A NEXT FOR AUTISM STRATEGIC REPORT



2026

NEXT FOR AUTISM

STATE OF ADULT AUTISM SERVICES

This Strategic Report shares data and insights compiled from **527 organizations nationwide** as part of NEXT for AUTISM's 2026 grants cycle, **representing 46 states and two U.S. territories.**

Learn what grant applications reveal about needs, capacity, and emerging solutions.

Spectrum Designs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



NEXT for AUTISM's annual grantmaking process provides a national view into the state of services for autistic adults and those transitioning into adulthood.

In 2026, NEXT received 527 applications from organizations across 46 states and two U.S. territories, requesting $5.9 million in funding.

The number of applicants has increased by more than 50% over the past four years.

The applications reveal both significant unmet need and promising solutions emerging in communities across the country.

KEY STATS FROM THE 2026 CYCLE

36%

Requested dollars were for work and employment related projects.

47,720

People awaiting services across the applicant pool.

77%

Reported at least one form of financial strain or operational disruption, up from **45% in 2025.**

662%

growth in autistic-led* applications, from 26 in 2022 to 198 in 2026

71%

Organizations facing staffing barriers said DSPs are the hardest positions to fill, limiting their ability to expand services.

27%

Applicants were founded in the last five years, compared with 17% in 2025.

Taken together, the applicant data suggests that providers are building new solutions while facing serious constraints in funding, workforce capacity, and access.

WHO APPLIED

The 2026 cycle reflects a broad and diverse applicant landscape, with organizations working across regions, service models, and community needs. The clearest shift was not only in what applicants proposed, but also in who was leading the work.

Total Applicants
527

Geographic Reach
46 Countries
2 U.S. Territories

First-time applicants
84

Previously Funded Organizations
78

Total Funding Requested
$5.9 MM

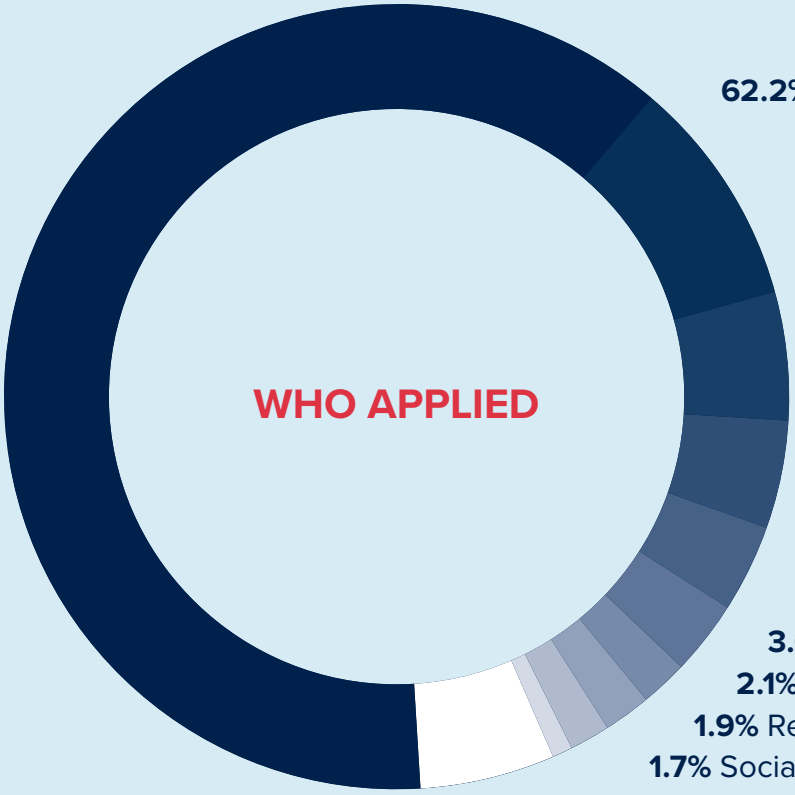
Estimated adults reached through proposed projects
500,000+

REGION

Proposal volume was highest in the country's most populous states, with California, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Texas representing 44% of all applications received. Still, the applicant pool extended well beyond, reflecting widespread need and innovation across urban, suburban, rural, and regional communities.

STRUCTURE

Organizations providing services and supports to autistic adults span a wide range of sectors and organizational models. The chart below shows how applicants self-identified their organizational structure during the application process.



62.2% Community-based nonprofit program

9.5% Large service provider or legacy nonprofit

5.1% Workforce development or job trainer

4.7% Grassroots organization

3.4% Healthcare system, hospital, or clinical provider

3.0% College, university, or academic institution

2.1% High school or educational provider

1.9% Residential provider or housing organization

1.7% Social enterprise

0.9% Advocacy or policy organization

5.3% Other*

*The **"Other"** category includes arts and cultural institutions, specialized housing models, hybrid service organizations, and other niche approaches.

WHO APPLIED: AUTISTIC-LED

The single clearest change in the 2026 data is not what the field is doing, but who is leading it.

+662% Increase

in Autism-Led* Applications from **26 to 198**



Driven by strong grassroots momentum, autistic-led applicants have a median founding year of 2023—four years newer than other community-based organizations. This relative newness makes them more vulnerable to funding disruptions and more dependent on short-term project support. Sustaining this momentum requires funders to invest in organizational capacity.

* Autistic-led projects have active and continuous involvement from an autistic employee of the organization.

43%
Autistic-led applicants were founded in the last decade

38%
Share of all 2026 projects/organizations identified as autistic-led

19%
Nearly 1 in 5, were founded since 2023.

Insight: Compared with the general applicant pool, autistic-led organizations were often smaller and younger, with leaner annual budgets and staffing.

Their proposals emphasized systems change, career mentorship, entrepreneurship, arts-based employment, and employer practice change. Together, these patterns suggest that autistic adults are increasingly shaping and leading solutions.

HOW AUTISTIC VOICES ARE REPRESENTED

Centering autistic voices showed up beyond explicitly autistic-led organizations. **Projects not categorized as autistic-led also reported involving autistic adults through surveys, listening sessions, focus groups, advisory roles, and co-design.** The applicant data suggests a broader shift: autistic adults are increasingly shaping, designing, and leading the services and solutions intended for their communities.

75%
Surveys, listening sessions, or focus groups

50%
Advisory or co-design roles

> "There is a need for models that build on individual strengths, support autonomy, and create visible roles for autistic adults as contributors."
>
> — TEXAS-BASED ORGANIZATION

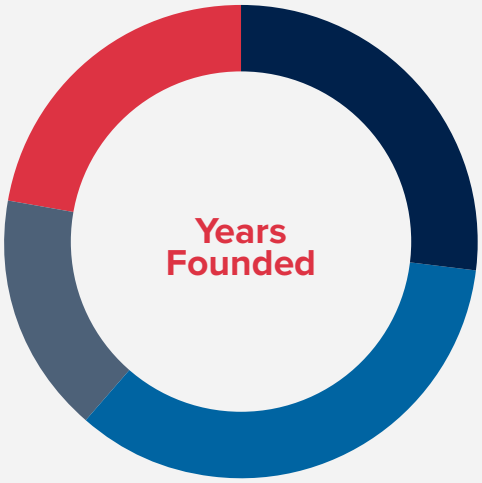


WHO APPLIED: EMERGING

Applicants also ranged widely in scale and organizational age, from newly formed grassroots programs to large legacy institutions.

How Long Organizations Have Been Operating

The applicant pool included a growing share of newer organizations. In 2026, 27% of applicants were founded in the last five years, compared with 17% in 2025. Their stated focus often aligned with pressure points seen throughout the applications, including the services cliff, workforce shortages, geographic barriers, and limited programs for specific communities.



27.1%
1 to 5 years

34.3%
6 to 25 years

16.3%
26 to 50 years

22.2%
50+ years

SIZE

The adult autism services field includes both small, highly localized programs and large organizations serving thousands of people each year. Here's the breakdown of our applicant pool by size.

NUMBER SERVED

5.1%
1 to 25

16.7%
26 to 100

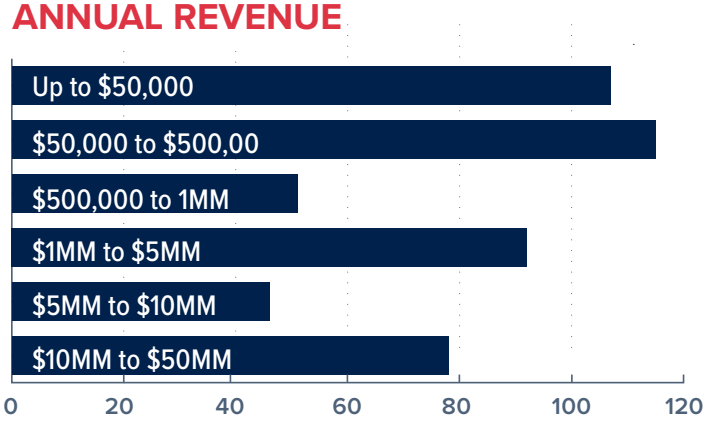
30.7%
101 to 500

10.1%
501 to 1,000

35.3%
1,001+

2.1%
Not Specified

ANNUAL REVENUE



The growing number of newer organizations applying alongside more established institutions suggests that communities are developing new approaches to address gaps in existing services. However, the emergence of new organizations does not necessarily mean services are becoming more accessible or sustainable. Instead, it may reflect the continued need for solutions that existing systems have not been able to fully address.



WHAT THEY ASKED FOR

In 2026, organizations requested **$5.9 million** across NEXT for AUTISM's four pillars: Work, Social, Health, and Home. The distribution closely mirrors 2025 requests.

FUNDING REQUESTED BY PILLAR

36%	32%	23%	9%
Work	**Social**	**Health**	**Home**
Employment	Community	Well Being	Housing

The 2026 cycle introduced a new layer of specificity: for the first time, applicants selected structured subcategories within each pillar, giving NEXT visibility into where applicants are focusing their energy within Work, Social, Health, and Home. NEXT is using this data to connect organizations working in common areas and help them share tools, strategies, and learning across geography and organizational size through NEXT COLLABORATES.



Employment and workforce initiatives remained the most requested funding area in 2026. Applicants proposed solutions through vocational training, supported employment, inclusive hiring partnerships, and work-based learning, reflecting sustained demand for stronger employment and career pathways.

BARRIERS

80%
reported increased demand for services

19%
characterized service access in their region as adequate and stable

The applicant data suggests a provider landscape under pressure. **8 in 10 applicants** reported increased demand for services, while **only 19% characterized service access in their region as adequate and stable.** Funding instability, workforce shortages, and limited access compound one another, constraining organizations' ability to grow, and most importantly, hindering access to services by those who need them.

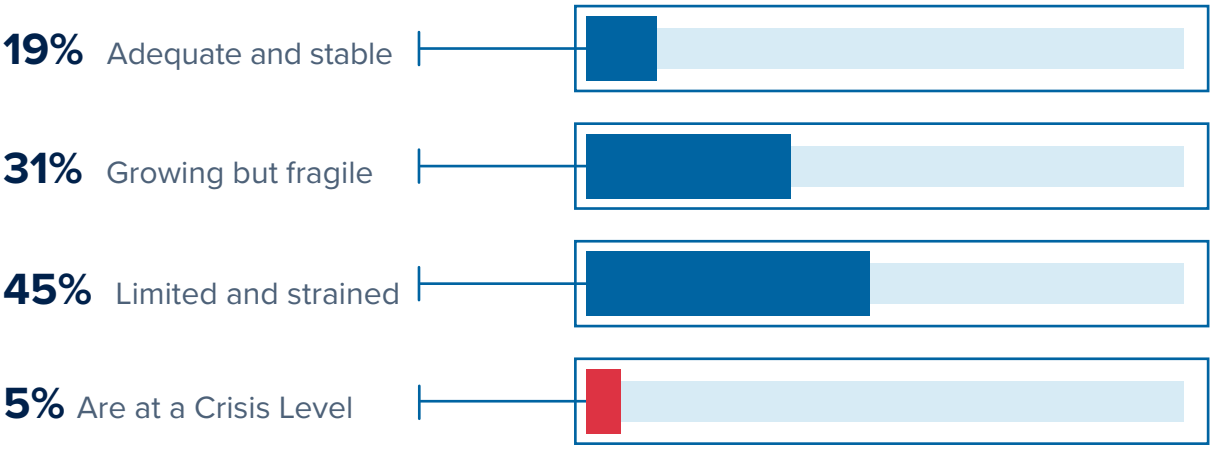
Waitlists show where rising demand, limited funding, and staffing shortages converge. **Across the applicant pool, organizations reported 47,720 people on active waitlists.** Wait times most often ranged from three to six months, but many extended beyond a year, with several exceeding two years.

The longest waits were often for residential supports and behavioral health services, where delays can quickly escalate into crises. Alarming as this total is, it represents only a small portion of the broader national gap in services.

WAITING BY THE NUMBERS

47,720
Active people on waitlists

3-6 months
Average range of wait times, with some exceeding 1-2 years



> In-person programs are especially limited and strained, underscoring the urgency to expand capacity now before more individuals are left without critical support.
>
> — TENNESSEE-BASED ORGANIZATION



BARRIERS, CON'T

A MIXED FUNDING LANDSCAPE

Applicants reported drawing on a mix of revenue sources, with no single source used by every organization.

Individual donations were the most commonly reported revenue source, followed by philanthropic grants and earned income. Government funding showed the sharpest divide: fewer than half of applicants reported receiving government dollars, but 20% relied on it for more than half of their budget.

A CLOSER LOOK INTO THE NUMBERS

Although 92% of organizations rely on two or more funding streams, diversification does not necessarily protect them from disruption. **Nearly 20% of organizations receive more than half of their revenue from government sources, and government funding cuts were the most commonly reported disruption in 2026.** For these providers, the loss of a single major funding source can threaten the entire organization. The data suggests that many remain highly vulnerable to public funding cuts, even when their funding appears diversified on paper.

These figures show how commonly each source was reported, not the share of total funding it represented across the applicant pool.

Most applicants reporting revenue relied on two or more funding streams, but diversification did not necessarily protect them from instability. Government funding cuts were the most commonly reported disruption in 2026, and applicants that relied heavily on public funding had limited ability to absorb losses.

Funding and Financial Strain

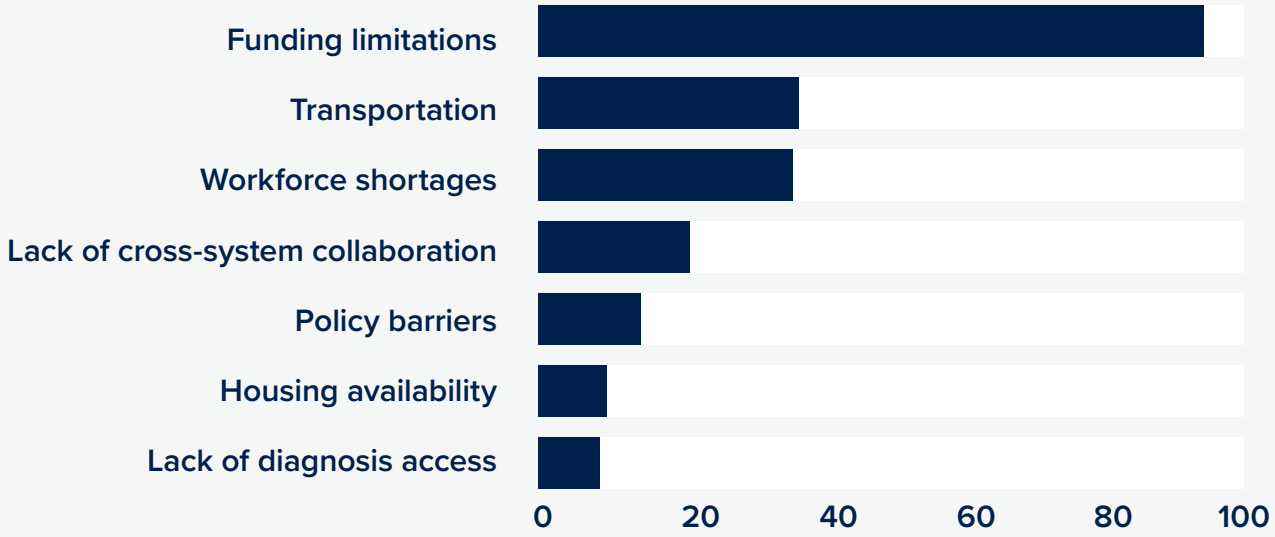
Applicants most often named funding limitations as a constraint on expansion. In 2026, 77% reported at least one form of financial strain or operational disruption, up from 45% in 2025.



BARRIERS, CON'T

BARRIERS TO EXPANSION

But the challenge is not funding alone. Staff layoffs and hiring freezes were reported less frequently overall, but narrative responses suggest that workforce disruptions can be especially consequential for organizations supporting people with the highest support needs.



Funding was the barrier applicants named most often, but it rarely stood alone. Transportation gaps prevented people from reaching services; workforce shortages left programs unable to take on more people even when funding was available; and limited cross-system coordination left organizations solving similar problems in isolation.

Note: Organizations could select more than one barrier, so percentages total more than 100%.

Their reported average reach was nearly double that of other projects (654 vs. 378). Their proposals emphasized systems change, career mentorship, entrepreneurship, arts-based employment, and employer practice change. Together, these patterns suggest that autistic adults are increasingly shaping and leading solutions.

> "These challenges reinforce each other: without staff, transportation programs shrink; without transportation, workforce participation drops."
>
> — "MARYLAND-BASED ORGANIZATION



BARRIERS, CON'T

WORKFORCE CAPACITY

Workforce capacity was one of the clearest limits on growth among applicants. More than one in five reported having no full-time paid staff. Many relied on volunteers, reflecting deep community commitment while also showing how much service delivery depends on unpaid or under-resourced labor.

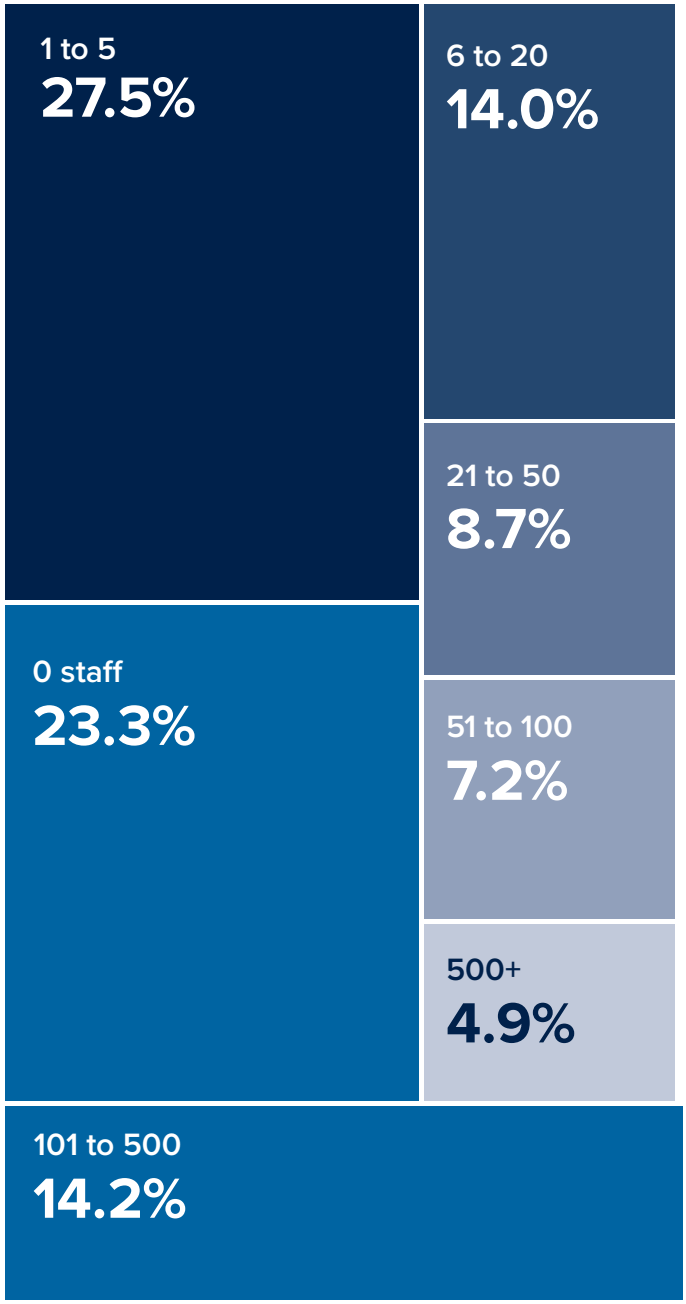
A closer look into the numbers

Staffing patterns varied by organization size. Smaller applicants often needed flexible funding to make a first or second paid hire.

Larger providers were more likely to face retention challenges, wage pressure, and competition for direct care staff. For these organizations, Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) are the pressure point. Among organizations that identified staffing as a barrier to growth, 71% indicated DSPs were hardest to recruit, making them the most commonly cited staffing gap by far. Without enough DSPs, providers cannot expand programs, reduce waitlists, or sustain quality.

Across the applicant data, every barrier leads to the same outcome: people are not receiving the services and supports they need and deserve. The 47,720 people reported on waitlists show what happens when rising demand collides with unstable funding, workforce shortages, and limited capacity. Organizations are working to respond, but until these barriers are addressed, too many autistic adults and their families will continue to wait.

Breakdown of Full-Time Staff



> "The DSP crisis is reducing access to reliable, individualized supports.."
>
> — NORTH CAROLINA-BASED ORGANIZATION



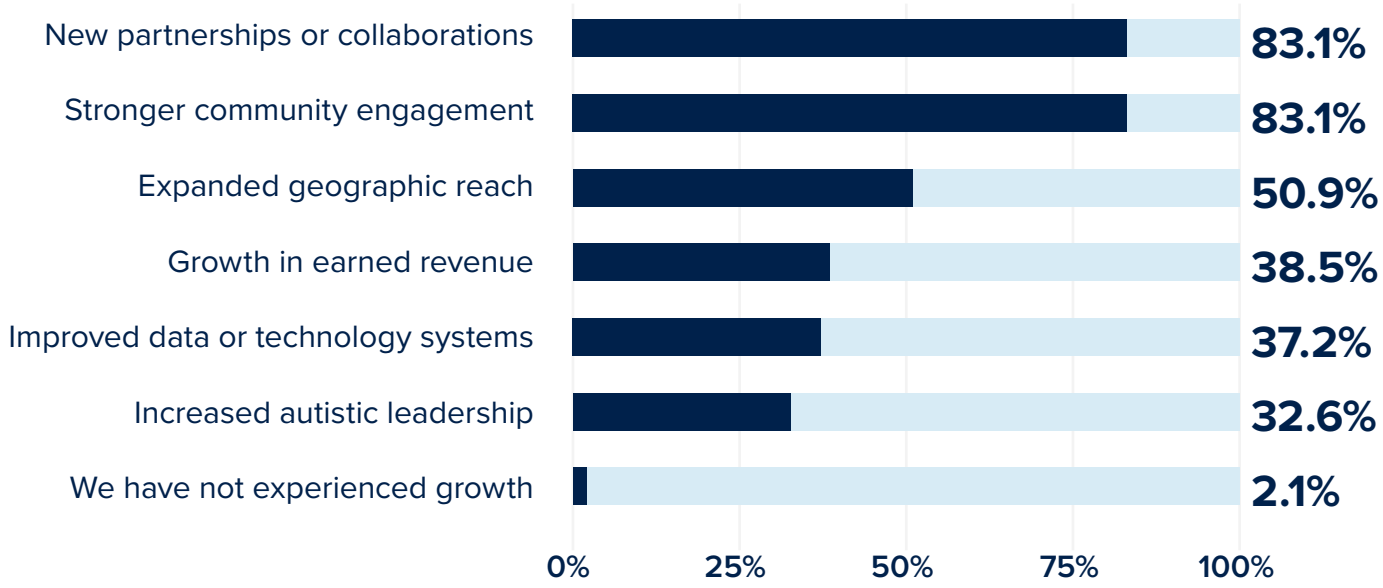
ADAPTATION AND MOMENTUM

AREAS OF GROWTH REPORTED

The applicant data also shows signs of adaptation and momentum. Eight in 10 applicants reported stronger community engagement and new partnerships or collaborations, while only 2% reported no growth. These measures reflect different forms of progress, including partnerships, infrastructure, reach, revenue, and leadership, rather than a single measure of organizational growth.

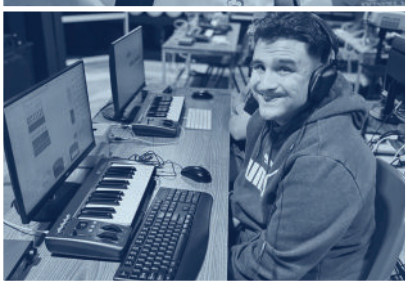
80% Applicants reported stronger community engagement and new partnerships or collaborations

98% Number of applicants that reported a positive growth









WHAT THE FIELD IS TELLING US

KEY PRIORITIES AND NEEDS IN THE AUTISTIC COMMUNITY

The 2026 application asked organizations to name the trends and unmet needs in adult autism services that funders should pay closer attention to.

DEFINING CHALLENGE

The Service Cliff Is a Defining Challenge in Adult Autism Services. When asked which trend or unmet need funders should pay closer attention to, respondents most often pointed to the service cliff and the transition to adulthood. They described a sharp loss of structured support once school-based services end, leaving autistic adults and their families to navigate fragmented systems with limited options for employment, social connection, and independent living.

- **Employment and career pathways**
- **Funding structure and sustainability**
- **Social isolation and connection**
- **The services cliff and transition to adulthood**
- **Transportation**
- **Independent living and life skills**
- **Mental health**
- **Housing and residential options**

> “Services for adults, especially those with great behavioral challenges and higher support needs, fall off a cliff after they graduate from school. Many autistic adults sit at home with little to do and very little direction”
>
> — VIRGINIA-BASED ORGANIZATION



CONCLUSION

The 2026 cycle reveals a service landscape growing under significant strain. Employment remains a leading priority, but rising demand is outpacing available services, leaving too many autistic adults and families waiting. Financial instability and DSP shortages are further limiting organizations' ability to expand their reach and respond to the needs in their communities.





A CLEARER PATH FORWARD

At the same time, new organizations are emerging to address unmet needs in their communities, and autistic-led organizations are playing a growing role in shaping the field. Across 527 applications, we saw autistic leaders, new organizations, and small teams creating employer partnerships, paid arts programs, peer networks, and other solutions in communities where services remain limited. Again and again, the strongest ideas came from people closest to the need, who are designing new models, challenging assumptions, and creating possibilities traditional systems have too often overlooked.

The through-line was not resignation, but invention: what becomes possible when the people closest to the need are given the resources and room to design the response.

MEETING THE MOMENT

NEXT for AUTISM will continue to focus our work on four essential areas that shape a full, connected, and meaningful adult life: Home, Work, Social, and Health.

Across these domains, NEXT will invest where needs are greatest and change is most needed. Guided by autistic lived experience, NEXT will strengthen services, improve systems, generate knowledge, and expand proven approaches. By investing in autistic leaders and advancing what works, NEXT will drive better outcomes across the full spectrum of autism and adulthood.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY AND DETAILED APPLICANT PROFILE

This report is based on applications submitted during NEXT for AUTISM's 2026/27 grant cycle. Applications were collected through an open national call using SurveyMonkey Apply and screened according to published eligibility criteria. The analysis combines structured application data with a qualitative review of narrative responses. Because the report draws from organizations seeking grant funding from NEXT, the findings describe the applicant pool and should not be interpreted as a nationally representative estimate of all adult autism service providers.

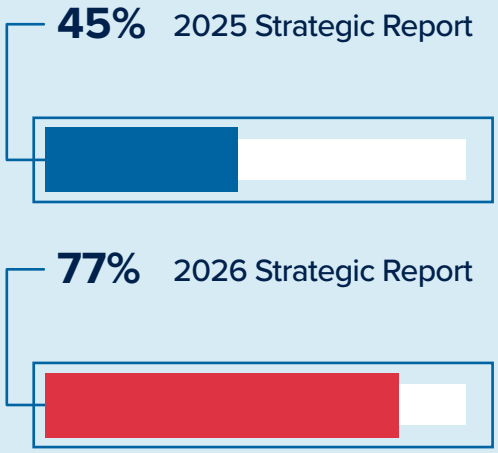
Application data were self-reported. Projected reach and waitlist totals may reflect differences in how organizations define and count participants and should be read as indicators of scale rather than unduplicated national totals. Narrative responses were coded to all applicable recurring themes, so thematic shares total more than 100%. Comparisons with prior years should be interpreted in light of any changes to application questions or definitions.

ONE IMPORTANT NOTE

Across a year-over-year comparison, **the 2025 Strategic Report found that 45% of applicants reported financial strain.** The 2026 figure is 77%. That increase is striking and directionally consistent with what organizations described in their narrative responses.

A CLEAR ISSUE

The shift in applicant financial strain has increased



HOWEVER, THE 2025 AND 2026 APPLICATIONS WERE NOT IDENTICAL INSTRUMENTS.

The 2026 cycle included new structured questions specifically designed to capture operational conditions, which may have made it easier for organizations to identify and report strain they were already experiencing. The comparison is meaningful, but it reflects both a worsening funding environment and a more sensitive measurement tool.

Both things can be true at once.

A NEXT FOR AUTISM STRATEGIC REPORT









NEXT FOR AUTISM

ABOUT NEXT FOR AUTISM

NEXT for AUTISM transforms the national landscape of services for people with autism by strategically designing, launching, and supporting innovative programs. We believe that individuals with autism deserve to live fulfilling, productive lives, supported by excellent services and connected to their communities. We continually ask, what's next for people on the autism spectrum? Learn more at **NEXT for AUTISM.org**.

Resources and Supports

- **Resources for autistic employees**
- **Resources for employers**