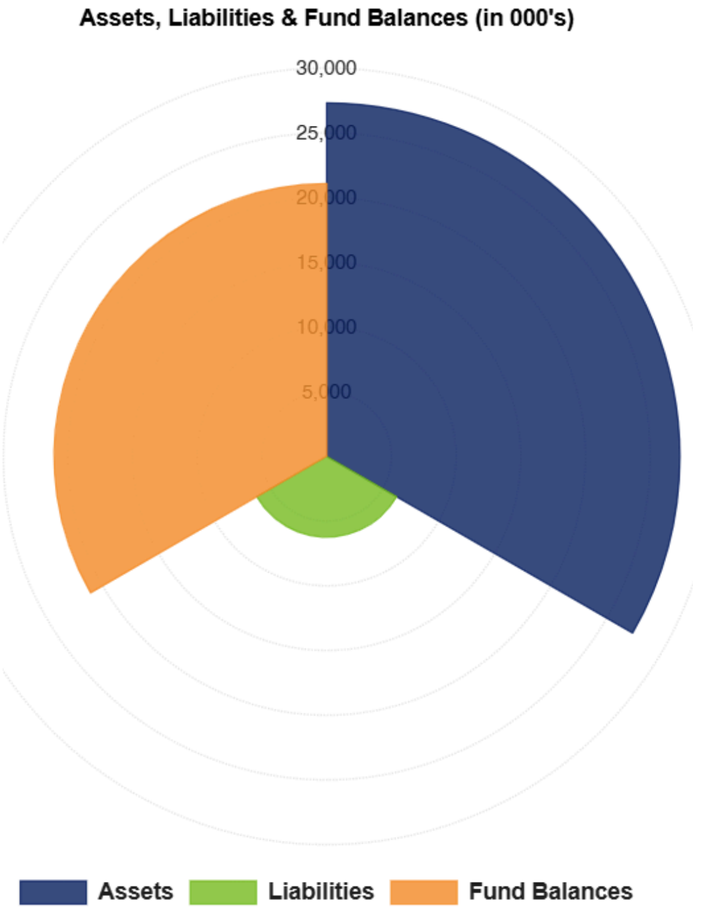
End-of-Life Care Partnerships

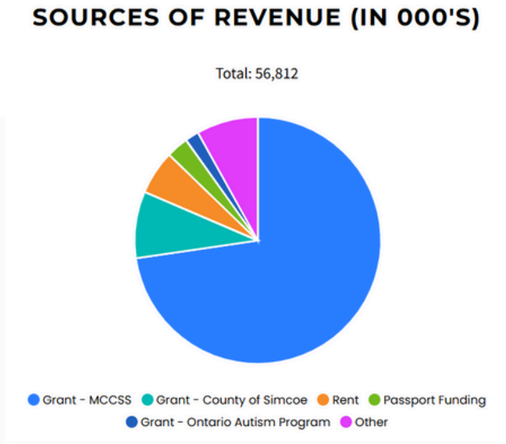
Collaborated with the Simcoe Muskoka Hospice Palliative Care Network to train Empower Simcoe Senior Support workers in palliative and end-of-life care.

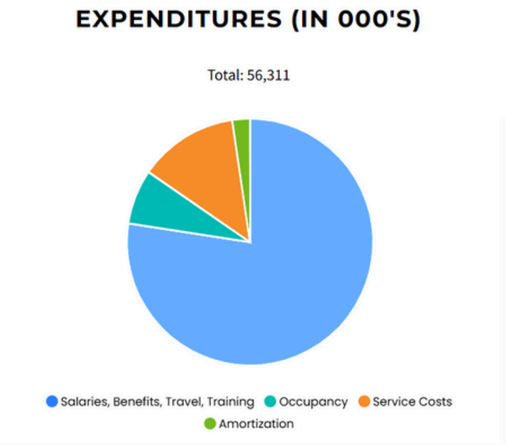
Financial Highlights
Budget to Actual Analysis

*Total Revenue was **$2.8M more than budgeted.** Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services **(MCCSS) provided funding of $1.3M** and one time funding of $0.9M to address critical needs. The County of Simcoe provided $0.3M additional funding for the Housing program. Fee for service revenue **contributed an additional $0.5M.***

***Total Expenses exceeded the budget by $2.6M. $1.6M** of this was due to unbudgeted cost of living increases and stipends paid to employees; as well as higher benefits premiums. Capital Projects, Vehicles, Equipment and Technology costs were $0.8M more than budget.*







Impactful Stories of Success

Setting the table for Success:

The Empower Simcoe Job Readiness Dining Experience was born from Community Participation Support Worker Sandra Urbshott's vision to create a meaningful, hands-on social enterprise employment training opportunity for individuals with developmental disabilities. Faced with the challenge of Bill 148, which removed exemptions for short-term, outcomes-focused job training in real work environments, Sandra sought a creative solution to fill this gap.

Inspired by skill-building initiatives like Waypoint Centre's Behind the Seams program, Sandra brought the idea of a pancake breakfast at Shaq's World where Job Readiness participants served food to friends and family.

The success of that breakfast led to the development of The Job Readiness Dining Experience-a comprehensive program incorporating menu planning, budgeting, grocery shopping, cooking, culinary presentation, and customer service. Now in its third year, the program runs two sessions annually, supporting 8-10 participants per session. While focused on skill related to the food service industry, the program's true strength lies in its ability to build confidence, self-esteem, and transferable employment skills.

"The program is helping people realize their goals and what they actually want to do on the job," says Sandra.

The outcomes speak volumes. Ellie, a recent participant, is now enrolled in the culinary program at Georgian College. Another participant, Dakota, has secured employment at Theta Precision Metal Forming. Graduates of the program have also hosted High Tea events and volunteer appreciation luncheons-proof of both their growing skills and community engagement.

Beyond employment training, Sandra sees deeper impact: *"This is about people's futures. It's also about helping people find connections with one another. They're now doing that on their own, without our support. That warms my heart."*

Empower Simcoe's Job Readiness Dining Experience is more than a program—it's a pathway to purpose, belonging, and possibility. As Sandra shares, *"I'm excited about what lies ahead for the program and the people we support at Empower Simcoe."*





power Simcoe CEO Dr. Claudine Cousins and Community Participation Support Worker Sandra Urbshott.

Impactful Stories of Success

Jackleen Givens' Story of Love and Perseverance

VAs a first-time author, Empower Simcoe Supports and Services Supervisor Jackleen Givens' journey is a powerful narrative of perseverance, love, and transformation. In her compelling new book, IN HIS LYRICS, published by Friesen Press, Jackleen shares her experiences navigating the complexities of autism, mental health, and addiction-related homelessness.

As the devoted mother of Ashton, who was diagnosed with autism at 15, Jackleen felt a strong urge to document his unique journey. She began journaling from Ashton's infancy, capturing the challenging moments and hurdles that defined his experience. Thanks to the encouragement of friends and loved ones, Jackleen bravely decided to transform her journals into a larger narrative, shining a light on the stark realities faced by those with neurodiversity and mental health concerns. These personal reflections paved the way for IN HIS LYRICS; a title that reflects the creativity and spirit of Ashton, whose poignant songs, written during a difficult time in jail, are woven throughout the book, representing his experiences. "Ashton and I met to create this book together," recalls Jackleen. "All of the information is my personal experience as a mom and the story he shares."

Writing this book was not just a way for Jackleen to express herself; it became a powerful platform for advocating a greater understanding of autism, mental health, and societal challenges. *"I want other parents and caregivers who are going through similar experiences to know they're not alone," says Jackleen. "Keep being that voice for your loved ones!"*

Interest in IN HIS LYRICS continues to grow. Jackleen is now on her third print order to meet the strong demand. She's also been busy hosting meet-and-greet events at locations like the Coldwater Library and Barnes & Noble stores in Barrie and Hamilton. Her schedule has included speaking engagements with youth from the Chippewas of Rama First Nation and media interviews with OrilliaMatters.

Having found her literary voice, Jackleen is already immersed in her next project. "I'm working on a children's series about autism. It's a collection of small board books designed to help young children understand different sensitivities—like textures and sounds. The notes are written; now I'm looking for an illustrator to bring the visuals to life." She adds, "I wish a resource like this had been available when Ashton was younger."

Available through FriesenPress, Amazon, and Barnes & Noble, IN HIS LYRICS is a beacon of hope for anyone navigating similar journeys. It's a powerful reminder that even in the face of adversity, transformation and triumph are always possible.

From all of us at Empower Simcoe, congratulations, Jackleen! Let's celebrate this incredible milestone and the heartfelt message she brings to the world.



Impactful Stories of Success

An unwavering commitment to Community Service

For Bryan, homelessness had been a harsh reality for 15 years. When he arrived in Orillia in 2020 with his devoted companion, Sky-his beloved four- legged best friend-he quickly discovered that they had nowhere to turn for shelter. Fortunately, Bryan sought assistance from The Lighthouse. However, he faced a heart-wrenching dilemma: staying at the shelter would mean leaving Sky behind, a choice he couldn't accept.

The compassionate staff at The Lighthouse recognized Bryan's predicament and provided an alternative solution. They guided him to a safe camping option where he could stay with Sky. Moreover, The Lighthouse Outreach Team made a commitment to check in with him daily, ensuring he felt supported during this difficult time.

Despite his determination, Bryan found it challenging to secure housing that would welcome both him and a potential roommate. He grew increasingly concerned about the future he and Sky faced as rising costs and limited availability seemed insurmountable. Yet, The Lighthouse team remained steadfast in their support, assisting Bryan in successfully completing a referral to Empower Simcoe's Housing First program.

In just a few weeks, with the support of an Empower Simcoe Housing First Case Manager and a Housing First subsidy, Bryan found a one-bedroom apartment that finally allowed him and Sky to call it home. Today, Sky enjoys relaxing on the couch and going for daily walks, while Bryan collaborates closely with his case manager and community partners to attain financial stability and prioritize his well-being. He dreams of reuniting with his family
back on the East Coast one day.

Linda Goodall, Executive Director of The Lighthouse, shares her excitement: "Having Bryan return to share his story—and then thrive independently in his own home-is an incredible success. It's thrilling to see people come back for those reasons."

But The Lighthouse is more than just a physical building at 75 Queen Street in Orillia; it is a hub of compassion and support for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness. "Our whole philosophy is centred around fostering partnerships," explains Linda. "We can't do any of this alone. Having Empower Simcoe here, working directly with our Housing Navigators to support people like Bryan, is everything. It creates an environment where people feel safe and supported. We couldn't ask for a better on-site housing partner."

The on-site Empower Simcoe Housing team, comprised of Housing First Case Managers Tina Stubbings and Tara Powell, Housing Specialist Jon Peters, and Housing Access Worker Taylor Doss, collaborate seamlessly with The Lighthouse team to develop comprehensive, holistic case plans. "It's never solely about housing. Many individuals are grappling with trauma, addiction mental health challenges, physical health concerns, transportation issues, unemployment, and educational obstacles," emphasizes Taylor. "Being here at The Lighthouse allows us to create integrated support plans with other service providers. Everything we need is conveniently located under one roof, making it possible for us to effectively coordinate care and resources."

Together, The Lighthouse and Empower Simcoe are building a brighter future for Bryan, Sky, and countless others in our community. The journey may be challenging, but with collaboration and compassion, we can achieve remarkable outcomes.



Impactful Stories of Success

Caring for Caregivers

What is Respitality?
Respite + Hospitality = Respitality
Respitality is an innovative partnership between social service agencies and the hospitality industry whereby hotels, restaurants, spa/wellness services, and other businesses donate their services to provide unpaid caregivers a meaningful break.

OUR GOALS

01. IMPROVED HEALTH & WELLBEING

02. STRENGTHEN CAREGIVER RESILIENCY

03. STRENGTHEN FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

04. STRENGTHEN CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY

OUR IMPACT

213 APPLICANTS

191 RESPITALITY EXPERIENCES DELIVERED

39 COMMUNITIES SERVICES IN SIMCOE COUNTY

196 PEOPLE IMPACTED



Empower Simcoe Foundation

Raising Funds to improve the quality of life for people of all abilities and foster an inclusive society

WHAT WE DO

SPECIALIZED HOUSING NEEDS

ACCESSIBILITY EQUIPMENT

RECREATIONAL & LEISURE ACTIVITIES

PROVIDE SKILL DEVELOPMENT

ASSIST FAMILIES WITH RESPITE

SPECIAL PROJECTS

Foundation
Board of Trustees



MIKE TAYLOR
Chair



DR MITCH WHYNE
Vice-Chair



DR. CLAUDIA COUSINS
Secretary to the Board



RANDY CRAIG
Treasurer



Roch Langevin
Board Member



VALERIE SCOTT
President



EMILY ELLIOTT
Board Member



MAROOF ALIM
Board Member



MELISSA BULL
Board Member



MIRIAN VILLAMIL PALLISTER
Board Memmber

MIKE TAYLOR

Chair, Foundation Board of Directors

Mike Taylor, Chair of the Empower Simcoe Foundation, reflects on the power of giving and the lasting impact of our donors. Speaking from the Landscape of Life Donor Wall, he highlights how every gift, whether to the Hooray for Outdoor Play campaign, the Champions Club, or planned giving, helps empower people of all abilities to live meaningful and inclusive lives.



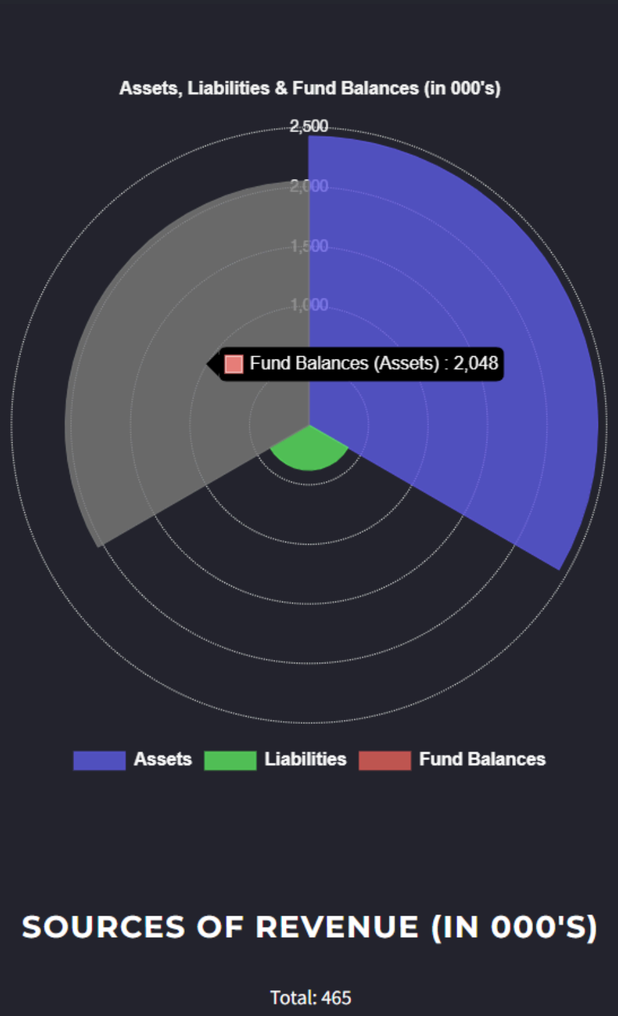
Foundation Financial Highlights

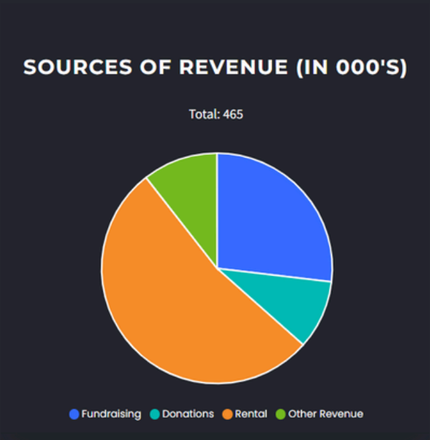
Why Give?

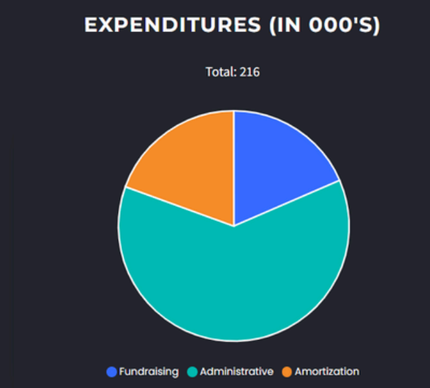
Many people with intellectual disabilities are living at or below the poverty line and barely have enough money to cover rent, food and basic health expenses. This means recreational activities and specialized equipment that would contribute to a better quality of life are simply out of reach.

With the support of many generous donors, our fundraising campaigns support the purchase of accessibility equipment; cover the cost of specialized housing needs; assist families with respite; provide youth with skills development; offer adults and seniors recreational and leisure activities.

Your donation helps make it possible for people of all abilities to live a meaningful and inclusive life.







A Donor's Story

A Legacy of Giving Across Three Generations

For **over 35 years, Dr. Mitch Whyne** and his family have been committed champions of Empower Simcoe. As an emergency physician at **Royal Victoria Hospital,** specializing in emergency, addiction, and pain medicine, Dr. Whyne brought not only professional expertise but also deep personal commitment to the organization—first as a volunteer Board member and later as a dedicated member of the Empower Simcoe Foundation Board for the last nine years.

Philanthropy runs deep in the Whyne family. “We’ve always believed in giving back,” says Dr. Whyne. “My mother had a brother with special needs who lived at home until the age of five, before being sent to the Huronia Regional Centre in Orillia. Although my grandmother visited him, he was rarely spoken about, and my mother and her siblings grew up without a real connection to him. It wasn’t until my grandmother passed away that we were reconnected with him as next of kin. Years later, when I moved to Barrie and had a child with special needs, becoming involved with Empower Simcoe felt like a natural and meaningful way to give back.”



A Donor's Story

A Legacy of Giving Across Three Generations

What began as a way to contribute professionally has evolved into a multi-generational family legacy. From supporting the organization's early focus on group living and Early Years programming, to watching it expand into homelessness services and individualized supports, Dr. Whyne has witnessed remarkable growth. "The needs have changed, and Empower Simcoe has adapted," he shares.

The Whyne family's support has been truly hands-on. Dr. Whyne's father, who ran the L. Whyne Agency and helped launch Ports International, donated dresses from international fashion houses for some of the early Empower Simcoe Fashion Shows—many of which were later raffled to raise funds. The family also enthusiastically participates in the annual Empower Simcoe Foundation Golf Tournament, with three generations—Mitch, mother Gilda, son David, sister Cari, nephew Ben, and others—coming together in support of the cause.

"The values of inclusion, and dignity for people of all abilities are what keep us involved," says Dr. Whyne. ***"We want to help people find their own way, with the right supports—whether that's at an Empower Simcoe group living home or living independently in the community."***
To anyone considering supporting Empower Simcoe, Dr. Whyne offers this: "You can make a real difference. You're helping people have choices—and the opportunity to live more fulfilling, independent lives."
Empower Simcoe is proud to celebrate the Whyne family's enduring generosity and visionary commitment to building inclusive communities for generations to come.



Foundation
Gift of the Heart Awards

2024
Award Recipients

For giving selflessly to improve the quality of life for people supported by Empower Simcoe, please join us in congratulating the 2024 Gift of the Heart Award recipients.

- Community Partner
- Family
- Volunteer
- Employee
- Self-Advocate









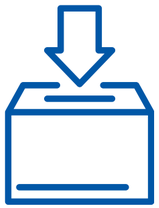
Foundation
Gift of the Heart Awards







Empower Simcoe
People That Make tHE Difference



Donors & Sponsors

Heartfelt 'Thank You' to all of the people and local businesses that helped support Empower Simcoe in 2021-22



Service Awards

Empower Simcoe staff are the heartbeat of our mission and we celebrate those that have reached a milestone this past year.

FUNDING AND PARTNERS

Collaborating with funders and partners to strengthen
our impact in the communities we serve









